

Disparities among Older Persons in China

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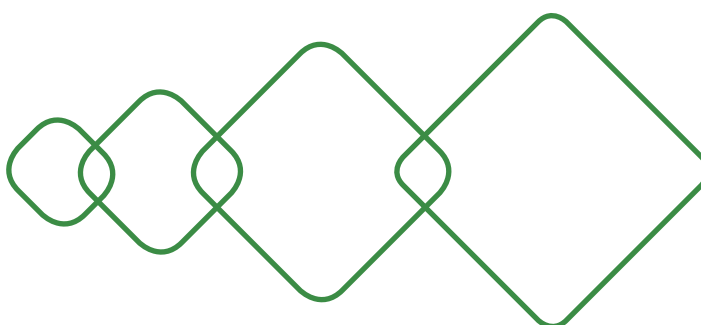
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— To ensure that older persons have equal rights and opportunities without any prejudice to benefit from and contribute to the national development process.

Preface

In July 2012, the United Nations System in China convened a seminar on “Rethinking the Equity-Efficiency Relations: Challenges Ahead”. That seminar focused on urgent and emerging challenges of growing disparities and inequalities in contemporary China. While China has rapidly transformed into a vibrant and dynamic middle-income country, major gaps still exist between urban and rural areas, between men and women, and between the wealthier Eastern coast and the poorer Western and Central regions. Subsequently, in December of 2013, the United Nations System in China launched the “Equity in China” report as the first of a series of United Nations publications designed to explore concepts of equity in contemporary China and identify policies towards closing the gaps.

Building on an academic paper jointly developed by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) China Office, the Institute of Gerontology at Renmin University of China (RUC), the China Research Centre on Ageing (CRCA), National School of Development of Peking University (PKU), the Women’s Studies Institute of China (WSIC), and National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), this report, “Disparities among Older Persons in China”, with its focus on the disparities within the group of older persons, is a product of a study led by the United Nations Population Fund China Office, with contributions from Professor Asghar Zaidi of the University of Southampton and London School of Economics (the United Kingdom), Dr. Gu Yan, Institute of Social Development of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), and Dr. Chen He, School of Public Health, Peking University. UNFPA China also appreciates the contributions from the UN agencies in China, in particular WHO and UNDP.

This report, employing the World Health Organization’s (WHO) “Active Ageing Framework” and the work of the Active Ageing Index led by Professor Asghar Zaidi, analyses three important dimensions of wellbeing of older persons: Health, Security and Participation.

Ageing is undoubtedly a phenomenon to be celebrated, yet it will continue to be one of the top priority challenges shaping Chinese economy and society at large. The rights of older persons include the right to participate in and benefit from national social and economic development. They should remain an undisputable part of national responses to ageing.

The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide unparalleled opportunities to countries around the world to support both older men and women to realise their potential and in the process maximize opportunities for prosperity and wellbeing for all. The study of equity and ageing addressed in this report provides critical insights how population ageing can spur further the pursuit of prosperity and development in modern China.

Executive Summary

China's population is experiencing a rapid transition towards a greater proportion and number of older persons. China shows a relatively good comparative position in terms of the wellbeing of older persons, on the basis of the latest 2015 Global AgeWatch Index (<http://www.helpage.org/global-agewatch/>). However, this study shows that despite unprecedented economic progress, major disparities persist between urban and rural areas, between the wealthier Eastern coast and the poorer Western and Central regions, and between men and women. These disparities exist largely because of differential life course experiences that tend to be magnified in old age due to their cumulative effects. These disparities have drawn attention from the Government of China as well as in the work of the international development agencies. This report contributes towards understanding the situation better and making recommendations for policy reforms.

This report takes as its starting point the “Active Ageing Framework”, developed by WHO's Ageing and Life Course Programme as a contribution to the 2nd United Nations World Assembly on Ageing, in 2002. The three pillars of this WHO policy framework, namely: Health, Security and Participation, are the three areas this report covers in studying the disparities across the subgroups of older persons. In addition, learnings are drawn from the analytical framework and core indicators of the Active Ageing Index of European Union countries.

The analysis included in this report points to the following nine policy recommendations aiming towards improving the wellbeing of older persons in China.

Health

1. Rural, female, central and western region, and oldest old are the four characteristics of vulnerable groups in terms of health. Policymakers should pay specific attention on these vulnerable groups, especially those with multiple disadvantage factors, in their health promotion programmes. More attention is required on the provision of health care for “empty-nest” older persons who live in central and western regions, and those living in rural areas. It is recommended to provide special support to the long-term care services needed by those oldest old women who are disabled.
2. Policy measures aiming at reducing health disparities among older persons should take a life course perspective and introduced through mainstreaming health in all national and local policies. Such measures should include, but not limited to, increasing reimbursement rates in Urban Residential-based Medical Insurance (URBMI), and New Rural Cooperative Medical Insurance (NRCMI), especially for outpatient care. The basic health package should be improved and provided to people of all ages to improve health management of pregnant women, children and youth as well as older persons and patients with chronic disease. Special policies need to focus on social determinants of health, such as equal opportunities to education and employment and enhancement of occupational health.
3. Policies are also needed to meet the increasingly higher health and long-term care needs of older persons, especially the needs of those key vulnerable groups mentioned above. Such policies should include, but not be limited to, adjusting the laws regulating the practicing sites of health workers; set more incentives for health workers in community health centres to provide home-visit

services for older persons; improve the quality of long-term care workforce through occupational education and continuing education; promote integrated medical and long-term care aimed at older persons living in communities; establish efficient inter-sectoral work mechanisms between National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC), Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA), Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) and National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) to better unify the fragmented health and long-term care services; provide incentives and trainings to older persons' families and communities on older persons care.

Security

4. One of the most important policy priorities is to invest in the Chinese social insurance system to promote pension income coverage and particularly income level of rural and low-income urban residents. The measures already introduced should continue, be evaluated and further strengthened.
5. The local and provincial governments should undertake special urban planning strategies in which the economic development is balanced with compensating measures for those who may no longer have comparative advantages in the modern Chinese labour market, especially older workers close to the retirement age and those who are residents of rural areas. Lifelong learning, age-friendly work environments as well as innovative types of new employment are required to assist older persons in rural areas to earn a decent living when working and to live a more financially secured life in retirement.
6. The local authorities must formulate favourable policies to attract private sector investments, together with professional social workers, to deliver the social services needed. The cooperation across private and public sectors should be strengthened to explore how best to pursue mutual benefits, i.e. to satisfy the pursuit of profits by private sector providers, while also making services accessible and affordable to all segments of society.

Participation

7. Education is a long-term investment, and policies should give specific priorities to early education and training, especially for girls. Special mentoring programmes should target young professional women to help them succeed in both economic and political participation of modern China.

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