



FAMILY SUPPORT NETWORKS AND POPULATION AGEING

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The Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development and United Nation Fund on Population in collaboration with Northwestern University and United Nations Programme on Ageing organized a seminar on “Family support networks and population ageing “in Doha on the 3rd and 4th June 2009.

The present publication contains submissions by the Experts and other materials of the above meeting.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	
Alberto Palloni	7
Family Support Networks and Population Ageing: A Summary Statement	
Alberto Palloni	8
Family Support Networks and Population Ageing	
Alberto Palloni, Guido Pinto and Rebeca Wong	13
What Explains Fertility? Evidence from Italian Pension Reforms	
Francesco C. Billari and Vincenzo Galasso	17
Living Arrangements of Older Adults in China: The Interplay among Preferences, Realities, and Health	
Melanie Dawn Sereny	19
Intergenerational Reciprocity and the Well-Being of Older Adults in Rural China	
Merrill Silverstein	25
Is Intergenerational Solidarity Really on the Decline? Cautionary Evidence from Thailand	
John Knodel	29
Family Disruptions and Social Support among Older People across Europe	
Karen Glaser, Cecilia Tomassini, Emily Agree	32
Gender, Generation, and Economic Transfers in Ismailia, Egypt	
Kathryn M. Yount, Solveig Cunningham, Emily Agree, Michal Engelman	39
The Dynamics of Multigenerational Care in Singapore	
Thang Leng Leng and Kalyani K.Mehta	48
Notices Concerning Elder’s Patronage in the Arab Countries	
Kheder Zakaria	53
Intergenerational Economic Transfers and Population Ageing in Latin America	
Luis Rosero Bixby.....	57
Child-to-Parent Financial Transfers and their Contribution to Reducing Elder Poverty in Korea	
Erin Hye-Won Kim and Philip J. Cook	61
National Transfer Accounts: Concepts and Some Examples from Latin America and Asia	
Jorge Bravo and Mauricio Holz	67
Living Arrangements and Differences in Family Support: A Comparative Perspective	
Jenny de Jong Gierveld	72

Protecting Older Persons against Violence, Abuse and Discrimination	
Monica Ferreira	77
Family Support for Older People in Europe: Determinants and Consequences	
Emily Grundy	81
Government Policies Supporting Family Networks: Best Practices from the Policy Area of Ageing	
Alexandre Sidorenko	85
Intergenerational Transfers and Population Ageing in African Countries	
Barthélemy KUATE DEFO	87
The Role of Support from Children and Own Labour Supply in Supporting the Elderly in Indonesia and Vietnam: A Comparison of Two Studies	
Deborah Cobb-Clark	94
Addressing the Challenges of Population Ageing in Eastern Europe: Policies and Constraints	
Nikolai Botev	98
Families and Intergenerational Solidarity in Mexico: Challenges and Opportunities	
Verónica Montes de Oca Zavala	107
Social Policies, Family Arrangements and Population Ageing in Cuba	
Rolando García Quiñones	112
Annexes	
Annotated Agenda	115
List of Participants	118

INTRODUCTION

While the literature on intergenerational transfers in societies in the very late stages of a demographic transition is voluminous and growing at the same pace as do the pressures they face from the aging tide, the same is not true in societies whose fertility declined to low levels only recently. And yet, because of the demographic nature of the process of aging throughout these societies--compressed in a fraction of the time it took in more advanced societies and under precarious economic conditions and fragile institutional contexts-- the issue of support for the elderly is being felt on a larger scale and the problems that it generates are assigned more urgency.

This volume, a result of a seminar held in Qatar during June of 2009, is an attempt to identify the more salient issues related to elderly support facing societies where aging is occurring much more suddenly than in North America and Europe. Some of these problems are common to all societies experiencing aging and some peculiar to those that have joined the low fertility level group only recently. The volume attempts to cover a wide ranging set of issues, from those purely demographic involving hard constraints on kin availability to those involving transfer rules rooted in cultural norms. The effect of the changing institutional context— macroeconomic performance, state policies and the operation of private markets—creates a large canvass within which the resource availability for the elderly are negotiated and allocated. The elderly' fortune or misfortune will be decided and settled within a complex ground where new ideologies, new fertility regimes, new morbidity and mortality patterns as well as a new balance between private markets and state based interventions, will seek mutual accommodation not without frictions nor conflicts both within the family and in the larger public arena.

It is our hope that the papers discussed in the seminar, of which this volume includes extended summaries, will help to stimulate the nascent body of research on intergenerational transfers with a specific focus on those societies newly arrived to the modern world of aging.

FAMILY SUPPORT NETWORKS AND POPULATION AGEING

A Summary Statement

Alberto Palloni¹

1. Objectives of the meeting

Ageing of human populations is perhaps the single most important population challenge facing societies in the twenty-first century. Although in developed countries population ageing has occurred gradually and over relatively long stretches of times, this is not so in developing countries where the age structure is changing more rapidly and in a much more contracted period of time. A compressed transition toward an older population age structure generates a completely different set of challenges which we are only now identifying and are ill-prepared to solve.

Compressed aging is accompanied by a number of changes that could threaten or weaken extant mechanisms of elderly support. First, the social fabric of traditional family relations is changing due to declining fertility, intense rural to urban and international migration and, not less importantly, a change in values and norms that could impair the effectiveness of the traditional intergenerational social contract that helps to generate support for the elderly. Second, in many low income countries the role of the state and the public sector in general is either weakening or inexistent altogether. This feature, in combination with widespread poverty and massive inequalities, create conditions that are unfavorable to the development of even minimal safety nets for the elderly.

Sooner or later the demand for care of older persons will take priority in the policy agenda of most low income countries, as it has already happened in the developed world. But those countries experience massive constraints. Health systems are woefully inadequate to supply adequate care of their general populations, let alone of older people. Government policies and programmes typically give low priority to the concerns of older persons as in many of these countries the expectation is that the family will take on responsibilities of caring for the elderly family members, thus relying on an unwritten social contract of intergenerational relations. But families are changing, marriages are occurring later, marital disruption is more frequent, and the increase in female labor force

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