



# **INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GERONTOLOGY AND GERIATRICS**

## **The Global Social Initiative on Ageing (GSIA)**

### **A RESEARCH AGENDA ON FAMILIES AND AGEING IN AFRICA**

**Outcomes of a GSIA Expert Workshop,  
Potchefstroom, South Africa  
29 - 31 July 2013**

**Conveners:**

Dr. Jaco Hoffman, Coordinator, African Research on Ageing Network, OIPA  
Dr. Isabella Aboderin, Africa Regional Chair, IAGG  
Prof. Norah Keating, Director, GSIA

## **BACKGROUND**

The world looks to families as the key social group in which older people are embedded and supported. Nowhere, arguably, is this truer than in Africa, one of the globe's poorest and least developed regions where – in the broad absence of comprehensive formal welfare systems – families are pivotal for understanding and for addressing challenges and opportunities of ageing.

Dominant African policy discourses uphold the relative strength of families and family values in the continent as a major, even moral, asset upon which old age support and development broadly can and must build. At the same time – and as is the case in other parts of the world – there are concerns in Africa about the ability of families to sustain support to its older and younger members within contexts of poverty, rural-urban and international migration and social strain, including pandemics and conflict.

The juxtaposition persists in a vacuum. There has been virtually no systematic debate on how the ideal of the African family relates to the realities of inter- and intra-generational relations and support in the region. While pockets of discussion have emerged as part of deliberations on social protection schemes especially for vulnerable children and older adults, there is little focused examination of the actual nature, determinants and normative underpinnings of family structures and bonds – and of their impacts on the well-being and capabilities of old and young.

A sound empirical and theoretical understanding of these realities is urgently needed, not only to fill an acute gap in our knowledge about the fabric and functioning of African societies, but also to provide a basis for forging appropriate policies to strengthen families and their support systems to harness ageing in the region.

## **THE WORKSHOP**

In response to this need, the Global Social Initiative on Ageing (GSIA) of the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAGG) convened an expert workshop to forge a research agenda on families of older adults in Africa. The core purpose of the meeting was to develop a framework of key research themes and questions to guide the generation of knowledge on families of older persons that critically engages with dominant discourses and concepts in Africa.

To this end, the workshop brought together key African and international scholars from the fields of family sociology, psychology, gerontology and demography (see Annex) in three days of joint, structured reflection and discussions. The meeting was hosted and supported financially by North West University (NWU) and the NWU Africa Unit for Transdisciplinary Health Research (AUPeR), Potchefstroom, South Africa.

The resulting research agenda, presented in this report, is intended as an open resource for all those interested in examining issues of families and ageing in Africa toward informing policy and practice, and advancing global debates in gerontology. It will be made available for public access on the GSIA website with links to the sites of the African Research on Ageing Network (AFRAN) and the Africa Unit for Transdisciplinary Health Research (AUPeR), North West University.

## **THE RESEARCH AGENDA:**

The following research agenda comprises five core themes, each of which encompasses a number of central questions for investigation.

### **I. MAPPING CONTEMPORARY FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS**

A basic element of understanding the current situation of older adults in families, is knowledge of their family constellations and living arrangements, and of the broad contexts that shape them.

#### *Key questions:*

- What are the types of kin networks of older persons?
- What are the living arrangements of older persons?
- How do the above vary across rural/urban, socio-economic, cultural and migration contexts and personal characteristics?

### **II. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF FAMILIES**

Little clarity thus far exists regarding appropriate definitions of contemporary 'families' in Africa. There is a fundamental need, therefore, to examine how people understand family membership and functions and how these might vary across generations and what broad contexts shape them.

#### *Key questions:*

- What are individuals' conceptions (normative and 'actually experienced') of who comprises their 'family'/'proper family'?
  - to what extent do these conceptions include members within and outside of the household?
  - to what extent are older people included in younger generations' conceptions of their family?
- What are individuals' conceptions (normative and actually experienced) of the 'functions' and salience of their family?
- How do the above vary across rural/urban, socio-economic, cultural and migration contexts and personal characteristics?

### **III. UNDERSTANDING ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN FAMILIES OF OLDER ADULTS**

Evidence of family structures is not sufficient to understand the quality and dynamics of roles and relationships of older people within families. Research needs to clarify the ways in which family members relate to each other and how these are shaped by family history and structural contexts.

#### *Key questions:*

- What are individuals' conceptions of their emotional relationships with and trust in others in their family within and across generations?
- How do relationships affect the well-being of those involved?
- How do relationships unfold over time and across the family life course?
- How do the above vary across rural/urban, socio-economic, cultural and migration contexts and personal characteristics?

### **IV. UNDERSTANDING SUPPORT AND CARE WITHIN FAMILIES OF OLDER ADULTS**

'Support' and 'Care' are key dimensions of family life. Yet, we know little about the beliefs regarding such responsibilities between and within generations and how they are managed in contemporary families of older people.

*Key questions:*

- What are individuals' conceptions of their everyday responsibilities toward other household and family members and how do these differ across generations?
- What responsibilities are actually carried out and what motives underpin these behaviours?
- What are individuals' conceptions of their obligations to care for dependent family members and how do these differ across generations?
- What care is actually provided/received and what motives underpin these behaviours?
- How do family care obligations play out with regard to formal/institutional care provision?
- What are the perceived impacts and adequacy of care provided/received?
- How are everyday responsibilities and care provision shaped by living arrangements?
- How do the above vary across rural/urban, socio-economic, cultural and migration contexts and personal characteristics

**V. THE GLOBAL CONTEXT**

Across all of the above themes research is needed to place African realities within the context of global trends in, patterns of, and discourses on family strengths and obligations.

*Key questions:*

- To what extent have structures, roles and relationships in families of older adults in Africa changed in recent decades and why?
- How different or similar are African families compared to those in other parts of the world?
- What transnational connections exist between families of older adults in Africa and their counterparts in other regions?

## ANNEX

### Expert Workshop Participants

- Dr. Isabella Aboderin, Senior Research Scientist, African Population and Health Research Center, Nairobi; IAGG Regional Chair for Africa; AFRAN coordinator, [iaboderin@aphrc.org](mailto:iaboderin@aphrc.org)
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- Dr. Jacobus Hoffman, Senior Research Fellow, Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, University of Oxford; Senior Researcher, AUTHeR, North-West University, Potchefstroom; AFRAN coordinator, [jacobus.hoffman@ageing.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jacobus.hoffman@ageing.ox.ac.uk)
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#### *International*

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