

Research on Ageing in Africa: The Need to Forge Directions

This issue of *GR* is dedicated to papers to be discussed at the conference on *Research on Ageing, Health and Poverty in Africa: Forging Directions for the Future*, hosted by the Oxford Institute of Ageing, from 11 to 13 April this year.

The conference and *GR*'s focus on ageing in Africa come in a year that is, ostensibly, the year of Africa.

The UK government, and through its chairmanship and presidency hopefully the G8 and the EU as a whole, promise to 'seize 2005 as an opportunity to make a difference for Africa'. It is to be the year of fostering new ideas and action – and moving beyond rhetoric and well-meaning declarations – to enable lasting human and economic development in sub-Saharan African nations.

This endeavour, spearheaded by the consultative work of the Commission for Africa, which recently issued its final report, is fuelled by an increasingly acute awareness of the need for greater global justice. More specifically, it is motivated by the obvious and profound failure of the international community so far to meet its own, self-imposed, minimum targets for improving the welfare of African populations: the millennium development goals.

This initiative, to advance ageing research in Africa, represents a small, yet important and integral part of the overall quest 'to make a difference' for the continent – on two levels:

First, on a substantive level: addressing the challenges raised by the sharply rising numbers of older people in Africa is critical to the overall success of development efforts over the next decades. And the most crucial pre-requisite for this is the fostering of high-quality research that: can provide an *understanding* of these challenges – and of the social, economic, cultural, familial contexts in which they unfold; can point to the most appropriate and effective policy options; and can create the necessary political awareness and will to put these into practice. Such research, in addition, can provide vital insights to advance not only African but global academic debates on the nature and implications of societal and individual ageing in different cultures and structural contexts.

Second, on the level of action: collaborative efforts are urgently needed to support the capacity of the as yet small research community on ageing in Africa to carry out the necessary ageing research, and to ensure that the emerging understandings can act as a catalyst for change.

Simply to discern the need for strengthened ageing research in Africa (as in other developing world regions) is, of course, nothing new. It has received growing attention in recent years, most prominently at the Second UN World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid in 2002, the ensuing Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, and in the global and African 'Research Agendas on Ageing for the 21st Century' formulated by the UN and International Association of Gerontology to support the implementation of the Madrid Plan.

However, despite this recognition in theory, very few

signs of concrete African research or policy initiatives are emerging in practice – and we are at risk of losing the momentum that the Madrid Assembly created.

This set back, at least in part, is reflective of some key limitations in the existing frameworks above. What these plans provide, in essence, are (long and often overlapping) 'lists' of relevant and important areas and themes to be explored by research, and of some of the challenges associated with this. This is laudable and a valuable first step, but it does not provide a meaningful basis, upon which African researchers, operating as they are in a context of scarce resources, can jointly build.

What is required, rather, is an agenda that, first, pinpoints a sufficiently focused number of **key priority questions** (that may cut across substantive themes or areas) to be addressed by research in order to both stimulate and inform policy development. Second, the agenda must identify concrete steps (in terms of collaboration, organisation and relation-building) that African scholars, in partnership with others, can take to enhance their research capacity and their ability to act as an effective pressure agent for change.

To achieve this, the African research community on ageing must urgently resolve vital questions of direction and focus: Where are we, and where specifically must research on ageing in Africa go in the coming years in order (i) to move forward ageing policy and practice as part of mainstream development efforts, but also (ii) to advance global academic debates on population ageing? How should the African research community work together with that in the UK or other western countries, and with practitioners or policy makers on the ground, to proceed most effectively and appropriately to these ends?

It is these questions that the African, UK and international stakeholders at the Oxford conference will jointly address. In doing so, they will forge future directions in four key areas:

- a) Required principal research orientations and approaches;
- b) Specific substantive priority questions in the broad areas of health, poverty and HIV/AIDS;
- c) Ways to enable and build the as yet limited research capacity on ageing in Africa;
- d) The development of concrete plans for collaborative links and joint work.

The papers in this issue, all bar one by African contributors and representing different stakeholder and subject area perspectives, will serve to stimulate thought and discussion in Oxford and, it is hoped, much more widely.

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