

# Guest Editorial

## 30 Years of African Research on Ageing: History, Achievements and Challenges for the Future

### The beginnings

The beginnings of research on ageing in Africa can be traced to the early 1970s, when the United Nations social development section, aware of the dearth of information on older people in developing countries, sponsored nine developing-nation pilot surveys on the socio-economic conditions of the aged. Ghana and Uganda were two of the nine countries in this group and I was privileged to take responsibility for Ghana's study. This was my first ever study on ageing and like many African scholars at the time, I myself was skeptical about the need for such an inquiry: after all ageing was not 'an issue' for Africa. Families were responsible for their ageing members and, in any case, aged people were few, embedded, and adequately cared for in the day-to-day life of their extended family.

The unexpected results of the Ghana study, as those of a second UN nine-country study on the older people's status and roles in the family, convinced me otherwise.

Among most scholars, planners and policy makers, however, the entrenched view of the adequacy of family protection for the old persisted. In seeking sponsorship for further studies on ageing in Ghana, I was constantly confronted with reactions, which advised me of the futility of such research. I was inevitably made to understand that my orientation to ageing was a result of my having studied abroad, that ageing was an issue for developed countries and not Africa, and that I would do well to examine issues that impacted on the growing numbers of children and youth in the country.

As perhaps in many – though clearly not all – African countries, such entrenched perceptions began to change dramatically after the first United Nations World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna in 1982. The Assembly raised the issue of ageing as a global and developing world problem and generated a momentum of interest in ageing studies in the subsequent years.

In Ghana, for example, university seminars and workshops began, in 1983, to focus on ageing and it became a popular topic of discussion in the media. Interest in older people further extended to the NGO sector and, through it, spread more widely. 1988 saw the establishment of HelpAge Ghana, the first NGO in the country (and among the first in Africa as a whole) to deal with, and engage in advocacy work and awareness raising on ageing. Presently most tertiary social science departments have incorporated issues of ageing in their curriculum, while some institutions – such as the Centre for Social Policy Studies, University of Ghana – have dedicated ageing research units.

Even greater strides in ageing research were made in South Africa, which was – and has remained – ahead of other African countries in terms of its responses to ageing. In 1984 the Human Sciences Research Council set up the first coordinated research

effort on ageing in Africa: a National Research Programme on Ageing, managed by Monica Ferreira and coordinated by a multidisciplinary committee from sociology, welfare, medicine, psychiatry, and psychology (Gillis, 2002). Although it faced the usual African challenges with regard to funding and, in particular, to finding persons with gerontological research experience, the programme thrived and produced numerous high quality publications. Continuing through the 1990s it led, in 2001, to the establishment of the first interdisciplinary Institute of Ageing in Africa, at the University of Cape Town.

Since the 1982 Vienna Assembly, individual country activities, where they existed, have been complemented by a modest number of regional, Africa-wide initiatives on ageing, supported by international NGOs or bodies. In 1984, the first-ever African discussion on ageing was held in Dakar, under the auspices of the Government of Senegal in collaboration with UNESCO and UNFPA, and with 29 African countries represented at the meeting. In 1986, the United Nations approved a mandate for the setting up of an African Gerontological Society (AGES), although – mostly due to infrastructural and financial limitations – the society was not established until 1989, when it was formally inaugurated at the XIV<sup>th</sup> congress of the International Association of Gerontology in Acapulco, Mexico. Today, membership of AGES, though grown since 1989, remains limited, with members drawn from only 12 out of 55 African countries. The main objective of AGES is to promote regional awareness of ageing through studies, publications and conferences. However, to date only four workshops have been held, reflecting the lack of organizational funds and the absence of national engagement – but there is hope.

In 2001, finally, and most importantly, the African Regional Office of HelpAge International based in Kenya achieved a major breakthrough in introducing ageing issues into the agenda of the African Union (AU). Consequently, the AU – sensitized by the accumulated (though still limited) research evidence on older people and the strong arguments made by the NGO sector – formally recognized ageing as an issue of serious concern to be addressed by its members and formulated an *AU Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing* (AU/HAI, 2003).

### Why study ageing in Africa?

Despite these developments, it has been very difficult to promote awareness of ageing as an important issue to be tackled by national policies. Similarly, the need for further research on ageing in Africa to do so is still often, and routinely, questioned – with pointers made to the still low proportion (around 5%) of older persons in African populations and thus their apparent relative unimportance.

This situation brings into relief the two primary goals that research on ageing in Africa must address in the coming years. First, it must sufficiently sensitize and convince policy makers of the urgent need to respond to population ageing – by documenting the scale and implications of the challenge.

Second, it must provide a sound basis for governments, development agencies and communities to identify policy options and devise effective strategies to ensure the welfare of the growing numbers of older Africans (from 45.7 million in 2005 to 182.6 million by 2050 – UN, 2005) over the coming decades.

Such research should, ideally, make use of the closer regional and global links to other African and developed country initiatives or information. The ultimate aim must be a comprehensive evidence base that identifies problems, strengths, demographics, and strategies across the continent, and thus gives Africa the opportunity to predict, compare, contrast and plan for the future of its ageing citizens.

At individual country level, research must generate understandings that enable the formulation of policies that are commensurate with, and build on, Africa's traditional cultural and value systems, in which the family – despite strains imposed by societal and economic change – is the main source and operator of social welfare (Apt and Grieco, 1994). In other words, policy makers must be enabled to devise strategies that can enable the generations in families to support each other in a manner that leaves none overburdened. This is how Africa had its strength in decades past and from where it should draw its greatest strength in the future.

Transferring models, institutions and techniques from developed societies clearly cannot solve African problems. Indeed, resistance to Western imposition of models should become one of the hallmarks of African understanding of and responses to ageing (Makoni and Stroeken, 2002).

What is specifically needed, therefore, is research that identifies how the energies and resources of the family and the community can be harnessed and complemented in resolving the social needs of ageing individuals and groups. To do this, research must illuminate the social and cultural reality of local contexts and ageing environments, and the real needs of older people and their families within these settings (Sokolovsky, 1997; Ferreira, 1999).

A major factor to be considered in this regard is the fact that older Africans are living in a context that has undergone the most dramatic social and economic changes. Older people now have great educational needs – ranging from literacy to technical training, through civic and political education to banking and enterprise skills – that have to be studied and met if their major human resources are not to be wasted. Similarly, social definitions of who should be economi-

cally active must change, and research must illuminate how social and economic structures, and cultural perspectives on the life course can support this change.

## The challenges

These broad needs for evidence point to a number of key, policy-related questions, which African ageing research, through the use and development of appropriate methodologies, must aim to answer in the coming years:

1. What are the support systems required for supporting the ageing population taking into account the strain imposed on family structures, the increasing prevalence and feminisation of poverty, the socio-economic changes that can marginalize the ageing population, the rapid urbanisation taking place in many African countries, and the devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic, which is creating a generation of AIDS orphans who need to be nurtured and supported most often by older persons, especially older women?
2. How can African policy makers be urged or supported in adopting a life course approach to the development of policies and programmes to ensure the welfare of Africa's ageing populations?
3. How can African countries best provide affordable and accessible health care systems responsive to age-related physical and mental disease?
4. How can the growing population of older citizens who are no longer economically active, but still physically and mentally healthy, be socialized and enabled to participate in the midst of society?

The sooner research can provide answers to these questions before population ageing becomes a problem in Africa, the better. However, while this urgent need for research has begun to receive some attention, little concrete progress seems to be ensuing. It is our hope that the initiative of which this special issue is part will provide the much needed impetus: serious research must begin now if Africa is to face the 'ageing' period ahead with confidence.

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