

Population Ageing and the Need for Research on Ageing: Correcting a Misconception

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Population ageing has become an increasingly important demographic, social, and economic issue around the world, including developing countries in Asia. One of the concerns is the lack of a scientific data infrastructure that can inform key life domains at older ages, including health status and healthcare, work, economic resources, and the role of family support for older persons. Without such information, it is difficult or impossible to monitor the key changes in these life domains as people age as well as how these domains mutually influence each other (Smith, 2012). Such data inadequacy also prevents policy makers from formulating evidence-based policies to address the situation of older persons as it changes over time.

We examined the extent that detailed information about the older populations was available in 19 low and middle income Asian countries with particular attention to whether or not any representative surveys had been conducted since 2000 that focused on the situation of older persons.² In 1975, persons aged 60 and older represented 6 % or less of the popula-

tion in all but two of the 19 countries and in none did it reach 8 %. By 2015, for 12 of the countries the share of population aged 60 and older is estimated to have exceeded 8 % and in 5 to be above 10 %.³ Thus population ageing increased rapidly in recent years. Moreover, the proportions aged 60 and older are expected to grow even faster in the coming decades (United Nations 2015).

Figure 1 shows the number of (nationally representative) ageing surveys by countries ranked from the highest percentages of persons aged 60 and older in 2015 to the lowest percentages. Just 10 of the 19 countries have such ageing surveys. While Thailand and China have the two highest rates of population ageing at present (16 % and 15 % respectively) and are expected to age the fastest in the next few decades, they also have more existing ageing surveys than the other countries. Among the countries with ageing surveys, most have only one such survey conducted since 2000. Although two countries with relatively high proportions of older persons, Sri Lanka

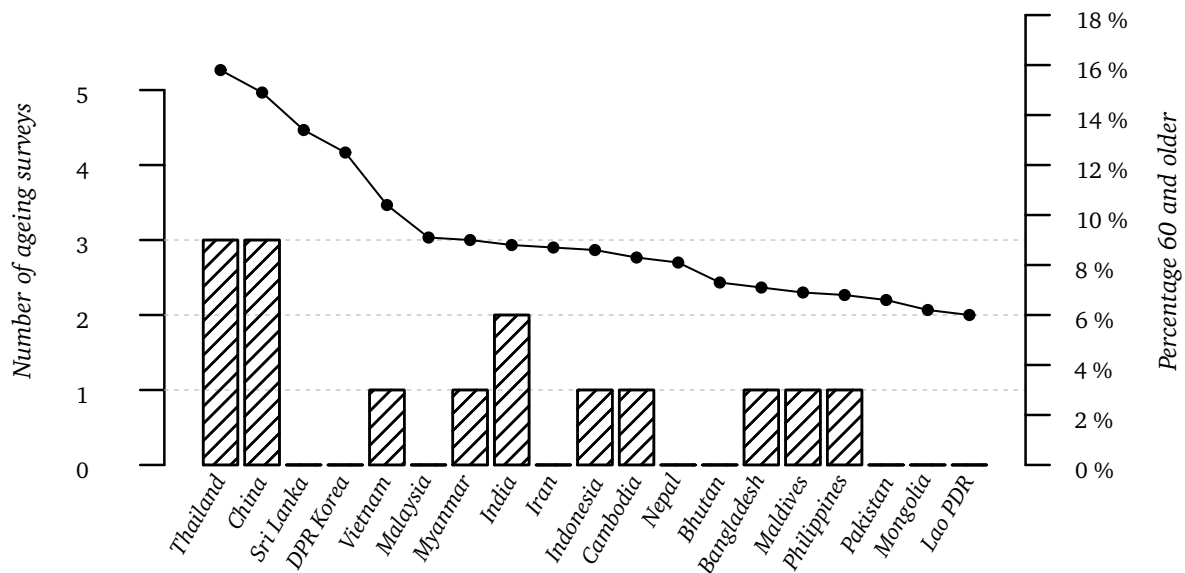


Figure 1: Number of ageing surveys for 2000-2014 by proportion of population aged 60 and over in 2015 for 19 middle and low income Asian countries. Source: United Nations (2015)

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² This was part of a larger study commissioned by HelpAge International to map availability of data relevant to ageing in Asia and the Pacific.

³ Based on Medium Variant estimates from United Nations 2015.

Table 1: Percent population and number of persons aged 60 and older in 25 Asia-Pacific countries, 2000-2050. Source: United Nations (2015)

Country	Percent persons 60+				Number persons 60+ (thousands)		
	2000	2015	2030	2050	2015	2050	% increase
Bangladesh	6.20	7.10	11.70	22.30	11,451	45,002	393
Bhutan	5.90	7.30	11.10	23.50	56	230	411
Cambodia	5.70	8.30	12.80	21.20	1,308	4,775	365
China	10.00	14.90	23.80	32.80	209,012	454,360	217
DPR Korea	10.20	12.50	19.40	24.90	3,149	6,733	214
India	6.90	8.80	12.30	18.30	112,301	296,559	264
Indonesia	7.30	8.60	14.10	21.10	21,885	67,738	310
Iran	6.20	8.70	14.80	29.40	6,890	29,616	430
Lao PDR	5.50	6.00	8.30	15.70	423	1,662	393
Malaysia	6.20	9.10	14.20	23.10	2,776	9,747	351
Maldives	6.30	6.90	12.30	25.80	25	130	520
Mongolia	5.60	6.20	11.50	19.80	182	743	408
Myanmar	7.00	9.00	14.10	22.30	4879	13,049	267
Nepal	6.00	8.10	11.30	18.10	2,316	6,610	285
Pakistan	6.00	6.60	8.90	14.80	12,450	40,042	322
Philippines	5.10	6.80	9.60	13.70	6,949	21,535	310
Sri Lanka	9.30	13.40	19.70	25.70	2,896	6,119	211
Thailand	9.90	15.80	27.00	37.50	10,632	23,148	218
Vietnam	8.60	10.40	18.30	30.60	9,695	31,699	327

(13 %) and DPR Korea (13 %) lack ageing surveys, countries with lower percentages of older persons tend in general to have fewer or no such surveys. This pattern suggests that significant data collection efforts and resources have been allocated to where population ageing is more advanced while less attention has been paid in the countries with a younger age structure. Quite likely policy makers in these latter countries do not see a need for such a data collection effort.

It is nevertheless important to note that increases in the size of the older population can potentially create significant burden/strain on support and health systems for countries even where proportions of older persons are currently relatively low and projected to rise at only a modest pace over the next few decades. This apparent tendency to assume that ageing issues are not important for countries with relatively low percentages of older persons ignores the important but generally overlooked fact that, as evident in Table 1, even if population ageing is not increasing dramatically, the numbers of older persons typically will. The Philippines provides a striking example of this. By 2050, it is estimated that the country will witness

over 300 % increase resulting in 21.5 million persons aged 60 and older even though the proportion of elderly will grow to only about 14 % (which is lower than Thailand's current proportions of older adults).

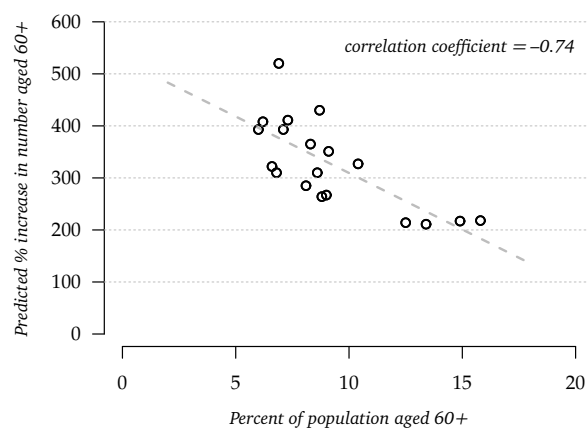


Figure 2: Percentages of population aged 60 and older in 2015 by percentage increase in the number of persons aged 60 and older between 2015 and 2050. Source: United Nations (2015)

Figure 2 indicates that for the 19 countries under consideration, not only are most countries with currently modest levels of population ageing expected to experience substantial increases in the numbers of older persons but also that the percentage population aged 60 and older in 2015 has a strong negative correlation with anticipated percentage increase in the absolute number of older adults between 2015 and 2050. In other words, countries where population ageing does not seem to be a big issue will actually experience a substantially greater proportionate increase between 2015 and 2050 in the size of the older person population than those where current population ageing is considered advanced and where their share of the total population is projected to increase sharply.

In sum, the misconception that countries where population ageing (thought of only in terms of increases in the proportions of the population in older ages) is not far advanced, do not need be concerned about issues related to older persons is seriously misguided. Focusing only on population ageing and ignoring increases in the size of the older population

is short sighted. In many cases, the burgeoning numbers of older persons will pose major challenges to the health, welfare and other support systems in these countries even if their share of the population remains modest. Given that the increased numbers of older persons can be projected with relative certainty for many decades in the future there little excuse for ignoring this. The time to start planning how to deal with the challenges this critical demographic development poses is now.

References

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