

Alleviating Poverty and Unemployment: Can African Senior Citizens Make Contributions?

by

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Abstract

This paper is based on a research survey study conducted in South Africa that investigated the contribution senior citizens can make in the alleviation of poverty and unemployment in Africa. In several societies senior citizens are branded as people who have exhausted their economic and social worth of wealth of expertise, knowledge and skills and for that matter see them as having no substantial role to play and make further contributions towards the social and economic development of societies. Families consider them as burden that requires attention and unflinching services from younger members of society. Senior citizens are associated with illnesses, home care, demanding attention from care givers and behave like they have never lived fulfilling lives. This research survey randomly selected 3600 senior citizens from the nine provinces of South Africa. Questionnaire was administered and interview conducted to be able to collect valid data to answer the research question. The long term goal of this study is to provide guidance for more creative policies, including strategies to alleviate poverty and unemployment through the creative employment of senior citizens skills and expertise. The conclusion that could be drawn was that senior citizens can make further contribute towards the alleviation of poverty and unemployment in Africa.

Introduction

The majority of Africans families consider senior citizens as burden that requires attention and unflinching services from younger members of society. Senior citizens are associated with illnesses, home care and demanding attention from care givers. Many families would rather want to see them sent to Old Age Home. What have been forgotten is the fact that majority of senior citizens have themselves been professionals of some sort and have contributed towards the social and economic development during their time of service.

After in-depth literature survey, 3600 senior citizens from the nine provinces of South Africa were randomly selected for the administration of questionnaire and the conduct of interview for primary data (400 from each of the nine provinces) to augment the data gathered from the literature. The main objective of the study was to identify the goodness in senior citizens towards poverty alleviation and elimination of unemployment and make such information substantive to governments, organisations and individuals so that the huge potential of senior citizens expertise in knowledge, experiences and skills could still be utilised.

Statement of the Problem

Can senior citizens make further contribution towards the alleviation of poverty and unemployment in Africa?

Relevant Literature Survey and Analysis

Several literature about senior citizens consulted concentrated on the negative aspects of old age – abuse, neglect and ill-treatment by their children and the state representatives (Ministerial Commission, Republic of South Africa: 2001). Reports from committees from the nine provinces revealed abysmal neglect, abuse and ill-treatment of Older Persons (ibid. 2001:1-14). The situation in South Africa is not different from other African countries and the rest of the world where the majority of senior citizens reside in the rural areas.

The United Nations General Assembly, in December 1991, adopted the United Nations' Principles for Older Persons and proclaimed the Principles for Older Persons in 1999 (UN Principles for Older Persons: 1999). Since the inception of these principles, governments all over the world have been encouraged to incorporate the five principles in the document, namely: independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity - into national programmes to be able to accord senior citizens the respect and dignity they deserve from society. The following details were provided in the documents. As regards independence, the UN Principles for Older Persons stipulates that older persons should:

- Have access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing and health care through the provision of income, family and community self-help.
- Have the opportunity to work and to have access to other income generating opportunities.
- Be able to participate in determining when and at what pace withdrawal from labour force takes place.
- Have access to appropriate educational and training programmes.
- Be able to live in environments that are safe and adaptable to personal preferences and changing capacities.
- Be able to reside at home for as long as possible.

With reference to participation in whatever category in services provision during senior citizen days, the UN Principles for Older Persons states that Older Persons should:

- Remain integrated in society,
- Participate actively in the formation and implementation of policies that directly affect their well-being,
- Share their *store of* knowledge of expertise and skills with younger generations,
- Be able to seek and develop opportunities for service to the community,
- Serve as volunteers in positions appropriate to their interests and capabilities.
- Be able to form movements or associations of older persons to serve their interests.

With regards to care, the UN Principles for Older Persons makes it clear that Older Persons should:

- Benefit from family and community care and protection in accordance with each society's system of cultural values.
- Have access to health care to help them to maintain or regain the optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being and to prevent or delay the onset of illness.
- Be able to utilize appropriate levels of institutional care providing protection, rehabilitation and social and mental stimulation in human and secured environment.
- Be able to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms when residing in any shelter, care or treatment facility, including full respect for their dignity, beliefs, needs and privacy and for the right to make decisions about their care and the quality of their lives.

With reference to self-fulfilment, the UN Principles for Older Persons stipulates that Older Persons should:

- Be able to pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential towards the sustainable economic and social development.
- Have access to the educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources of society.

In relation to dignity, the UN Principles for Older Persons makes it clear that Older Persons should:

- Be able to live in dignity and security and be free from exploitation and physical or mental abuse.
- Be treated fairly regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status, and be valued independently of their social and economic contribution.

A critical study and analysis of the provisions of the UN Principles for Older Persons revealed that senior citizens have a role to play in the social and economic development of their respective communities and can contribute towards the alleviation of poverty and unemployment. In particular South African senior citizens can still make positive contribution towards the achievement of sustainable national, social and economic development of the country in a progressive manner.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2002) ageing is to be a positive experience and that longer life must be accompanied by continuing opportunities for health, participation and security. Active ageing is a concept adopted by WHO to express this process. The African Union's (AU) (not dated) has provided Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing, which concurs with WHO'S document and further indicates and stresses that governments should not undervalue the accumulated worth and wealth of experience of senior citizens and that ways should be found to make sure that they are tapped and used to help to develop Africa while in retirement.

The WHO document titled Active Ageing: A Policy Framework (2002:12) clearly indicates that 'Active ageing is the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. This theory holds good for every living being, because, all things being equal, every living human being will eventually grow old and die'. However, the fact that one is aged does not in any way mean that one cannot make a contribution towards the social and economic development of one's country.

The WHO document referred to further explains the theory of ageing and adds that active ageing applies to all individuals and population groups. It allows people to realise their potential for physical, social, economic and mental well being throughout the life course and to participate actively in society according to their needs, desires and capabilities, while providing them with adequate protection, security and care when they require assistance and unable to physically work.

The concepts active ageing were first adopted by WHO in 1990, and as used by WHO in the referred document encompasses physical ability. To WHO the word active refers to continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs, not just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labour force. The implication in this respect is that senior citizens who retire from work and are physically fit and those who are ill or live with disabilities can still remain active contributors to their families, peers, communities and nations.

In 1999, which was the International Year of Older people, the World Health Organization (WHO) proposed the theme of active ageing. "Active ageing aims to extend healthy life expectancy and quality life for all people as they age, including those who are frail, disabled and in need of care" (WHO, 2002:12). WHO further proposed a life course perspective on ageing to ensure that health promoting strategies are in place throughout the life span to ensure active ageing. For many countries the challenge is ensuring that the concept of active ageing is adopted and applied in the face of many challenges such as globalization, changing family patterns, consequences of epidemiological transition, persistent inequalities and poverty, to name a few (WHO, 2002).

Senior Citizens and the HIV/AIDS Carnage

The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002) commits all UN members to support senior citizens living with HIV/AIDS with adequate information, training, treatment, medical care and economic support. Studies indicated that over 40% of senior citizens who are 60 years and above are HIV positive. Given that discussion of sexuality issues is taboo among South African cultural groups, especially discussing this with senior citizens, senior citizen nurses could be mobilized to address senior citizens on issues of HIV/AIDS and sexuality in their communities.

At workshop held in Botswana for senior citizens in 2003, most senior citizens suggested that they would be more comfortable if senior citizen nurses were to discuss issues of sexuality and HIV/AIDS with them rather than younger nurses. Therefore there is a need for inclusion of senior citizen nurses in programme responses to HIV/AIDS. Such programmes should reflect cultural sensitivity in order to be accepted (Shaibu & Wallhagen, 2002).

The African Union (AU) policy framework and plan of action of ageing recommends that member states should undertake to guarantee the delivery of health services that meet the specific needs of senior citizens. Although, health is also a basic human right, access to health services is still problematic due to geographical and socio-economic reasons including shortage of health personnel in most African countries including South Africa in particular (Shaibu, 2002). Therefore, senior citizen nurses in the health arena can assist to provide adequate professional service to the needy.

Senior citizen nurses can play positive role in the care of orphans in this era of HIV/AIDS. WHO acknowledges this role and maintains that for senior citizens nurses to continue to assist in this regard, they need to be re-employed on part time basis while they can still serve their communities.

The literature surveyed revealed that there have been several senior citizens entrepreneurial programmes that have empowered senior citizens to make positive contributions towards sustainable social and economic development of their countries. These countries include Japan, China, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America (<http://www.google>; <http://www.higheredjobs.com>; <http://www.teachersunlimited>). Why can this not be done in South Africa and Africa in general?

Data Analysis and Interpretation

What follows is detailed analysis of the survey of the randomly selected senior citizens from the nine provinces. The recommendations are based on the findings that the survey revealed, which the researchers believe can help to unravel the potentials that lie dormant in senior citizens and use them to help in the social and economic development of South Africa in particular and Africa in general to help in the alleviation of poverty and unemployment.

Senior Citizens and Entrepreneurship Skills Development

The survey revealed that 100% have the desire to run their own small businesses upon retirement which will relieve them from redundancy and boredom. However, they are forced by circumstances of inadequacy in entrepreneurial skills training to be able to successfully operate small businesses upon retirement. Another revelation from the survey is that about 55% who have ventured into small businesses upon retirement fade out after a few months of operation. When asked about the circumstances that led to such failures, they indicated that they have not had any training in small business management and entrepreneurship and as such have no entrepreneurial skills to be able to operate small businesses profitably.

When asked about what they would like the Government, the NGOs and the Corporate World to do for them to be able to succeed in their endeavours to be able to run small business successfully, the following recommendations were identified from 75% of the respondents. Their propositions have been briefly listed for introspection and if possible action taken by interested parties in South Africa to make the dreams of senior citizens to own and operate successful small businesses a reality.

1. Government should set up a commission or hire an NGO to undertake to train them in small business management and entrepreneurship where they would be given both the theoretical and practical orientations of small business management a few months before they retire.
2. The training should be organised and introduced to them 18 months [at least] before they go on pension so that they are able to steer clearly the path that they are going to take on retiring. For example those who are teachers and would like to set up nursery and pre-schools should be given adequate training to be able to set up such schools and run them successfully. Those who are health professionals could set up and run community health centres and render health care services.
3. The training should take into account the specific business each retiree would like to set up so that they are provided training in that business and be able to successfully manage it.
4. The training should be on-going and that retirees who start such businesses after their training should be monitored and re-oriented in their pursuit so that evaluation and assessment could be initiated and the programme revised and implemented for greater success subsequently.

What have been listed above are what the senior citizens believed could help them to establish and operate successful small businesses on retiring. To them if they succeed in operating their small businesses, it will help them to make visible contribution towards poverty alleviation, creation of job, sustainable social and economic development of their country.

Over 50% of senior citizens analogies are worth inclusion in this discussion since they outline the possibility of employment creation that the initiative could provide for South Africans. Their concern was about the ability of senior citizens to create employment for the unemployed in the areas that they would set their businesses and operate them. They indicated that if, for instance, 10 000 people go on retirement in 2008 and receive such training and each one is able to establish small businesses and employ two people each, they would have created 20 000 jobs. And if for instance the two employees come from two families that will mean 20 000 families could be financially supported and sustained financially through senior citizens involvement in job creation and that the contribution this can make to the social and economic freedom of South Africans would be substantial.

To this end 75% of senior citizens reiterated that the Government of South Africa should put such mechanism in place immediately to give would-be senior citizens skills that would enable them to operate successful small businesses of their choice to be able to make visible sustainable social and economic development contributions after their retirement and still be part of the main stream economic and social development activities of South Africa. This is an august proposition worth considering by organizations, NGOs, the Corporate World and the national Government of South Africa.

The Role of Senior Citizens in the Health Care Delivery Services

Throughout the world doctors and nurses are the backbone of the health care delivery system. In South Africa, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has put pressure on the limited resources of the health care delivery system. Although there is shortage of human resources of all cadres, the shortage of doctors and nurses seems to be acutely felt in the provision of health care services and continues to rise. There is no hope that this will improve in the near future since no provisions have been made by the established institutions that train doctors and nurses to expand their intake of students in the health sector.

In response to the increased bed occupancy Home-Based Care programme that has been introduced in South Africa since the apartheid era continues to expand in the new South Africa. Over 85% of senior citizens indicated that in the face of the acute shortage of professionally qualified and experienced medical doctors and nursing sisters, the services of the retired doctors and nurses could be sought to augment the shortage. If already hired to work in this programme, their numbers should be increased and their remuneration made attractive enough to woo them into this service. This is a good example of involving older medical doctors and nurses in community health care development programmes. It is also an example of active ageing which has been promulgated and recommended by WHO, which needs serious attention by organizations, NGOs and the South African Government.

Furthermore, 95% of the respondents indicated that working in communities requires that one works alone and makes decisions without supervision and those senior citizens have this knowledge and skills capability and can work without supervision. Taking into consideration the expertise and years of experience of retired health professionals, their involvement in community health care would be required because they would draw a lot from their many years of experience. Another 75% are of the view that where newly trained and qualified nurses are sent to work in these communities; the senior citizen nurses would help them with orientation. Further 90% indicated that senior citizen nurses need to be gainfully employed in other sectors of the health care delivery system as well, especially in health centres and clinics that are in villages and community health workers are lacking.

The survey also revealed that a common criticism has been that senior citizen nurses are unable to cover vast distances on foot due to their old age and associated muscular-skeletal disorders and as such cannot be employed in remote health care centres. However, 66% of senior citizens in the health care services suggested that it is expedient for the Ministry of Health to make available vehicles to enable senior citizen nurses to move easily and freely rendering quality care services to the needy rural communities. Among the many services they could render included those who are chronically ill including those of the vulnerable populations, especially children in rural communities.

As mentioned earlier, the small business management and entrepreneurial training of would-be senior citizens should include the establishment of day care centres for chronically ill patients so that such patients are also catered for in the entrepreneurial establishments by senior citizens. Furthermore, there are many families who have chronically ill patients and are unable to look after them during the day due to other commitments. Such families can seek the services of senior citizen nurses from the day care centres for their services (Bainame & Shaibu, 2003). Senior citizen nurses require more resources for a scaled up response to these community needs and this can easily be provided by the Ministry of Health because there would be no need for initial training only short conferences and workshop to acquaint them with information on new developments in the nursing profession. What would be required from time to time is regular development workshops where the senior citizen nurses would be introduced to modern technology associated with the use of modern instruments in this respect which were not available at the time of their active services.

To those senior citizen nurses who want to establish their own clinics and health centres, 75% requested that they should be given the necessary entrepreneurial training, as indicated earlier, to be able to successfully operate their established centres. In fact this should be supported by, private organization, NGOs and the Government with financial support and if resources are unavailable they should be provided with equipment and material to be able to make a contribution towards the health care development, especially in rural and remote settlements in South Africa.

There was unanimous agreement (100% of respondents) that there should be Association for Senior Citizens Healthcare Providers, where all established clinics and health centres run by senior citizen nurses should be registered to bring sanity into that particular sector. The registration of such association could be linked with either the Nursing Council of South Africa or the South African Medical Council so that everything done would be professionally regulated and controlled.

The researchers are of the view that the introduction of part time employment to senior citizen medical doctors and nurses will give them opportunity for flexi time and to participate in gainful employment that suits their lifestyle. Some senior citizen medical doctors and nurses have worked in the private sector on a part time basis before their retirement. If the Government, who is the largest employer, can look into this and re-employ senior citizen health professionals on part time basis; it would go a very long way to alleviate the shortages that are experienced in the hospitals, health centres and clinics in South Africa.

It becomes necessary to indicate that even though senior citizen health workers have been used in this discussion, all other senior citizen professionals can be considered in the same light so that shortages in expertise can be either reduced or completely eliminated.

Generally, health is pivotal in the accomplishment of national and community development goal, which the Government has targeted and would do everything, to see to its attainment the achievement will be dependent of senior citizen nurses. Senior Citizen Nurses can help to make a remarkable contribution. They are out there and it is left to the Government to robe them into it. Surely the Government can promote the active participation of senior citizens in community development by acknowledging them as repositories of knowledge and expertise and bringing them on board. More no-governmental organizations that deal with senior citizens need to also come on board to assist in advocating the role of senior citizens in health and community development.

Senior Citizens and Educational Services Provision

The issue of senior citizens and the provision of educational services was mentioned and 100% of the respondents indicated that the education sector is one of the areas where they abound and that their services could easily be sought. In fact, in almost every country in the world the teaching fraternity constitutes over 75% of the working population (Boaduo & Babitseng, 2007). It is therefore pertinent to conclude that almost all over the world senior citizens in the teaching fraternity constitute about that percentage. However, evidence from the internet concerning teacher shortages is recurring in almost every country (www.google, Accessed, 25/4/2009; www.teachersunlimited Accessed, 25/4/2009; www.Higheredjobs.com, Accessed, 25/4/2009). From the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Asia and Australia, not mentioning the developing world where the shortage is more than acute and untrained personnel are recruited to teach.

In community development projects, adult literacy programmes, counselling services for youth development including the provision of skills, the services of senior citizens professionals in these fields can be sought to provide such services. The teaching and learning enterprise through the expertise of senior citizens can make added visible contribution in this respect. In the survey over 85% senior citizens are of the view that their contribution in this sector of service provision can be the establishment of private schools – primary, secondary and tertiary.

They further indicated that senior citizen teachers abound but their expertise and experiences are not utilised maximally by the Ministry of Education to reduce the problem of teacher shortages, especially in primary and secondary schools. The suggestions made by 95% of the respondents is that it would be ideal for the Ministry of Education of the South African Government to tap into the services of this group of professionals and make use of their services while upping for the training of more younger teachers to take their places after they qualify (Boaduo & Shaibu, 2006).

Furthermore, 95% of the senior citizens suggested that they should be made to replace those untrained teachers in the education system until such time that qualified teachers could be recruited to replace them. According to them the advantages they weired in this respect overweigh the disadvantages if they are re-employed on part time basis or on short contracts. They further indicated that they are not in the employment, this time around, to make money because most have made that before they went on retirement and come in to help fulfil a pressing need. Finally, most of them indicated that they have brought up their own children and have experienced the necessities of having a better upbringing among the youth which they have the capability to provide such guidance. Their belief is that they can contribute towards discipline in schools compared to the untrained teachers who are currently being employed to teach.

Conclusion

What has been provided is a brief discussion from a survey conducted in South Africa of the potential contributions that senior citizens could still make towards the alleviation of poverty and unemployment and add to the economic and social development of South Africa. In this discussion, the views of senior citizens sampled for the study have been carefully analysed and presented. In the field of establishing their private small businesses, they expressed the need for entrepreneurial training prior to their retirement. They have shown that they require such training so that they are able to establish businesses to stand the tribulations of failure providing employment to citizens. The authors of this study report are of the view that senior citizens should not be considered to have exhausted their worth because they are in retirement. Once their health, which is pivotal in the accomplishment of active ageing and community development, is still adequate, they should be given the recognition they deserve in our society to be able to continue to make contribution towards development. We can still promote the active participation of senior citizens in community development by acknowledging them as repositories of skills, knowledge and expertise and bring them on board (Boaduo & Shaibu, 2006). Better still non-governmental organizations that deal with senior citizens need to come on board to assist in advocating for the role senior citizens in health, education and community development can play to enhance the lives of their communities. Lastly, it must be indicated that senior citizens are the vestiges of progressive advancement in society and should be recognised as such by the South African society in particular and Africa as a whole. In view of the survey, it can be indicated that senior citizens can make contribution towards poverty alleviation and unemployment in Africa.

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