

PRESS RELEASE

Colloquium on Poverty Research: Current Imperatives in Understanding Poverty

30 June – 1 July 2011, Ceylon Continental Hotel, Colombo

The Elderly: Resource or Burden?

Sri Lanka's population is aging fast and Prof. Indralal De Silva, Senior Professor of Demography, University of Colombo, estimates that 25 percent of the population will be over 60 years of age as we enter the 2040's. While this would put Sri Lanka in a similar situation to that of Europe or Japan today, the larger issue is that unless our development process is improved in the present and sustained we would have a lower level of income to support this aging population. The lack of formal and decreasing intergenerational support systems to the aged would push a larger proportion of them into poverty in the coming years.

Aging is an outcome of Sri Lanka's successful policy and implementation of family planning. While family planning has brought clear benefits to the development process - a manageable population and increased social achievements to families - the rapidity with which Sri Lanka is approaching an aging society is a cause for concern. Prof. Indralal De Silva stated that the East Asian Tigers, countries such as South Korea, had made use of the demographic bonus - the increase in the share of working age persons in the population - to achieve high levels of development.

Sri Lanka is in the midst of its demographic bonus right now and needs to make use of this period, which Prof. De Silva estimates will last until 2017, to achieve high levels of development outcomes. Dr. Cem Mete, Senior Economist, South Asia Sector for Human Development (SASHD), at the World Bank stated that one of the reasons for aging not being high on the agenda of the state is because expenditure on the aged is low in comparison to its expenses on infants and young children. He however stated that in considering individual/family expenses, the expenses for the aged are as high as the expenditure for young children, because of the increasing incidence of non-communicable diseases, especially amongst the aged.

As Sri Lankan society ages in coming years, the present intergenerational caring system of the elderly is unlikely to sustain itself with larger families needing to be supported by decreasing numbers of income generating members,. Additionally 63 percent of the Sri Lankan working population being in the informal sector makes it difficult for the state to provide support. This would make it imperative for elderly engaged in the informal sector to continue work into their old age even with infirmities.

Female participation in the labour force is low in Sri Lanka, but female life expectancy is higher making them more dependent on support from the family in their senior years. Mrs. Krishnamoorthy, Director (National Secretariat for Elders), Ministry of Social Services

indicated various laws and processes through which the aged can seek redress in overcoming their economic vulnerabilities. She mentioned that the government has established contributory pension funds for people engaged in agriculture, livestock and fisheries. However, these funds do not include everyone in the country and there remained issues in the expansion of this system. She also stated that elders committees have been established at local levels, in temples and community centres, providing the aged with opportunities to socialise and address specific issues. These need to be nurtured and supported if they are to be effective.

While these measures are welfare oriented, the elderly can and do contribute productively at home and outside and this should be recognised and supported. The retirement age in Sri Lanka is lower than most of its South Asian neighbours, but life expectancy of Sri Lankans is higher than their South Asian neighbours, and the discussion on extending the retirement age has had to take into consideration its effect on employment creation for the younger generation.

Dr. Richard Vokes, former Country Representative, Asian Development Bank Sri Lanka, presenting the case of Thailand, showed that the agricultural sector and the rural economy are the ones that are likely to be affected first by the aging population largely due to increased educational attainment and the desire of the rural youth to pursue opportunities in the urban area commiserate with their education. He argued that however, that there is no indication that an aging society resulted in reduced productivity in agriculture in East Asian countries.

Azra Abdul Cader, Karin Fernando and Geshan Kalupahana, from CEPA, similarly contend that the aged should not be seen as a homogeneous entity and they are not always a burden to society. The elderly contribute in productive and non-productive ways, in the form of home based activities such as child-care and household help, supplementing household income by working and through pensions, and to wider society in the form of sharing knowledge and experience, and volunteering/social service. They also noted that considering the rights of the elderly; the right to work, the right for protection and support, and the right to choose. The policy framework should have this balance; social protection and wellbeing of the elderly. They also argued that Sri Lanka needs to look at experiences of other countries that have made effective use of aged by creating means for sharing their knowledge such as mentoring younger professionals.

Obviously much needs to be understood about the aging population in Sri Lanka, their level of productivity, their care needs and the ways in which they can contribute to the welfare of their families and society. It is important that Sri Lanka conducts ageing specific surveys to understand the issues faced and the contribution of this demographic group so that informed and appropriate policy responses can be devised. The elderly are not a burden to society; they help protect our way of life and our productivity and should be supported so that they can continue to do so.

This Op-Ed reflects the views of panellists and not necessarily that of the centre for Poverty analysis. For more information on the outcomes of the CEPA colloquium please contact colloquium@cepa.lk or you can also telephone us on (011) 2676955-8. For more information on our events and publications, please see www.cepa.lk or contact by email at cap@cepa.lk.