The Transformative Force of Population Ageing

Statement of UNFPA Executive Director, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, on
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Population ageing – one of the most significant trends of the 21st century – represents both a cause for celebration and a challenge. To ensure that everyone's well-being is enhanced through this demographic shift, more efforts are needed to minimize lifelong inequalities and improve the life conditions of older people.

People aged 60 and older accounted for 12.3 per cent of global population in 2015, and by 2050, that number will rise to almost 22 per cent. Most of the projected growth of the older population is expected to take place in developing countries. Asia is home to more than half of the world's 901 million older persons, with 508 million people aged 60 or over. Another 177 million older persons reside in Europe, 75 million in North America, 71 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, 64 million in Africa and 6 million in Oceania.

In some countries, population ageing may lead to a proportionately smaller labour force. But whether this occurs, and its impact on the economy, will depend on many uncertain factors, including measures to increase the retirement age, on migration, and, ultimately, on the productivity of both people and machines.

Population ageing can potentially be a socially disruptive force, as social inequalities tend to be magnified in old age. For example, elderly men receive, on average, a 68 per cent higher income than women due to their longer formal employment and higher lifetime wages. This is particularly significant as the older population is predominantly female.

We at UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, could not agree more with the theme of this year's International Day of Older Persons – "Take a Stand against Ageism". We believe that reducing lifelong inequalities and embracing the contributions of older people offer tremendous prospects for development.

These efforts start in infancy, with safe deliveries, and continue with good childhood nutrition and excellent schools. They require ensuring that sexual and reproductive health and rights are universal, that gender equality is assured, that social protection and income security extend to all older persons, and that wealth is transferred to younger generations.

Discrimination and ageism in the workplace may be a growing concern in countries where life expectancy and good health encourage older people to keep working, especially if youth unemployment is high. Societies may need to alter their expectations about the natural age of retirement, or the public and private roles of older persons, as they remain increasingly active.

Ageing populations rely on various sources of financial support – from labour income and assets, to their families and public programmes. This means that ageing countries will need to foster intergenerational dialogue and put in place policies that promote mutual understanding, and empower young and old alike to support one another.

UNFPA continues to help countries respond to the opportunities and challenges of population ageing by promoting policy dialogue and supporting training, research and data collection disaggregated by age and sex. We are currently reviewing 15 years of progress towards the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and supporting the exchange of lessons learned for a healthy ageing world and to capitalize on the second demographic dividend of a more productive and prosperous older population.

Population ageing is a transformative force in every country that will test the existing structures of our economies, households and societies. Let us work together to ensure that all people can age with dignity and enjoy a lifetime of contribution, integration and well-being.