

Ageing population in Sri Lanka and planning beyond the second age: challenges and opportunities for sustainable development

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Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provide a universal plan of action to achieve sustainable development while recognizing the human rights of all people (United Nations, 2016). It demands for no one left-behind for all segments of society, at all ages, including older persons. Ensuring the quality of life and well-being of population at different stages of life, are key to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Literature on phases of ageing discuss four ages (Baltes & Carstensen, 1996; Weiss and Bass, 2002). The first age is identified as "youth" and during this phase of life individuals prepare for the activities of maturity including employment and child rearing. The second age is stated as "maturity" and individual engage in those employment and child rearing activities. The third age is an extension of middle age, between retirement from the workforce and the beginning of age related implications. In this stage, people use pensions, and accumulated savings to maintain a standard of living and have more freedom in their lives. Sometimes third agers will continue to work if they have insufficient economic means at old age or willing to continue in economic activities. The fourth age is generally considered as an individual entering the 80th birthday and many fourth agers face health challenges (Baltes & Carstensen, 1996; Erber, 2010). Each of these stages has its own value in the life cycle and important for when planning for productive and healthy lives beyond the second age. Sri Lanka is one of the countries in South Asia, which has been experiencing accelerated growth in ageing population, for the last two decades. Presently there are about 2.5 million older persons who are aged 60 years and over (13%) in the country. According to medium-term and long-term standard population projections it is expected that this number will further increase to 5.1 million (22%) and 6.2 million (25%) by 2037 and 2050 respectively (De Silva & De Silva, 2015; Dissanayake, 2016). These future trends in older population are vital to address ageing related vulnerabilities while recognizing older persons' active participation in social and economic development (Perera, 2017). Therefore, this study examines socio-economic and health related dynamics affecting the older people at their third and fourth ages and then discuss challenges and opportunities faced in achieving sustainable development and in creating healthy, productive and sustainable environment for older communities in Sri Lanka.

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Methodology

This analysis was mainly based on the secondary data obtained from the Sri Lanka Population and Housing Census (SLPHC) which was conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) in 2012. It is the 14th SLPHC with a national coverage was conducted after 31 years. Socio-demographic and economic data of the population were analyzed in relation to elderly population to understand the diversity of older persons in terms of their needs that are shaped by their age, gender, ethnicity, education, health and disability, employment participation, and other factors.

Results and discussion

Rapid demographic transition with marked decline in death rates and birth rates, increases in life expectancy are leading to significant changes in age-sex structure in Sri Lanka. As a result, the median age of the Sri Lankan population has also increased from 21.4 years to 31.0 years for the 1981-2012 periods, which is much higher than other countries in the South Asian region. The life expectancy at birth for male and female has reported as 72 and 79 years respectively and female often live six years longer than male counterparts in 2012. Females accounted for about 56 % of total aged population which mark feminization of ageing in Sri Lanka. Older females have lower literacy rates than males while about one third of older women were widowed in Sri Lanka. The ageing is observed in Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups. The old-age dependency has increased to 20 per 100 working-age people in 2012 and it will increase faster than the child dependency ratio by the mid of this century. The change in age structure and an increasing number of old-age population would result in a significant shrinking of the support base for the older persons there were on average only four persons (age 20-59 years) to provide support for one older person in 2012. Majority of older persons (31 %) resides in the Western Province. The second and third highest proportions of older persons live in the Southern (13.8 %) and Central Provinces (13.1 %). Most of older persons live with the family. The number older parents who live with their children were (17.5 %) while there were 13,081 older persons as domestic employees. More than half of older persons (55.6 %) function as the head of household and more than half of the total older persons (59.2 %) lived in extended households which are households of more than one generation. Three-fourths of older persons in the Estate sector had lived in semi-permanent housing structures while in Rural sector it is slightly greater than one fourth. Employment Participation In 2012, one in every four older persons was employed while three fourths of older persons were economically inactive. About 43 % of older men were employed while only about 11 % of older women were employed. One in every three older persons belonging to the young-old category were employed. More than one third of females were employed in

elementary occupations while over one thirds of males engaged in skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery related employments. Older persons had experienced difficulty in seeing (21.8 %), difficulty in hearing (11.3 %), difficulty in walking (19.4 %) and persons (or 8.3 %) had experienced difficulty related to cognition. Over half of older persons had physical or mental impairments. About 60 % of the oldest –old persons had experienced at least one disability while for the young-old and middle-old persons were 25 % and 43 % of respectively. The consequences of the population ageing process that Sri Lanka is currently experiencing will have several challenges in relation to feminization of ageing, gender differences in longevity, health and old age disability and lower female employment participation which directly impact on their quality of life and wellbeing in the third and the fourth ages.

Conclusion

In developing sustainable, productive and healthy environment of older people in Sri Lanka, elderly friendly ecological models need to be adopted. Since at present more than two thirds of older population are belonging to young old category, providing dynamic employment opportunities, making aware about young population cohorts for planning their retirement at the second age and also providing elderly friendly living arrangements would be useful for mitigating future challenges towards population ageing. The theme of the International Day of Older Persons for 2017 is "Stepping into the Future: Tapping the Talents, Contributions and Participation of Older Persons in Society" (United Nations, 2017). Sri Lanka needs comprehensive policies and programmes which can provide better environment that matches an older persons' physical capabilities and social needs to ensure their contributions and participation in society. Older persons' needs should be kept in priority when allocating resources as well as planning and developing physical and social infrastructure at provincial and district levels.

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