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All the World's A Stage

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All the World's A Stage

by Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.

Being an older person can be like being a book inside a big library. Each book is different and the library contains huge numbers contending for attention.

I thought of this analogy as I read through report on global aging from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) called *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge*. Each country has its library and each library's holdings are expanding enormously.

This report on global aging, which I'll call *Ageing* for short, is quite readable, even at 192 pages. It employs graphics and interviews with elders across the world to weave a narrative about growing older that has striking similarities, along with some differences, by region. Its intent, carried out over three years, was to determine progress since the Second World Assembly in Ageing in 2002 (Madrid) in three priority areas: development, health and well-being, and enabling and supportive environments. Over 20 United Nations entities and international aging-related organizations collaborated to measure how well the planet is doing in creating societies for all ages. Besides reviewing national data, they held group discussions with older men and women in 36 countries around the world to obtain first-hand accounts and to compare these with official national policies, plans, or legislation.

Overall, the take-away is positive. Population aging is called "a triumph of development" and "one of humanity's greatest achievements." In 1950 there were about 205 million people globally who were ages 60 and above; today it's almost 810 million. Today, around the world, two people reach age 60 every second, producing a total of about 58 million 60th birthdays a year. In 2010-2015, life expectancy at birth is 78 years in developed nations, 68 years in developing nations.

Population aging is occurring worldwide because of success in attacking causes of infant mortality, improved public hygiene, and falling fertility rates; health care in later life itself has had only marginal impact in the numbers.

Aging is transforming nations. Like many transformations, some parties embrace, some parties ignore, and some parties undermine the experience. Aging, undoubtedly, presents nations with both the opportunities to realize the potentials of its citizens for and in an extended life course and the challenges of altered socioeconomic systems. Some nations are probing the benefits of longer life, a so-called "longevity dividend."

An important finding in *Ageing* is "the incredible productivity and contributions of those aged 60 and over, as caregivers, voters, volunteers, entrepreneurs and more. The report shows that, with the right measures in place to secure health care, regular income, social networks and legal

protection, there is a longevity dividend to be reaped worldwide by current and future generations." (p. 14)

Put another way, societies should appreciate the differences associated with being older but also deem to later life the value and protections given to other ages.

The present reality is a mixed bag. Successful aging is aided and abetted or frustrated and denied by national policies. Lessons for policymakers and community leaders are here, if they take time to heed them. The same applies to ourselves and our communities. Too often, unfortunately, aging is either ignored or coated with the tar of being a problem.

It is sobering to see how seldom "aging" and "older adults" broadly considered rise to the level of national consciousness, even in times of national elections. It is distressing that so few leaders and policy makers seem to be considering how profoundly the citizenry's longer life is transforming virtually every aspect of life, not just so-called benefits programs.

Gender and aging are intertwined, affecting policy and practice throughout the world. As *Ageing* states, "The so-called 'feminization' of ageing, particularly the relatively large proportion of the 'oldest old' who are women, has important implications for policy." (p. 27) Anti-female policies in restrictive nations have obvious consequences for the well being of older women. They grow older having been denied access to education, with limited employment and travel options. They may have had and continue to have less access to health care services or home/land ownership. In other, less restrictive nations, less blatant national policies may still have telling consequences for women, such as lifetimes of lower earnings resulting in greater poverty and lesser access to health care in later life.

In developing countries, *Ageing* reports, some three fifths of the older women are illiterate, compared to one third of the older men. This illiteracy seriously reduces older women's ability to obtain information or take part in economic, health, political, and social activities. One study which is cited notes that low literacy in Latin and Caribbean nations "was associated with low levels of participation in cancer screening." Clearly, efforts to educate young girls will have numerous benefits throughout their life courses and their lives will improve the lives of their daughters and granddaughters.

Ageing shares some eye-opening data about longevity. Some national practices seem to enmesh work and value; sometimes they seem to say that if you work you are valuable; other times they seem to say that if you are of a certain age you are entitled not to work; still others allow age discrimination. The mixture of age and work, to my mind, can be a misplaced or, at least, an inadequate focus. As a national policy, should there be more to life than work? What should be national policies when populations reach super-longevity and working doesn't make sense? Centenarians, those who are 100 years old or more, are the fastest growing sub-group among the older age groups, which themselves are the fastest growing populations in both developing and developed nations. There are already some 316,000 centenarians in the world.

Ageing raises questions about the impact of societies on aging and vice versa. It notes barriers, some that differ by nation or region, that change the way older people live, and, of course, this changes the meaning of old age. Not surprisingly, those countries that have more barriers to older persons to education, employment, health care, decision making, politics, social life, etc, are likely to see population aging and older people as burdens.

Ageing offers 10 "priority actions to maximize the opportunity of ageing populations." Each is relevant in our communities, states, provinces, and nations, but, for space, I'll list just three:

1. "Recognize the inevitability of population ageing and the need to adequately prepare all stakeholders (governments, civil society, private sector, communities, and families)...(by) strengthening national and local capacities, and developing the political, economic and social reforms needed to adapt societies to an ageing world." In other words, call everyone's attention to the elephant in the room.
2. "Invest in young people today by promoting healthy habits, and ensuring education and employment opportunities, access to health services, and social security coverage for all workers as the best investment to improve the lives of future generations of older persons." The report mentions lifelong learning and retraining opportunities as related investments.
3. "Mainstream ageing into all gender policies and gender into ageing policies, taking into account the specific requirements of older women and men."

Ageing is both a report and a sermon. It seeks to promote "a new rights-based culture of ageing and a change of mindset and societal attitudes towards ageing and older persons." This goal is courageously ambitious, maybe even unreachable. Like so many great goals, breaking things down to achievable objectives or action steps can make the process less daunting. Read this report and determine what you and your community might do to create policies and practices that encourage the opportunities of longer life and the steps needed to realize them.

To learn more and to take action, see www.helpage.org/resources.