

# **Demographics of Ageing and the Implications for Humanitarian Crises**

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## **Introduction**

The number of humanitarian crises is proliferating throughout the world and increasing numbers of people are finding themselves in adverse situations such as conflicts, wars, natural disasters and environmental calamities that disrupt normal life. Large numbers of innocent people are forced or choose to uproot themselves and their families because of civil unrest, religious persecutions and ethnic cleansing. Many others leave when natural disaster strikes, homes are destroyed and livelihoods are threatened. While many flee their homelands and cross international borders, the majority are displaced within their own countries. Many embark on dangerous journeys over land and sea in search of better opportunities for themselves and their families. They pay exorbitant fees for passage to safety. Many survive the ordeal, others perish en route. Whether refugees or internally displaced, many who leave their homes suffer from overcrowding, lack of basic social services and a lack of employment opportunities.

Humanitarian crises affect population groups differently and can exacerbate existing inequalities and marginalization. One of the more seriously affected groups in society are older persons, those aged 60 years and over. Indeed, older persons are among the most vulnerable in times of crises and many must rely on others for their very lives.

## **Implications of Population Ageing for Humanitarian Crises**

In 2017, 12.7 per cent of the world's population, or 962 million people, were aged 60 years or over. By mid-century, there will be 2.1 billion people in this age group, comprising 21.5 per cent of the total population. Population ageing is happening in all regions and in countries at various levels of development. It is progressing fastest in developing countries, even those with high proportions of youth. In fact, the number of older persons is growing faster than the number of people in any younger age group. In 2017, there were 57 per cent more older people than there were in 2000. By 2050, it is estimated that the number of elderly will have more than tripled since 2000. [UN DESA, 2017].

Most of the world's elderly live in developing countries which are least prepared to address their needs. Their number is increasing at a rapid pace from 214 million in 1980 to 652 million in 2017 - a staggering increase of 205 per cent. It is projected that by 2050, nearly 80 per cent of the world's older population will live in the less developed regions. [UN DESA, 2017]. The impact of natural disasters can be devastating for many low-income countries in these regions that account for more than 70 percent of the world's disaster "hotspots," and where one-third of the population lives in multi-hazard zones. [World Bank, 2005].

The urbanization of disasters and risks has become a significant challenge to the international community and the humanitarian sector. It is notable that older persons are becoming more

concentrated in urban areas where humanitarian action is more and more directed given the frequency and severity of disasters increasingly impacting cities and urban centers. Data show that between 2000 and 2015, the number of older persons residing in urban areas increased by 68 per cent compared to a 25 per cent increase in rural areas. The faster growth of the older population in urban areas relative to rural areas is a result of the urbanization of the population across age groups, as well as the differences in mortality risks that tend to be lower in urban areas. [UN DESA, 2017].

Among the world's geographic regions, the largest increase in the proportion urban among the older population was in Asia, which is also the most disaster-prone region in the world. The proportion of older persons in urban areas rose to 49 per cent in 2015 from 37 per cent in 2000. Those aged 80 years or over urbanized even faster with 53 per cent residing in urban areas in 2015 compared to 38 per cent in 2000. The region is also home to the country with the most aged population. In 2017, 33 per cent of Japanese were aged 60 years or over. [UN DESA, 2017].

Over the last decades, Asia has borne a disproportionate share of the world's natural disasters, including earthquakes, floods, landslides, cyclones and tsunamis. Japan and Indonesia, in particular, account for a large proportion of people living in tsunami prone areas. Emergencies and disasters have wreaked havoc across the region, killing people, wiping out homes and livelihoods and leaving economies in distress. The Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 was one of the deadliest natural disasters in human history. The victims were mostly the poor, vulnerable, including older persons, and those living in remote areas.

Many governments are not ready to cope with the growing number and proportion of older persons in their populations. Government policies, programmes and budgets typically give low priority to the concerns of the elderly. Their focus is primarily on the young. Older persons are too often invisible and neglected by planners and policymakers. The expectation is that the family will take responsibility of caring for its elderly members. Many of the world's poor elderly are left to care for themselves in the absence of family and/or community support. Not all countries have planned for the ageing of their populations.

The ageing of the world's population has important implications for humanitarian situations. As life expectancy increases and people live longer, one can expect increasing numbers of older persons to be affected by humanitarian crises and to comprise growing percentages of displaced populations. It is essential that disaster risk reduction and preparedness plans as well as humanitarian aid during and post humanitarian crises recognize and address the unique issues, needs and contributions of older persons and harness their experience in ways that benefit them and their communities.

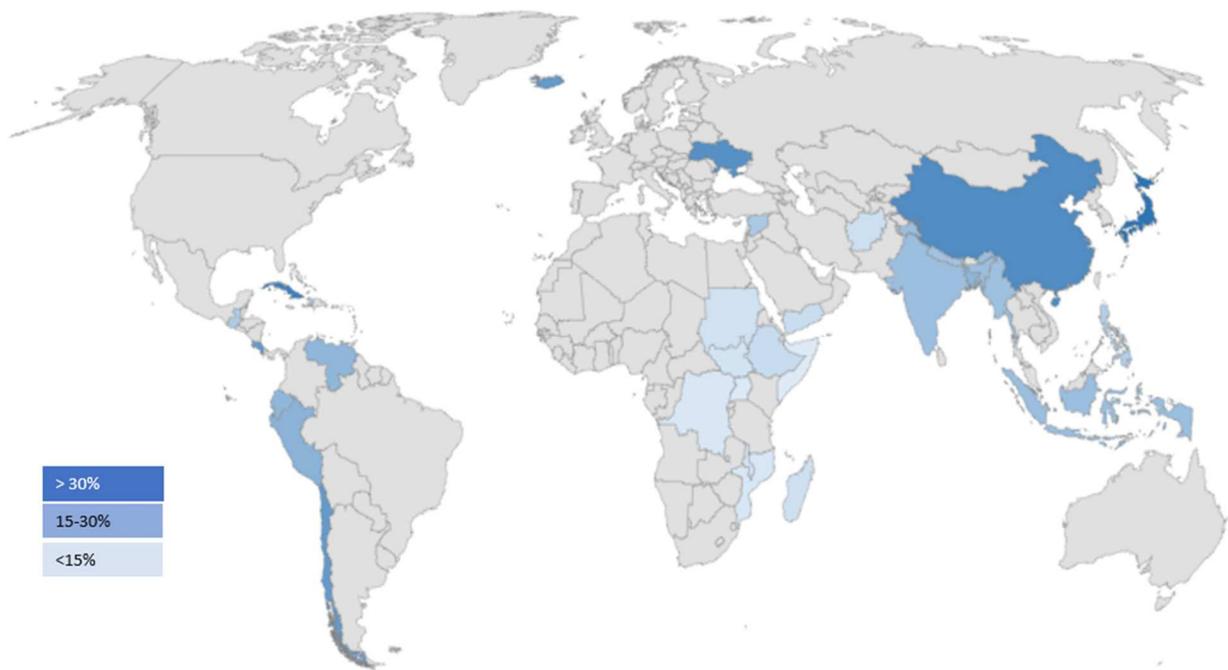
### **Disaster “Hotspot” Countries**

Disaster “hotspots” are geographic areas where the risk from one or more natural hazards, including earthquakes, floods, drought, cyclones and landslides, is relatively high and/or associated with conflict and violence. The list of disaster-prone “hotspot” countries was drawn from the 2018 Global Report on Internal Displacement by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT), the global disaster database maintained by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters

(CRED) in Brussels and the 2005 World Bank study *Natural Disaster Hotspots: A Global Risk Analysis*.

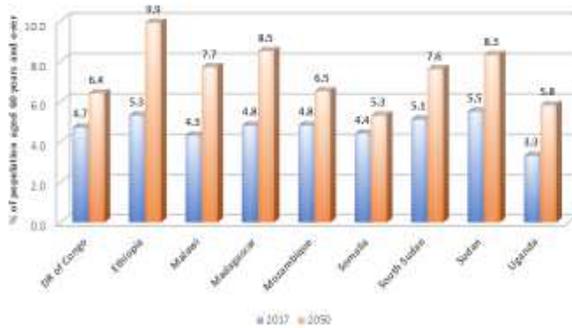
Identifying areas of relatively high disaster risk potential is important to better inform humanitarians, development planners and policy and decision makers. Disaster risk information provides a rational basis for disaster preparedness, particularly in prioritizing risk-reduction efforts and identifying areas where risk management is most needed.

## “Hotspot” Countries

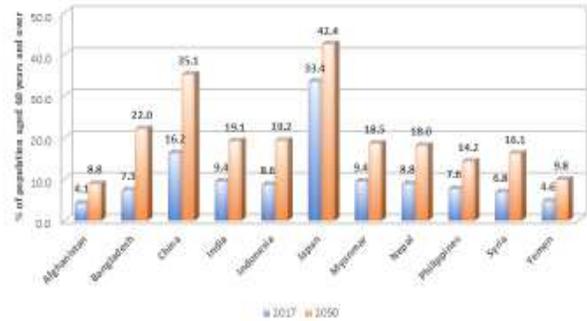


# Per Cent of Population 60 and Over 2017 and 2050

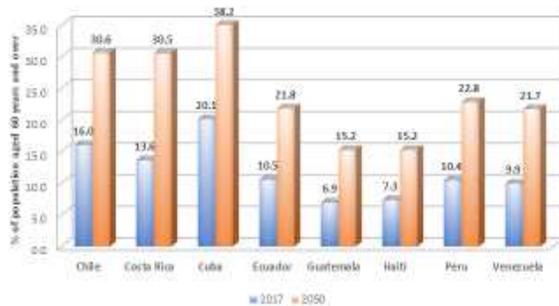
## Africa



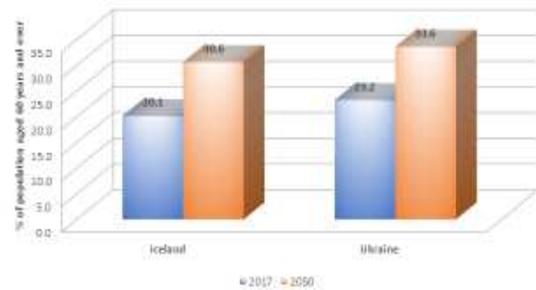
## Asia



## Latin America & Caribbean



## Europe



Source: Based on data from the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). World Population Ageing 2017 (ST/ESA/SER.A/408).

Older persons are typically more at risk during disasters and crises not only because of the obvious physical decline that comes with ageing, such as lack of mobility, declining sight and hearing, and increased frailty. Vulnerability is also exacerbated by age discrimination which excludes and isolates the elderly. Discrimination and isolation frequently result in a lack of adequate and age-appropriate information and service provision especially during emergencies. Poverty, a lack of social protection and few livelihood opportunities heighten the vulnerability of many older persons. [HelpAge International, 2015]. Older persons who have only limited literacy are especially vulnerable as are those without identity documents such as birth certificates.

The elderly are largely invisible in disaster preparedness programmes, rescue efforts and reconstruction projects. Many have difficulty in accessing humanitarian aid and are not always included in support provided by economic and social recovery programmes. As a result, many become helpless in a crisis situation.

In times of emergency when disaster strikes without warning and normal routines are upset, older persons may become disoriented and afraid, especially if they are separated from their families. Many are less able to adapt to the changing situation. Those who are less mobile are not able to run for shelter, climb onto rooftops to escape flooding or walk long distances carrying their belongings on their backs. Most cannot expect to be carried out of harm's way. In many cases, older persons refuse or cannot leave their homes. Some stay behind to guard the family property and possessions. Some are abandoned by their families. Suffering from a lack of basic services and medical attention, they are most at risk of becoming casualties when disaster strikes.

Many older persons, especially those with chronic health conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, respiratory ailments and joint pain, have specific health and nutritional needs which are not always addressed. Such untreated chronic conditions may lead to severe complications such as stroke and increased levels of mortality. Even minor health conditions such as the common cold, when left untreated, can have serious consequences for the elderly. [HelpAge International, 2012a]. Medicines, vitamins, hearing aids, eyeglasses, and walking canes are often left behind or lost in the commotion or in flight and cannot be easily replaced or are too expensive to obtain.

Nutrition is also a big issue for older persons caught in humanitarian crises. Those who have specific nutritional needs, who are on restricted diets or who rely on micronutrient intake will not always be able to have these needs satisfied with the general distribution of food in times of disaster. Elderly with dental problems may not be able to eat the foods that are included in standard distributions. This makes older persons more vulnerable to disruptions in food security during times of disaster and crises. [Gonzalez, 2012; Fritsch, 2013]. Food distribution centers may be difficult for the elderly to get to and the food packages themselves may be too heavy for them to carry. Some older persons may not be able to cook. Older men may not even know how to cook for themselves.

Violations of human rights can both precipitate humanitarian crises and be precipitated by them, especially armed conflict and persecution. Displacement, breakdown in law and order, violence, poor governance, absence of accountability and corruption are hallmarks of many humanitarian situations and often result in human rights violations. Crises, in turn, are often accompanied by a lack of equal access to adequate health services, food, shelter and other humanitarian aid.

The elderly are particularly at risk of discrimination, abuse and neglect. Older women can be more vulnerable than men because they typically live longer than their male counterparts and are more likely to be widowed and alone. In many countries, widows do not inherit land and can become impoverished upon the death of a spouse. Those that are less educated, unskilled, and poor are more likely to be victims of physical, financial, familial and sexual abuse.

### **The Challenge of Accurate Data**

To adequately respond to the needs of the elderly caught in humanitarian situations, it is necessary to have accurate data on the age and sex of the population. Unfortunately, this information is extremely difficult to obtain since most available data refer to total affected populations. Whenever information is provided on specific groups, it usually refers only to the number of children, and

sometimes women. For example, when the International Organization for Migration reported on its response to the Syria crisis in 2018, it provided numbers of families or individuals receiving assistance but did not detail the ages of the recipients. Some of the information was provided by sex and, for some types of assistance, there was mention of the number of recipient students and children. [International Organization for Migration, 2018]. Many countries do not report disaggregated data to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and if they do, the data cover only a small percentage of the affected population. For example, in 2017, 136 countries reported at least some age-disaggregated data but this information covered only 38 per cent of the entire population of concern. [UNHCR, 2018].

### **Older Persons are Disproportionately Affected by Crises**

It has been estimated that approximately 26 million older people are affected by natural disasters each year. [Barbelet and Samuels, 2018]. However, there are few concrete data available on the numbers of older persons in humanitarian crises and disasters. For example, it is difficult to find accurate statistics of older persons affected in recent crises including the 2018 earthquake in Indonesia and the 2018 drought in East Africa. Workers on the ground providing relief to the victims of the 2019 cyclone in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe report that older people and their families are among those most affected by the flooding, but do not provide numbers. Moreover, needs assessment surveys of older persons in humanitarian situations do not provide a total picture of the number of older persons in harm's way because they typically sample only a part of the elderly population. [HelpAge International, 2019a; HelpAge International, 2019b; HelpAge International, 2018c]. Indeed, although older persons, especially those with disabilities, are among those most at risk, little is known about their particular experiences. Their rights and needs are largely overlooked in humanitarian response. [HelpAge International, 2018b].

In Ethiopia, which experienced the worst drought and food insecurity crisis in decades, it is estimated that around 1 million or 8-10 per cent of those affected are older people and people with limited access. A large percentage of these people are older women. [HelpAge International, 2016].

The on-going military conflict in eastern Ukraine is disproportionately harming older people, especially older women and older persons with disabilities. The Humanitarian Country Team in Ukraine estimates that of the 3.5 million people in need of humanitarian and protection assistance, 30 per cent, or more than one million, are elderly, making Ukraine's humanitarian crisis the "oldest" in the world. [United Nations OCHA, 2019]. A 2018 baseline report showed that older women and men continue to be one of the most vulnerable groups impacted by the conflict. Displacement, family separation and isolation, and lack of access to essential goods continued to affect older women and men disproportionately. The suspension of social benefits and pensions for hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons, many of whom constitute older people and people with disabilities, has contributed to a sharp deterioration in the humanitarian situation in the area. Many of the most vulnerable older women and men, especially those with mobility limitations, disabilities or chronic illnesses, are at risk of being excluded from conventional forms of aid distributions. [HelpAge International, 2018a].

Some information is available from earlier disasters. For example, in Nepal, of 678 people hospitalized as a result of the 2015 earthquake, 18 per cent were over the age of 60, yet only eight per cent of the population was aged 60 or over. [Shami and Skinner, 2016]. Thirty-eight percent of those who died as a result of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 were people aged over 60, even though this age group accounted for only seven percent of the local population. [HelpAge International/COSI, 2014b].

### **Capacity Development: Including Older Persons in Disaster Preparedness, Rescue Efforts and Recovery Programmes**

There is an urgent need for sensitizing policymakers and the general public to the necessity of including older persons in humanitarian planning. The challenge is to strengthen national and local capacity to formulate appropriate policies and implement programmes to address changing age structures and to meet the needs of all age groups, especially older persons, who are often among the most vulnerable. Policymakers should be aware that the elderly are entitled to the same basic human rights, security and dignity as other groups in society. Their voices should be heard.

It is particularly important that humanitarian aid workers and volunteers be fully trained in ways to include older persons in their work to ensure that no elderly person is left behind. Training should have practical guidance on including older persons in disaster preparedness, rescue efforts and recovery programmes so that their particular vulnerabilities, specific needs and potential contributions are addressed during all stages of an emergency. Guidelines and checklists should include specific references to older persons.

It is also important to make humanitarian aid workers aware that not all elderly are helpless recipients but that many can be tapped for their wisdom, know-how and experience in times of crises. Many older women are the primary caregivers of their children and grandchildren, orphans, as well as other vulnerable groups during emergencies. Older women often act as midwives and many are familiar with traditional healing practices and alternative medicine.

The knowledge and skills that older persons have accumulated over their lifetimes can be invaluable in understanding and predicting local environmental events and their impacts. As village elders and keepers of knowledge, culture and tradition, older persons can be a valuable source of information on local hazard and risk profiles and sustainable community-based mitigation strategies. For example, in rural Peru, older indigenous persons have been predicting weather by observing early warning signals from nature such as the height of birds' nests and the call of seagulls. In response to the challenge of global warming, they are accessing scientific information to help fine-tune their observations since fauna and flora are changing behavior patterns. The elderly then encourage farmers to take appropriate prevention and adaptation measures to safeguard their crops. [Hartog, 2014].

## **Capacity Development: Building Resilience of Older Persons**

Policymakers and humanitarian workers should be made aware that building resilience is the best way to prepare older persons to cope with crises. A good step in this direction is the provision of a secure income and access to affordable essential health and social services so that older persons can live with dignity and security. Social protection schemes which ensure a minimum income and basic health services for poor elderly will provide a safety net that contributes to the postponement of disability and prevention of impoverishment in old age. [UNFPA and HelpAge International, 2012]. Promotion of active ageing, including participation in part-time employment, volunteering, mentoring, continuing education, training, social programmes, senior citizen centers and hobbies all serve to build confidence, independence and the resilience necessary to help face crises. Even providing older persons with ordinary items, such as canes, walking sticks, eyeglasses and hearing aids can significantly assist them in crises by helping them reach food distribution points, access humanitarian assistance, prepare food or collect firewood. [Hartog, 2014].

Older people's associations (OPAs), which are invaluable in the community, need to be encouraged and supported. Besides providing social support and assisting the poorest, most frail and sick older persons, OPAs play an important role in serving as a voice of the voiceless. They create social cohesion within the older community and act as a network for older persons that can be vital in identifying vulnerabilities and capacities within the community. [Hartog, 2014]. For example, a volunteer network of older persons identified by OPAs following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti helped vulnerable elderly receive humanitarian assistance by accompanying them to distribution sites. The network also warned older persons of upcoming danger and helped evacuate the elderly in subsequent earthquakes. [Hartog 2014].

Large numbers of older persons already live in conflict and disaster-prone areas. As the number of conflicts and humanitarian situations increase throughout the world, more older persons will be affected. As the numbers of elderly increase, even more will be in harm's way. Older persons cannot be forgotten but must be included in all stages of humanitarian preparedness, rescue efforts and recovery programmes. Many of them are more vulnerable and depend on others for their survival in crises. Others can contribute in all phases of humanitarian work.

As the world's populations become increasingly aged, it is more important than ever that policymakers formulate policies, including humanitarian preparedness and response, that specifically address the situation of older persons in emergency and humanitarian disaster situations.

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