

CHANGING AGE STRUCTURES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA

A statement by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

Africa is the youngest continent in the world in terms of the age structure. But the numbers of older people in Africa will change more dramatically than in any other region of the world. Consequently, the challenges posed by increasing numbers of older persons will be more important in Africa than elsewhere in the world because Africa is the continent with the highest levels of poverty as well as HIV/AIDS prevalence rates which affect the quality of life of every individual, especially the elderly women. In this regard, ECA is actively engaged, in partnership with DESA and other regional commissions, in activities leading to the review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging (MIPAA).

Africa will have the fastest growing numbers of the elderly by 2050, from approximately 42 million in 2002 to approximately 205 million in 2050. This dramatic change is taking place in an environment where the family institution which used to take care of all members, including the elderly, has continued to break down as a result of increased migration (especially from rural to urban areas), urbanization, social and political instability as well as HIV/AIDS. With regard to HIV/AIDS, the elderly have found themselves losing their support from own children, either taken sick by HIV/AIDS or dead from the same disease or due to other factors, to being income earners, and supporters and active care givers to own children and grandchildren. There is a need, therefore, to intensify efforts to deal with the issue of HIV/AIDS and its effects on different age segments of the population. Over the last couple of years, ECA has actively participated in a partnership HIV/AIDS treatment acceleration programme (with WHO, World Bank and the Governments of Burkina Faso, Ghana and Mozambique. Its major niche is to draw lessons learned from project activities to enrich knowledge sharing within the region. The Commission's advocacy activities on HIV/AIDS are also continuing.

It is observed, however, that being the youngest continent, Africa consists of countries with the youngest population such as Mali, Niger and Uganda whose median age is 16 years or less. Consequently, whereas the population of the working age group is expected to decline in the future in the more developed regions of the world (to about 52 per cent by 2050), in Africa (like in most least developed countries) the corresponding proportion will rise from 53 per cent to 61 per cent by 2050. This implies an economic opportunity for growth. But this can

only be realized if adequate gainful employment is created for the working age population, especially for the youth. Therefore, creation of gainful employment remains one of the greatest challenges for Africa; and this was affirmed in the 2004 Ougadougou Summit of Heads of State and Government on Employment and Poverty Alleviation.

The Heads of State and Government acknowledged that we need to urgently formulate and implement policies geared towards overcoming jobless growth; ensure increased employment for women; and pay priority attention to creating opportunities for youth employment. Widespread youth unemployment can lead to political and social instability. Moreover, lack of decent employment opportunities for young women and men has forced many of them to risk their lives and try to get to the shores of Europe and the Middle East using dangerous means of transport. The pictures we see on television screens of our youth trying to reach the Canary Islands are indeed distressing and we need to find urgent solutions to the root causes of why they have to risk their lives in such a manner. These issues formed part of ECA's participation in the High Level Dialogue (HLD) on international migration and development held last year, and were highlighted in a report on *International Migration and Development: Implications for Africa*.

The ECA continues to work within the ambit of the UN inter agency consultation in support of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) to enhance its policy analysis and advocacy on a range of development issues, including employment and poverty alleviation. The Commission is a member of a number of clusters facilitating the process of consultation, including the cluster on *Human Resources Development, Employment and HIV/AIDS*.