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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

High-level Meeting on the Regional Review of the Madrid International Plan
of Action on Ageing (MIPAA)

9-11 October 2007
Macao, China

Country Report

*Malaysia**

* This paper was prepared by the Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia, for the High-level Meeting on the Regional Review of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), 9-11 October 2007, Macao, China. The views expressed do not necessary reflect those of the United Nations. The paper has been reproduced as submitted.



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AGEING IN MALAYSIA: SOME SELECTED PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

Like other developing countries, Malaysia's population is also undergoing demographic transition. The speed of demographic transition in Malaysia is moderate with a crude death rate that has been declining since 1965. The life expectancy for Malaysians has improved remarkably. The life expectancy at birth stands at 70.6 years for male and 76.4 years for female as of 2005. The 2000 Census showed that 6.2 per cent or 1.452 million people, were aged 60 or over and that by the year 2020 about 9.5 per cent of the country's population will be aged 60 years and over. Indeed, Malaysia has been experiencing improved health, longer life expectancy, low mortality as well as declining fertility and these have brought changes in the demographic profile of the country's population.

In terms of development, the philosophy underlying Malaysia's development initiatives is that growth is not to be pursued as an end in itself. Growth has always to be accompanied by equitable distribution of wealth so that all segments of society benefit from the growth process.

The National Policy for the Elderly

The National Policy for the Elderly was formulated in 1995, with the objective of creating a society of elderly people who are contented and possess a high sense of self worth and dignity, by optimizing their potential and ensuring that they enjoy every opportunity as well as the care and protection of members of their family, society and nation. Specifically, the policy has the objectives of upgrading the dignity and self-worth of senior citizens within the family, society and nation, and of improving the potential of older persons so that they can continue to be productive in national development. This policy is currently being reviewed as to better enhance the developmental aspect of older persons in the country.

Profile of Malaysia's ageing population

The rate of growth of senior citizens shows spatial variations within Malaysia, with a larger proportion of the elderly population living in the rural areas. The slow growth rate of the elderly population in urban areas is partly due to the urban-migration of the young rural population to the urban areas in search of employment and education opportunities, as well as the influx of foreign labour into Malaysia.

The current proportion of ageing population is about 7 per cent to the total population of 26 million people. This is due to the low mortality rate and the low fertility rate. The fertility rate has fallen from 6.7 children per woman in 1987 to 3.3 in 1996. The figure is estimated to drop further to 2.6 between 2005 and 2010. The dependency ratio of the working age (15-64 years old) to elderly is 15 working-age persons in 2000 to 11 working-age persons in 2004. It is estimated that the proportion of older persons will reach 15 per cent of the total population in 2035.

Priority Direction I: Older persons and development

In line with the Madrid International Plan of Action, Malaysia has shifted from a welfare approach to a developmental approach to ensure active and productive ageing. Programmes introduced emphasise community participation that includes promotion of healthy lifestyles as well as social and recreation activities. These programmes also encourage volunteerism among older persons as well as intergenerational activities, lifelong learning programmes and promoting learning skills such as ICT.

Active participation in society and development

- The older persons are actively involved in society and development through their participation in NGOs such as the Central Welfare Committee (CWC), National Council of Senior Citizens Organisation of Malaysia (NACSCOM) and Golden Age Welfare Association of Malaysia. The NGOs play an active role and contribute in the decision making process by participating in dialogues and forums organised by relevant ministries, such as in the pre-focus budget dialogue and the preparation of national development plans. They contributed in giving views and ideas on various issues relating to their needs.

- The NGOs also participate and become members in the National Advisory and Consultative Council for Older Persons. The council consists of 34 members from various government agencies, NGOs, private sectors and individuals who have interest on ageing issues. The National Advisory Council has been actively holding meetings and discussion since 2002 with the objective of enhancing the quality of life and well being of older persons in this country.

Work and the ageing labour force

- Employment opportunities for older persons were provided by the Ministry of Human Resource whereby employers were allowed to claim 100 per cent tax rebate on retraining costs for older persons taken in as employees.
- The Ministry also produces a directory of the retirees to better facilitate the older persons to be re-employed. At the same time, retraining and skill upgrading are carried out to enhance their knowledge due to the rapid technological changes and increasing need for skilled workers. The Government has also started the initiative to re-employ retirees on a contractual basis.
- The Government has also increased the mandatory retirement age in the public sector from 55 years to 56 years old. This extension will allow civil servants to work longer and utilise their experience and skills for development.

Access to knowledge, education and training

- The 'lifelong learning' programme and retraining of older persons aims at capacity building and empowering older persons with the necessary skills and knowledge to gain employment and continue contributing economically.
- In recognising the importance of ageing, the government has set up the Institute of Gerontology at the *Universiti Putra Malaysia* (UPM) that specialises in research and findings related to ageing. These findings will contribute in the formulation of policies that reflect the developmental aspect and needs of older persons in the country.

- Lifelong learning programmes with flexible entry requirements were provided by community colleges as well as by public and private institutions of higher education. The community colleges offered short-term courses while institutions of higher education provided extension education programmes.
- In line with this, several institutions of higher education has started offering courses, namely, the Open University of Malaysia that offer courses to older persons of 55 years and above with subsidized fees and the *Universiti Sains Malaysia* that has a special intake for older persons aged 50 years or above with 10 years working experience in the related areas.

Intergenerational solidarity

- To foster the intergenerational solidarity between older persons and younger generation, the Government focuses on strengthening the family structure through the design, implementation and expansion of preventive, supportive and rehabilitative programmes that emphasise on a culture of mutual respect, caring and sharing resources and responsibilities among the family members.

Income security, social protection/social security and poverty prevention

- Formal social protection in Malaysia includes the Employees Provident Fund (EPF), the Social Security Organisation (SOCSO), the Government Pension Scheme for Civil Servants, the Old Age Benefit Scheme for the Armed Forces, and private sector provident and pension funds. After the 1990s, the financial institutions started offering facilities for older persons to provide income security and better financial options. The Central Bank of Malaysia also offers attractive saving bonds for the elderly to enable them to gain better returns, such as the Merdeka Bond that guaranteed annual tax-free return for retired persons to encourage savings.
- The EPF scheme is mandatory for those in the formal sector, but it also allows those who are self-employed to contribute towards the fund. This flexibility is aimed at encouraging savings for old age.

- The Government has also taken steps in amending the EPF to increase the proportion of contribution fund for saving. The new amendment allows contributor above 55 years old to continue to contribute to the fund and allows staggered withdrawals or fixed amount of withdrawals each month. The amendment allows the retirees to better plan their finances and in ensuring adequate savings for sustainable living in their old age.
- However, the social security for older persons in the informal sector relies mostly on their savings and financial support from their children. As most of the older persons are involved in informal sectors, they tend to rely on their working children for social support and security. Savings for the old age still remains the best option to make older persons more independent.
- The Government also provides financial assistance to older persons. Recently the Government has revised the income security for old age by increasing the monthly allowance from RM200 (US\$58) per month to RM300 (US\$87) per month. The allowances are given to those over 60 who have no family support network and who are unable to support themselves financially. The thrust of this form of poverty prevention program is to encourage the family members to continue taking care of the elderly by reducing the financial burden. This programme enables older persons to remain within the family unit and only to consider admission to institutional care as the last resort.
- In addition, the Government also gave assistance to older persons to generate their own income. The programme aims to empower older persons to be self-reliant by improving their livelihood through income generating projects. Each participant is given a launching grant amounting to RM2,700 to carry out viable economic projects.

Priority Direction II: Advancing health and well-being into old age

Health promotion and well-being throughout life

The approach taken by the Government aims to promote healthy, active and productive ageing by empowering the older persons, family and community

with knowledge, skills, an enabling environment, and the provision of optimal health care services at all levels and by all sectors.

In this regard, preventive, early screening and detection services will be enhanced to reduce the disease burden and cost of curative and rehabilitative care. The government will also promote the concept of 'lifelong wellness' and a proactive approach to maintain health through awareness-raising initiatives in order to enhance better health among the public.

- Among the activities for promotion and prevention are health education and information through talks, seminars or public forums; assessment of activity of daily living (ADL); and screening for early stage of illness such as breast examination and cervical cytology for women, and heart disease assessment for both sexes.
- In 2006, about 70% of the rural health clinics have implemented health care for the older persons, and four of the hospitals had dedicated units for treatment of the elderly (geriatric unit).
- Presently, the MOH has 610 clinics that promotes health care through public education, screening and health appraisal, treatment and counseling, home visits, nursing, physio and occupational therapy and recreational. The MOH has also formed about 234 Elderly Clubs in the health clinics.

Universal and equal access to health-care services

- The clinic and hospital care in Malaysia is made 'elderly friendly' by giving them priority in waiting lines, and ensuring their comfort while waiting for treatment. In addition, pensioners get free treatment, and poor elderly can get their hospital fees waived. Treatments of specific illnesses, including HIV/AIDS, also include referrals to higher levels of care that facilitates the navigation of the patient smoothly. Another very important feature of medical care for the older persons in Malaysia is the multi-disciplinary approach. This includes a good geriatric assessment of the patient.
- Physiotherapy and other forms of rehabilitation services are offered at primary and hospital levels. To reduce hospital stay, the older persons

can avail of such services at some of the primary clinics, which are gradually being expanded in coverage. Home care nursing, another very important component of extended care, is being expanded by the MOH and has been piloted in several states.

Training of care providers and health professionals

- There have been many efforts by the Ministry of Health to educate and train the health staff in various areas of elderly health care.
- In the clinical field, doctors are encouraged to do specialist training in geriatrics. Related training is also encouraged such as in rehabilitative medicine and in palliative medicine. A number of nurses and medical assistants have undergone training in health care nursing/management.
- In public health, public health practitioners have undergone short-term training in social geriatrics and gerontology, and public health nurses and medical assistants have undergone special training in health care for the older persons.
- There is a module developed by the MOH in 1996 for in-service training of health care providers at primary level on health care for the older persons. Up to December 2006, more than 18,000 health staff (Medical and Health Officers, Dental Officers, Nurses, Physiotherapists, Occupational Therapists and Medical Assistants) have undergone training for health care of the elderly.
- There is also training for community and family caregivers for which a module has been developed. More than 15,000 personnel have been trained for care of the elderly (care givers). These included health personnel, elderly care givers, non-governmental organisations, voluntary bodies and other agencies.
- In addition to services available in the public sector, private hospitals have also started providing geriatric services.

Priority Direction III: Ensuring enabling and supportive environments

Various amenities and privileges for older persons were introduced, such as the provision of special counters and seating areas by Government agencies that offer counter services and rebates of 50 per cent on fares for domestic air and rail travel.

Housing and the living environment

Housing is a basic social need and provision of adequate, quality and affordable housing is a national imperative. The Government has set housing standards aiming at improving the quality of life and well-being of the population.

- Public housing authorities allocate ground-floor flats to families with aged or disabled members. This helps in promoting independent living and ageing in the community,
- Under the Ministry of Housing and Local Authorities, the open registration for housing gives priority to applicants with older persons in the family to acquire low cost housing.
- The private sector has started the initiative to develop integrated housing concept to enhance independent living among the elderly. Several developers have provided health facilities in their housing areas, bringing care closer to home. Also available are housing alternatives for the elderly, such as purchasing or renting a unit with various facilities and services.
- The Government also continuously upgrading the quality of life through better living conditions. The government has implemented standards for the inside and outside environment towards creating a barrier-free environment using the universal design.
- To facilitate the usage and convenience of older persons in terms of accessibility, ramps, zebra crossings, side walk pavement and recreational infrastructure were built at strategic locations. In improving the functionality of older persons with disability, various assistive devices have been given to older persons such as orthopedic devices,

prosthetic, hearing aids, wheel chairs, spectacles and walking sticks. The devices assist older person with disabilities to carry out their daily activity living without being fully dependent to others.

Care and support caregivers

- Among the smart partnership programme with the NGOs is the setting up of **Day Care Centres** for the elderly. This programme emphasises the promotion of healthy and active ageing of older persons in the community as well as provision of social support system to the families of older persons.
- The day care centre acts as a platform for older persons to interact with peers, promoting intergenerational activities, recreation activities, health talks and learning. The programme provides an avenue for older persons to integrate with society. Presently, there are about 19 'Day Care Centres' throughout the country. The NGOs also play a significant role in providing services to the community by setting up homes for the elderly within the community. These centres are run by the Central Welfare Committee and the National Council of Senior Citizens Organisation of Malaysia.
- The Government has also set up **Activity Centres for Older Persons**, which cater for the needs of the older persons. These centres are located in densely populated areas. Local authorities as well as housing developers participate in this programme by providing the premises and infrastructure, while administration of the centre is run by the community. In this way, the Government utilizes the resources that are available within the community for the benefits of not only the older persons but the society at large. The Government is presently expanding this programme to other parts of the country.
- **Home Help Services** is a community based service rendered to older persons to encourage them to live with their families for as long as possible and admission to an institution is only to be considered as a last resort. The approach is reaching out to older persons who need help in the community. The target group is the poor older persons receiving financial assistance from the Social Welfare Department. This project has been successfully carried out and will be expanded to other

states in Malaysia. The volunteers conduct home visits and perform activities like feeding, bathing, dressing, grooming, house cleaning, laundry, walking companion, advisory, personal errands, medication reminders, accompanying visits to doctor, and shopping for essential things.

- The Government also introduced a Home Help Mobility programme that provides transportation services for the needy and poor older persons to go to the hospital and clinic. In addition, a mobile welfare unit, *Unit Mayang* has been set up with the objective of making available welfare services direct to the community. The Unit provides professional services such as counseling beside processing applications for financial aid and the making of payments, registration of people with disabilities, advocacy as well as disaster relief operations.

Challenges and conclusion

The main challenges facing Malaysia with regard to the ageing population are in providing more specialised health care for older persons; the availability of health care in urban and rural areas; improving income and social security for the informal sector and improving facilities and services in the rural areas.

The Government continues to undertake social development programmes aimed at strengthening family units as well as improving the quality of life of the elderly. Taking cognisance of the socio-economic implications of the increasing proportion of the elderly, programmes for the aged are being shifted from a welfare approach to one that promotes active and productive ageing.

Measures will be undertaken to provide for an environment for the elderly to remain healthy, active and secure while being able to age with dignity and respect as well as leading independent and fulfilling lives as integral members of their families, communities and country. Programmes to create greater awareness among family members and the community in caring especially for the elderly will be undertaken. Community level participation will be enhanced through a strong network of community services and the creation of opportunities for their engagement in social and economic activities.