

THE PHILIPPINE RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES OF AGEING

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INTRODUCTION

The older persons (a segment of the population who are 60 years old and above) serve as the bridge of the legacies of one generation to another. Whatever good society enjoys today reflects the goodness of the humanity the older persons have nurtured during their time.

The Philippines is a country that recognizes the older persons as part of its human resource. In a country that considers the family as a basic unit of society, the central role played by the elderly in the development of their families and communities could not be underestimated. Thus, in affirming the significant contribution of the older persons, the Philippines recognizes the need to put in place policies and programs that do not only entitle the elderly to adequate social services, promotion of their full employment and to raise their standard of living but also actualize opportunities for continued and active participation in national development.

THE SITUATION OF OLDER PERSONS IN THE PHILIPPINES

With the population reaching about 80 million today, the older persons population has likewise steadily increased generally brought about by developments in health care and consequently increasing life expectancy. There is an estimated 5.2 million elderly Filipinos or about 6.4% of the population. By 2020, the elderly population is estimated to increase to 9.5% of the population.

The traditional high regard for older persons remains characteristic of Filipino families. But this notwithstanding, their special needs such as health care, housing, income security and other social services need to be addressed not only by their families and communities but by the whole government machinery. They are vulnerable to neglect as the pressures of economic survival impinge on Filipino families. In 1970, for every one elderly there are about 11 working people from whom support could be drawn. By 2020, studies indicate that there will only be 6 people of productive age to support the elderly.

Among the many psychosocial concerns of older persons, the elderly health poses the greatest challenge to the government today. There has been a noted high mortality rate from otherwise preventable diseases. Lifestyle related diseases such as heart disease, diseases of the vascular system, diabetes mellitus and chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (COPDs) as well as iron deficiency anemia are notably prevalent. From the response end, the country's public health care system has not adjusted adequately to meet the health needs of the elderly. To date, the ratio of geriatricians to elderlies is registered at 1:186,839. There is also a noted lack of geriatric wards in government hospitals. Most older persons have low incomes and therefore could ill afford private health care. Moreover in 1997, the proportion of older persons who have social security coverage was only registered at about 12%. Thus, even if the health care services are available, the elderly population have limited capacity to have access to said services.

Globalization and modernization have tremendous impact on the family system. The exodus of working age adults to jobs abroad has established a pattern of the older persons assuming surrogate parental roles. To them is entrusted the responsibility of providing parental care over their grandchildren whose parents have left as overseas workers. This imposes undue strain on the physical, psycho social and financial capacities of older persons. On the other hand, given the limited income of families, it is the needs of the elderly that are sacrificed over the needs of the younger children. This puts the elderly to a situation of disadvantage.

NATIONAL POLICIES AND PLAN OF ACTION FOR OLDER PERSONS

The Philippine Constitution clearly articulates the broad policy framework relative to older persons. Article XV, Section 4 provides that "it is the duty of the family to take care of its elderly members while the state may design programs of social security for them". This implies the country's adherence to the prevention of age discrimination and the promotion of productive aging. The aspirations, knowledge and energy of older persons need to be effectively channeled in the process of national economic and social development. On the other hand, the Philippines supports global agreements on ageing as formulated during the 1982 First World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna. Likewise, it affirmed its support to the 1992 UN General Assembly's commitment to formulate a Plan of Action on Ageing for the 21st Century. In 1998, the Philippines participated in the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) sponsored conference that adopted the Macao Plan of Action for Asia and the Pacific. In 2002, ESCAP prepared and endorsed guidelines on the Macao Plan of Action as policy reference for government and other concerned entities.

Translating into action the enabling policies of global and domestic dimensions, the Office of the President issued last July 17, 2000 Executive Order No. 266 which approved and adopted the Philippine Plan of Action for Older Persons (PPAOP) for 1999-2004. The Executive Order provided for the organization of an inter-agency committee that will shepherd the implementation of the action plan. The inter agency committee is chaired by the Department of Social Welfare and Development with the Department of Finance as co-chair. All other relevant executive offices of government including non-government organizations such as the National Federation of Senior Citizens Association of the Philippines (NFSCAP) and the Coalition of Social Services for the Elderly (COSE) as members.

The Philippine Plan of Action for Older Persons contained the country's vision for older persons and the major action steps to institute appropriate policies, strategies, mechanisms and programs/projects. The PPAOP focused on 8 major areas of concern with a designated focal agency:

Concern	Focal Agency
1) Older Persons and the Family	- Dept. of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)
2) Social Position of Older Persons	- Dept. of Interior and Local Government (DILG)
3) Social Services and Community	- Coalition of Social Services for the Elderly (COSE)
4) Continuing Education / Learning among Older Persons	- Dept. of Education (DepED)
5) Older Persons and the Market	- Dept. of Trade and Industry (DTI)
6) Health and Nutrition	- Dept. of Health (DOH)
7) Housing, Transportation and Built Environment	- Dept. of Transportation and Communications (DOTC)
8) Income Security, Maintenance, and Employment	- Dept. of Finance (DOF)

On April 18-12, 2002, the Second World Assembly on Ageing was held in Madrid and on September 23-26 of the same year a regional follow-up to the

World Assembly was held in Shanghai. During the said for assembly, the 8 concerns for Older Persons were synthesized into 3 major concerns namely:

- 1) Older Persons and Development;
- 2) Advancing Health and Well-being into Old Age;
- 3) Ensuring, Enabling and Supportive Environment.

Inter-agency review of the PPAOP have indicated the following progress:

A. Older Persons and Development

In an effort to mainstream ageing into development policy, government has not only ensured the passage of the Senior Citizen's Act or Republic Act (RA 7432) but also the passage of the Senior Citizen's Center Act (RA 7876). Of late was also the passage of the Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2003 (RA 9257) which amended RA 7434. RA 9257 grants additional benefits and privileges to Senior Citizens. These privileges include a grant of 20% discounts on all prices of goods and services offered to the general public regardless of the amount purchased from all establishments as utilized by the senior citizen. These include among others hotels, restaurants, recreation centers, drug stores, hospitals, funeral parlors, theaters, cinema houses, places of culture, leisure and amusements. They are also exempt from payment of income taxes and enjoy free medical and dental privileges in government facilities and 20% discount is also granted for air and sea transportation expenses. Educational privileges are also granted to elderlies who wish to pursue further education. These aside from the social security benefits made available for retirees.

The good thing about the new law is that apart from the "enabling" provisions, it also carries the "compelling" clauses that would guarantee its enforcement. The availment of these privileges are ensured by the various government agencies but locally monitored by the Office of the Senior Citizens Affairs (OSCA) of every local government unit.

To maximize contributions of older persons in community development, a network of organizations of Senior Citizens for Volunteer Resource was organized as avenues for older persons involvement in community volunteer work.

B. Advancing Health and Well-being into Old Age

To ensure provision of quality health and long-term care, programs for institutionalizing family and community system of care giving for older persons were undertaken. This is supported by promotion of healthy lifestyles, training of community gerontologists, promotion of alternative family care and positive family values.

C. Ensuring, Enabling and Supportive Environment

Towards enhancing capacities of families and communities to provide support for older persons, a network of 331 day centers for the elderly were established in strategic towns and cities. A program for Neighborhood Support Services for Older Persons was piloted and expanded in several regions. Compliance to RA 7432 was ensured through issuance of nationally controlled Senior Citizen's Identification Cards and organization of OSCAs were monitored. Standards for accreditation of residential facilities for the elderly was formulated and enforced. Executive Order 105 was also issued which directed the provision of group/foster homes for neglected, abandoned, abused, detached and poor older persons and persons with disabilities. These are just but few of the many actions taken to ensure the welfare of the elderly.

CHALLENGES

The Philippines has undertaken tremendous efforts to pursue the policies of motivating and encouraging older persons to contribute to nation building and also encouraging families and communities to affirm the valued Filipino tradition of caring for the older persons. It has also advocated for the recognition of the rights of older persons to take their proper places in society as well as recognizing the important role of the private sector in the improvement of the welfare of senior citizens and by seeking their partnership. It has also put in place the building blocks for a comprehensive health care and rehabilitation program that will enable them to attain a more meaningful and productive lives. While big steps such as the passage of RA 9257 has been undertaken, reaching out to about 5 million older persons whose number is steadily growing every year remains a challenge.

There is a need for a more aggressive advocacy programs that should be undertaken throughout the year and making the Elderly Filipino Week the highpoint of the year round campaign. The education and information campaign on new policies and programs must reach a wider population of older persons thru collaboration with various stakeholders. On the other hand, the academe should be encouraged to undertake studies on older persons and share their

findings as basis for policy and program development. Related to this is the need to continuously update the government's database on older persons.

There is also the need to strengthen the 1,497 municipal Office of Senior Citizens Affairs (OSCA) as the focal point of all Older Persons programs/ services and activities at the local government level. This involves not only provision of budgetary subsidies from the local governments but also more importantly the provision of technical assistance and capability building support by the concerned national government agencies, to both the workers and volunteers of the OSCA. Likewise of critical importance is the establishment and development of local networks of service providers for older persons under the auspices of the OSCA.

There is a need to institutionalize the National Inter-Agency Committee (NIAC) of the Philippine Plan of Action for Older Persons as shepherd of the plan. The PPAOP should serve as the point of synergy of all efforts directed towards the promotion of the wellbeing of the older persons. The institutionalized activities may include periodic review of PPAOP and updating the same, encourage public discourse on issues of ageing, trends and interventions that must be undertaken by both government and the private sector leading to a more responsive programs and projects for the older persons. The NIAC structure should also be replicated at the regional level to ensure regional coordination of agencies and also monitor the operation of the OSCA and the enforcement of senior citizens privileges and benefits at the municipal level.

The overall country efforts will never succeed if pursued in isolation from the realities of ageing in the ASEAN region. The Philippines therefore must keep an open stance to opportunities for cross learning within the region particularly in the area of policy and program development; advocacy, social marketing, information and education; service delivery trends and networking as well as capability building of institutions providing frontline services for older persons. Likewise, the experiences of Japan in serving its older persons are rich sources of ideas which when adapted to Philippine context takes the form of enrichment of the existing array of programs meant to promote the quality of life of older persons. Thus ensuring quality of life ensures sustained contribution to national development by the country's special human resource--- the older persons.