PANEL DISCUSSION ON AGEING AND HEALTH

In 2013 the Regional Committee for the Western Pacific endorsed the Regional Framework for Action on Ageing and Health in the Western Pacific (2014–2019), and the World Health Assembly in 2016 endorsed the Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health (WHA69.3).

With the current Regional Framework coming to an end, the Regional Committee agenda includes a high-level panel discussion on ageing and health to exchange experiences of countries at different stages of population ageing. This document aims to facilitate the discussion by providing background information on the current situation and emerging issues from country experiences.

Member States are invited to share their experiences and perspectives on the trend of ageing populations and reflect on the way forward, including the importance of early action to prepare for the needs of an ageing society.
1. CURRENT SITUATION

Populations are rapidly ageing throughout the Western Pacific Region and across the world, with this Region containing some of the most “silver” societies globally. In recent decades, increasing life expectancies combined with decreasing fertility rates have made adults over the age of 65 years the fastest-growing age group in the Region. The opportunity for a longer life can be attributed to rapid social and economic development in the Region, as well as countless public health successes.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to leave no one behind, which can only be achieved by ensuring the best possible health and well-being of older people. In an effort to address population ageing and health and to provide guidance for Member States, the Regional Committee for the Western Pacific in 2013 endorsed the Regional Framework for Action on Ageing and Health in the Western Pacific (2014–2019). Three years later, the World Health Assembly endorsed the Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health (WHA69.3). WHO in the Western Pacific Region supported Member State efforts to collect and analyse evidence for decision-making on ageing and health, as well as efforts to strengthen national capacity.

Countries and areas in the Region are at different stages of population ageing (as of 2015):

- Aged society: those in which more than 14% of the population is above 65 years old (namely Australia, Hong Kong SAR (China), Japan and New Zealand)
- Ageing society: those in which more than 7% of population is above 65 years old (namely China, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Viet Nam)
- And those countries or areas that will experience an ageing society, meaning those in which less than 7% of the population is above 65 years old.
  (This classification includes all other countries and areas in the Region.)

2. EMERGING ISSUES FROM COUNTRY EXPERIENCES

Regardless of Member States’ current status of population ageing, experience suggests that early action to prepare for the needs of ageing populations is critical: the earlier the better to avert much larger issues in the future.
2.1 Population ageing is a global trend

All countries will inevitably experience ageing populations as a result of improvements in life expectancy. In many countries in the Region, populations are ageing faster due to declining fertility rates. Although the transition to ageing societies started sooner in high-income countries (for instance Australia, Japan and the Republic of Korea), the rate of change for other countries in the Region will be faster and lead to competing investment priorities, such as infrastructure and poverty reduction. Given the narrower window of opportunity and limited resources, countries are encouraged to plan ahead and implement necessary early action.

2.2 Ageing requires significant social changes

Member States can take many paths to ensure the same outcome for older people: health and well-being, rather than merely the absence of disease. A transformation not only of health systems but of all of society, based on national experiences and aligned with the SDGs, will be essential. Comprehensively preparing for an ageing society requires a whole-of-society approach, and many countries in the Region have achieved great progress to date in such efforts. Preparing for this demographic transition requires collaboration and teamwork from a broad range of sectors, including public and private entities, and various government ministries. Countries in the Region are leading the way with successful experiences from implementing strategies using a whole-of-society approach. However, their experiences indicate that significant time and commitment is needed, including intersectoral collaboration, negotiations and advocacy.

a. Older people have different health needs

Older people have a higher burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and age-specific diseases. As a result, countries will have to manage a larger burden of NCDs. Health systems will need to adapt to this shift from communicable diseases to NCDs in many countries in terms of financing, facilities, referral systems and human resources. By starting with the vision of a reoriented health system, countries can utilize “backcasting” to plan short-term goals on aspects from service delivery to training and financing that adapt and prepare health systems progressively with long-term goals of integrated, team-based and age-friendly health services.

b. Some older people experience social vulnerability and health inequity

WHO estimates that one in six older people worldwide face some form abuse – physical, verbal, psychological/emotional, sexual or financial. This often has consequences for health and well-being. As such, groups of older adults facing health inequities may require particular consideration in policy development and service planning.
c. Older people have more opportunities and motivation to contribute and be productive

As people live longer and healthier in old age, more older people will be available to contribute to society. This presents a unique opportunity presented by population ageing for countries to grasp by designing health (and other social) systems that support people as they age and offer possibilities for older people to work, learn and participate in their communities.

d. Older people thrive in community environments

Countries need to empower communities to provide tailored and mutual support to older people and serve as places of belonging where older people can thrive. This is especially important with increasing urbanization and shrinking family sizes in many countries, which creates an increasingly constrained environment for communities to support older people at a time when their need for community support is growing.

2.3 Early action yields greater benefits

The prevention of NCDs at earlier ages improves health outcomes, quality of life and productivity, thus ensuring sustainable development. Early engagement of the community is critical to build greater community ownership and empowerment to lessen the risk of trends such as urbanization reducing the community’s ability to offer support services for the older population. Anticipating future needs enables more efficient design and planning of health systems, avoiding the need for more significant and costly changes later.