

Preface

Africa is a relatively youthful continent, but projections suggest that in the future older people will constitute a proportionally larger share of the total population. The shift towards an ageing population is largely a result of improvements in food production and distribution, water and sanitation, advances in medical technology, as well as changes in child spacing and family size. The book shows that the ageing of the population in Africa varies considerably by region. The vast majority of the older populations are concentrated in the most populated regions of the continent. However, the elderly constitute a significant share of the total population of the less populated regions of Africa which have the most rapidly ageing populations in the continent. The ageing of the population is likely to have major and far-reaching implications for a continent with widespread poverty, decades of instability and civil strife, changing household structures, a heavy burden of communicable diseases, inadequate health systems, and weak or poorly managed political institutions.

Despite the evident need to understand issues that affect the health situation of the population, the book shows that in many parts of Africa there has not been adequate focus on the older population. As people live longer in Africa, the health profile of the population is likely to change as many chronic illnesses increase with age. As health deteriorates with advancing age, frailty and disability become more frequent and there is an increased demand for health care. The shift in the health profile of the population will have considerable implications for health service provision and resource allocation. Traditionally, in Africa, older people were primarily supported by the family. However, increasing development and urbanization, together with socioeconomic and political changes, have resulted in the weakening of traditional social support networks. As a result, the social realities of ageing as well as the implications for national policies need to be better understood.

This book documents the realities facing the population as they grow old in Africa. In many parts of Africa, the older population live in poverty, which often exacerbates the degenerative effects of ageing. A major challenge is access to health care, especially for those who are poor and living in rural areas where distances to clinics are great and public transport scarce. The AIDS pandemic is also adding to the stress of the older population as they increasingly have to take responsibility

for sick and/or dying children and grandchildren. This book is timely—as the number of older people in the population steadily increases there is an obvious need to explore their needs and contribution.

Information that is relevant and specific to the older population and their situation is a high priority area given the dearth of adequate data. Improving the quality and availability of data will assist in improving our understanding of the ageing process in Africa. In Africa the issue of population ageing has often been marginalized. It is therefore of vital importance that ageing issues are given serious consideration in national programmes and policies and governments in Africa take measures to face the challenges posed by population ageing.

Durban, South Africa

Pranitha Maharaj



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