

# COVID-19 and Older Persons

## *Africa Global HelpAge International Network Statement*

### **Background**

The Global HelpAge Network in Africa applauds the African Member States for their efforts to reduce the spread of the CORONAVIRUS 19 pandemic. We welcome the heightened prevention information dissemination and awareness raising, efforts to strengthen health services through increased supply of protection gear and necessary equipment, as well as the provision, and in some cases expansion of social protection measures.

Social protection measures are essential to support those at higher risk, vulnerable groups, the unemployed, and those whose jobs have come to an end in formal and informal employment as a result of the pandemic. Despite these great efforts, after just less than a month of restrictive measures, communities are struggling to survive, meet their basic needs and adhere to orders and guidelines set up by the authorities. The majority of business enterprises have been forced to close or face near collapse rendering a huge proportion of the population without a source of income.

Through our grassroots network we would like to draw the attention of African Member States to the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has on older persons, their families and communities in order to ensure their response and recovery interventions maintain equality and non-discrimination principles and meet the unique needs and rights of older persons. We reiterate that, while COVID-19 is not an older person's disease since it affects people of every age, the vast majority of deaths have been among older persons<sup>1</sup>.

### **Risks of COVID-19 on older persons' wellbeing and dignity**

Older persons and their families are likely to be greatly affected by the pandemic<sup>2</sup> because:

- The majority of the existing public laws, policies, programmes and services already exclude older persons. Social and economic policies are currently characterised by the absence of long-term care measures, inadequate social protection and age discriminatory employment mechanisms among others.
- Of underlying inequalities due to the absence of laws that adequately protect the rights and respond to the needs of older people.
- Older persons experience ageism, discrimination, neglect abuse and violence at family, community and society levels.
- Only 29.6 per cent of Africa's older population have access to a pension<sup>3</sup>. The majority of older persons derive their income from the informal sector.
- A large number of older persons live in rural areas where health care systems, water and sanitation, sources of income, access to information and infrastructure are poor.
- In urban settings, the majority of older persons live in densely populated informal settlements with an increasing number of homeless people, high poverty levels and where there is lack of water.
- 15% of displaced older persons live in a densely populated environment with inadequate services.
- Social distancing and lockdown cut-off extended family and traditional community support systems that older persons depend on for survival.
- Changes to operational infrastructures including transport and medical care systems to support the curbing of the pandemic put older persons at increased

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<sup>1</sup> HelpAge and Age Internal, 2020, Older people and COVID-19 in low- and middle-income countries and humanitarian settings

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, 2020, Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19

<sup>3</sup> ILO, 2007-19, World Social Protection Report

risk of further health complications as they miss their regular check-ups for underlying conditions.

- Health care systems are not able to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Medical equipment protective and hygiene material are limited, while medical professional workers and health workers are not adequately prepared to respond.
- There are inadequate disaggregated data collection procedures across the continent to help understand the trend of the pandemic for effective preparedness and response.
- Of limitations in cross border contingency plans to reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Of inadequate communication and age-appropriate technology facilities to create awareness in rural areas and the suburbs on protective measures against COVID 19.
- Of challenges to respecting social distancing in family settings due to cultural and religious determinants.

### **Social and economic contribution of older persons in society**

Older persons, often missed in the current COVID19 interventions because of the points raised above, play an important role in the social and economic development of the continent including, but not limited to:

- Food Security. The average age of small holder farmers is 60 years and they contribute to the bulk of the food production, many being women and poorly educated.<sup>4</sup>
- 40% to 60% of vulnerable children are under the care of older persons in Southern and Eastern Africa. Additionally, older persons also provide unpaid care work to orphans and vulnerable children and sick family members.
- Older persons continue to work as professionals in wide range of sectors including medicine, law, engineering, civil society, education, volunteerism and consultants. A substantial number of retired doctors are supporting COVID-19 response.
- Older persons play a critical role in peace and conflict resolution as they provide mediation.
- Older persons have knowledge that contributes to climate change mitigation.
- Older persons continue to support the majority of the youth who are unemployed and transfer their knowledge to them.
- Older persons are also primarily responsible for executing the home-based care model through which many African governments have shifted the burden of HIV and AIDS-related care from the state to families and communities.<sup>5</sup>

### **Call for Action**

To protect the lives, dignity and rights of the 69 million older people on the continent and enable them to continue to play their important role in society, the Africa Global HelpAge Network is calling on African governments, UN organizations, development partners and civil society to:

- Ensure older persons affected by COVID-19 have access to medical treatment on an equal basis with others and without discrimination and that protocols on allocating scarce medical resources are based on clinical assessment, medical need, scientific evidence and ethical principles and not on non-medical characteristics such as age or social worth.
- Raise awareness of and tailor information on COVID-19 to older persons in rural areas and who are homeless, using community structures and local languages so that older persons are fully informed about the disease, prevention, protection and treatment measures.
- Include the unique needs and rights of older persons in any training and capacity-building activities currently ongoing various sector such as health, violence and abuse, local authority, humanitarian among other due to the higher risks they face because of the pandemic.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.panap.net/campaigns/save-our-rice/rice-events/cora/youth/post/2655>

<sup>5</sup> Mokomane. Z PhD, 2012, Role of Families in Social and Economic Empowerment of Individuals.

- Strengthen community services within health care systems and national health infrastructure to ensure older persons continue to access support and treatment of underlying health conditions during the COVID-19 response period.
- As the pandemic enters the community transmission face, raise awareness that everyone is at risk of acquiring the virus and the importance of everyone adhering to physical distancing and other containment measures to protect the whole population.
- Urgently increase and facilitate social protection, food, water and sanitation provision to ensure older persons continue to access basic needs on an equal basis with others and without discrimination in line with prevention and protective COVID-19 guidelines.
- Promote social support and intergenerational solidarity while maintaining physical distancing to ensure older persons connect with families, communities and society to avoid further isolating them.
- Ensure older persons have access to community structures and new technologies so they can access relevant services including information and protective materials.
- Utilize the expertise and infrastructure established by older persons' organizations to ensure COVID-19 response and recovery interventions are age-friendly, taking into consideration older persons living in rural, urban and refugee settings.
- Disaggregate COVID-19 data by age, gender and disability to monitor demographic and epidemiological trends to inform COVID-19 interventions.
- Focus on protecting farmers, the majority of whom are older persons, from contracting the virus in order to safeguard food security.
- Educate law enforcement agencies, the military and administrative officers on their role in offering security and implementing government movement restrictions with the least necessary force and to ensure security of homes and property.
- Strengthen mechanisms to prevent and respond to both gender and age-based violence, abuse and neglect in the COVID-19 response.
- Expand online education system to ensure members of older people households continue with their primary, secondary and tertiary education during the COVID-19 pandemic period.
- Ensure that revised UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan reflects specific risks faced by older people who are disproportionately affected by the virus, including provision of leadership and coordination toward an inclusive response by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).
- Support targeted actions towards older people within contributions to the COVID-19 appeal and other financial contributions to address the pandemic by the donors.
- Ensure recovery interventions include accelerated age-inclusive programmes while prioritizing the strengthening and expansion of social pensions.

For more information, questions or advice, contact Roseline Kihumba, Ag. Head of Network Coordination and Development, [roseline.kihumba@helpage.org](mailto:roseline.kihumba@helpage.org)

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**HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives. The HelpAge Africa Hub Secretariat is working with 48 network members and more than 100 network partners spread in 35 countries. More details of the network and how to join visit: <https://www.helpage.org/about-the-global-network/>**

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