

The Importance Of Taking A Life-Cycle Approach To Ageing In Malaysia — UNFPA

This year's United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Asia Pacific International Day of Older Persons (IDOP) entails a regional advocacy campaign, "For Every Age", underscoring the need for rights-based life-cycle policies to transform perceived demographic challenges into opportunities for all.

UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Director Bjorn Andersson stated in his official statement to mark the occasion, "We need to take action now. The megatrend of rapid demographic shifts is altering Asia-Pacific and our entire world."

Indeed, the Asia-Pacific region is the most rapidly ageing region in the world. By 2050, one in four people will be above the age of 60, most of whom will be women.

In light of the gendered impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to adapt a life-cycle approach with gender equality at its core.

It is by investing in each stage of life, starting from before a girl's birth to her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, that women — and entire countries — will be able to enjoy healthy and active ageing.

UNFPA Malaysia hosted a special presentation commemorating IDOP 2021, to highlight the importance of taking a life-cycle approach to population ageing in Malaysia.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), the nation will reach ageing status by 2030, with an estimated 15 per cent of Malaysians over 60 years of age.

Amidst the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and close to 18 months of varying stages of lockdown, it is essential to address both the unique opportunities and challenges experienced by older persons in Malaysia.

Klang Member of Parliament Charles Santiago's opening remarks emphasised a few of the disproportionate risks faced by older persons. Lockdowns have also increased older women's economic vulnerability, due to a lack of savings, in particular those working in informal sectors.

At the same time, many older persons living alone or as older couples with comorbidities have increased their Covid-19 risk and incidence of succumbing to the virus. This is also true for aged care home residents, especially those who have not been vaccinated in time.

He also highlighted the following core areas for Malaysia to remain inclusive of older persons' needs:

- Adequate social protection for older persons working in the informal sector, including rental budgets to address homelessness.
- Health care personnel trained to meet older persons' needs.
- Acknowledging and compensating care work of older persons in raising grandchildren.

- Specific programs to expand older persons horizons and make the most of their abilities to contribute to society.

Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor (PSWS) co-founder and consultant Irene Xavier further expanded on the fact that the Covid-19 crisis has a woman's face, and how this also rings true when it comes to gendered impacts on older women.

Xavier explained that older women were the first to lose their jobs as cleaners and factory workers in the informal sector at the start of the first lockdown, back in March 2020.

This loss of income, especially for daily wage earners has increased PSWS's outreach in meeting demands for food aid. Older women additionally suffered increased levels of gender-based violence from intimate partners and husbands due to their partners' hazardous or harmful levels of alcohol use during lockdown-related unemployment.

Older women also endured further difficulties in accessing social services and even vaccination appointments due to poor digital literacy and/or access.

Xavier recommended robust policy responses including social security across the life cycle, particularly as Employees Provident Fund (EPF) savings of older persons are insufficient to meet their daily needs or allow them to live their golden years with dignity.

During the broader discussion on issues impacting older persons in Malaysia, Dr Rahimah Ibrahim, deputy director of the Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing (MyAgeing), emphasised the importance of strengthening a healthy ageing framework, with the goal of bridging gaps between policy, research and practice.

Dr Rahimah expressed that a coordinated approach to promoting productive ageing through a national social protection system could reap lasting benefits as demand for aged care services is increasing.

However, she noted the need for uniformity in quality of care and affordability, as well as diversity of care options.

Hakim Hamzah, secretary-general of the Malaysian Red Crescent Society (MRCS), acknowledged the various challenges faced due to a breakdown in support systems for older persons over the pandemic. Many could no longer rely on their adult children's frequent visits back to their hometowns during ongoing lockdowns.

Beyond the decline in daily quality of life and psychosocial health, vaccine registrations among older persons were also low as a result of digital limitations.

He shared MRCS's efforts in providing vaccine equity for older persons in last mile communities via house-to-house vaccinations. MRCS's outreach involves vehicles, ambulances, medical equipment and health care personnel; which translates into an estimated 16 houses covered daily by each mobile vaccination unit.

So far, 1,383 older persons and 2,430 caregivers have been immunised in the Klang Valley, meeting MRCS's objective of leaving no one behind in efforts to ensure the most vulnerable are adequately protected against the virus.

With Malaysia expected to become an ageing nation by 2030, adequate preparations to address population ageing needs through a life cycle lens is no longer just optional, given the increased vulnerabilities of older persons exposed by the pandemic.

Recognising that older persons have a wealth of knowledge, experience and contributions and engaging with them will raise awareness and transform outdated stereotypes. Also of importance is investing in their well-being. This will require strategic, comprehensive, multi-sectoral, long-term collaborations between government and civil society at all levels.

Achieving the end goal of a society that respects, protects and empowers older persons will not only meet Malaysia's Sustainable Development Goals, but also opens up opportunities for a new "silver economy" in Malaysia, a critical part of national recovery in these challenging times.

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