

Lifelong Learning for the Third Age¹

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“At dusk do not say it is too late; do say that there is sunshine all over the sky.” (Chinese proverb)

Today, there are around 590 million people in the world aged 60 and over. With this figure expected to mount to 1.2 billion by the year 2025, public policy needs to find ways to encourage lifelong learning opportunities for the elderly. Lifelong learning can help retain the elderly in the workforce for a longer time period, thereby reducing the dependency ratio and poverty in general and can be an instrument for social and inter-generational cohesion. Developed countries like Sweden are already implementing innovative programs in this field. China’s University of the Third Age has over a million senior citizens enrolled. However, most developing countries, where the majority of the elderly population is illiterate, are far behind. Technology offers an increasing opportunity for reaching the elderly.

The Greatest Social Challenge of the 21st Century

The greatest social challenges of the 21st century will be the aging of human society. By the year 2025 the number of persons aged 60 and over (the “third age”) will increase from today’s 590 million to 1.2 billion. In Japan by 2020, over 25 percent of the population will be 60 or over. A few decades later, nearly every country in the world, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa (because of the AIDS epidemic), will have a similar percentage of the population aged 60 to 65 and over. The oldest old (over 80) are increasing the fastest; in very old age women outnumber men by 2:1. At the same time the percentage of the elderly who are chronically ill, at least in the developed world, is declining. In contrast to the developed countries, developing countries will become old before they become rich and the issue of the poverty of the elderly will be crucial. All countries will need to rethink public policy on pensions and on financing of health care and support services for the elderly, and come to grips with the reduction in the number of full time workers (aged 20 to 65) who in the past were expected to support the elderly and the young.

Why Lifelong Learning for the Third Age Is Fundamental

Lifelong learning for the “third age” will be an essential part of the new set of public policies and programs. There are four potential areas for learning which will help to meet the evolving economic and social needs of an aging population: (i) for individual health, (ii) to strengthen community and family, (iii) for productive employment, and (iv) for self enrichment.

Learning for individual health will help to reduce the human and financial burden of chronic health problems. For example, regular and appropriate checkups are needed to detect illnesses at an early stage. Diet, especially a low fat, low salt, is important to reduce heart disease and cancer. There is strong evidence that frequent physical exercise, even for the oldest, will reduce the possibility of illness. Finally, loneliness and a sense of lack of purpose can lead to mental illness, particularly depression, as well as physical health problems. The well educated understand the importance of these actions, but the poor do not. For a simple example, a study of the attitudes of elderly women in Barbados showed that the majority believed that even moderate exercise was dangerous to their health. Programs of information and education can change the elderly’s knowledge, attitudes, and action to help ensure a healthy and productive old age.

¹ This article is based on a meeting held in Washington, DC, June 1 and 2, 2000, “Inter-Regional Consultation on Aging of the Population,” hosted by the Inter-American Development Bank.

Learning can mobilize the elderly as a resource to strengthen communities and families and to enhance social cohesion. With increasing family mobility, a more competitive workplace, and both parents increasingly working, support systems are becoming more and more fragile and the risks of social disintegration are mounting. With both parents increasingly working, children are likely to be left in day-care centers of uncertain quality. Yet it is known that high quality developmentally oriented care of children aged 0-5 can have a profound impact on long-term achievement and even on a future adult's emotional and social stability. The elderly can be encouraged and trained to serve their own families as well as to undertake voluntary activities in the community. In particular, they can be taught the fundamentals of developmentally-oriented childcare for their own grandchildren as well as others.

There will also be a continuing need to train the elderly for service towards the handicapped and the chronically ill. Overall, the wisdom of the elderly with regard to child rearing, ethical behavior, and family and communities can be tapped to guide and benefit younger adults. The elderly can also act as watchdogs on political and social developments to which working families have little time to devote. Learning opportunities provided to the elderly can cover all these areas—training in developmental child care, developing community activities for elderly handicapped and chronically ill, supporting young families in trouble, and acting in the political arena.

With the decreasing numbers of population aged 20 to 65, lifelong learning will help the elderly to increasingly remain in the work force, as a means of reducing poverty, increasing economic growth, and giving a stronger sense of self value to the elderly themselves. While the elderly lose some skills, such as working in physically demanding and time-intensive jobs, overall they can continue to engage in occupations ranging from the most rudimentary to the most sophisticated. This is especially true if they can build on previous learned skills and do not need to work full time, and if the work environment can be adapted to their needs.

Public policy, including pension reforms, will need to encourage the elderly to remain in the labor force. While this is resisted today in some countries with current high unemployment rates, over the long run, retention of the elderly in the labor force will be essential for economic growth, since it will help to reduce the “dependency” ratio—the ratio of full time workers to the very young and very old who are outside the labor market. In many cases, the elderly will be able to use their existing skills. In other cases, they will require training in new skills, such as computer literacy. The elderly also can be trained in new productive roles in areas as varied as childcare, senior adult care, school assistance, security guarding, and conflict resolution. At the same time, it will be important to re-educate employers on the value of older workers and on how to adjust the work environment for the elderly.

In developing countries, finding a productive role for the elderly will be more difficult, since for many years to come large proportions of the elderly will be illiterate. Developing countries will need to find cost-effective means of providing functional literacy for the elderly.

Finally, learning for self-enrichment and empowerment of the elderly will clearly lead to better individual and social mental health. Self-enrichment leads to increased interactions among the elderly and enriches the whole fabric of public life. Learning for self-enrichment can also be a path leading towards an increased role of the elderly in the community and the labor market.

In short, there is a strong economic justification for a public investment in lifelong learning of the elderly. Keeping the elderly healthy pays off in reduced costs for care of chronic illnesses. Keeping seniors in the labor force reduces poverty and the dependency ratio. Involving the elderly in the community and the family increases social cohesion. Even self-enrichment programs strengthen the productive role and health of the elderly.

While a public role in financing learning activities is well justified, the cost to governments must be kept low in part because of competing demands for government funds but also because the elderly also gain economically, socially, and in personal health from nearly all learning, especially those related to productive employment. The elderly should therefore pay for at least part of the cost of nearly all learning opportunities. To ensure flexibility and lower costs, private agencies and NGO's rather than government should be the providers of learning for the elderly.

Public Policy and the Elderly: Country Cases

SWEDEN is typical of an advanced country with an aging population and a comprehensive policy for the aging, which includes adequate pensions, high quality health care, and well-equipped facilities and homes. Sweden is seeking to change its pension system to encourage the elderly to continue in working life. Sweden has begun to educate 40-year olds to prepare them for older life and is working to adapt the work environment to the elderly. Sweden has accepted the fact that lifelong learning is no longer a catchword—even in old age there is a need to change occupations. Sweden is building up centers for occupational health, educational systems for the elderly, and programs of information to change attitudes of employers. It is focusing on the concept that aging people are part of the solution—as the elderly work, they find a purpose and they meet social needs. In fact, the elderly in Sweden are now the backbone of public and community life.

Among developing countries **CHINA** has by far the largest program of learning for the elderly. The University of the Third Age² has 15,000 campuses enrolling one million people (still a low number considering the many millions of the elderly). Hundreds of newspapers and periodicals are available for the elderly. The government has an ongoing publicity campaign to retain traditional values, including the respect for the elderly, which is inherent in its culture. China is moving from a national-organization- and-enterprise base to a community-based system, from a wholly publicly financed system to a system encouraging mixed public and private financing. China is remarkable in its emphasis on the elderly because it is still a poor country but one which is in the midst of the profound demographic transition already affecting developed countries. Through its culture and its policy, the Chinese seek to put in practice the proverb: “At dusk do not say it is too late; do say that there is sunshine all over the sky.”

BARBADOS is a country that is far more typical of developing countries than China. About 80 percent of the elderly are illiterate. The role of the elderly in Barbados is deteriorating, as attitudes of respect especially towards the traditional “matriarch” decline. Older women are becoming isolated and impoverished and concerned about crime. They have outdated understandings about exercise and preventative health. There are almost no facilities specifically designed and made available to the elderly.

Most programs in middle income countries such as **BRAZIL** and **ARGENTINA** are directed at the middle class and are small scale. Poverty is growing among the elderly who are not part of the public pension system. There is resistance in Argentina to encouraging the elderly to re-enter the labor market because of current high unemployment rates.

Technology and Lifelong Learning for the Third Age

Mass media, especially television, but also radio and newspapers, can be powerful tools for the delivery of learning opportunities to the elderly. They are not adequately used to date. A few of the elements for which the mass media are already used in the developed world are: campaigns for healthy living, self-help and enrichment programs, and television exercise classes. Several cable channels are explicitly designed with the elderly in mind, providing cultural and enrichment programs and advice for daily living.

² For more information on the University for the Third Age see “Life-long Learning and the Use of New Technology in China,” *TechKnowLogia*, September/October 2000 found at www.techknowlogia.org

Areas in which the mass media are so far rarely used for the elderly include training in childcare, literacy and caring for handicapped and chronically ill adults. The Internet is already serving the elderly to some extent in developed countries but too many of the elderly are not yet computer literate. The Internet will become important for training the elderly only over the next 5 to 20 years, much later in developing countries. The Internet is already being used on a pilot basis in a few places as a means of reducing the isolation of the home bound and disabled. The elderly can be used as volunteers or low-cost aides for a wide variety of media and technology-based programs. In particular the elderly with skills can teach the elderly lacking such skills. The elderly can also act as monitors and guides for television-based training programs.

In developing countries over the next decade, radio and television is expected to play a more important role than the Internet, which may be restricted to the middle class. China's experience needs to be studied and replicated where appropriate. Of critical importance in the developing world is the need to find a cost-effective means of reducing the poverty of the elderly. The mass media can be part of this response through education and information programs leading to better health practices, to functional literacy, and to awareness of new opportunities in the work place.

A number of experimental uses of technology for the elderly are underway. Carlow International, a Human Factors Engineering and Ergonomics company that creates environments to enhance human use of technology, especially those of the elderly, is implementing several projects.³

In Ennis, Ireland, more than 80 percent of the homes are wired for participation in a Local Area Network and 4,000 out of the 5,000 homes there have computers. Many of the Ennis seniors are participating in this "Information Age Town" and a local boys' high school offers training to seniors to enable them to use the Internet. The oldest participant is 87 years old. Carlow's Electronic Friendly Home Project will examine prototype electronic technologies for use in the home by seniors. Thirty-five seniors living in their own homes have been recruited to test electronic technologies in their homes.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, USA, a project hopes to develop a Local Area Network that will link frail elders and persons with disabilities who live alone to the County Department of Health, the Department of Social Services and to the Schools of the County. The goal is to use technology to reduce isolation, reduce hospitalization rates due to rapid response and continued communication, and increase access to information.

Lastly, LINC-21 seeks to link elders between two wired communities: Ennis, Ireland, and Blacksburg, Virginia. These two communities have committed to linking 25 percent of their frail elders. This project, through teleconferencing, chat rooms, and other forms, will offer elders the opportunity to meet others whom they may never have met as well as the chance to participate in their own communities.

³ For more information on Carlow International and the projects described, contact Michael Creedon, Director of Aging Research at macreedon@carlow.com.