



UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE FOR ALL AGES

Case studies:
Older People's Associations, Africa

Community is key to health and wellbeing

Achieving universal health coverage fit for all ages requires intervening at the primary health care level through a person-centred, community-based approach across the life course, taking into account chronic illness and non-communicable diseases such as cancers, heart disease, and diabetes.

Living longer, does not necessarily mean living longer in good health. For older people in low and middle-income countries, ageing is often accompanied by poverty, poor health, discrimination and marginalisation.

Healthy ageing is about enhancing the capacity of people to do what matters to them as they age, including taking part in daily activities at home and in the community, staying active, and maintaining productivity, health, and wellbeing. It is about maintaining functional ability, not necessarily curing diseases.

Recognising opportunities for improving health at all ages is integral to healthy ageing and is what we mean by a 'life course approach'. It is also important to remember that older people are not a homogenous group. Diverse life experiences across the life course and a person's intersecting identities (wealth/poverty, gender, race, age, disability, marital status, and sexual orientation) have significant influences on older people's health.

Community based health care and support is key to improving long-term health and creating opportunities for older people.

Older people's associations (OPAs) aim to improve the living conditions for older people and to develop their communities. OPAs utilise the unique resources and skills older people have, to provide effective social support, to facilitate activities and deliver services. They provide a valuable social protection mechanism which complements existing means to improve the lives of older people.

OPAs are sustainable, self-managed, multifunctional organisations which aim to enhance equitable and inclusive development. They have a number of important benefits for local development including:

- Building livelihood security
- Improving health care
- Promoting participation in community life
- Promoting older people's rights
- Supporting disaster response.

Focus on Older People's Associations in Kenya, Africa



Milka Wanjiru, 85

Milka joined KARIKA in 2012. Kenyan Aged People Require Information, Knowledge and Advancement (KARIKA), is a charity that fights for the rights of older people in Kenya, and was funded by Age International and HelpAge to set up the Older People's Association (OPA) that Milka attends. KARIKA has also implemented the BHOPA II programme (Better Health for Older People In Africa) with our support and funding.

OPAs support older people with healthcare, exercise, income generation, and give guidance on advocating for rights; mobilising local groups in hard-to-reach villages to manage their own care.

Milka appreciates connecting with her peers at the OPA, sharing ideas about how they used to live and fondly remembering their youth. They share meals, exercise and earn money together – she credits these activities with being able to “go home, relax and go to sleep”.

Milka received health support including arranging hospital appointments and physiotherapy for her leg and spinal cord injury which enabled her to walk with a stick again. She also received medical check-ups for her eyes including a cataract operation to restore her vision, which had a huge impact on her life: *“I see a big difference in my life because if not for the help I got at KARIKA I would be still at home and I would be blind forever”*. Without KARIKA supporting OPA members to access medical care, she would have received no treatment at all, and been unable to support herself.

Milka's husband died in 2016, and she has no choice but to share her home with one of her sons, who abuses and harasses her. Milka sought help from the authorities to no avail. Milka stays positive thanks to the support she gets at the OPA: *“They know I am a good woman in the groups... and I pray and motivate them, and they can see I am strong enough”*.



Jacinta Kongo ‘Mama Safi’, 68

Mama Safi’s home is the meeting place for her local OPA, supporting older people to keep fit, stay healthy and seek medical care: “In the group, we educate each other, exercise, and share ideas that keep us more productive. Everyone, even those bedridden and so old even at 80 years old, are members of our group.”

Mama Safi’s group support each other: *“We talk to each other and teach each other things that are beneficial to all of us. We do exercises that keep us healthy and fit. Since we started being together it has been very good for all of us.”*

Their group regularly invite doctors to facilitate preventative health care such as eye checks, enabling members to seek further treatment and even operations, for free, if they need. They share knowledge and skills on hygiene and cleanliness, and how to maintain this to support disease prevention at home.

Mama Safi’s group support each other with income generation, such as training members to farm poultry. They also grow vegetables and fruits which provide much needed food and nutrition, as members can struggle to get enough to eat each day.

In addition, members are supported to fight for the rights of older people in their community to ensure they are treated right. Jacinta said: *“From the groups, older people have known that we have rights. A lot more rights than we thought. And we know that we ought not to be discriminated against and our rights violated. A lot of older people out there do not know much about their rights but am glad we are getting educated... I would want people to know that older people are important in society. We are supposed to be taken care of and have rights.”*



Joseph Oliech, 71

Joseph Oliech works as a freelance electrician. Since he joined his local OPA, exercising for health and working together, he has “been so happy to meet other older people like me. We get to discuss a lot of issues involving us and we leave there very happy.”

Joseph takes part in prayers, exercise, and receives guidance. He also makes soap to sell, providing an additional income: *“We have saved some money that when it gets to December, we share among ourselves ending the year happier.”*

Joseph values being able to come together and talk about problems affecting older people, including how to keep healthy, eat nutritionally, and how to deal with abuse and neglect.

Joseph has received medical care as part of the groups support for local people: *“The doctors come to treat us, do some tests on us, and give us some medicines sometimes without paying anything during the medical camps.”*

The group has made a significant difference to Joseph’s life: *“What motivates me to keep going to these meetings is the unity we have in the group... We only talk about things that help us live comfortable lives. We teach each other and everyone comes out of the group happy... What makes me want to go back to this older person group is that...we go there and get educated on a lot of things about our health and I come out of there healthy.”*



Felista Njenga, 61, health volunteer

Felista has been working as a community health volunteer for almost 30 years, she specialises in evaluating and reporting health and domestic issues, and supports over 100 households in the Mukakara region of Kenya. Felista was trained by HelpAge on how to support older people's to advocate for their rights.

Felista says: *"My work is to evaluate the problems within the household e.g. those with health problems and people with disabilities and report them every month and do referrals where necessary. For example, clinic visitations, ongoing vaccination, expectant mothers, and those with chronic diseases. I do follow-ups at home and the cases dealt with at the hospital."*

She explains that older people face challenges in health facilities which prioritise younger people and don't take the time to consult or treat older people well. Felista advocates on behalf of older people: *"I take them back to the hospital and back to the doctors, I explain their problems*

and they get tested fully and diagnosed and given medication appropriately. The doctors listen to us a lot because they fear us as Community Health Volunteers. So even after testing, they prescribe different medications appropriate for the illness they are suffering."

Felista says: *"Older people have rights like everybody else in the country. They have needs and rights that need to be observed. They also need to be listened to and they have the right to receive appropriate medical attention."*

She has been supported by the BHOPA programme led by HelpAge and Age International to advocate and support older people to improve their lives.

"I feel very great and happy that my position in society has been beneficial not only to me but to a lot of older people in the community I work with as a Community Health Volunteer. I feel good as an older person that I have my rights and I have a say and I can be listened to, and my older people are also listened to."

Acknowledgements

About Age International

We are dedicated to responding to the needs, and promoting the rights, of older people in low and middle-income countries across the world. We support older people in the poorest countries to improve their income, escape poverty, receive the right kind of healthcare, survive emergencies, and have their contributions to families and communities recognised and valued. Our vision is a world in which women and men everywhere can lead dignified, healthy and secure lives as they grow older.

It is a subsidiary charity of Age UK, it is the UK member of the HelpAge global network, and it is a member of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC).

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