

# Asian and European perspectives on old-age vulnerability

Report >  
Asia-Europe

Population ageing and old-age support are topics of growing importance to Europe and Asia. Currently one in five Europeans is 60 and over; by 2050, it will be more than one in three. Compared to Europe, most Asian populations, with the exception of Japan, are still young. However, the speed at which age-structural changes are taking place, the huge absolute size of some of Asia's elderly populations, and the comparatively low levels of aggregate wealth and formal provisions are cause for concern and have spawned a large body of research on older people in Asia. This has led to good, oftentimes comparable data on elderly support in European and Asian countries - yet few attempts have been made to draw parallels or learn from the different experiences.

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In response to the common challenge of understanding the impact of ageing on societies, families and individuals, an international workshop entitled *Old-Age Vulnerabilities: Asian and European Perspectives* was organised by Brawijaya University (Malang, Indonesia), in cooperation with the Universities of Oxford and Amsterdam. The aim was to initiate intellectual exchange on ageing within a theoretical framework of vulnerability by focusing specifically on disadvantaged subgroups of elderly. The reasons for this focus were threefold: vulnerable older people are of obvious humanitarian concern; by studying vulnerability, we are interested in processes of relative inclusion or exclusion, thus absolute differences in socio-economic or policy context can be set aside; and a vulnerability framework encourages debate about realistic, targeted interventions.

In studying vulnerability we seek to understand why *some* individuals are at heightened risk from bad outcomes, whilst others are apparently secure. The concept is, of course, not new. Vulnerability has a long history in studies of natural disasters, epidemiology, and famine, but has rarely been applied to the study of ageing in a systematic way. Doing so entails distinguishing the domains of exposure (or 'risk factors'), threats, coping capacities and outcomes, and examining their inter-relationships over time.

Research on vulnerability needs to clarify first what outcomes people are seeking to avoid. In other words: what is it that older people feel vulnerable to? This may be an untimely or degrading death, lack of care or social support, exclusion and poverty, dependence, institutionalisation, or loneliness. Old age can be a period of marked discontinuities, and it is often specific threats or crises, like the loss of a spouse, cessation of work, or illness episodes, which have the potential to precipitate dramatic declines in well-being unless compensatory mechanisms are in place. Understanding vulnerability therefore requires attention to the ways in which exposure to threats is shaped over the life course. For example, childlessness, affecting as many as one in four or five older people in certain Asian and European populations, may result in a lack of care and support in old age; divorce - which is common in Europe and Islamic Southeast Asia - may leave older men with small social networks and make them particularly vulnerable should illness strike. Simi-



Kubu woman, Jambi province, Indonesia

larly, life-time poverty or exclusion from the labour market may prevent the accumulation of assets, savings or pension entitlements on which to rely in old age.

But of course not all childless, divorced or poor elders are vulnerable. They are embedded in societies, communities and kin networks, and therefore intimately affected by the resources and limitations of these wider structures. For this reason the study of vulnerability always necessitates the study of people's

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differential strategies and resources. Here attention to cultural and social context, which shape the normative transmission of goods between generations and genders, is crucial, as not everyone has access to the same strategies or resources.

Unusually, among the matrilineal Minangkabau of Sumatra it is men who find themselves in a vulnerable position in old age, as their entitlement to assets and support is via sisters or wives. In Europe and among better-off groups in Asia, formal welfare arrangements provided by the state or market can protect older people from destitution following retirement or from a lack of quality health care in illness. Although the importance of informal social networks among poorer segments of Asian populations has often been stressed, their capacity for mitigating risks and reducing vulnerability should not be overestimated. As several of the papers in the workshop illustrated, poor people tend to have poorer and smaller networks than their richer peers. To put it bluntly, even shared poverty remains poverty, and in situations of economic constraint, it is rarely the elderly who are regarded as a priority by families, com-

munities and society. Thus, one of the key points in discussions was the importance of formal, legally enshrined protection for vulnerable subgroups. Until now, many Asian countries have tended to provide state support to those groups who are already relatively privileged, such as civil servants or members of the formal labour market. The notion of universal benefits, widely accepted (if increasingly under threat) in Europe, is only gradually gaining currency in Asia. Indonesia, for example, recently passed

a new Social Security Law seeking the gradual expansion of protection to more vulnerable groups, including informal sector workers.

The potential of poverty to heighten exposure to threats and reduce resilience in the event of a crisis should not blind us to the importance of other sources of vulnerability in old age. Social and psychological threats to well-being in later life, like loss of autonomy, loneliness or disempowerment, loom large in older people's narratives. Thus, in urban North Sulawesi and the Netherlands alike, people fear outright dependence on others, especially where this entails reliance on distant kin or non-kin or on already over-burdened caregivers. Consequently older people work hard to 'manage' their dependence, for instance, by maintaining a degree of independence through continued work

or a switch to lighter work, by understating physical or emotional complaints, by engaging in small-scale reciprocal exchanges or by relying on age peers for some of their support.

The workshop closed with a discussion of policy suggestions on how to target vulnerable groups and prevent both the increase in the number of vulnerable older people, and the progression from vulnerability to serious harm. Participants emphasised the importance of targeting material protection, paying more attention to health and long-term care without 'medicalising' old age, rethinking legal aspects of protection and policy enforcement, and maintaining and strengthening family and community support. Whilst these points were certainly not new for those interested in vulnerability and well-being in later life, their communication by researchers (who tend to emphasise complexities) to policy makers (whose attention is not easy to win and hold) is often still far from perfect. By involving the media and organisations like Help-Age International, who are able to lobby policy makers directly, it was hoped that small but lasting contributions towards reducing vulnerability in old age may have been made. <

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