Promoting ageing and health – the Sri Lankan experience

Ministries of social services and health*

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a country with rapidly ageing population as a result of increase in life expectancy and decrease in birth rates. The unprecedented demographic transition taking place in Sri Lanka will result in the old and young representing an equal share of the population. The proportion of elderly people in Sri Lanka is expected to double between 2001 to 2031 from 9.2% to 20.7% whereas the proportion of children (below 15 years) is projected to drop from 26.3% to 16.1%.

The feminization of ageing, especially at very old age, is a phenomenon that is consistent in the country. Greater female longevity depicts the gender rate being in favour of women as compared with men. Declining fertility and mortality rates have caused the aged to dependency ratio to increase. The aged to dependency ratio is expected to rise from 14.3% (2001) to 32.8% and 51.2% in the years 2031 and 2051 respectively.

The successive governments of Sri Lanka have accorded high priority to health, education and social services sectors. Substantial budgetary allocations were made to these three sectors to ensure healthy living conditions of people in the country. At present Sri Lanka holds the unique position in South Asia as being one of the developing countries to provide universal health and education. As a result of welfare-oriented policies implemented by successive governments, Sri Lanka has been able to attain a relatively high standard in the areas of health, education and coverage of basic social services.

To face the challenges posed by rapidly ageing population, the Ministry of Social Services has taken several measures including enactment of legislations to protect the rights of elders, establishment of a separate secretariat for elders and implementing numerous programmes to enhance the living condition of elders in the country.

Legislative provisions

The enactment of Protection of the Rights of Elders Act Number 9 of 2000 is a breakthrough in the history of services for elders in Sri Lanka. The Act has made provisions for the establishment of a National Council for Elders, a National Secretariat for Elders, a National Fund for Elders and a Maintenance Board for Elders. Until the enactment of the Elders Act Number 9 of 2000, there was no specific legislation to provide for the general, social and financial security of older persons. This piece of consensual legislation, which established the National Council for Elders, provided for the first time in Sri Lanka the legal foundation for the development of a national policy. In 2011, amendments were made to the existing Act and the Protection of Rights of Elders (Amendment) Act was enacted that provided more rights to the elders.

Establishment of National Council of Elders

The Council consists of 15 members representing the ministries of social services, health and finance, as well as elders and voluntary organizations that are engaged in providing services for elders and professionals. Other than the three ex-officio members all other members are appointed by His Excellency, the President. The principal function of the Council is promotion and protection of the welfare and the rights of elders in Sri Lanka, and to assist elders to live with self-respect, independence and dignity. Some of the other functions of the Council are to take all such measures as are necessary in consultation with the relevant ministries, provincial authorities, district and divisional secretariats, NGOs and private sector organizations to promote and protect the welfare and rights of elders. The Council meets monthly and discusses the issues related to elders and takes remedial measures to overcome them.

National Secretariat for Elders

The National Secretariat for Elders functions under the Ministry of Social Services and is the implementing arm of the National Council. The National Secretariat assists the Council in the discharge of its functions. The Secretariat is headed by a director and is assisted by 100 Elders Rights Promotion Assistants who are attached to divisional secretariats. The Secretariat implements the programmes directly and when necessary also allocates funds to provincial authorities and divisional secretariats for this purpose.

National fund

A national fund for the welfare of elders shall be established. It will constitute money allocated by the treasury and donations, bequests and grants from any source whatsoever, whether in Sri Lanka or abroad.

Maintenance Board

A Board has been established for determination of claims for maintenance made by elders. An elder who has a child or children and who is unable to maintain himself/herself may apply to the Board for an order that one or more of his children pay him a monthly allowance or a lump sum for his maintenance. Establishment of the Maintenance Board is a legal recognition of the existing Sri Lankan socioeconomic norms of caring for parents. The law provides for the first time in Sri Lanka a legal mechanism for neglected parents to receive maintenance from their children.

Provision for the protection of rights of elders

The following provisions have been made for the protection of rights of elders:

“Children shall not neglect their parents willfully and it shall be the duty and responsibility of children to provide care for, and to look into the needs of their parents.”

“The State shall provide appropriate residential facilities to destitute elders who are without children or abandoned by children”.

“No person shall on account of age, subject any elder, to any liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to or use of any building or place or institution…….”

“No person shall on account of age, deny any elder, the use or enjoyment of any facility, benefit, advantage or service ……”

National Policy and National Charter

The National Charter and National Policy on elders were adopted by the Cabinet in 2006. The following strategies were grouped in terms of the three priority areas decided at the Second World Assembly on Ageing.
The priority areas are as follows:

1. Elders and development
2. Advancing health and well-being; and
3. Ensuring, enabling and supportive environment.

The following (17) are the strategies

1. Mainstream ageing into development policy and promote full integration and participation of senior citizens.
2. Create awareness of ageing population and positive attitudes towards ageing and senior citizens.
3. Provide access to appropriate education and training.
4. Provide social welfare and protection.
5. Insure income security and promote suitable employment.
7. Ensure provision of services for persons in special circumstances.
8. Ensure health and well-being in old age through healthy nutrition and recreation.
9. Counselling services.
10. Promote appropriate housing, transportation and living environment.
11. Strengthen the family unit to take care of parents and other senior citizens.
14. Encourage community participation.
15. Cater to cultural and spiritual needs.
16. Conduct research and disseminate information.
17. Develop an implementation and follow-up mechanism.

National Plan of Action on Ageing (2012-2021)

The National Secretariat in collaboration with WHO formulated the National Plan of Ageing in 2010. The plan was developed in line with the priority areas and strategies of the National Policy. Activities, timeframe and responsible partners were identified in line with the priority areas and strategies. The plan is expected to be submitted to the Department of National Planning for allocation of funds for its implementation.

Establishment of Elders’ Committee at village, divisional and district levels

Let us empower the elders to protect their rights and promote welfare!

This is the primary idea of establishing elders’ committees. The National Secretariat commenced this programme in 2003 and has achieved remarkable progress. In order to organize elders all over the island, committees have been established at different administrative levels, including provincial, district, division and Grama Niladari levels. The village-level elders’ committees were established with the aim of protecting the rights of elders, promoting welfare, participation in decision-making and enhancing social, economic, cultural and spiritual development of elders. In order to expand and make the services more fruitful, elders’ committees were set up at divisional level combining all village-level committees. District committees are set up by combining all divisional committees while provincial committees are set up by combining all district committees. A national-level committee is also expected to be set up.
as well. Guidelines have been issued by the Secretariat for the smooth functioning of these committees. The Secretariat continues to provide support to such committees by conducting progress review meetings and awareness-raising programmes. To strengthen the financial capability of committees the Secretariat grants Sri Lankan Rupees (Rs) 5000 to each registered village-level committee, Rs 7500 to a divisional committee and Rs 15000 to a district committee. The Cabinet of Ministers has granted approval to award direct contracts for construction work to village-level elders’ committees with the aim of improving their financial situation. Some committees have been able to generate more funds and have provided scholarships to needy schoolchildren, as well as housing and self-employment grants to needy elders. The elders’ committees organize pilgrimages and cultural and religious programmes for the psycho-social development of elders.

Raising awareness

Awareness programmes are conducted all over the island to educate the elders and general public. The Legal Aid Foundation in collaboration with National Secretariat has conducted a number of programmes islandwide, for the legal empowerment of elders. Photography and poster exhibitions and essay competitions on older persons have been conducted to raise awareness among the general public including schoolchildren. Older persons with outstanding qualities were conferred with awards. Leaflets and handbooks on elders are issued at mobile workshops. Print and electronic media programmes are also conducted to raise awareness among the general public on challenges of population ageing. The handbook on elders printed in Sinhala, Tamil and English languages carries articles on positive aspects on ageing, prevention of diseases, leading a healthy and active life, and information on obtaining various services, etc. The magazine “Wedihitiyo” contains articles written by intellectuals and elders.

“Counselling for elders” is another valuable publication issued in 2009. The book contains articles on counselling and it enhances the skills of caregivers and provides knowledge for elders. The publication on “Healthy Ageing” contains articles in three languages and is useful for elders to lead a healthy life.

Day centres

A day centre is a place for elders to get away from loneliness and isolation. It is cost-effective as compared with a home for the aged and helps elders maintain their family ties. Some elders are confined to their own homes and lead an isolated and lonely life during the day time. Day centres enhance opportunities for elders to actively participate in many activities. They provide recreational, educational, spiritual and cultural programmes. Elders can engage in productive activities during the day time with their peers and exchange views and have discussions on various subjects. A day centre can be set up in a common building. The Elders’ Secretariat provides financial assistance of Rs 25,000 to each centre for purchase of required goods such as chairs, kitchen utensils and cupboards, etc. In addition, Rs 10,000 are granted to start self-employment ventures.

Pre-retirement seminars for a healthy and active life

For whom: Employees of the public sector who are close to retirement

The objectives of these seminars are to prepare the public sector officers for an active, productive and healthy life after retirement, and to educate them to plan and prepare for old age. The national secretariat conducts two day seminars at national, provincial and district levels. The Ministry of Health also
conducted pre-retirement seminars to promote a healthy and active life following retirement. The speakers include medical officers, psychologists, sociologists and other intellectuals. This has immensely benefitted the public officers who are close to retirement.

Counselling
A counselling division has been established in the Ministry of Social Services and 100 counsellors have been attached to divisional secretariats. A 24-hour online counselling service is available for those who need counselling. Establishment of counselling centres, increasing the attendance of clients by conducting awareness programmes for public sector officers, teachers, community leaders, and training active listeners, are some of the programmes conducted. A counselling section has been established at the National Secretariat where counselling sessions are held every Monday for elders.

“Wədihity Awarana” (sponsorship) scheme
Elders over 70 years of age and who do not have any income are entitled to receive financial assistance under this programme. This programme is implemented with contributions from well-wishers. Those who are willing to contribute can select elders from the list maintained by the secretariat and credit the money to the account of the National Secretariat for elders. The minimum contribution is Rs 3000 per year.

Home-care service
In Sri Lanka there is a great demand for care-givers to look after the frail elders. The Secretariat initiated the care-givers programme with the aim of meeting this growing need. Suitable persons to be trained as care-givers are selected by the divisional secretaries. Three-week training programmes are conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Health. The service of trained care-givers can be obtained by contacting the Secretariat. A 24-hour hotline is available to obtain the service. Identifying the importance of trained and skilled care-givers at the community level, the Ministry of Health has commenced another training programme for care-givers selected through medical officers. The home-care service enables the frail elders to continue living as long as possible in their own homes with their family members. Home-care helps elders to maintain an optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being.

Standards for homes for the aged
In Sri Lanka there are three types of homes run by the State, voluntary organizations, religious bodies and private parties. The provincial authorities run three homes and divisional administration runs 25 cottage homes. About 200 homes are managed by voluntary organizations, religious bodies and private parties.

The Secretariat provides financial assistance to upgrade the homes for the aged run by provincial councils and religious bodies. Requests are made through the divisional secretaries and financial allocations are made after investigations.

The National Secretariat published Standards for Homes for the aged in 2004 with the aim of enhancing the quality of services provided to elders. This was distributed to all homes for the aged expecting them to provide a humane and secure service and to create elderly-friendly environment where residential elders are able to lead a life filled with physical and mental comfort.

Identity card for elders
Special identity cards for elders are issued by the Secretariat to enable them get preferential treatment when obtaining public services. The identity card ensures various benefits for elders in obtaining public services from hospitals,
post offices, banks and other public institutions, 5% discount when purchasing medicine from the outlets of the State Pharmaceutical Corporation, and higher interest rates for fixed deposits in certain banks. Separate counters have been arranged for elders by the Ministry of Health in major hospitals. The provisions of the Rights of Elders (Amended) Act No.5 of 2011 also apply to the private sector as well.

Home gardening in homes for the aged
Financial assistance is provided to start home gardens in homes for the aged. Capable elders are encouraged to grow vegetables required for consumption in homes.

Dignified citizens — economic and social development
This programme was started in collaboration with several ministries. The experience, knowledge and skills of elders were utilized for the following national development programmes:

- Promoting home gardening in line with the national agriculture development programme
- Green country—protection of environment
- Development of indigenous medicine
- Promoting rural industries.

Issue of eye lenses and assistive devices
Eye lenses and assistive devices such as hearing aids, wheelchairs, tricycles and crutches are provided free of charge for the needy elders. Eye lenses are issued on the required date enabling elders to get surgeries done on time. The provincial social service departments provide assistive devices.

Registration of homes for the aged
Every person or organization, whether voluntary or otherwise, engaged in the establishment and maintenance of any institution providing residential care for elders shall, if such institution has more than five elders residing therein, register such institution in accordance with the provisions of the relevant Act. Under this Act any person or organization that fails to comply with this requirement shall be guilty of offence. Organizations and individuals who are running such homes should apply for registration to the National Secretariat along with required documents.

Commemoration of International Day for Elders
The International Day of Elders is being observed on 1 October every year since 1991. This day is celebrated by raising awareness about issues affecting elders. It is also a day to appreciate the contributions that older persons make to the society. It is an event celebrated in many places around the country not only by public sector organizations but also by Ngoos and elders’ committees. Programmes are organized to raise awareness among the general public including children and media personnel in order to create a conducive environment for elders to lead a dignified, active and healthy life.

Age-friendly cities
The Parliament of Sri Lanka has passed regulations to make public buildings, public places and public services accessible to persons with disabilities. The National Secretariat for Persons with Disabilities has taken all measures to make this a reality by conducting training and awareness programmes to personnel including construction engineers and technical officers. An inter-ministerial committee has been
appointed to discuss the progress periodically. Currently the certificate of conformity for newly-constructed buildings is not issued unless the regulations are followed. This situation has immensely benefitted the elderly people who have mobility problems. At present, new buildings and roads are constructed in keeping with these regulations.

Mobile programmes
Mobile programmes are conducted island-wide with the aim of reaching the people in rural areas. Photographs for elders’ identity cards are taken free of charge and identity cards are issued the same day. Awareness-raising programmes regarding challenges of population ageing, rights of elders and obligations of people towards the betterment of older people are conducted through mobile services involving discussions, lectures and distribution of leaflets and other printed materials among general public. Spectacles for reading purposes are also issued to elders at these mobile programmes.

Pension scheme
A pension scheme is in operation under the Social Security Board. A donation was made by the Lotteries Board as the capital and at present 100 elders above 70 years, who do not have any income at all and who do not have anybody to look after them are being benefitted through this scheme in the form of a lifelong monthly pension of Rs 500.

Social security for elders
In Sri Lanka a number of social security schemes are in place for different categories of people to support them in their old age. Farmers’ pension and social security benefit scheme, Fishermen’s pension and social security benefit scheme and self-employed persons, pension and social security benefit scheme are voluntary and contributory pension schemes targeted for the people in the unorganized sector. The self-employed persons pension scheme commenced in 1996 under the Ministry of Social Services. The main objective was to provide social security for the workers in the informal sector in their old age. Since 2010 this scheme is managed by the Ministry of Finance.

Public assistance monthly scheme
The public assistance monthly scheme (PAMA) is the oldest financial assistance scheme managed by provincial social service departments in Sri Lanka catering to the ultra poor people. The majority of recipients of this scheme are older persons without any income. The monthly payments range from Sri Lankan Rs 250 – Rs 500 depending on the number of family members. It has been proposed to increase this amount from Rs 500 - Rs 1000 for elders who are over 70 years of age.

Training of medical personnel on medicine for the elderly
In order to deliver quality health services to elders, it is essential to equip the system with qualified medical personnel specializing in elderly care. The Postgraduate Institute of Medicine (PGIM) in collaboration with the Ministry of Health has taken steps to start postgraduate programmes on medicine for the elderly. Elderly care has been included in the undergraduate medical curriculum and basic training programmes for public health personnel are being provided to enhance the quality of health services. A short training course on medicine for the elderly was organized through the PGIM with support from WHO in 2011.
References and bibliography

(1) De Silva-Population projections of Sri Lanka-2007
(6) Protection of Rights of Elders Act, No 9 of 2000, Part 11, Article 15, section(1)
(7) Protection of Rights of Elders Act, No 9 of 2000, Part 11, Article 15. section (2)
(8) Protection of rights of Elders (Amendment) Act, No.5 of 2011 Section (5 3a)
(9) Protection of rights of Elders (Amendment) Act, No.5 of 2011 Section (5 b)
(11) Protection of Rights of Elders Act, No, 5 of 2011

Further readings

(12) Second world assembly on Ageing, Madrid-2002”The International Plan of Action on Ageing.”