At an ancient Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka, modernity has made its mark: Leading to the temple’s entrance a ramp makes it possible for the elderly and disabled to join the many other devotees offering their prayers.

Wellawaya, where the temple is located, is Asia’s first ‘Disability and Age-friendly’ city, and is part of a WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities. According to estimates, the number of older persons globally aged 60 years and above will double from the current 600 million to 1.2 billion by 2025. Unless changes to infrastructure are made, ageing populations will live in environments that do not cater to their needs and capacities.

Wellawaya is ahead of the curve. In keeping with the goals of the Age-friendly Cities and Communities initiative, disability and age-friendly infrastructure have been installed at public places throughout the city, including at bus stations, police stations, community auditoriums, schools, banks and health centres.

R D Dayawasha, Development Officer with the Office of the Medical Officer of Health, Moneragala, explains the importance of installing inclusive infrastructure with reference to the temple. “It had been brought to our notice that the elderly and disabled in Wellawaya were finding it difficult to climb the stairs. People’s medical conditions must not inhibit their ability to participate in community activities. We had to address this and make a change,” he says.
According to Sumudu Hewawasam, WHO Sri Lanka’s Programme Officer for Non-Communicable Diseases, installing disability and age-friendly infrastructure has become a key concern of officials and the wider community. “In Colombo and other cities, the practice of ‘pinthaliya’ or providing water-points for the aged or disabled is being revived. Similarly, ‘ambalama’, or leisure centres for the aged, are being planned in cities like Wellawaya,” he says. “Awareness has reached a tipping point, and we are now seeing concrete action in terms of making cities more disability and age-friendly.”

The WHO Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities was established in 2010 to support municipalities that wished to transform ambitions into reality. It seeks to do this by inspiring change, connecting cities and communities worldwide, and supporting cities and communities by providing innovative and evidence-based technical guidance. By 2015, the network included more than 250 cities and communities in 28 countries.

Back in Wellawaya, Hewawasam says that the changes will benefit everyone. “The Disability and Age-friendly project is encouraging the community to foster healthy and active ageing,” he says. “We’ll all be old one day, so now’s as good a time as any to start transforming our cities for the future.”