

Facing the facts of an aging global population

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Fact: Between the years 2010 and 2040, the global population age 65 and older is expected to rise from 530 million to 1.3 billion.²

Fact: By the year 2040, 28% of Western Europe's population is expected to be age 65 or older - the highest percentage worldwide.³

Fact: Currently there are 357,829 people age 100 or older in the world. By the year 2040, this number is projected to be 2.8 million.⁴

The facts are clear: global aging is upon us. In the history of mankind, the statistics paint a picture of a world never before witnessed - a world where older people are a force to be reckoned with. To engage in collective denial of global aging is akin to the Hans Christian Andersen tale of the townspeople who, out of fear, ignore the emperor's stark nakedness and praise his non-existent new clothing. Our individual experiences and our cultural biases may color our perception of reality but there can be no question that facts remain facts.

People die without having made wills or other arrangements for their death often due to fear - fear of older age and all that it brings, including proximity to death. Few people can gather the courage to face and plan for possible health challenges, loss of productivity or the end of life. It is as though planning for older age and death hastens reality. The truth, though, is that facing the facts and putting all the right plans in place will soften reality.

The same is true for our aging population. Rather than cowering from the reality of a world filled with more older people, we - governments, policy bodies, civil society,

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² U.S. Census Bureau International Data Base at sasweb.ssd.census.gov/idb/worldpopinfo.html (accessed 12 March 2010).

³ Kevin Kinsella and Wan He *An Ageing World: 2008* (2009) United States Census Bureau, International Population Reports P95/09-1 at p 11.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Note 2 above.

academia, and all professions - must face this phenomenon and embrace the potential it brings.

Our world has exploding numbers of older people due to advances in health care. Older people command a far greater proportion of the global population because of declining birth rates. Fewer births combined with longer lives brings certain inevitabilities, such as fewer working age people to support a larger non-working population. Economies will be negatively affected unless policies and laws are enacted to properly manage this population evolution. And herein lies the fear. How can we afford an aging population? The answer lies, at least partly, in tackling the challenge head-on and by focusing on the contributions offered by older persons rather than merely wallowing in the uncertain costs of an older population.

What can be done to encourage older, capable workers to remain in the workforce? How can we keep our older population healthier? What policies will create the appropriate mix of private and public funding of the costs associated with older age? How can we harness the experience, skills and wisdom that come with age? If Nelson Mandela can gather a small Council of Elders to provide guidance with the world's challenges, then we must envision what millions of older people might offer their families, communities and nations.

The focus on aging issues has already begun. The World Health Organization urges nations to develop policies which promote healthy and active aging. The World Bank identifies pension reform as a key development issue. The International Labor Organization targets age discrimination legislation as a policy tool to keep older persons in the workforce. These and many other organizations are facing the facts and leading the march for policy changes which impact the older population of today and of the future.

In Hans Christian Andersen's tale, it took a child to to speak the obvious truth: "But he is wearing nothing!" In the end, the emperor was left with the humiliating realization that he had traipsed about in public without clothing. If nations and societies ignore the facts about global aging, the consequence will not be simple embarrassment. The consequences of ill-preparedness could be economically and socially catastrophic.

The facts speak for themselves. Let not our grandchildren look back in the year 2040 and wonder why we ignored the plain truth before us today.