

# Global Poverty, Inequalities and Ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Focus for Policy and Scholarship

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The third in our series of the new *Giants of the 21st Century* to mark 70 years since Beveridge is on Global poverty, inequalities and ageing in sub-Saharan Africa by Isabella Aboderin.

William Beveridge's focus on want, disease and squalor as three of the five giants in mid 20th century British Society is echoed in the 21st century in an international concern about poverty trends and prospects globally. While the ongoing worldwide economic downturn has brought to the fore the mounting realities of hardship in industrialised countries, global poverty concerns remain nonetheless focused on poor developing regions.

As the international community begins the countdown to 2015, the target year for achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and their associated targets, questions about the variable poverty situation in countries loom large. Poverty in this regard is typically considered in monetary income or expenditure terms – most notably the absolute \$1.25 per day threshold – but also, increasingly, across health, education and living standards domains, in acknowledgement of its multidimensional nature.

Accompanying the international monitoring of the MDG status is an intensifying interest in– and the development of methodologies for – the analysis of poverty inequalities between countries or regions as well as at national level within countries.

On both counts Sub-Saharan Africa stands out. Recent pioneering analyses show that income inequality between world citizens across has substantially increased since the mid 19th century. They show, moreover, that most of the disparity is due to location - rather than to differences in class (Milanovic 2011) - and that Sub-Saharan African countries are decisively at the bottom of the per capita income distribution. In a similar vein, SSA today has the largest prevalence of poverty of any world region: 47.5 % of the population live under \$1.25 a day and 65 % are multidimensionally poor (World Bank 2012; United Nations Development Programme 2011).

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As regards within country poverty inequalities SSA, too, ranks lowest. Africans suffer much larger losses in Human Development than do people in other regions, due to wide inequalities in health, education and living conditions. The significance of such disparities is heightened by the strong economic growth that many SSA countries have experienced in recent years, which raises acute questions over the distribution of ensuing opportunities and benefits.

Against the backdrop of broad poverty and inequality, sub-Saharan Africa's populations are ageing. While most of SSA is still in earlier stages of the demographic transition and will remain younger than other world regions, the population share of older people (aged 60 years and over) will, nonetheless, see a sharp four-fold rise from 5 % today to 19 % by the end of the century. In the same time span, the absolute size of the older population will grow a massive 15-fold from 43 million to 644 million. This is a sharper increase than for any other world region or age group (United Nations Population Division 2012). Life expectancy at age 60 in Africa is already 17 years for women and 15 years for men. While slightly shorter than the global average (21 and 18 years respectively) this signifies that a long old age is becoming a reality for an increasingly large number of Africans.

Yet, this aspect of SSA's demography is given little attention in policy, public or academic debates about poverty, inequalities and population in the region. The focus, instead, is overwhelmingly on children and reproductive age adults, in particular women. This reflects an overriding dual concern with, first, curbing plateauing fertility rates and the predicted massive population growth in SSA. Second, with building the capacity of, and providing opportunities for, SSA's large population of youth in a bid to foster peace harness a potential demographic dividend for the region.

In the very first issue of this *Journal* in 2008, Monica Ferreria and I reflected, on why, in this context, policies to ensure the quality of life of older persons in Africa - as called for by international instruments - were not being pursued by SSA states (Aboderin and Ferraria 2008). At the time we highlighted a fundamental uncertainty on the part of decision makers, engendered by profound knowledge gaps, about how issues of older adults fitted in with mainstream poverty reduction and development agendas. Four years later, with advanced empirical insights and crystallising foci in African development debates, it is possible to argue that considerations of ageing and older persons may, in fact, be critical for core SSA efforts to mitigate the pervasive poverty and inequalities that place it at the bottom of global league tables.

The nexus between population ageing and addressing poverty inequalities in the region arises on three major levels (Aboderin 2012). First, is the fact –contrary to persistent but fallacious old age ‘dependency ratio’ thinking – that substantial, if not majority shares of the older population in SSA countries continue to be economically active. Crucially, most older adults are active in agriculture – a most critical sector requiring revitalization if poverty and hunger are to be sustainably reduced in the region. The bulk of agricultural and horticultural food production in SSA is performed by small holder farming communities, among which older farmers often preponderate – due to the selective rural–urban out-migration or HIV-related morbidity or death of younger age adults. In Kenya, for example, the average age of a farmer is estimated to be 60 years. However, old-age related capacity limitations in the SSA context – such as impaired health and function due to chronic diseases or

impaired vision, malnutrition and a lack of formal education, as well as entrenched agronomic practices – can substantially impair older farmers' capacity to grow, process and market their crops effectively, their access to agricultural support (extension) services and, finally, their receptiveness to innovative farming approaches.

Second, and crucially, older adults, through their intergenerational family roles, can have critical impacts on the perspectives and capabilities of younger generations and, ultimately, their level of present or future economic, especially agricultural engagement. For example, the nutrition, healthcare and education rural older persons provide to grandchildren under their care may not be optimal, and their control of land and inheritance can negatively affect how their adult children engage or plan to engage in farming and enterprise. Thus, while a modernization of Africa's agriculture is critical for reducing poverty and hunger in the continent, investment in and a harnessing of older farmers' capacity and influence is critical for fostering such a transformation.

The third major connection between ageing, poverty and inequality in SSA arises in relation to the social patterning of poverty incidence within countries. Attention thus far has concentrated on gender, ethnicity and rural-urban residence as key axes along which such inequities unfold. Yet, mounting indications also point to old age as another such fault line. Evidence is emerging of apparent and likely overlapping age-based inequalities, reflecting a disadvantage of older persons vis-a-vis younger aged adults, in education, health and access to material resources. The development of an 'Age-Inequality Index', to parallel the recently developed United Nations Gender Inequality Index (GII) seems called for.

However, routine, national-level evidence on the extent and patterns of poverty disparities between age-strata, including their intersection with gender, is all but absent in SSA – as is systematic evidence on the scope of older persons' agricultural productivity and intergenerational roles. Similarly lacking are serious attempts to investigate and theorize the micro, meso and macro-level social, cultural and material factors – including global forces – that act over the life course to give rise to them. And yet, such documentation as well as analyses that are explicitly theory informed are critical. Firstly, they are a prerequisite for understanding the present, and predicting the future contours of the phenomena – thus providing a basis upon which effective policy responses aimed at reducing poverty and inequalities can be forged. Secondly, making age-strata disparities, as well as productivity and intergenerational impacts in old age in SSA a major focus of analytical inquiry will imply a major step forward for African gerontology, which thus far has lacked theoretical and conceptual depth. By the same token, a bringing of African perspectives to core social gerontological theories, will advance global ageing scholarship as a whole.

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