



Older persons at an Operation Dignity
Imbizo in Kwa -Thema near Springs,
Gauteng Province

CHAPTER 7

PROMOTING THE STATUS OF OLDER PERSONS

7.1 Operation Dignity

Older people in South Africa are not a homogenous group. The diversity of cultures and the differences in the economic status of older persons make the promotion of the social well-being of older persons in the South African context is a complex phenomenon. Older people do however, have one thing in common, namely, the need to be treated with respect and dignity and to be in control of their own lives.

The government in partnership with the South African National Council for the Aged (now known as Age-In-Action), launched Operation Dignity in 1999 as part of the International Year of Older Persons. The national launch was followed by launches within the provinces. The broad objective of Operation Dignity was to raise awareness of the rights of older persons, sensitise communities and government officials to the needs of older persons, and to promote a positive image of older persons. The central theme of Operation Dignity was that older persons are an integral part of our society - they are valuable and irreplaceable assets and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

Thousands of older people and young people participated in the programme. The National Council played a critical role carrying the message through a range of projects, events and promotional materials. Unpublished research by the Medical Research Council indicates that there was a high level of awareness of the International Year of Older Persons, notwithstanding the other major issues on the national agenda such as the national election.

Operation Dignity has been built into the advocacy programmes of the National and Provincial Departments of Social Development. Each year, Social Development month begins with the celebration of the International Day for Older Persons. The Department of Social Development also published a book of poems by children about their grandparents.

7.2 Minister's Consultations With Older Persons

Between June 2000 and March 2001, the Minister of Social Development undertook an

extensive programme of consultations with poor communities in all the provinces of South Africa. The aims of the programme were to:

- Hear first hand the concerns of the poor, especially in rural areas;
- Observe the conditions under which services were being delivered and the blockages to effective delivery;
- Mobilise and consolidate partnerships with community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations and the business sector.

The Minister's programme included visits to pension pay points, poverty relief projects, homes for older persons and importantly, many public meetings with older persons. The significance of the programme is that it provided many older people, especially those in rural areas with an opportunity, to raise their concerns directly with a Minister of the national government. The extensive media coverage given to the visits placed the issue of poverty and older persons on the national agenda. The information gained from the visits also assisted the National Department of Social Development to align its strategic priorities with needs of the people. The improvement of social security, the expansion of the Home/Community-Based Care for children and families affected by HIV/AIDS and improvements to the Poverty Relief Programme were greatly influenced by the programme of visits.

7.3 Legislative Reform

The existing legislation, the Aged Persons Act, came into existence prior to the democratic elections and does not reflect the principles of the Constitution. The legislation has a narrow focus on residential care, affords limited protection of the rights of older persons and does not address the current social and economic realities of older persons.

The Department has embarked on the development of new policy and legislation on the status of older persons and it is envisaged that the legislation will be tabled in Parliament in the latter half of 2002. The principles underpinning the policy and the legislation include:

- Recognition of ageing as a normal phase of life with value to society and promoting a positive image of ageing

- Rights of older persons as enshrined in the Constitution and in UN resolutions
- Personal responsibility to provide for social and financial independence in ageing and Government responsibility to create conditions for this
- Responsibility of Government to provide assistance in areas of social security, health, etc. where financial independence cannot be achieved
- Equal employment opportunities for older persons
- Opportunities for education and recreation
- Social integration through community-based services and inter-generational programmes
- Multi-disciplinary and inter-sectoral approach to older persons

The policy was developed with the participation of the International Year of Older Persons (IYOP) co-ordinating structure, namely Older Persons South Africa 1999 (OPSA 99). This structure was representative of older persons, non-governmental organisations, government departments at national and provincial level, and persons with specific interest and expertise in the field of ageing.

7.4 Role of Civil Society

The various sectors of civil society have made and continue to make an important contribution to promoting the well-being and status of older persons. As is evident from the earlier sections of this report, the formal non-governmental organisations have been instrumental in introducing community support initiatives and provide extensive assistance to older persons. Smaller community-based organisations, faith-based organisations and thousands of volunteers have extended the reach of government services in rural areas. The media has also played an important part in highlighting issues confronting older persons, in particular, issues of abuse.

The government needs to nurture partnerships with trade unions and the business sector. A partnership with trade unions can be mutually beneficial. Trade unions have a pool of retired members whose skills could be harnessed in the interest of development. Retired members can also benefit from involvement in volunteer action. Most large companies have corporate social investment programmes and they have

demonstrated their willingness to support concrete development programmes.

It is imperative that the partnership between government and civil society be maintained. The government remains committed to supporting civil society through the various mechanisms at its disposal. In particular, government needs to support initiatives of civil society organisations by providing financial and technical assistance.

7.5 South Africa Human Rights Commission

The South Africa Human Rights Commission is charged with the responsibility for promoting and protecting human rights in the country and has played a pivotal role in the Ministerial Inquiry into the Abuse, Neglect and Ill-treatment of Older Persons. The Commission, due to its recognition and concern about the plight of older persons, has taken the following measures:

- Assigned, as a focus area to one Commissioner, the advancement of the rights of older persons
- Established a committee to advise the Commission on its work on promoting and protecting the rights of older persons

The South Africa Human Rights Commission is also giving consideration to further strengthening its work in the area of older persons through the following strategic interventions:

- Monitoring the implementation of the recommendations of the Ministerial Committee on Abuse, Neglect and Ill-treatment of Older Persons
- Monitoring the development and implementation of national legislation, policies and programmes that impact on the rights of older persons
- Monitoring and assessment of observance of the rights of older persons and making necessary interventions where such rights are violated
- Providing public education on the rights of older persons in South Africa

Ensuring that older persons enjoy their fundamental human rights and lead their lives in dignity remains a priority. Government, through the watchful eye of the South Africa Human Rights Commission, is committed to this challenge.