



Operation Dignity at Groblersdal,
Mpumalanga

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

In the short period of less than eight years since the first democratic elections, South Africa can claim progress in a number of areas in promoting the general well-being of older persons within the South African society. The country report shows a strong alignment with the priority directions and objectives of the Draft International Strategy for Action on Ageing 2002. The task however, is far from complete and there are many challenges to be addressed to achieve the ultimate goal of developing a society for all ages.

Reducing poverty and promoting development

Reducing the high levels of poverty in South Africa remains the central challenge. It is necessary to address the issue of poverty amongst older persons as well as poverty amongst the rest of the population. The two issues cannot be dealt with in isolation of each other as children in poverty are likely to remain poor throughout their adult life, through to old age. It is also necessary to address the issue of poverty in the younger population in order to reduce the economic and social stress placed on older persons in receipt of social grants.

Without diminishing social grants as an important source of income for the majority of older persons, it is essential that older persons be engaged in other development programmes such as the Poverty Relief Programme, the Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Programme and the Urban Renewal Programme. These programmes not only have the potential to provide an additional income to older persons, but can enhance their sense of self-reliance and promote active ageing. Government departments need to identify older persons as a distinct group for their programmes and interventions.

The infrastructure backlogs in rural areas and in informal settlements have a negative impact on the living environment of older persons. Transport in rural areas hamper older persons' access to essential health and social services. Access to adequate sanitation also requires attention as it has a significant impact on the health and daily well-being of older persons.

Land redistribution for productive purposes and for settlement, as well as security of

land tenure are important for promoting development in general and for improving the living conditions of older persons, especially in rural areas. The land reform programme has been progressing steadily over the past three years and it is essential that the needs of older persons are recognised explicitly in the programme.

Recognising the heterogeneity of older persons

While the needs of older persons should be addressed from the common platform provided by the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, it is essential to recognise that older persons are not a homogeneous group. Older persons in South Africa come from diverse cultural backgrounds and some groups are predominantly urban, while other groups are predominantly rural. Policies and programmes for older persons should take this diversity into account, within the human rights framework provided by the South African Constitution and the United Nations Principles.

Policies and programmes should recognise that the needs of men and women in old age are not the same. Women constitute the larger proportion of older persons in South Africa and are more likely than men to be heads of households. Older women in poor communities are required to continue in their role as primary caregivers, due to circumstances beyond their control. They need to be supported.

It is equally important to understand and respond to the needs of older men who may experience loss of status as the breadwinner. The relatively lower levels of participation of older men in community-based activities also requires attention.

Improving the Quality of Services

There is room for improvement in the quality of services provided by government departments. The government must therefore accelerate the implementation of the comprehensive recommendations made by the Ministerial Committee on the Abuse, Neglect and Ill-Treatment of Older Persons. The effective implementation of these recommendations will require better co-ordination amongst the government departments and between government and civil society.

Government officials are expected to comply with the principles of Batho Pele (People First), but there are numerous complaints from older persons about the treatment they receive from government officials. Government departments will have to give serious attention to the implementation of Batho Pele principles.

An important aspect of service quality is ensuring equitable access to services. Older persons, in rural areas, still experience difficulties in accessing services. Furthermore,

in the case of social development services, the quality of services is still racially biased. The restructuring and transformation of services is therefore imperative.

Improving the quality of services also requires greater investment in training and development of government officials. A major challenge facing government is the difficulty in retaining health professionals and social workers. These professionals are being recruited by other countries or they leave the profession in search of better career prospects. There is also a dearth of people specialising in geriatrics and university courses in geriatrics are not in high demand.

As is the case with many development programmes, it is essential that government builds strong partnerships with civil society, including non-governmental organisations, faith-based organisations and community-based organisations. Involving the business sector to support initiatives can expand the pool of available resources.

Promoting the Mental Well-being of Older Persons

The promotion of mental well-being is an intersectoral responsibility, with the Departments of Health and Social Development being the primary departments. Some work has been done by the two departments but this is not sufficient to meet the mental health needs of older persons. The work done to date should be reviewed with the view to developing an integrated strategy to promote the mental well-being of older persons.

Directing Resources to Community Support Programmes

Statutory social grants consume 90 percent of the total social development budget and the bulk of the budget for services to older persons goes to subsidising residential care. This means that fewer resources are available for community support programmes. The social development budget has to be restructured to ensure adequate allocations for community support programmes.

Consumer Protection for Older Persons

Older persons are vulnerable to exploitation and are easy targets for unscrupulous moneylenders, vendors and funeral policy agents. The low levels of literacy amongst older persons also create difficulties for them in negotiating business transactions. South Africa does not have a strong consumer protection system and older persons have to rely on the media to take up their issues. Consumer education for older persons should form part of capacity building and adult basic education.

Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

Much of the research done on ageing in South Africa emanates from universities, and in particular, from the medical sciences. There is a dire need to extend research into the social aspects of ageing and for government to develop a research programme that is relevant to the needs of government. There is also need for a national clearing house on research.

Although many government departments maintain statistics on their programmes and beneficiaries, few departments have data disaggregated to identify older persons. This makes it difficult to monitor the effectiveness of programmes. The National Department of Health has commenced with the development of Minimum Data Sets for Older Persons, based on the requirements of the World Health Organisation. The evaluation of existing datasets is close to finalisation. The Minimum Data Sets will provide baseline indicators, which can be monitored over time. The Minimum Data Sets not only cover health issues, but also issues of poverty, social security, social welfare services, and crimes against older persons. More attention should be paid to evaluating the range of pilot programmes and interventions in the area of older persons.

New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)

Ageing is an important issue for the African continent and should be placed on the agenda of NEPAD. NEPAD is a vision and programme of action for the redevelopment of the African Continent. The comprehensive integrated development plan of NEPAD addresses key social, economic and political priorities in a coherent manner. The broad goals of NEPAD are to:

- Promote accelerated growth and sustainable development
- Eradicate widespread and severe poverty
- Halt the marginalisation of Africa in the globalisation process

NEPAD places people at the centre of development. Older persons have a critical role to play as active participants in the development process and not merely as recipients of assistance. They have a wealth of knowledge and through their position as custodians of values, they can make an important contribution to cultural underpinnings of NEPAD.

The current initiatives taken by South Africa in respect of older persons provide a foundation for the development of a Country Strategy for Action on Ageing. The South African Government will initiate the development of the Country Strategy following the

Second World Assembly on Ageing. In developing the Country Strategy there will be a detailed review of those areas, which have been identified as gaps in the National Report. The draft Country Strategy will be consulted with all relevant role players, including older persons, before it is submitted to Cabinet for approval.

Older persons are the custodians of our traditions, heritage and culture and they have made an invaluable contribution to the struggle for democracy and equality. The challenge now is to develop solidarity between young and old generations, so as to ensure alignment between our history, our roots and our ultimate vision for Africa in the 21st century.