Global ageing and climate change
Regional dialogue series

Asia and the Pacific
Webinar summary
Introduction

The world is undergoing a significant demographic shift as the global population ages. In 2018, the number of individuals aged over 65 surpassed those under five year old worldwide. Despite the considerable risk climate change poses to the health, well-being, and livelihoods of older persons, climate discussions often overlook this ageing phenomenon.

To bridge this gap, the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) at the University of York and HelpAge International together with Prototopia have launched the Global Ageing and Climate Change Regional Dialogues. Stemming from the findings of the Climate Justice in an Ageing World Report, this initiative focuses on the unique effects of climate change on older people, particularly in lower and middle-income countries.

The regional dialogues cover Asia and the Pacific, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and Central Asia. This webinar series aims to catalyse action, increase awareness of the intersection between global ageing and climate change, and develop policies tailored to the challenges of ageing in a changing climate.

Asia-Pacific regional dialogue

The Asia-Pacific region faces unique challenges as it grapples with two mega trends: ageing populations and climate change. Recognising the urgency to address these converging challenges, a webinar was organised in May 2024 to discuss the intersection between ageing and climate change, exploring the exposure, risks and contributions of older adults in climate action and resilience.
Dr Gary Haq, a Senior Research Fellow at the Stockholm Environment Institute at the University of York, started the discussion by underscoring the importance of integrating ageing considerations into climate strategies. He emphasised the need for awareness and understanding of how ageing and climate change impact each other. He highlighted the collaborative efforts of the Stockholm Environment Institute, University of York, HelpAge International and Prototopia in driving these discussions forward.

Different regions have very specific challenges and we want to understand those challenges and opportunities that climate change poses, but also to identify practical recommendations and to see how we can influence regional and global climate discussions.

Dr Gary Haq

The intersection of ageing and climate change in the Asia-Pacific region calls for detailed research and targeted policy development. Recent reports acknowledge this intersection but lack comprehensive analysis and integration. For instance, while the 2024 Regional Human Development Report briefly mentions ageing populations and climate change, it primarily focuses on broader human development issues. Similarly, the 2023 State of the Climate in Asia report acknowledges how climate-related hazards affect vulnerable populations, including older persons, but lacks in-depth analysis.

The 2024 Ageing Well in Asia report addresses the well-being of older populations but omits detailed discussion on climate change. These reports highlight the need for a more integrated approach to address the unique risks climate change poses to the health and well-being of older people.
By the mid-century, the ageing population in the region is expected to face nearly four times higher heat exposure compared to other regions, driven by the large ageing population and the region’s tropical climate. This heightened heat exposure poses severe health risks for older adults, requiring adequate infrastructure and public health interventions. The combined effects of rapid ageing and increasing temperatures will strain social services and healthcare systems, requiring integrated climate adaptation and ageing policies. To address the dual challenges of ageing and climate change, urgent action is necessary in the Asia-Pacific region.

Eduardo Klien, Asia-Pacific Regional Representative, Help Age International, emphasised the critical need to address ageing and climate change, particularly focusing on the unique challenges and opportunities presented by this intersection in the Asia-Pacific region. He pointed out that climate discussions often overlook older adults, despite their potential to make significant contributions to climate action and resilience strategies.

He suggested that society should shift its perception of ageing and see older adults as active participants with valuable knowledge and skills, not merely as “vulnerable individuals”. Eduardo stressed that older adults have a crucial role to play in adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change, and their inclusion in policy making and implementation processes is essential for creating sustainable and resilient communities.
Older adults contribute to environmental conservation, biodiversity and sustainable practices, specifically through their involvement in community-based initiatives. There are several key projects in Indonesia where older adults are engaged, including organic farming and community forestry, which not only help mitigate the effects of climate change but also enhance local food and water security. There are dual benefits of these initiatives: environmental sustainability and the empowerment of older adults, providing them with purpose and a means to contribute to their communities.

Older people have a role to play in climate action. In this session of the webinar, we focused on initiatives in India and Indonesia that address climate change.

**Heat adaptation in India**
Dr Prakash Tyagi, Executive Director, GRAVIS

Heatwaves and drought conditions impact older adults in India, particularly in the arid and desert regions where such climate events are most detrimental. The unique vulnerable situations of older people in these regions mean they suffer disproportionately because of their physical, social, and economic conditions. GRAVIS, as part of its efforts to mitigate these effects, engages older adults in locally-led adaptation practices. This includes promoting traditional knowledge and practices that are crucial for survival in harsh climates. The effectiveness of community-led initiatives that Gravis supports not only helps in adapting to the immediate effects of heatwaves but also contributes to long-term resilience building. Integrating the needs and experiences of older adults into broader climate adaptation frameworks is needed. Policies are required that specifically address their needs while harnessing their potential as agents of change within their communities.

**Older people and nature-based solutions for climate resilience in Indonesia**
Dr Sylvia Szabo, HelpAge International
Ciptaningrat Larastiti, SurveyMeter

Older adults contribute to environmental conservation, biodiversity and sustainable practices, specifically through their involvement in community-based initiatives. There are several key projects in Indonesia where older adults are engaged, including organic farming and community forestry, which not only help mitigate the effects of climate change but also enhance local food and water security. There are dual benefits of these initiatives: environmental sustainability and the empowerment of older adults, providing them with purpose and a means to contribute to their communities. Key challenges older adults face include lack of recognition and support, and policies that recognise and leverage their contributions to climate action. Planning and executing nature-based solutions should involve older adults more. Their knowledge and experience are invaluable resources for building community resilience.
Climate justice and the ageing population in Fiji and the Pacific

Mohammed Hassan Khan
Pacific Network on the Rights of Older Persons

All indigenous cultures of the Asia-Pacific region are about life and living in harmony with the natural environment and the climate. For the Pacific people, there is a strong spiritual connection with the earth, the sea and the winds. It has been the duty of the family and community elders to pass on this traditional knowledge to the generations. This was bound in family traditions, as every clan specialised in aspects of the natural habitat, like the winds, the sea and land conservation.

In today’s language, it started as the environmental crisis, ecological crisis, climate crisis and now it is called Climate Justice. Families and elders have a role in adapting to climate change, underpinned by the indigenous spiritual connection to the environment.

Environmental changes such as rising sea levels, the increased frequency of extreme weather events, and significant shifts in biodiversity and agricultural productivity present pressing concerns in the Pacific. Communities, particularly older adults, face heightened vulnerabilities, including health risks and displacement because of environmental degradation. Traditional knowledge and cultural heritage are at risk as climate change threatens livelihoods and forces community relocation.

In terms of adaptation and responses, community initiatives include protecting water catchments, implementing sustainable farming techniques, and conserving coastal and marine resources. Civil society organisations are pivotal in constructing climate-resilient infrastructure and fostering community involvement in climate action. Educational workshops and forums have helped to spread awareness about the impacts of climate change and the importance of community action. The policy implications are significant. There is a need for extensive international cooperation to keep global temperature increases at bay, protecting the Pacific islands. Policies should incorporate the needs of older adults into climate adaptation strategies, ensuring that human rights to health, food, and subsistence are given priority.

In conclusion, addressing the intersection of climate justice and ageing in the Pacific demands a comprehensive approach that respects human rights and utilises traditional knowledge. The continued dialogue is essential for developing strategies that effectively tackle both immediate and long-term challenges.
Age and climate

Ageing and climate change in the Asia-Pacific
Dr Gary Haq, Stockholm Environment Institute, University of York

The Asia-Pacific region is home to 697 million people aged 60 and over, representing 60% of the global older adult population. This demographic shift is significant as it presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, rapid economic growth in the region has lifted 1.5 billion people out of poverty. This economic progress has come at the cost of considerable environmental degradation. Wealthier nations in the region show larger ecological footprints, highlighting the complex balance between economic advancement and environmental sustainability.

By 2050, projections show that China, India, Japan, and Indonesia will have the highest proportions of older adults. Within this demographic, women comprise 54% of the older adult population, a share that increases with age. Economic challenges persist, with income insecurity being particularly high among older adults, often even higher among older women.

The region’s heavy dependence on fossil fuels, which account for 85% of its energy needs, significantly contributes to global greenhouse gas emissions. This reliance underscores the urgent necessity for sustainable energy solutions. Despite their minimal emissions contributions of just 0.01%, small Pacific Island States are vulnerable to the existential threats posed by rising sea levels, making them critical focal points in the climate change dialogue.

In 2023, the region reported 79 disasters linked to hydrometeorological hazards, with over 80% of these being floods and storms. These disasters resulted in over 2,000 fatalities, with flooding alone accounting for over 60% of these deaths. More than nine million people were directly affected by these disasters, highlighting the profound human and economic impact. Older adults face many challenges in this context. They are at increased risk from climate change, including higher deaths from heatwaves, natural disasters, and air pollution. Climate-related emergencies significantly affect older adult mobility, complicating evacuations and access to emergency services. Many older adults live in homes that are ill-suited to withstand extreme weather events, increasing their risk during climate incidents. Agricultural systems disrupted by climate change impact food availability and affordability for older adults, while water insecurity and inadequate sanitation exacerbate significant health risks. Cultural traditions and social structures are disrupted, disproportionately affecting older adults, particularly those in remote and rural areas.
Health concerns for older adults are also increasing, with a rise in non-communicable diseases and mental health issues. The impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated access issues to health services and increased social isolation, further complicating the challenges faced by this population group.

A triangular strategy for addressing ageing and climate change was outlined, centred around three primary actions: Protect, Reduce, and Mobilise. The "Protect" action emphasises the need for robust climate adaptation and disaster response strategies that specifically address the needs and capabilities of older adults. For instance, ensuring that evacuation plans are tailored to accommodate the mobility issues of older adults and that housing is upgraded to withstand extreme weather.

The "Reduce" action advocates for aggressive climate mitigation efforts to reduce the carbon footprint of older adults, such as transitioning to renewable energy sources. The "Mobilise" action encourages the active involvement of older adults in climate action, promoting age-friendly cities and communities and leveraging older adult knowledge and experience in resilience-building efforts. This includes engaging older adults in community planning and disaster preparedness initiatives.

Effectively addressing the challenges of ageing and climate change in the Asia-Pacific requires integrated approaches that consider both the immediate and long-term needs of older adults. Policymakers must not only protect vulnerable populations but also empower them, ensuring that older adults are not only seen as beneficiaries of climate action but also as active participants and leaders in shaping resilient communities. This holistic approach is essential for fostering sustainable development that harmonises economic growth with environmental stewardship and social inclusion.
In 2023, the South Korean population aged 65 and over was estimated to be 9.5 million, accounting for 18.4% of the total population. This number is expected to rise to 20.6% by 2025 (Statistics Korea, 2023). South Korea’s readiness to help older people face the realities of climate change is not yet ideal. As an example of the country’s need to enhance its readiness, from 2010 to 2019, individuals aged 65 and over accounted for 68.5% of yearly average heat-related deaths (Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, 2022). With 88% of South Koreans expressing concern that “climate change will personally harm them during their lifetime” (Pew Research Center, 2021, p. 8), the government has pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40% compared to 2018 levels in its 2030 Nationally Determined Contribution (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Interestingly, unlike in other countries in which younger people are more worried about climate change than older people, in South Korea, people aged 65 or older (94%) are more concerned than those aged between 19 and 29 years (79%) (Pew Research Center, 2021, p. 5).

Against this backdrop, on 6 March 2024, 123 older South Koreans petitioned the National Human Rights Commission of Korea regarding the government’s failure to implement protective measures against climate change for older people (Solutions for Our Climate, 2024). These individuals were members of two environmental groups (60+ Climate Action and Solutions for Our Climate); the average age of the petitioners was 64, with the oldest being 92 years old. Their requests were to (1) raise the national greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals for 2030, which were set under the Enforcement Decree of the Framework Act on Carbon Neutrality and Green Growth for Coping with Climate Crisis, as well as improve the annual reduction target set under the first National Basic Plan for Carbon Neutrality and Green Growth; (2) incorporate the criteria published in the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and establish suitable and effective goals to limit the global average temperature increase to a maximum of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels when establishing the next national greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals under the Paris Agreement; and (3) conduct a factual and epidemiological investigation on the dangers of the climate crisis to the human rights of vulnerable groups, including older adults. Use the results of the investigation to improve the Third National Climate Change Adaptation Plan and the Enhanced Third National Climate Crisis Adaptation Plan, as the government has a basic duty to protect and promote citizen’s human rights, including the right to life, food, health, and housing (Solutions for Our Climate, 2024).

To confirm and guarantee older people’s human rights in all areas, the ASEM Global Ageing Center (AGAC) published a legislative draft—the Framework Act on the Human Rights of Older Persons in South Korea—in 2024. It proposes that “older persons shall have the right to receive priority protection and care from the government and society in the event of a crisis caused by climate change or other disasters” (AGAC, 2024, p. 70).
The report on climate justice in an ageing world delved into the intricate dynamics between demographic shifts and environmental challenges, highlighting often overlooked facets in climate change discourse. One key theme underscored the need to integrate considerations of global ageing into climate policy frameworks. Despite the relevance of ageing populations to climate resilience and adaptation efforts, crucial aspects are notably absent from key policy documents such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs).

The report particularly emphasised the vulnerabilities encountered by low and middle-income countries, where heightened exposure to climate-related hazards and socio-economic fragilities exacerbates climate change impacts. These regions, despite bearing lesser historical responsibility for emissions, face disproportionate effects, requiring tailored policy interventions that acknowledge diverse demographic profiles and resilience capacities across nations. Recommendations included integrating ageing considerations into climate analyses at global and national levels. This involves recognising the distinct vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities of older populations and harnessing their potential as agents of change in climate action efforts. Cultivating life-course resilience through age-sensitive climate risk assessments and empowering older individuals to actively participate in climate action initiatives were highlighted as crucial strategies.

Addressing the mental health consequences of climate change on older adults and advocating for universal social protection systems to enhance resilience is important, particularly in informal sectors prevalent in many low and middle-income countries. Prioritising the socio-economic inclusion and well-being of older populations through targeted initiatives can contribute to broader societal resilience in the face of climate-related challenges.

There is an urgent need for action-oriented research and context-specific policy interventions that recognise older adults as essential stakeholders in the collective effort towards climate justice. By cantering ageing within climate change dialogues and policymaking processes, societies can leverage the knowledge, experience, and resilience embodied by older populations to forge a more equitable and sustainable future.
Participants discussed the heightened economic and health risks faced by older adults in the context of climate change. Older adults, especially in rural and impoverished areas, are often the most affected by climate-induced disasters, lacking the resources and support needed for adequate resilience and recovery.

A significant challenge highlighted was societal ageism, which manifests in the exclusion of older adult voices from policymaking and climate action planning. The participants emphasised that this ageism not only undermines the potential contributions of older adults but also diminishes the effectiveness of climate resilience strategies that could benefit from their traditional knowledge and experience.

Successful case studies were shared, illustrating the positive impact of older adult involvement in environmental initiatives. For instance, in Indonesia, older adult-led groups have been pivotal in local conservation efforts and in promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Personal narratives from participants like Eva from the Alzheimer Indonesia Foundation underscored the relevance of these initiatives in providing purpose and engagement for older adults, aligning their traditional knowledge with modern conservation efforts.
Policy recommendations and strategic insights

**Recommendation 1**  Integrating older adult perspectives

It was recommended that older adult perspectives be integrated into all levels of climate adaptation planning. This could be achieved by including older adult representatives in climate action committees and ensuring that disaster management plans address the specific needs of older adults.

From India, examples included Dr Prakash Tyagi’s (Executive Director, GRAVIS) discussion on the importance of older adults in managing heat stress and drought conditions, emphasising their role in agriculture and local knowledge systems.

**Recommendation 2**  Enhancing social protection

Enhancing social protection for older adults was identified as a crucial strategy. Robust social protection systems are essential to ensure that older adults can participate actively in society and in climate resilience activities without the burden of economic insecurity. In particular, the need for universal social pensions was recognised by all participants.

**Recommendation 3**  Prioritizing life course resilience

The importance of life course resilience, particularly for girls and women, was stressed, highlighting the diminishing governmental attention with age. The absence of proactive measures in response to climate change was underlined, with most actions occurring reactively. There was a call for NGOs to broaden their focus to include older individuals in their climate change efforts, alongside other vulnerable demographics such as women and the disabled.
Conclusion & future directions

The webinar concluded with a strong call to action for continued dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders to refine strategies and integrate older adults into climate action plans. The discussions underscored the importance of viewing older adults not just as vulnerable groups but as active participants with valuable knowledge and experience.

"We need to create spaces for older generations to act, to connect, to really make a meaningful difference from the communities to the national governments, to the corridors of the UN."

Eduardo Klien
Resources


WMO (2024) State of Climate in Asia 2023, World Meteorological Organization, Geneva, Switzerland. Available at: https://wmo.int/publication-series/state-of-climate-asia-2023

Contact

Dr Gary Haq
gary.haq@sei.org