

UN Roundtable on Older Persons in the 2004 Tsunami
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Opening

It is indeed a pleasure for me to be part of the Roundtable on Older Persons in the 2004 Tsunami. I wish to thank UNDESA, Global Action on Aging, HelpAge International and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung for their initiative in co-organizing this commendable event. I hope to learn and benefit from other speakers as well as from the participants in the discussion that follows. This is the important issue which we need to listen to and learn from each other, and act together.

Overview

At the World Summit in September 2005, world leaders gathered here in New York to reaffirm their commitments and determination to realize the development goals and objectives agreed in the major United Nations conferences and summits, including the Millennium Development Goals. An important part of this effort involves the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, by which Governments pledged not only to work for the security of older persons, but also to empower them, so that they can participate fully in the economic, political and social lives of their societies.

Basic information about ageing people in Thailand

Thailand, with over 60 million people, will graduate into an ageing society, within the year 2012. The proportion of population age 60 and over is projected to increase from 9 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2020, and 30 percent in 2050. The increase in the proportion of the elderly population in Thailand is far faster than what have happened in the developed countries. In 2006, the number of elderly population in Thailand stands at 6,850,000.

Concern about ageing population and the need for policies and programs specifically targeted towards older age group is relatively recent development in Thailand. Evidence of an increased interest is seen by the adoption in June 2002 of the second National Plan for Older Persons, covering the period of 2002 – 2021. It should be noted that this National Plan was adopted just two months after the adoption of the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing in April 2002. The National Plan calls for the support of the elderly at all levels and strategies to ensure the social security and well-being of elderly. Conceptually, the National Plan recognizes the importance of the elderly as a center for development.

As part of the strategy stated in the Plan, the Elderly Act was enacted in 2003 and became effective on 1 January 2004. Under the Act, the National Commission on the Elderly, chaired by the Prime Minister, was established for the first time as a permanent body. Basically, the Act protects rights of the elderly and establishes a specific Elderly fund to cover expenses relating to the promotion and support of activities related to the elderly. It also establishes that the monthly allowance scheme for destitute elderly is to be implemented evenly and throughout the country. Tax deductions for children who care for an elderly parent were also passed.

As part of a reorganization of the government bureaucracy, the Office of the Empowerment for Older Persons was also established within a newly conceived Ministry of Social Development and Human Security in 2004, as a core agency on issues concerning older persons. The annual National Elderly Week was proclaimed in 1983, which is to be held from every 13 April of each year. The aims of the elderly week are to provide opportunity for every sector of the society to participate in activities for older persons, and for older persons to play their roles and demonstrate their potential, as well as raising awareness of the people in the society on the importance of older persons.

To a great extent, the problem of taking care of older persons in Thailand has been comfort in the merit of traditional values of reciprocating the older members of the family by taking care of them once they are in dependent state and frail. The elderly is still very much regarded as a pillar, not a burden, of the society.

The devastating effect of the Tsunami on Thailand

While the situation in Thailand was less severe than in other affected countries, the Tsunami catastrophe still cost so much in terms of lives and property, reaching levels unprecedented in our history. Overall, there are 5,395 confirmed death, 8,457 injured and 2,906 people missing. It has been estimated that over 58,000 people or 12,000 household have been affected, over 4,800 homes were totally or partially destroyed. While a full official account of a number of affected elderly is still lacking for the time being, the Department of Medical Service of the Ministry of Public Health has estimated the number of elderly tsunami survivors under its care at 1,238.

Immediately after the disaster, the Thai Government, in close collaboration with the private sector and NGOs moved quickly to provide immediate relief and temporary shelters for affected victims. According to the World Bank figures, as of 1 September 2005, the Royal Thai Government has funded tsunami emergency response and recovery in the amount of 1.06 billion USD. Various projects were undertaken during the first stage of rehabilitation and reconstruction work to help those affected. Victims were provided with the means to help themselves and restore their livelihood, which have been made possible for many to get back on their feet and regain their lives once again. Admittedly, however, in a state of chaos and shock, every affected victim might not have been reached in the initial phase of relief.

While particular focus was placed on women and children, the assistance rendered to the elderly victims was not lacking as it was indeed channeled through overall relief and assistance programs provided to members of affected household, in particular, in such areas as family welfare, advisory counseling, psychological rehabilitation, provision of temporary shelter, and provision of welfare fund. In addition, One-Stop Service centers to help vulnerable group affected by tsunami including the elderly were established by the Social Development and Human Security Ministry to facilitate their access to help. Vocational training and counseling program for the affected victim have been developed by the Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency (TICA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with its operation center in Phang-nga, one of the most affected provinces

in Thailand. Plans to construct day centers in all six affected provinces was envisaged by the Department of Medical Service, the first of which was opened in March 2005. The centers work to encourage elderly survivors to care for their health and also work as a place where the elderly can learn new skills, such as batik fabric making and artificial flower making, to enable them to use their free time constructively, provide them with possible means of income.

Thanks to the Elderly Act of 2003, improved facilities, provision of support, greater access and full guarantee of entitlements have been put in place and made available to older persons by respective government agencies in accordance with their specific mandate given by the Act. The Act, therefore, put older persons on radar screen of government agencies in the formulation and implementation of their policies, thus help increase more visibility of older people in all spheres of the Thai society. It is therefore fair to say that, in principle and in general, older people are included in the efforts of respective government agencies in their provision of relief, recovery and rehabilitation.

In this connection, it is indeed encouraging to note that efforts of government agencies were supported and complemented by other important players like foreign governments, international organizations, financial institutions as well as NGOs, the civil society working in the fields. Their experiences and expertise are indeed deemed very valuable to our efforts and thus very much appreciated by the government. In this regard, I wish to take this opportunity to thank the Global action on Aging and the HelpAge International for their useful work in Thailand and for their consistent efforts in promoting the issues of the elderly.

What should be the next steps for improved response to elderly victims' need?

The magnitude of the tsunami was indeed unimagined and unprecedented, both in scope and scale. Despite its devastating effect, the tsunami disaster could be seen as a blessing in disguise in many aspects. It has brought us true sense of reality and great sense of possibility. It allows us to take stock of and examine our past actions, success, failure, and shortcomings, and thus enable us to try to do better for the future. Disaster is a global problem of transnational nature, and, as such, requires collective efforts by all concerned. Key elements of lessons learned are

prevention, preparedness and timely, well-coordinated and coherent response whenever disaster strikes. Rehabilitation must focus on build back better for all affected victims. Awareness raising and education on natural disasters, and their effect are important and should be reached out to and accessible by all groups of society.

A lot more needs to be done to help affected communities cope with long term need. As with any disaster of this magnitude, the psychological impact is likely to be long lasting. By all means, the tsunami disaster has made it clear to all of us that elderly population is another vulnerable group which requires specific assistance in their preparedness for and response to future disasters. In this connection, the Madrid Plan of Action can serve as a blueprint for future endeavors, especially, its issue 8 on emergency situations outlined in paragraphs 54 – 56. While the framework and mechanism for the elderly do exist and are in good progress in their implementation, Thailand still needs the expertise and to learn from the experiences of all other players, that is, governments, international organizations and civil societies, in dealing with the long term effect of the Tsunami disaster, especially, the issues of how the government and families could work together to provide assistance and comfort to elderly victims.

At the same time, while being vulnerable victim themselves, the role and contribution of the ageing people in providing morale support to other affected members of the family, in particular orphaned children, can be of particular importance, and should therefore be emphasized. It is to be noted that loving and caring environment which is well-founded in Thai extended family would best provide moral support to the traumatized children as well as other affected adult members of the family. Viewed in this regard, elderly population should also be seen as asset, not as liability, of the society and community. Appropriate support should thus be rendered to them to enable them to play a more meaningful role in this regard.

Urgent actions, in my view, are required in the following.

1. Collection of accurate data, disaggregated by age and gender, on the elderly victims and elderly population in general, should be carried out, and the data base thereon should be established.
2. A specially targeted master plan/plan of action, at national and regional level, to assist elderly population in emergency situations, including natural disasters should be developed and adopted, taking into account the Madrid International Plan of action, as well as, views, concerns and involvement of elderly population. Capacity building for local communities should be included, among others, in such a plan.
3. Exchange of information, lessons learned and identification of best practices on response and assistance to elderly community's need should be encouraged.
4. Partnership among governments, international organizations, international financial institutions, and all relevant stakeholders, including the NGOs and civil society, should be encouraged, and strengthened.