

2014

THE PROBLEM OF AGEING IN NEPAL

The case for the introduction of Senior Citizens' Users Group

A plea for its inclusion in the upcoming budget speech

Prepared by

Bihari Krishna Shrestha,

Anthropologist,

Founder, BKS Elderly Empowerment Fund,

Former Additional Secretary in the Government of Nepal



THE PROBLEM OF AGEING IN NEPAL

The case for the introduction of Senior Citizens' User Groups

A plea for its inclusion in the upcoming budget speech

Prepared by:

Bihari Krishna Shrestha

Anthropologist

Founder, BKS Elderly Empowerment Fund

Former Additional Secretary in the Government of Nepal

Note:

This paper was jointly submitted by the National Senior Citizens' Organisation Network Nepal and the Council of Former Public Servants to the Finance Minister in June 2014 in support of their demand for policy statement in his Budget Speech to the Legislature Parliament for the fiscal year 2014-15 requiring the establishment of Senior Citizens' User Groups in the communities.

1. Problems of the elderly in Nepal

The elderly in Nepal now represents more than eight percent of the country's population and number around 22 lakhs at present. But the number and proportion are only set to increase in coming years due to steadily improving life expectancy and decreasing population growth rate. However, the elderly people remain among the most deprived in the country for many reasons that mainly include the following:

- **Widespread problems in access to services**

Nepal remains a chronically rural country with some 85 percent of the population continuing to live in the rural areas. However, most of our rural areas are hilly and mountainous most of which remain without access to motor transport. This poses tremendous physical challenge for the elderly even to move in and out of their homes and immediate neighborhoods. This, in turn, seriously affects their access to basic services. The widespread and serious nature of this problem for the elderly has lately been brought to light by the fact that many elderly people got their citizenship certificates only after the government organized peripatetic sub-district service delivery camps. This also shows that most elderly in Nepal remain without access to even such basic services as healthcare due to lack of physical access to them. But the government itself has never taken ameliorative steps to bring services closer to where the elderly live in our physically forbidding landscape.

- **Massive human tragedy waiting to happen for the elderly in Nepal**

Secondly, the proportion of the elderly population has been on the rise, and this means, there will be more and more people in the days ahead who would be suffering from want of access even to basic services in our country. In the last 15 years, the proportion of the population aged 60 years and above has increased from 6.5 percent (2001) to 8.14 percent in 2011. Similarly, the dependency ratio stands at 84 percent at present, which means, 100 people in the age groups between 15-59 years have to support 84 persons in the age groups of 14 and below and 60 and above. But with decreasing population growth rate and rising life expectancy, this dependency rate too is only expected to worsen. Therefore, without some significant intervention by the government, the unfolding scenario for the elderly would be one of massive and worsening human tragedy in Nepal

- **Widespread health care needs of the elderly**

Thirdly, the health needs of the elderly people (60 years and above) are the most acute. The NLSS III (2010-2011) has reported that the percentage of population "reporting chronic illness by gender" has been the highest at 38 percent in the age group 60 years and above which, as mentioned above, represent only 8.14 percent in the country's population at present. Of them, women are the worse sufferer with 39.6 percent reporting chronic illness compared to 36.4% for men. This means that the incidence of chronic illness among the elderly population

remains quite acute and widespread, and more so for women elderly. Furthermore of the chronic illnesses, the dominant types remain asthma, rheumatism-related, gastrointestinal disease and high blood pressure all of which need regular medical attention.

- **The elderly bearing the brunt of poverty in Nepal**

Fourthly, Nepal's poverty continues to be rural in that according to the NLSS 2010-2011, the proportion of the people under poverty line is only 15.46 in the urban areas whereas the proportion is 27.43 percent in the rural areas. This is further underscored by the fact that while some 70 percent of workforce is employed in agriculture, its contribution to GDP is only around 35 percent, suggesting that our rural economies suffer from severe unemployment and underemployment (47%), widespread food shortages, and income poverty, the factors that invariably affect the older people the most severely.

- **Absentee population aggravating the problem of the elderly**

According to the NLSS III report, some 53 percent of households have at least one absentee, and this proportion is 56 percent for the rural areas. This means that more rural households have one or more people living away from home inside the country or abroad. Besides, the survey has also reported that some 74 percent of the absentee population belongs to the age groups between 15 to 60 years. This suggests that a vast number of working age people are living away from home. This adds tremendously to the responsibility and burden of the elderly people to manage their household economies in the rural areas.

- **Concentration of poverty among the dalit elderly**

Lastly, Dalit caste groups are the poorest in the country, 42% under poverty line as against the national average of 25.16. Again, this means that it is the dalit elderly who stand more in need of an inclusive approach to development and benefit sharing in the communities than members of most other caste ethnic groups in Nepal.

Due to the factors briefly enumerated above, the quality of life of the elderly people in general in the country and those living in the rural areas in particular has generally been quite poor. If no significant intervention is made in favour of the senior citizens of the country, the prospects for the future promise to be even worse due particularly to declining population growth rate and increased life expectancy. Thus, the situation calls for the institution of special policy measures to alleviate their difficult conditions being faced by the elderly population in the country.

2. Limitations of government delivery mechanisms to attend to the problems of the elderly

While the government agencies including the local bodies today remain the major service delivery agencies in the country, they suffer from many limitations such as lack of motivation, professionalism, transparency and accountability with the result that the quality and quantity of service delivered by them leave much to be expected.

3. Nepal's successful experiences in self-managed service delivery system and their implications for the management of the problems of the ageing population

However, in the areas of forest restoration and management and delivering primary health care to the communities, Nepal has a very successful experience of organizing those services under user management itself. For instance, while Nepal's forests had become totally denuded between 1957—when it was first nationalized—and mid-Eighties when desertification of the country had become a national alarm, Nepal introduced the institution of forest user groups in 1988 and devolved authority to them to manage their own forests. With 18,000 FUGs at work across the country Nepal has emerged as the acknowledged world leader in community forestry. Similarly, Nepal introduced mothers' groups and female community health volunteers (FCHV) in 1988 too—who now number more than 52 thousand each in the country—for managing primary healthcare at the community level. The FCHVs, accountable as they are to their specific mothers' groups, access health services from the government health posts and bring them to the women and children in the communities. Due to this mothers-focused participatory arrangement, Nepal today is ranked at the top of the table in meeting the UN' Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in child survival and maternal mortality rate reduction. The one vital lesson of these two successful experiences has been that services are most effectively managed when the authority is devolved to the users themselves.

4. Plea for the establishment of Senior Citizens User Groups in the VDCs

The earlier discussion has shown that the elderly people in the country and those in the rural areas in particular are confronted with many serious problems that adversely affect their quality of life. Besides, given the limitations of the government-led delivery mechanism on the one hand, and the grand success of self-managed user institutions in forestry and primary healthcare on the other, it further follows that the quality of life of the elderly people in the communities could be better addressed by putting themselves in charge of organizing and managing their own service delivery. Therefore, to that end, it is requested that, based on the decentralization policy of the government, the forthcoming budget document of the government provide for the institution of Senior Citizens User Groups in all the VDCs in the country even as the government also commits to explore the possible institutional options for similar user-based management of the senior citizens' problems in the urban areas of the country.

It is further proposed that the VDCs should be charged with the task of organizing such Senior Citizens User Groups and their executive body, the Senior Citizens User Committees, in their respective areas. The benefits of such an arrangement would include the following:

- **"Society for All Ages": Promoting empowerment of the elderly in society**

From the rights-based perspective, all the people in the communities are seen as their rightful member, subsumed under the internationally accepted principle of "Society for All Ages. Therefore, organizing the elderly people into their own organization--which, based on the decentralization tradition of Nepal, is to be called Senior Citizens User Group--would go a long way towards empowering them to live a meaningful and dignified life. As members of their own organizations, the senior citizens of the country would enjoy and exercise the legitimate authority to manage their own affairs for their collective and individual wellbeing and betterment. As in other forms of user groups referred to above namely, the forest user groups and mothers' groups, organizing the senior citizens into their user groups would not only empower them but also set the stage for unleashing their own creativity so as to manage their problems in a manner best suited to their own specific socio-economic and geographic circumstances

- **Managing the problems of the elderly in the communities based on transparency of management and accountability of leaders**

While the collectivity of "senior citizens" would comprise of a wide range of age groupings from age 60 upwards, the younger senior citizens could organize themselves in the service of those more advanced in age. Thus, it would set in a new tradition in the communities with the younger senior citizens helping out their older compatriots. Although the available resources would be limited, they nonetheless would be used more effectively for the benefit of those elderly people who need the services and help the most. In this regard, it should be emphasized that the women elderly among the poor and the Dalit caste groups count among the most disadvantaged people in the rural communities. Thus, such local self-help organization as the Senior Citizens' User Groups alone would have the capability to identify and address such individual-specific problems that otherwise would normally remain unattended in the nook and corner of the village communities. A government agency, for instance, would never be able to identify them and much less, have the motivation to address them. Since as in the case of the forest user groups and mothers groups, the management of the senior citizens' user groups too would be participatory and transparent, resources would be allocated and used in the most optimal manner with priority going to the weaker sections of the community such as poor and Dalit women mentioned above.

- **Self-help management of services**

In line with the services rendered presently by the forest user groups and mothers' groups to their own members, the proposed Senior Citizens' User Groups to manage their own services. One such service could be the distribution of the old age pension that the government has been providing to the elderly aged 70 and above. More such activities could be organized by the user groups as they become more organized and increasingly creative.

- **Senior Citizens' User Groups to function as pressure groups for promoting their own cause**

More importantly, the senior citizens could act as pressure groups for making the various government agencies and other non-government and local organizations such as the forest user groups responsive to their needs and concerns too. Since the older people would need greater healthcare, such User Groups could exert necessary pressure on the health-related institutions such as the local health posts to be more responsive to the curative and preventive health needs of the senior citizens in their communities.

- **Possible formation of national federation for advocacy of senior citizens' cause**

One all the VDCs (and municipal areas) have their own Senior Citizens' user Groups, they could go on to form their own national federation for promoting their cause in the policy making corridors of the government and other related agencies. The most potent example in this regard would be the FECOFUN, the national confederation of forest user groups, that has successfully acted as the bulwark against attempted curtailment of the authority of the forest user groups at the hands of the forest authorities in the country. Thus, once the national level body would be formed, the policy making for the elderly could be one of its active civil society agenda for which it could continuously partner with the government and other related national and international agencies.

5. Financial resources for the Senior Citizens' User Groups

Based on the principle of "Society for All Ages", no separate and special financial allocation from the government is stipulated. Since the senior citizens constitute an integral part of the local community, it is instead recommended that the Senior Citizens User Groups should be made eligible for a proportion of the development grant that the government gives to the VDCs and municipalities each year. Furthermore, based on the fact that people of 60 years and above currently constitute 8.14 percent of the country's population, it is recommended that the Senior Citizens User Group in each VDC should be made eligible for 10 percent of the development grant given to the VDCs each year. Similarly, appropriate institutional and financial arrangements should be made for municipal areas too after conducting necessary studies as to how a user-owned and user-managed arrangement could be made in urban context. The proposed approach, thus, is based on the principle of "entitlement" whereby the elderly consider themselves legitimate claimants to the resources of the communities to which they have always belonged. However, the proposed 10 percent sum of the VDC grant is seen only as the basic funding for the new institution. Since they would be autonomous institutions, they could mobilize their own additional funds locally and externally, based on the expansion of activities they would undertake in support of the elderly people in their communities.

6. Proposed draft for inclusion in the 2013 budget speech of the Finance Minister

Based on the rationale for the creation of Senior Citizens' User Groups as discussed above, the following formulation is proposed for inclusion in the upcoming budget speech of the Finance Minister for the fiscal year 2070-71 (2013-14).

The government has recognized that there is a need for making stronger institutional arrangement for addressing the problems of senior citizens in the country whose number and proportion are expected to increase every year due to the progress we have made in lowering the population growth rate and increasing life expectancy of our people. However, given the socio-economic and geographical diversity of our country, and to empower the senior citizens to plan and implement their own programmes for their well-being and progress, the government has decided to establish one Senior Citizens User Groups to be composed of all the people aged 60 years and above in each VDC in the country. Similarly, necessary investigation would be undertaken to implement the approach in the urban context of our municipalities too. Based on the principle of "Society for All Ages", the government has decided to make the Senior Citizens User Groups automatically eligible for 10 percent of the development grant to be given to the VDCs each year. Necessary rules will be framed to implement this approach in the country from next fiscal year.

References

- United Nations, 2011: *Current Status of the Social Situation, Well-Being, Participation in Development and Rights of Older Persons Worldwide* Department of Economic and Social Affairs New York