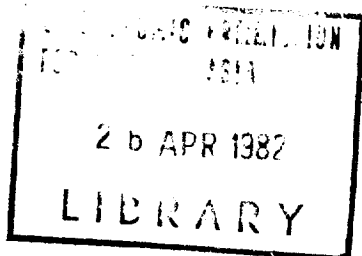




UNITED NATIONS

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL



Distr.
GENERAL

E/ECWA/155
3 February 1982

Original: ENGLISH

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Ninth session

8-12 May 1982

Baghdad, Iraq

Item 6(e) of the Provisional Agenda

REPORT ON THE ACTIVITIES OF
THE COMMISSION

REGIONAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORLD ASSEMBLY ON AGING

Report of the Executive Secretary

I. Introduction

1. In recent years, concern about the situation of the aged has increased rapidly. It is apparent that many of the most critical needs of aged persons are met only partially or not at all. At the same time, the world and all its regions are witnessing an increase in the older age groups of the population, both in terms of absolute numbers and in proportion to the total population.
2. This concern has been reflected in the debates and resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly during the last few years on the question of the aging.* The General Assembly has emphasized the need for interchange and international review of policy alternatives affecting the elderly. The majority of the reports of member States have recommended that a world assembly on aging should be convened to facilitate exchange of information and to design policy recommendations for the guidance of the participating nations. It was believed that there is an urgent need for international exchange of views and for the elaboration of the means to improve the conditions of the aging.
3. At its thirty-third session, the General Assembly adopted a resolution in which it decided, inter alia, to organize in 1982, a World Assembly on Aging. The World Assembly, which is to be held in Vienna in June 1982, is expected to approve an international plan of action in favour of aging persons. In preparation for the World Assembly, the member States of the United Nations are invited to give special attention to the question of aging and the aged, including the formulation of policies and programmes in conformity with national priorities.
4. The regional economic commissions are requested to put forward recommendations on aging, taking into account regional needs and requirements. Technical meetings on aging have been held in the different regions of the world, to bring expert advice to bear on the issues connected with aging.** By holding meetings of policy-makers the regional commissions are to review the results of the

* Recent General Assembly resolutions on aging include: 33/52 (1978); 34/153 (1979); 35/129 (1980); 36/20 (1981) and 36/30 (1981).

** The Regional Technical Meeting for the Mediterranean and the Middle East was held in Valletta, Malta, in June 1980, was organized by the United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs.

technical meeting and provide regional recommendations to be incorporated into the international plan of action.

5. In the case of Western Asia, it has not been possible to hold the regional meeting for policy-makers. Instead, this document has been formulated for the consideration of the Commission. It sets forth the situation of the aged in Western Asia, identifies key issues connected with aging, and identifies a number of guidelines for action in favour of the aged. The guidelines take full note of the recommendations of the Regional Technical Meeting for Aging in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

II. Trends in the Situation of the Aging in the ECWA Region

6. A review of the situation of the aging in the countries of Western Asia leads to the following main conclusions:

(a) That the present situation is relatively encouraging, with the attention being paid by families to their aging members;

(b) that the needs of the aging are not visible to the governments, that there has been little planning for the aging, and that programmes for the aging have low priority;

(c) that the rapid changes in the region may affect the situation of the aging adversely. It is appropriate, therefore, to take action now to minimize the effect of these changes;

(d) that information regarding the situation of the aging is insufficient for the formulation of programmes of action.

Thorough study of the situation and needs of aged persons is urgently needed.

7. Newly available resources in the region set a pace of economic development that brings with it, in turn, additional social problems. One of the most pressing of these is the inter-country migration of workers. As workers are drawn to the oil-producing regions, the countries from which the workers originate face important social difficulties, especially in connection with the worker's family.

One example is the situation of the aging family members who are left without the company and social support of the younger members of the family. Sometimes income is interrupted, when the migrant worker finds difficulties in his job situation or in delays in transmitting funds.

8. It is essential to note the particular political problem that confronts the ECWA countries. It has resulted in enemy occupation of Arab territories, and the denial of national rights to the Palestinian people. It has resulted in very heavy expenditures for armaments, absorbing funds which could otherwise be used for economic and social development. It has also resulted in the displacement, for very long periods of time, of hundreds of thousands of families. Among these families are many aging persons, now cut off from their homes, forced to re-establish themselves in new and unfamiliar situations, often in great poverty.

9. In some respects, the situation of the aging is at present relatively encouraging:

(a) In contemporary Arab society, the family is a remarkably strong unit of society. By and large, the family still continues to bear responsibility for the care and welfare of the aged. Though many social forces are undermining the extended family in the ECWA region, the extended family is still more predominant numerically than the nuclear family.

(b) Heavy industrialization in the ECWA region has not accompanied urbanization. In large parts of the region, agricultural commodities are produced, with rural styles of life in which aging people have important roles to play.

(c) Urbanization in the ECWA region is due to (i) the present demographic transition characterized by sharply declining death rates accompanied by a continuing high birth surplus and (ii) the rural-urban migration flow. Those who are attracted to the city are, in the main, the young men. As is evident in several ECWA countries, the newly arrived city migrant does not cut all ties with his rural area. There is a considerable interaction back and forth. Many of the urbanized, to a considerable degree, maintain their rural values. Consequently, family ties are still strong.

10. It should be stressed, however, the elderly and aged have not received due attention in the countries of the ECWA region. Some reasons for this state of affairs are:

(a) Most ECWA countries have not defined their attitude toward the elderly. As yet, no discernible trend has emerged to recognize resource pivotal to national development;

(b) Social welfare plans and programmes have been introduced and implemented only recently in many ECWA countries. By and large, these plans and programmes are in their initial stages. They reach only a part of the population, sometimes in an unsystematic fashion. There is a notable absence of developmental services for the aged and the elderly. There is a need to develop a comprehensive policy for this particular group and integrate this with the national development plans. It should be added that countries have initiated some measures within the context of social welfare for the aged. In a number of countries, social security payments are provided to the elderly, especially to men. With regard to institutional care for the aged, a limited number of homes have been established while planning for additional institutions is under way.

11. The question of the aged and the elderly as a social economic, medical and demographic issue will assume increasing importance in the ECWA region. It must be emphasized that the question of this largely neglected vulnerable group should not be viewed, by development planners, as an isolated issue. The aged and the elderly cannot be isolated from overall development planning. Solutions to the problems of the aged are connected to the solutions to the overall problem of development. Action in favour of the aging is needed at the national, regional and international levels.

III. Issues on Aging

12. The aging of population should be viewed within the context of both developmental and humanitarian issues. The developmental issues deal with how to ensure the aging with a meaningful and active role in the developmental process,

such as their participation in decision-making for development, their contribution to economic, social and cultural development efforts, and their education, training and retraining. The humanitarian issues deal with the integration of the aging into the mainstream of development in terms of making development more responsive to their needs and requirements and hence enabling them to obtain a fair and equitable share of the development benefits.

(a) The aging of population can have an impact on overall social and economic development. It has implications with regard to production, consumption and savings, employment, investment, migration and rural development, among others. These implications can have an adverse effect on the development process if the fact that the population is aging is not taken into account by planners and policy makers.

(b) The aging of populations has implication with regard to employment and the utilization of human resources. The increasing numbers and proportions of older adults coupled with policies of governments of forced retirement are resulting in a changing composition of the dependent population. The increase in the numbers of dependent elderly will place a burden on the labour force which is supporting it. In addition the skills of the aging population represent economic and social resources that should be utilized effectively.

(c) The aging of populations has also an impact on rural development. Many rural areas of the region are being depleted of their younger population because of heavy migration and these areas are being left with population whose age distribution could be unfavourable to the development of the area. Thus, a coherent policy combining action in different fields is required to encourage fuller use of the human capital of the aging which is available in the agricultural areas. Some suggestions might include increased agricultural education, expansion of extension services and adequate supplies and services needed to encourage efficient use by aging farmers of their production resources.

14. The aging of the population also has serious implication with regard to social security. In many countries of the region social security constitutes a major field of social investment. The resources mobilized and disbursed on account of social security have, in some cases, reached magnitudes which have a profound impact on the national economics. The benefit of social security schemes for development can be hindered if these schemes are not planned and integrated with the programmes of economic development and if the structure of the population to be served by such schemes is not taken into account.

15. In other words, the aging of populations, coupled with urbanization and industrialization, will give rise to critical issues with regard to human resources and social and economic development. In some countries of the region the issues relating to the aging have not as yet arisen to a significant degree. However, increased industrialization, urbanization and other related social and economic changes, including the increased income from energy products in some of the countries of the region, as well as increase in the numbers of the aging and their proportion in the total population, imply that these countries would increasingly face such issues.

16. Health aspects of aging are among the most important considerations in framing policies and programmes on aging. The advantage of considering the care of the aging as an integral part of the general health services for the entire population must be emphasized. Preventive programmes are essential for the whole population, e.g. education in hygiene and nutrition are among the most effective ways of promoting health and checking chronic disease in old age. An important advantage of integrating the aging in the general health services is the possibility of extending care to the aging through decentralized network of basic health services. The lesser mobility of the aging and the demonstrated reluctance of many to seek medical advice show the importance of encouraging and facilitating the access of the aging to health services. Better access to health care has a special and crucial meaning for the aging: it allows them to remain in their own home or in the care of relatives.

17. Because most of the schemes for income security have been established during the last two decades they are limited in their scope and structure and cover only the segment of the active population working in the modern sectors of the economy and in government service. In many countries this segment is a small percentage of the total working population. In the long run, there should be universal coverage and social security benefits should be linked to the cost of living and increased living standard as a whole. Wages, pensions and social security benefits ought to be carefully balanced to preserve incentives to work, ensure financial independence to the working or retired elderly, without overtaxing the younger generations. A functional rather than a chronological definition of aging, flexible retirement arrangements and sound financial management of social security funds are specific ways to achieve such equilibrium.

18. For the immediate future, social security remains out of reach for the vast majority of the population of the region and public assistance programmes providing cash, food, clothing, or shelter may bring relief to the most acute cases. The search for alternative forms of social protection must begin immediately. The role of co-operatives as well as local levels institutions among other possibilities in providing such protection should be investigated.

19. For the aging, housing is more than mere shelter. It has psychological, emotional and social significance in addition to meeting their physical needs. In many countries of the region, there is a severe lack of adequate housing for all in the population including the aging. In addition, there is a growing proportion living in slums and uncontrolled settlements. Furthermore, due to the political situation, there are large numbers of people who have been displaced and are currently living in sub-standard accommodations.

In this regard, every effort should be made so that housing provided for the aging would facilitate access to family, peers and neighbours, as well as to supportive health and social welfare services.

20. The increasing rate of social and technological changes, and the explosion of knowledge throughout the world have resulted in the need for continuing education of people in their middle and later years and for the retraining of those workers whose skills have become obsolete in their middle years. This is also needed to ease the transition from work to retirement through pre-retirement education.

21. For the aging who lack basic knowledge of reading and writing or who had a poor command of the local language, education for literacy should be provided. A large number of the aging in the region are either totally or functionally illiterate. Curriculum content specifically designed for this sector of the population should aim at increasing their knowledge and skills as to enable them to participate more fully in the process of development.

22. Social welfare activities and local level action can have an essential role in preparing the grounds for community centered activities for the aging. It is through successful social work intervention that many programmes for the aging could be provided with the least cost, and which could also assist in avoiding unnecessary institutionalization and social isolation of the aging.

23. The aging constitute a large reservoir of experienced manpower for a variety of welfare tasks. Social and community welfare programmes could benefit by utilizing the aging in numerous programmes such as day-care centres or home help to the incapacitated aging, among others.

24. Ways and means of strengthening the role of the aging within the family should be encouraged. There is ample evidence of the high esteem in which older people are held in countries of the region. However, increasing trends of industrialization and urbanization and the mobility of the labour force indicate that the traditional concept of the place and relationship of the elderly in the family is undergoing major change. The traditional family is becoming a nuclear unit. In spite of this, it has been widely recognized that the family in the region continues to be a fundamental social institution which is playing an important role in the social life of the aging as well as in meeting a wide spectrum of their needs, including non-material needs such as psychological, emotional and recreational.

25. A most important issue in the ECWA region is the well-being of elderly Palestinians and the attainment of their legal and national rights. This issue arises because of the occupation by Israel of territories belonging to the Palestinian people and the expulsion of many Palestinians from their homeland. As a result, many elderly Palestinians live under conditions of enemy occupation, while others are exiled from their homes. In either case, occupation or exile, the situation of elderly Palestinians requires special measures of national and international action.

IV. Guidelines and Recommendations

General

1. National committees should be established to promote the issue of aging at the national level and to monitor and evaluate the international plan of action of the World Assembly on the Elderly.
2. When nation-wide voluntary movements are formed, they should include joint government and non-governmental community based committees, and where appropriate workers and employers organizations, in order to promote and support the interest of the aging.
3. Voluntary contributions should become available to finance technical co-operation activities in this field including training and research activities and the assessment and development of national policies and programmes on aging. Assistance could also be provided to non-governmental organizations.
4. Governments should be encouraged to request technical assistance needed from regional and international organizations particularly in the area of data collection, research, training and policy formulation. Governments should also take initiatives to encourage the development of technical co-operation activities among themselves in the field of aging. Full use should also be made of presently available resources within the region, including universities, research institutes and other organizations.

Elderly Palestinians

5. As noted in the discussion of issues, special means of national, regional and international action are required to improve the well-being of elderly Palestinians and to attain their national and legitimate rights. Elderly Palestinians require, in extra degree, the same types of assistance as all elderly persons. They should also be enabled to play a positive and effect part in contributing to the economic and social development of the Palestinian people.

Research and Data Collection

6.(a) In planning for the aging, the most urgent need is for well-based information on their situation. Demographic data should be more systematically collected in the region and should be classified on an age-specific basis, preferably by five-year intervals. Presentation should be more understandable to the public, by such means as tables and graphs, and the data on the aging should be presented in relation to the demographic data of other sectors in the population. Urban/rural breakdown and migration patterns should also be presented.

6.(b) The special study of "geriatrics" must be encouraged, to provide a broad-based approach to the problems of aging. This knowledge will form the basis for training the specialized personnel needed for programmes assisting the elderly.

7. Statistical information on the aging should be collected and reliable social indicators in such key areas as health, nutrition, income, housing, and education should be collected. The incidence and generity of disability among the elderly must be carefully monitored.

8. Indepth research should be conducted in the countries of the region in order to determine the true conditions and needs of the aging. The results of the research will facilitate the formulation and implementation of plans and programmes for the aging and should facilitate linking the aging population to development planning.

Aging and Development

9. In view of the gradual aging of the population of the region, attention should be paid to the effect on this phenomenon on development. Wherever possible efforts should be made to promote the aging's continuing participation in the development efforts through such means as training and retraining programmes to enable the aging to adopt to new technologies. This could serve the dual purpose of utilizing the human resources of the aging as well as of minimizing the economic burden of an idle aging population. These activities depend, in the first place, on attainment of literacy by the adult population with special concentration on the older age groups.
10. The "aging of the population" in many rural areas of the region could be unfavourable to the development of the areas. Multi-dimensional policies and programmes are required to encourage full use of the human capital in the rural areas. These could include increased agricultural education, expansion of extensive services, and the provision of adequate supplies and services needed to encourage efficient use of production resources.
11. Social security schemes in many countries of the region constitute a major fund for investment. The schemes should be planned and integrated with the programmes of economic development. Importance should be given to the gradual aging of the population of the country and the impact of this phenomenon on the development of social security schemes.
12. In the future, the aging of the population may affect the consumption and savings patterns of many countries in the region. Due account of these changes should be taken into account in development planning and in the distribution of the benefits of development efforts.

Health

13. Health care services for the aging, in the long run, should aim at universal availability and accessibility. The services maintain the individual's independence in the community for as long as possible. This shall be done

through the promotion of health, the prevention of illness and disability, and the provision of adequate treatment, including rehabilitation when illness occurs. To achieve such goals requires appropriate and adequate community health services including home health services. There will be a need for sufficient and appropriate in-patient care facilities for the elderly when institutional care on a short or long term basis is necessary. Institutions should be adequately staffed and equipped and so maintained as to positively assist the patient to achieve the greatest possible degree of independence while, at the same time, providing in an acceptable manner the direct care services needed.

14. Care of the chronically ill elderly inevitably includes care of the terminally ill. Facilities should be made available for the terminally ill to ensure that the environment will provide the patients with the best possible human condition during their last days.

Social Security

15. Social security schemes should be designed appropriate for each stage of national development, taking fully into account available national resources and the needs of the persons protected.

16. As long as certain sectors of the population are left unprotected by social security, new and innovative approaches to social protection should be investigated. This could include, among others, local level institutions, co-operatives, etc.

17. Social security benefits for the aging should be designed to provide to the aging an adequate level of protection sufficient to maintain their financial independence, as well as an appropriate share in the increased standard of living. Such benefits should be adjusted to changes in the level of cost of living, with a view to assuring purchasing power.

18. The age at which old age benefits under social security are normally payable should be made flexible as far as possible. Legal provisions concerning retirement conditions should be constantly reviewed in the light of the prevailing social and economic conditions. As the population ages, the cost of retirement at younger ages may become extremely high.

19. The existing scheme of social security providing old age benefits should be extended as far as possible, its goal being to attain the universal coverage of the whole population.

Education

20. The goals and content of education should be designed for the life span and existing educational programmes should be adopted for the needs of the aging including education for literacy. The importance of literacy for the elderly cannot be overstressed, and this is vital for national development.

21. Education about aging should be part of national and local education programmes and content on aging should be included in the basic curriculum for the young. This education must be based on sound research.

22. The mass media should give greater emphasis to information about and for the aging. Public information campaigns should be designed to promote a positive image of the contribution of the aging to society.

Family

23. The family is a basic and effective social institution to provide care for the elderly. Where needed, in the region, the family should be assisted and strengthened to continue to fulfil its function of caring for the elderly. Changes in family support for the aging must be carefully monitored, in order to identify emerging needs.

Social Welfare

24. Social welfare activities should aim at co-ordinating community services for the aging and stimulating voluntary community actions. Elderly people should be part of the community, and institutionalization and isolation should be avoided. The services promote the continuous participation of the aging themselves in the life of the society.

Housing and Urban Planning

25. In ECWA countries, the need is usually for suitable housing for families, rather than special facilities for the elderly. Steps to improve the housing conditions for all in the population are urgently needed. Housing that is designed specifically for the aging should facilitate access to family and community as well as supportive services. General housing policies should be designed to support the extended family in providing housing for the aging. This could be done through urban planning, design of housing, rent subsidies, low cost loans, etc.

Institutional Care

26. Institutional care may become necessary for a very small number of elderly persons. In designing these institutions, the "asylum" concept must be avoided, so that isolation of the aged does not take place. The involvement of family members must be encouraged to the maximum and the institutions must maintain strong links with the community.