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IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS**

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**REPORT ON THE OBSERVANCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF OLDER
PERSONS AND ON PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MACAO
PLAN OF ACTION ON AGEING FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**

SUMMARY

In recognition of the ageing of populations across the world, the General Assembly, in 1992, decided to observe the year 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, with the theme "Towards a society for all ages". In line with that decision, the Macao Declaration and Plan of Action on Ageing for Asia and the Pacific was adopted on 1 October 1998 by the Regional Meeting on a Plan of Action on Ageing for Asia and the Pacific and endorsed by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific at its fifty-fifth session in 1999.

The Commission, through its resolution 54/5 of 22 April 1998 on the International Year of Older Persons: towards a society for all ages, and resolution 55/4 of 28 April 1999 - Towards a society for all ages: Macao Declaration and Plan of Action on Ageing for Asia and the Pacific, requested the Executive Secretary of ESCAP to report to the Commission in 2000 on the observance of the Year and on progress in the implementation of the Plan of Action, and on the basis of consultations with members and associate members, to recommend further action and initiatives to achieve the goals and targets contained therein.

The present report on the observance of the Year and on progress in the implementation of the Macao Plan of Action has been prepared in response to the requests made by the Commission in its resolutions 54/5 and 55/4.

The present report is in three parts: (i) introduction; (ii) report on the observance of the International Year of Older Persons; and (iii) progress in the implementation of the Macao Plan of Action. The review was undertaken based on information that became available through a survey conducted by the ESCAP secretariat late in 1999 and from documents provided by government agencies and concerned non-governmental organizations. For ease of reference, the part on progress achieved in the implementation of the Macao Plan of Action was formulated in accordance with the seven major areas of concern outlined in the Plan of Action itself. Recommendations for further action and initiatives have been incorporated in the relevant parts of the report.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The General Assembly, on 16 October 1992, in recognition of the rapid ageing of populations in societies across the world, adopted resolution 47/5, the annex to which contains the Proclamation on Ageing, by which it decided to observe the year 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons. The theme of the Year is “Towards a society for all ages”, with four dimensions: (1) the situation of older persons, (2) lifelong individual development, (3) multigenerational relationships, and (4) development and the ageing of populations.

2. Countries in Asia and the Pacific are confronted with serious and complex challenges resulting from the rapid ageing of populations. The dramatic alteration in the age structure of societies caused by falling fertility rates and increasing life expectancy has led to estimations that the proportion of older persons in some countries will reach 25 per cent by the early twenty-first century, posing challenges in both the development and humanitarian areas.

3. The Commission, at its fifty-fourth session, adopted resolution 54/5 of 22 April 1998 on the International Year of Older Persons: towards a society for all ages, in which it urged all members and associate members to take early and effective action to implement General Assembly resolutions concerning older persons and make preparations for the Year. The Commission requested the Executive Secretary of ESCAP to convene a regional meeting to formulate a plan of action on ageing for Asia and the Pacific, as called for in General Assembly resolution 50/141 of 21 December 1995.

4. The Macao Declaration and Plan of Action on Ageing for Asia and the Pacific, which was adopted on 1 October 1998 by the Regional Meeting on a Plan of Action on Ageing for Asia and the Pacific, was endorsed by the Commission in its resolution 55/4 of 28 April 1999 – Towards a society for all ages: Macao Declaration and Plan of Action on Ageing for Asia and the Pacific. The Commission, through its resolutions 54/5 and 55/4, requested the Executive Secretary of ESCAP to report to the Commission in 2000 on the observance of the Year and on progress in the implementation of the Plan of Action and, on the basis of consultations with members and associate members, to recommend further action and initiatives to achieve the goals and targets contained therein. In resolution 55/4, the Commission further requested the Executive Secretary to report to the Commission on a regular five-year basis, on the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Plan of Action.

5. The present report on the observance of the International Year of Older Persons and on progress in the implementation of the Macao Plan of Action on Ageing for Asia and the Pacific has been prepared in response to the requests made by the Commission in the resolutions mentioned above.

6. For this purpose, a questionnaire was prepared by the ESCAP secretariat in September 1999 and sent to government agencies responsible for ageing-related issues or national focal points for the

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International Year of Older Persons in members and associate members of ESCAP as well as to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with older persons in the region, to collect the necessary information. The reviews presented below are based on the information obtained from surveys and other documents received from members and associate members of ESCAP.

I. REVIEW OF THE OBSERVANCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF OLDER PERSONS IN THE REGION

7. The International Year was commemorated with much enthusiasm in the region. Fifteen governments were reported as having undertaken a wide range of activities to observe the Year along the lines of its four dimensions.

8. National agencies and mechanisms on ageing, as well as national focal points for the International Year, have been established in many countries, such as Australia, Bangladesh, China, Fiji, Indonesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet Nam. These agencies and national committees initiated activities at both the national and local levels to generate greater awareness of issues relating to ageing and to older persons, mobilize social and community support for older persons, integrate older persons into mainstream development and promote multigenerational relationships for the benefit of societies of all ages.

9. The cooperation between government agencies and NGOs and other organizations, as well as the contribution of the mass media, were distinctive features of the observance of the Year in many countries. In countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam, many activities were characterized by joint efforts between the government and NGOs, in terms of shared resources, joint sponsorship, and the mobilization of participation by the public in activities to support the Year. In Thailand, the Department of Public Welfare organized various activities, including walk events, sports events for older persons, and festivals of older persons in four regions of the country, with the strong support and wide participation of different government agencies and NGOs as well as the public. In Viet Nam, cultural festivals were held throughout the second half of 1999 featuring exemplary older persons and the contribution of older persons to national development over the past decades. In the Philippines, national awards were conferred on older persons in recognition of their role and contribution in resource generation, community service and leadership. Establishments which are easily accessible by older persons were promoted. Photo exhibits, poster design contests, trade fairs, seminars and walk events were organized in Australia; Bangladesh; China; Fiji; Macao, China; Malaysia; Mongolia; New Zealand; and Papua New Guinea.

10. More importantly, the observance of the Year was made into an opportunity to review and strengthen existing policies and programmes for older persons in countries where such policies were

in place. In countries where a national policy and national mechanism on ageing were yet to be established, the Year provided an invaluable opportunity for initiating and adopting a national policy, a plan of action for older persons or a national strategy regarding older persons. The Government of India adopted a national policy on older persons in 1999. In the Philippines, a six-year Plan of Action for Older Persons was adopted. A draft law on the care, protection and promotion of older persons was under consideration by the National Assembly in Viet Nam. The Government of Thailand adopted the Declaration on Older persons in Thailand on the occasion of the International Year and the International Day of Older Persons, in addition to the setting up of the National Commission on Older Persons Affairs.

11. Many governments and NGOs have planned follow-up activities to the Year. These include meetings and congresses of older persons to discuss issues related to ageing and development, such as health, employment for older persons, transmission of cultural values, and the promotion of a positive image of and attitudinal change towards older persons.

12. At the regional level, the ESCAP secretariat enhanced its activities relating to older persons, which aimed at three major goals: (a) to strengthen national capabilities for policy and programme development for older persons; (b) to generate greater awareness and understanding of ageing-related issues; and (c) to enhance cooperation and coordination between all actors concerned, governments, NGOs and other organizations, for the benefit of older persons.

13. The ESCAP secretariat organized a series of seminars, workshops and consultations on national and regional preparations for the Year. The Regional Workshop on Preparations for the International Year of Older Persons was held in Beijing in May 1998, which drafted the Macao Plan of Action on Ageing for Asia and the Pacific. The Regional Seminar on Promoting a Society for All Ages was held at Bangkok in December 1998, and focused on the two dimensions of the International Year: the interaction between ageing and development, and the promotion of multigenerational relationships. A publication, *Promoting a Society for All Ages in Asia and the Pacific* (ST/ESCAP/1982) was issued in 1999. It contained the findings and recommendations of the Regional Seminar. The secretariat convened the International Symposium on Planning Attainable Targets for Societies for All Ages in Macao in October 1999. The Symposium, which was attended by participants both from the region and from other parts of the world, developed guidelines on the implementation of the Plan of Action which included specific time-bound goals and targets on ageing.

14. The support and protection of older persons as consumers was another theme covered by the Plan of Action that was promoted by the ESCAP secretariat through the implementation of a project on the theme. Under the project, the Regional Seminar on Support and Protection of Older Persons as Consumers was held at Shanghai, China in October 1999.

15. The ESCAP secretariat continued to disseminate information relating to the Year and to older persons through the distribution of publications, newsletters, and information kits as well as through electronic means, including the Internet.

16. Through the above activities, recommendations have been made by countries and organizations, among which are suggestions to integrate ageing into national and international development plans and programmes, improve cross-national research, include ageing-related issues in international events, and establish a global network of senior volunteers, as follow-up activities in the years to come.

II. PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MACAO PLAN OF ACTION ON AGEING FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

17. The adoption in 1998 of the Macao Plan of Action on Ageing for Asia and the Pacific represented a regional benchmark in the field of ageing. By the endorsement of the Plan of Action at the fifty-fifth session of the Commission in April 1999, the Asian and Pacific region became the first and, thus far, the only region in the world with a regional plan of action on ageing. The Plan contains concise recommendations and guidelines regarding seven areas of concern; (a) the social position of older persons; (b) older persons and the family; (c) health and nutrition; (d) housing, transportation and the built environment; (e) older persons and the market; (f) income security, maintenance and employment, and (g) social services and the community.

18. This section reviews progress, on the part of governments and relevant NGOs in the region, in the implementation of the Macao Plan of Action, in the seven major areas of concern elaborated in the Plan of Action. The information available demonstrates that many governments and NGOs have been genuinely committed to the goals of the Plan. Appropriate measures have been taken and others are planned in response to the ageing of populations. It is envisaged that, in the coming years, more action will be undertaken by governments towards accomplishing fully the goals and targets set in the Plan of Action.

A. The social position of older persons

19. Older persons are often negatively perceived as being physically frail, and dependent. These perceptions can often leave older persons marginalized and neglected. Improvements in medical care and nutrition have contributed to the fact that older persons today are generally both healthy and independent. In addition to offering a pool of knowledge and experience, they act as a link between the generations and assist in maintaining cultural continuity in a world of rapid change and development.

20. Governments have recognized the importance of promoting positive attitudes and dispelling the negative perceptions towards older persons in preparation for an ageing society, as seen in many

activities to observe the Year, including poster design contests and photo exhibits as well as national awards to older persons.

21. There is a growing realization that preparation for a productive and meaningful role of older persons should be undertaken at the levels of both the individual and the society. At the individual level, this involves a lifelong preparatory process that starts from an early age and should be nurtured in younger people. At the society level, preparation for productive ageing should include such steps as lifelong education and provision of equal opportunity, to allow older persons to remain engaged in as many social, economic and community activities as possible.

22. Many governments in the region have made efforts to promote the United Nations Principles for Older Persons within the national and cultural context and harness the contribution of older persons as a national resource. A good number of governments have set up national focal points for the development and coordination of policies and programmes relating to ageing and older persons. Some governments have also carved out specific national policies or plans for action on population ageing. To improve knowledge and awareness of the field, research has been encouraged and supported in a number of countries. Seminars and conferences, on both national and international scales, have been held to further promote and heighten understanding of the relevant issues.

B. Older persons and the family

23. The family is often the fabric and cornerstone of most societies in the Asian and Pacific region and fulfils the role of primary care provider for older family members. However, recent socio-economic forces have affected the capacity of the family to support and care for older persons adversely. Declining family size, the increasing number of women joining the workforce, the diminishing extended family arrangement and the geographic mobility of family members are contributing factors that have reduced the number of potential caregivers within the family. Governments realize the importance of family support for older persons and have undertaken measures to support the family, although much remains to be done. It has become necessary for governments to take effective steps to enhance the care-giving capability of the family through appropriate programmes.

24. In support, governments have agreed to initiate programmes to strengthen the role of the family as the traditional support provider through the following aspects:

- (a) The promotion of co-residence through housing policies and financial incentives;
- (b) The provision of home nursing services for older persons;
- (c) The strengthening of intergenerational relationships.

25. Governments are aware of the existence of vulnerable and disadvantaged older persons, including those who are disabled, displaced, financially insecure and lacking family support. These

groups of older persons require direct humanitarian assistance and should receive special attention and be adequately covered by the social safety net. The governments need to identify and assess the size of these groups and the extent of the assistance they require.

26. Examples of efforts to promote the role of the family as caregiver can be found in the Islamic Republic of Iran; Macao, China; Malaysia; Mongolia; Thailand; Viet Nam and others. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Government provides the following services to families with an older person: paying a life pension for taking care of the older persons in the family; presenting medical rehabilitation equipment; offering consulting services and social work; and delivering training material in the field of special care for older persons. Consulting services are offered to families with older members and financial support is given to those families which look after their older members. In Macao, China, housing policies include supportive measures for families caring for older persons. Malaysia offers tax relief for family members on their medical expenses and purchases for their parents. In Mongolia, a system of social services delivered at home for single older persons has been initiated.

C. Health and nutrition

27. Older persons are naturally more prone to illnesses, although advances made in technology, medical care and nutrition have increased the average life expectancy of older persons today, making them physically stronger, more active and improving their all-round health. However, a number of countries in the region lack sufficient infrastructure and funds to cover medical expenses and services for the growing older populations. Governments recognize that health care for older persons will be a key issue in the future, requiring significant budgetary commitments from the governments as well as the individuals and their families. Governments have also recognized the strong need for establishing a systematic programme of activities to educate the population on healthy ageing and raise awareness of the physiological changes that accompany old age.

28. As a result, countries across the region are investing in preventive and rehabilitation care and services, covering home health care as well as hospital care and mental health services. The coverage of such services, however, varies among countries as well as between the rural and urban segments within each country.

29. Geriatric training is provided in varying degrees to persons working in related health-care fields, such as physicians, nurses and social workers. For example, in Bangladesh, emphasis and support are given to the development of geriatric medicine and treatment. The development of geriatric medicine and care is also being promoted and a national geriatric council including representatives of the government has been formed. The financial implications of health programmes for older persons in the future has been acknowledged and addressed by a majority of the

governments in the region, a number of which provide concessions and incentives in relation to health care for older persons.

D. Housing, transportation and the built environment

30. In the Asian and Pacific region, a large proportion of the older persons live with their families. Their quality of life is thus often dependent on the adequacy of their living conditions. Resources should be made available to address the housing needs of older persons. A minimum standard needs to be set for a reasonable and adequate living environment for older persons with barrier-free access throughout the community, made possible through appropriate means. Some governments in the region have adopted housing policies which deal specially with the housing situation of older persons and which assist in enabling older persons to continue living at home. In addition, governments should provide incentives to facilitate home upgrading and improvements to the surrounding environment. Public housing programmes and community residential care of a satisfactory standard should be available options for older persons.

31. Governments should, in addition, make special arrangements to meet the transportation needs of older persons. Concessions in travel fares should be considered for older persons commuting by public transport. Some governments have incorporated policies and programmes which address the environment and infrastructure to facilitate accessibility and freedom of movement for older persons. Further adaptations should be made to the physical environment and transportation infrastructure to facilitate the independent, unrestricted mobility of older persons. Governments should promote road safety, as older persons are particularly at risk of traffic accidents.

32. Governments in China; Macao, China; Myanmar; Singapore; and Thailand have provided incentives and support for older person's accommodation. In other countries, such as Fiji, Malaysia, the Philippines and Mongolia, public travel concessions are offered to older persons.

E. Older persons and the market

33. Many older persons require specialized goods and services, making them a distinct and often disadvantaged group of consumers. In some countries, this has given rise to well-defined markets for older persons. Governments pledged in the Macao Plan of Action to ensure that older people's rights as consumers, as provided for in the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection,¹ are recognized and safeguarded. Encouragement should be given to older persons to join or form consumer groups to protect their interests.

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34. It has been recognized that the specialized market for older persons is likely to grow in size as demand is expected to increase with the ageing of populations. Some governments have agreed to

¹ See the annex to General Assembly resolution 39/248 of 9 April 1985.

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supervise and facilitate the development of this market in accordance with regulations aimed at preventing abuse, and guarantee minimum standards in order to protect older people's rights as consumers.

F. Income security, maintenance and employment

35. Financial security at old age is a very important aspect of an individual's well-being, especially taking into consideration the increase in the average life expectancy. Saving for old age is a valued tradition in Asia and the Pacific. However, a person's financial situation at a young age may not always allow for sufficient savings. Although a large number of countries in the region have a set retirement age, this is being reviewed in order to eliminate discriminatory practices and ensure that individuals are judged not by their age but their productivity at work. Recognizing the benefits in allowing older persons to stay in the workforce, some governments are assisting older persons to do so by creating job opportunities and providing training as well as financial incentives for self-employment schemes.

36. Pension and social security schemes are offered to older persons in many countries in Asia and the Pacific, although the coverage varies among different countries and varies further between the rural and urban areas of each country. Some governments are in the process of reviewing the coverage of pension and social security schemes in terms of their availability and whether it corresponds to the standard of living. Furthermore, governments have urged that extensive studies be made to provide new instruments of income security.

37. While governments in Bangladesh; Brunei Darussalam; Macao, China; Malaysia; Nepal; Pakistan; Thailand; and Viet Nam have some form of programme or pension scheme for providing subsistence allowance for older persons, not all older persons are covered under each of the programmes. In China, the "Self-Help Enterprise" was set up to provide healthy old people with the opportunity to support themselves by working in an environment suitable to their physical condition. The Government of Fiji provides a nominal family assistance allowance to poor older persons on merit. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran provides interest-free loans with a long repayment period.

38. In the Philippines, older citizens are offered benefits and privileges such as discounts in restaurants, recreational facilities and other places of culture as well as hotels and lodging establishments. The Philippines has programmes and services aimed at developing economic self-reliance and social responsibility among older persons. Skills training is provided to individuals or groups, and those who may wish to start their own livelihood project may avail themselves of the Self-Employment Assistance Programme, whose initial capitalization is provided by the local government units. Grants-in-aid and bigger capital assistance which are interest-free are provided to groups of older persons to encourage their participation in income-generating activities.

G. Social services and the community

39. Older persons have a wealth of experience and knowledge which they have gathered in their lifetime. The contribution that older persons offer and the needs they require from society have been recognized by governments. The opening of avenues for older persons' participation in community activities not only allows older persons to involve themselves with their community but provides them with opportunities to pass on their knowledge and experience. Some countries have done this by inviting older persons to partake in the educational system on a community level as teachers and leaders, while in others it is through membership in community clubs and residents associations.

40. In Fiji, the Help Age Centre is a drop-in centre for older persons residing in Suva, the capital. One of the key activities of the Centre is the promotion and contribution of older persons to community development and social services, including vocational training, marriage counselling and teaching of local languages to tourists. In Macao, China, the Government, together with an education institute, is designing a non-formal senior education and literacy programme in order to enable older persons to become active participants in the society and to further promote educational opportunities for them.