

# STRATEGIES TOWARDS REDUCING THE PROBLEMS OF AGEING IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

*Nnubia Uju E*

## **Abstract**

Ageing is a natural phenomenon. It is seen as a process of favorable progressive change, usually correlated with the passage of time becoming apparent after maturity and terminating invariably in death. However, one of the issues disturbing the world today and presenting formidable challenges is the problem of the elderly and how to manage them. Thus, the main thrust of this paper is to highlight the problems associated with ageing in Nigeria. The writer also looked into the conceptual framework of ageing and finally, the theories of ageing.

## **Introduction**

The ageing process is an undeniable feature in human growth and development. It involves physical, social and psychological transformation as one transits from young adulthood to old age. Thus, irrespective of race, colour and geographical location, human beings go through this evolutionary process of life changes. However, differences occur in qualitative and quantitative ageing process as it result of varied socio-economic and technological development in different societies, environmental and cultural forces, and accessibility or otherwise of qualitative health care and nutrition, and the interplay among these forces. Ageing process is also a function of the influence of the biological/inherited properties.

Today, with advances in technology and improved nutrition and health care, life expectancy has increased, improved survival chances throughout the life cycle. This implies an increase in the number of the elderly (National Centre for health statistics 1999). Thus, the percentage of the elder is not only significant in developed Countries but also in developing countries. In Nigeria for instance, the elderly population has moved from 1.21 to 4.60 million between 1911 and 1991. Also, a World Bank projection of the population of the elderly stated that by year 2000, they would be 7.25 million and 17.62 million by 2025 (World Bank Report, 1990).

However, one of the issues disturbing the world today and presenting formidable challenges is the ageing and the problem of the elderly. As people become elderly, they become frail, their health status starts to depreciate as a result of degenerative illness or increase in aches and pains. They cannot fend for themselves any longer and as such become economically, socially and psychologically dependant on the people around them. The above notwithstanding, traditional family setting in Nigeria and the extended family system was meant to cater for the elderly by their close kins. With urbanization the elderly are however left to care for themselves. In developed countries, Institutional cares frame work for the elderly are available. This arrangement, referred to as "old people's home," is where the old is housed an taken care of.

In Nigeria, there are very few old people's home in existence. According to Adegboro, (1978) in Usoroh and Akpan (2007), there is one old people's home at Ibadan, Benin and two in Lagos. Again, social security for the elderly are not strong in Nigeria as in developed countries. Thus, this paper sought to identify the problems of Ageing in Nigeria society,

### **Conceptual Framework of Ageing**

Ageing is the process of becoming older. It is considered as an important part of all human societies reflecting the biological changes that occur, also reflecting cultural and societal convention. According to Masoro and Austand (2006), ageing is the process of system deterioration with time thus, allowing for existence of non-ageing system ("when old is as good as new"), an anti-ageing intervention (when accumulated damage is required).

Ageing is a natural phenomenon. It is unequivocal that we are growing one year older every year. It is a

continuous process from birth onwards (i.e. it begins with conception and ends with death). Thus, birth, growth, maturation, senescence are all part of the normal ageing process. Ageing can be defined again as a process of unfavourable progressive change, usually correlated with the passage of time, becoming apparent after maturity and terminating invariably in death. Ageing is characterized by the following:

- loss of job due to retirement (for the paid workers)
- Narrow mindedness for some people
- Becoming more religious
- Emotional insecurity
- Graying hair Ageing skin (Warty skin)
- Slow in responding to the environmental stimulus.
- Vast reservoir of knowledge.
- Forgetfulness and difficulty in learning new techniques and skills (Kolo 2007).

As one ages, there tend to be some effect of that ageing on the individual. Among them is the general decline in many cognitive processes. However, researchers have found that there is still improvement in the area of semantic and general knowledge such as vocabulary definitions as one ages. Also, emotional experience has been found to improve with age.

In African societies, ironically, many people distaste the visible ageing signs that begin to manifest as one grows older. For instance, a 60 year old woman may be preoccupied with maintaining a youthful appearance of 30 year old woman. Serious attempts are made to mask the visible signs of ageing or to deny ageing outrightly. For one to age gracefully, attitude (possessing good positive attitude) towards life has been found to be a very important ingredient (The psychology of ageing 1998). The Australian Aged Care placement solution (2007) proposed 10 rules of positive ageing as following:-

- Remain physically active
- Participate fully in social life
- Work for the love of it -
- Eat what you want in moderation Rest well
- Never stop learning and teaching
- Practice safety
- Smile and laugh often
- Do what you like best Remain positive in all you do.

Imbibing these principles will help one to properly handle misconceptions about old-age and learn to love growing older or age positively.

### **\_ Theories of Ageing**

There are different theories of ageing such as, genetic preprogramming theories wear and tear, theories of ageing, disengagement theory, activity theory and social break down- reconstruction theory.

### **Genetic Preprogramming Theories**

These theories of ageing suggest that there is in-built time limit to the reproduction of human-cells and that after a certain time, they are no longer able to divide (Hayflick in Madu, 2006). A variant of this theory is that some cells genetically reprogrammed to become harmful to the body after a certain amount of time has gone by causing the internal-biology of the body to self destruction (Smith et al and Finch in Madu 2006).

### **Wear and Tear theories**

According to the wear and tear theories of ageing, the mechanical functions of the body

simply stop working efficiently. Moreover, waste by-products of energy production eventually accumulate and mistakes are made when cells reproduce. Eventually the body in effect wears out. The above two theories explain the biological process of ageing which is common to individuals of all cultures, '

### **Disengagement Theory:**

The disengagement theory of ageing sees ageing as a gradual withdrawal from the world on physical, psychological and social levels (Cummings and Henry as in Alkinson, Alkinson, Smith and Hilgard:1987). Physically lower energy level produce less activity, psychologically, the locus shifts from others to the self, and socially, there is less integration with others and a reduction in the level of participation in society at large. However, disengaging from all forms of physical activities will be inimical to ones, health and this must have given rise to the next theory, activity theory.

### **The Activity Theory:-**

This theory suggests that the elderly who age most successfully are those who maintain interest in activities they pursued during middle age and who resist any decrease in the amount and kind of social interaction they have with others (Blan,1973). According to activity theory, old age should reflect a continuation as much as new activities to replace those lost through changes such as retirement.

Disengagement theory and activity theories are the two major approaches suggested to have explained elderly people's social environment. The two theories are reminders to us that at a point in one's life time, one may have cause to disengage from certain economical and social activities which one had hitherto engaged in. When eventually this becomes the case, the individual, will look for alternative activities that will not be much demanding on one's physique and health.

### **Social Breakdown-Reconstruction Theory**

This is one of the social theories that argues that ageing is promoted through negative psychological functioning, brought about by negative societal views of older adults and inadequate provision of services for them. And that social reconstruction can only occur by changing society's view of older adults and by providing adequate support system for them (Pers and Bengton, 1973 in Santroch, 1999)

Nevertheless, both activity theory and social breakdown - reconstruction theory argue that old adults capacities and competence are far greater than society has acknowledged in the past. Older adults' active participation in society can increase their life satisfaction and positive feelings about themselves. Finally, it could add few years on to their life span.

### **Problems of Ageing in the Nigerian Society**

Every segment of the population in all parts of the world has lots of challenges facing them. The Nigerian case is no exception however, these challenges are more on the part of the elderly following what is obtainable nowadays. The obvious challenges are in the areas of:

1. Socio-cultural aspect
2. Delay in payment of gratuity and pension
3. Societal perception of the aged.
4. Income.
5. Abandonment and Loneliness'
6. Urbanization
7. Medical/ mental Health Challenges of Ageing
8. Housing.

### **Socio-Cultural Challenges:**

In the past few decades, the challenges and problems of old peoples' care and welfare were more or less taken care of by the traditional African care value orientation, qualified by communal concern, interest and commitment to the welfare of the elderly by members of the family and the community at large. This was based on the simple fact that traditionally, the elders in the community were viewed positively and regarded as guardians of important knowledge and problems in the communities. In those good olden days, the elderly parents enjoyed their old age in company of grand children, cousins and relation who were around and handy to minister to their needs of the elderly. In many situation their

children who by virtue of residing outside home in urban centers, had to send their children to stay and live with their aged parents. Others resort to marrying second or third wives as the case may be, who alternate staying in the village to look after their aged parent

Today, while one can argue that the Nigeria family is still relatively intact (Nweze 2004), the impact of development and modernization has been closely connected with rapid social and economic challenges that act to weaken the traditional social-values and social net work that provide care and social for the elderly in the communities unlike in the past. For example, formal education has been one single factor that tends to liberate and give greater independence to the individual from the bonds of traditional values to the extent that many do not go home to see their aged parents who are languishing in village, instead, they stay behind in cities in the name of socialization and independence.

### **Delay in Payment of Gratuity and Pension**

Given the normal circumstance, the elderly in paid employment look forward to retiring at about 60 years of age. When there is a steady progress in one's career up to this age uninterrupted by ill health or compulsory retirement, the socio- economic problem of the elderly person becomes less, and the individual can easily adjust. When on the other hand, there is a major health problem or sudden, termination of one's appointment without another opportunity for employment, adjustment may be more difficult, frustration may set in, health, problems may worsen. Usually people are expected to plan for their retirement and government policy towards this is through the provision of gratuity and pension. In Nigeria, the gratuity and pension arrangement and management has been a failure in the recent past as individuals retire and stay for years without receiving their benefits. These are people who served the nation creditably in many capacities. Perhaps, this is done by the people concerned working under the belief that these people may not engage in effective unionization to possibly hold government at ransom for non-payment of their pension. When these negative images are continually perpetuated throughout the society, the aged cannot help but feel worthless and left out. The message seems to be that you must-be young to be worthwhile.

### **Societal Perception of the Aged**

Another great challenge to growing old in Nigeria is the changing perception and attitude towards old age which in many circumstances, is far from being positive. The elderly are no more looked upon especially by the younger generation as custodian of information and wisdom as it was in the past. This negative perception of seeing the elderly as having outlived useful life has consequences in our relationship with them. For example, we are all aware of the descriptive words that are often used to refer casually to old people in our communities. Such include, "papa", "maama", "Okongwu" and "Qkongwuress", "Okoman" and " Oko-woman" etc. which have so negative-connotation that simply reminds the person that he/she is old. Society's widespread acceptance of. these views helps to perpetuate them.

### **Income**

One of the biggest problems affecting the old is poverty. Some are so deprived that they cannot afford enough food, drugs and means of communication. Many people after a life time of hard ' work become poor for the first time in old age. They out-live their savings, pension and social security, (for those likely to receive them) rarely allow for more than a mere subsistence - existence.

Income affects the dimension and conserves of ageing in several, possibly contradictory ways. It confers a protective effect against mortality and disability. Studies have found contradictory result on the relationship between health and income. Some studies, found out that income is strongly protective of health even after controlling for education while others found higher incomes mildly hazardous to health. The only clear conclusion that can be drawn is that income interacts with other factors that promote better health.

### **Abandonment and Loneliness:**

Following the social change that potentially weaken and rub off the traditional value orientation of care and support for the welfare of the elderly, the elderly have obviously felt abandoned. The loneliness many of them (especially widows and widows and widower) experience add

to the challenges of getting old in Nigeria one can better appreciate the picture being painted by envisioning the case of elderly couples whose children reside in foreign countries or even urban cities. Apparently, the situation of the elderly in many Nigerian communities is that of abandonment, isolation and above all loneliness. Indeed, apart from the factors, of old age illnesses and lack of appropriate health care facilities, the greatest challenge for the elderly is the psychological consequences of loneliness and apparent abandonment.

### **Urbanization**

Nigeria is a society which upheld the close knit traditional family system in which communal living was the order of the day. Nowadays, urbanization has forced young people who would otherwise have continue to stay in the rural communities and looking after their elderly parent to flee for better life opportunities in the urban cities. The elders are left at the mercy care-givers who most of often, abuse them.

### **Medical /Mental Health Challenges of Ageing**

Much of the health implication of the ageing process is the degeneration aspect of the physical and biochemical constituents. As soon as development toes a downward trend, the individual begins to experience decrease in psychomotor skills, cognitive and impairment. Adjusting to these life transitions becomes a problem itself. Apart from physical illness, the problem of mild to severe mental disorder becomes more apparent. These include:-

#### **1. Alzheimer's disorder:**

This disorder is as a result of degeneration of the brain cells. Its symptoms include progressive memory loss (amnesia), difficulty with vision, language skill and emotional control. In many cases, the victim may require 24 hours care with daily routines such as eating, growing and toileting. This constitutes the major problem of the 85 years and above in many Nigeria communities. To compound the problem, there is no cure yet in Nigeria for such problems.

#### **2. Depression:**

Under normal condition, people experience non clinical depression as a common life condition coping with frustration and disappointments in daily life. For the elderly, what drives them into depression are much ranging from concerns about ageing itself, having to stop work, not earning income, feeling a sense of desertion, the starting of arthritis and fear of other old age illnesses. Sometimes, the deaths of spouse, friends and/or neighbours are parts of the sources of depression in the elderly.

### **Housing**

The elderly in some parts of the Nigerian society have housing problems which ranged from deteriorating and dilapidated structures. Most of the retirees are experiencing decline in their physical strengths for them to personally maintain their housing unit and pay for their services. The result is that some of them do not have houses of their own and are exposed to the dangers of living in another person house.

### **Strategies for Reducing the Problems Associated with Ageing in Nigeria**

In the light of the problems and challenges of ageing in the Nigerian society, the following strategies could be of help in reducing the problems::

- Institutional homes or old people's home
- Reforms in the pension scheme
- Investments/savings
- Re-orientation about ageing
- Counseling
- Recreational centers, parks and gardens
- Adults in paid jobs.

### **Institutional Homes or Old People's Home:**

The concept of old people's home is now ripe in Nigeria to help alleviate the problems of urbanization, abandonment and loneliness of the elderly population of the country. Even though the concept and practice may be alien in Nigeria's culture and traditional context, the obvious reality is that the country is at the crossroad of change as far as the care and welfare of the elderly population where those without homes or persons to take care of them can go for refuge. According to Usoroh and Akpan (2007) today, most elderly live alone while others are neglected by their family members. They further said that it is the view of the researchers that the citing of old people's homes "would aid in the care of the elderly who have no dependents".

### **Reforms in the Pension Scheme:**

Considering what retired workers go through in Nigeria in a bid to receive their retirement benefits, government should ensure that the ongoing pension reform is properly packaged and delivered in order to check further suffering and untimely death of people immediately after retirement from active services.

**Investments/savings Culture:** People should invest for the "rainy day" because a young man/woman today will be "okongwu" and "Okongwuress" of tomorrow. A time shall come in one's life when one will rest from active work and is expected to fall back on what he/she had served all through the active years. In a situation where one neither invested on anything nor made savings, the individual is bound to suffer unless he is lucky to have wealthy children and relatives to cater for him. Therefore, investment and savings should be the watch word for one so as not to be a burden on people around financially.

### **Re-orientation about Ageing**

The society needs to be re-orientated through seminars/workshops, meetings and foray on what ageing is all about. This will help to calm the mind of people that ageing is not a curse but a blessing. Through such media the young ones will begin to appreciate the old people in their midst, knowing that at a stage in their lives, they too will be like them.

### **Counseling**

Counseling is a good strategy in reducing the problems associated with ageing in Nigeria. Anyone who wants to age gracefully, should seek for counseling. The individual will be equipped with coping mechanism/strategies that will help him to handle life challenges with little or no stress. Counseling will help individuals to work out a blueprint for life aimed at reducing the stress and strains, diseases and illness that hasten ageing thus making it stressful and strenuous.

### **Recreational Centers Park and Gardens**

There should be amusement parks for the aged where they can get together in their various localities as social support group, to relax and while away time.

### **Adults in Paid Jobs**

Adults in paid employment should on their own plan for their retirement considering the problems that may arise. They should also engage in some economic activities that can yield little income according to one's capacity and helps one remain active and integrated.

### **Conclusion**

Growing old in Nigeria is an important phenomenon with increasing challenges to the individual, family, community and government. This paper looked at the conceptual framework of ageing, theories of ageing, problems of ageing in the Nigeria society and finally, strategies for reducing the problem.

## References

- Alkinson, R.L, Alkinson, R.C. Smith, E.E, & Hilgard, E.R. (1987). *Introduction to Psychology (9<sup>th</sup> ed)* Orlando; Havcom Brace jovanonic, Publishers.
- Blau, R.O. (1973). *Ageing in changing world*. New York. Franklins - Walts.
- Kolo, F.D. (2007). Adulthood and ageing in Nigeria. A key note address at 7<sup>th</sup> National Conference of Nigeria Society of Educational Psychologists, Held at University of Jos, 8<sup>th</sup>- 12<sup>th</sup> October.
- Madu, V.N. (2006). Coping with health concerns of the female middle adults. *Journal of the Nigerian society for educational Psychologists (N/SEP) 4* (\) April, 69 -78.
- Masoro, E.J & Austael, S.N (2006). *Handbook of the biology of ageing (6<sup>th</sup> ed)*,U.S.A, San Diego Academic press.
- National Centre for Health Statistics. Table 12: Estimated life expectancy in years by Race and Sex.1997 *National Vital statistics Report .47* (2\$)
- Santroch, J.W. (1999). *Life Span Development (7<sup>th</sup> ed)*. Boston, McGraw - Hill Companies Inc. The
- Psychology of Ageing (1998). Retrieved March 21, 2007 from -
- Usoroh, C. & Akpan,;A.E. (2007). Housing problems of the elderly. A paper presented at 7<sup>th</sup> National Conference of the National Society for Educational Psychologist (NISEP) held at University of Jos, 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> October.