

ExpertView

# Never too old to contribute

Welcome to the new age – of ‘productive ageing’. Instead of seeing Asia’s rapidly ageing population as a liability, consider it an asset for society.

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For The Straits Times

Asia’s population structure is following in the footsteps of other advanced economies. Like them, it is ageing – but at a much faster rate. The region’s elderly population is projected to reach 923 million by the end of this century.

A greying population increases the weight on society’s shoulders: 100 Singaporeans will support 35 older adults by 2030, up from 11 older adults in 2007. For China, the burden is even greater. By 2050, 100 working citizens will be supporting 44 who are retired.

Asia is rapidly ageing in both its developing and developed countries.

According to a survey by the Washington-based Pew Research Centre, nearly nine in 10 Japanese and nearly seven in 10 Chinese believe the growing number of elderly is a major problem facing their societies. Such public worry reflects society-level concern that a growing ageing population will have an impact on economic development, welfare distribution and support systems for the aged.

While the numbers look less dire for developing Asian economies than in developed economies, the impact of an ageing population still poses a challenge for economic growth. In addition, there are implications for caregiving, given the trend towards having fewer children and the trend of moving from the countryside to the city in search of work.

Older adults have to deal with these changes in family values and family structures, but social welfare has not yet filled in the gaps that are being created.

The issues related to a greying population often paint a pessimistic picture of slowing economic growth and declining family values.

However, we also have to remember another trend: older people are not only living longer, but they are staying healthier well after what has been the traditional retirement age.

The World Health Organisation has estimated the number of years that those aged 60 will continue to live in good health: Singapore at 20.2 years, Japan at 18.9 years,

Vietnam at 16.8 years, and China at 15.9 years.

Indeed, many older folks will still be capable of working and undertaking daily activities. A prolonged healthy life expectancy has influenced older adults’ attitudes towards their retirement planning. In fact, increasing numbers of Chinese, Singaporeans and South Koreans prefer to work after retirement age. Sixty is the new 40.

## THE ELDERLY AS ASSETS

Asian societies may take a progressive approach to accommodate this trend. A new and promising strategy for sustainable ageing societies is to view older adults as assets with their longer good-health expectancy and rich experience, called productive ageing.

This concept emphasises that older adults can be more integrated and engaged in activities that contribute to family, community and society, such as working, caregiving and volunteering.

What productive ageing suggests is not completely new for older people in Asia. After all, many older adults in Asia provide full-time care for their grandchildren when their adult children migrate to cities or to other countries in search of employment.

In urban areas, grandparents provide part-time care when their adult children have full-time jobs. Some older adults still work to help their adult children financially. Senior volunteering organisations and lifelong learning courses are booming across Asian countries.

However, seeing older workers as liabilities in the workplace and as burdens to society stops them from getting jobs or promotions.

Moreover, age-unfriendly environments and infrastructure in rural and urban areas, such as heavy traffic, unaffordable housing and residences lacking safety, limit opportunities for older adults to engage in social activities outside their homes. Research even shows that a society with widespread negative attitudes towards the elderly negatively impacts the health of its senior citizens.

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Research also shows that engaging in productive activities delays the onset of physical living limitations. Additionally, those who are involved in productive activities have less depression.

## WHAT CHANGES ARE NEEDED?

How to promote productive ageing in Asia? This requires a change in

the social, cultural and political factors that shape opportunities for older adults. We need to build the infrastructure and environment that will support older adults and combat the idea that they are too old to contribute.

The physical and social environment can be improved to create opportunities for older adults to attend activities and to let them upgrade the necessary skills to engage in activities.

Changing labour laws and work conditions for older workers is a crucial first step. Transforming our mindset from treating old age as a dependency to an asset, via multimedia and grassroots advocates, will help the public to cast off stereotypes of older folks.

In addition, the traditional values of respect for older folks and grandparental involvement can still be observed across Asian societies.

Integrating such cultural and societal characteristics in

improving productive engagement in later life will be essential. Policymakers and community activists should consider cross-cultural contexts when designing programmes to promote productive ageing in Asia.

Productive ageing blueprints envision a society where older adults will have sufficient support to contribute to their family and communities, and where their contributions will be appreciated. Productive ageing opens up new dialogues to think more positively about old age.

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• This is the first of four articles in the Expert View series by Asia Research Institute academics.

The writer says policymakers and community activists should consider cross-cultural contexts when designing programmes to promote productive ageing in Asia. Productive ageing blueprints envision a society where older adults will have sufficient support to contribute to their family and communities, and where their contributions will be appreciated.  
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