

Active Aging: The Importance of Community Environment

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“Older adults are more likely to engage in volunteering and leisure activities in a community with basic infrastructure, such as paved roads and sewage, and with residents with higher education.”

China is actively preparing for its ever-growing aging population. According to the United Nations, in 2015 100 working people supported 14 senior citizens. By 2050, that will change to 100 working people supporting 44 seniors. As the aging population grows, it will affect economic development and demand on medical resources. In anticipation of these changes, China has blueprinted long-term care policies, including building nursing homes, expanding training of care professionals, and improving the physical environment of residential communities.

People are not only living longer, but they are staying healthier well after what has traditionally been the retirement age. Older adults are often eager to engage in work, caregiving or volunteering later in their lives. The World Health Organization (WHO) initiated the campaign *Active Aging* in 2002. This program encourages society to enhance quality of life for older adults by providing opportunities to maintain their health, to encourage social participation and to protect them from danger. Essential to this is enabling older adults to actively participate in family and community through working, caregiving, volunteering and leisure activities. Studies have shown that participating in social activities results in improved life satisfaction and mental health. The European Union (EU) has already integrated *Active Aging* into long-term care policies, providing support for older citizens to participate in social activities, which prolongs good health and delays long-term care.

WHO statistics showed that the healthy life expectancy in China was 68.5 years old in 2015. Social policy experts in China have been advocating policies to encourage seniors to actively participate in volunteering or work. With China's shrinking family size, changing family values and rural older adults being left behind as younger generations migrate to the larger cities, redesigning the policies to support older adults is crucial.

Studies of Western societies use an "ecological approach" to examine how residential communities affect social participation by older adults. An ecological approach looks at how infrastructure and public facilities influence older residents' motivation to participate in activities. This in turn affects their long-term health because they spend more time in their home communities than do other age groups. For example, a physically disabled senior finds it almost impossible to get out into his or her local community if there are no ramps. Living in a place like this, he or she would have little motivation to even try to get out of the house. Even worse, healthy seniors who live in a poor community are probably not going to volunteer even if they want to because of fear of crime. A high crime rate, combined with unmaintained infrastructure, contributes to distrust of neighbors

Clearly, if China is to take seriously the ideas of *Active Aging*, the environmental conditions of various communities need to be examined. Since the 1980s, China has been implementing community-improvement projects by distributing more social welfare funds to local governments. The goal is to aid in dealing with social issues attributed to the infrastructure gap between urban and rural communities

and to transformations taking place throughout society. Seniors living in poor communities or areas with high air pollution show signs of poor mental health. At the same time, those who live in communities with more facilities and grass-root NGOs have better mental health.

Recognizing the importance for the Chinese government to promote the most beneficial policies, I conducted a study to examine how the community that senior citizens live in affects their engagement in social activities. In an extensive analysis of the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study, I found that older adults in urban areas have more opportunities for work and caregiving than do those in rural areas. Also, senior citizens living in communities with better infrastructure, more educated residents and larger percent of migrants coming from the countryside in search of work will participate more in volunteering and leisure activities than will older people from other types of communities.

To conclude, this study demonstrates not only the importance of community economic conditions, but also that built-in infrastructure and community composition matter to *Active Aging* in China. The government can use results like these in designing policies. Building on what has been done in Western societies, China can promote *Active Aging* by continuing to build a long-term care system and to design aged-friendly community environments, both of which will be key factors in improving quality of life for older adults in China.