

Poverty and older age in sub-Saharan Africa

What are implications of the COVID crisis?

Isabella Aboderin

Outline

- Contexts
 - Debate on ageing and older populations in SSA
 - Old age poverty - pre-COVID evidence, perspectives
- COVID: impacts on older people
- What implications for scientific and policy debate?

Debate on ageing, older populations in SSA

- Expanding scientific and policy debate, part of global ageing discourse:
 - Centred on chronological definition (60+ years)
(but: persistent critical perspectives, incl. ‘prospective longevity’)
- Unique demography:
 - youthful population (almost 2/3 < 25 years; only 5% 60+)
 - extraordinarily rapidly growing absolute number of older people

- Distinctive foci of debate:
 - little concern with impacts on sustainability of societal systems (e.g labour markets, economies, health and social care, security)
 - Rather: ensuring well-being, rights of older adults (underpinned by reference to SDG, GSAH, AU Protocol)

- Two dominant narratives esp. in advocacy / policy oriented debate:
 1. Particular vulnerability to negative social, health, economic outcomes
 2. Valuable contributions to development
(e.g. repositories of knowledge; carers – e.g. HIV/AIDS)

- Recent, more nuanced perspectives: need to:
 - Foreground heterogeneity, inequalities in older population
 - Understand multilayered connections to youth focused development

Poverty and older age:
pre-COVID evidence, perspectives

1. Later-life poverty reflects:

- Exposures in earlier phases of life course
(lack of formal education, ill-health, inability to accumulate savings/ assets)
- Contemporary constraints: macro, meso-levels
(lack of pension coverage; un- or poorly paid employment, limited health care access, family, intergenerational, support)

2. Focus on some dimensions...

- income poverty (consumption, asset-based measures; HH-level)
- food security
- disease burden, access to health care

....but no systematic multidimensional approach

3. Age as an axis of poverty inequality

- Older adults vs younger aged adults:
 - More likely to live in poor households
 - Less able to access required health care (despite greater disease burden)
 - Financial, physical barriers, unavailability of care
 - Health systems orientation: RMNCH, infectious disease, narrow NCD agenda
- Expanding debate, programming on old age social protection (social pensions; social health insurance or fee exemptions)

4. Within older population inequalities?

- Little focused examination, but indications of:
 - Spatial (rural-urban) inequalities in income poverty
 - Gender inequalities in disease burden...
 - ... but unclear picture w.r.t health care access, income poverty

COVID: impacts on older people in SSA

- Spotlight: heightened awareness of older populations, vulnerability
- Concerns, queries about impacts of virus and mitigation measures on two key levels:

1. COVID19 infection, disease and death

- Heightened risk among older adults, given:
 - Higher prevalence of chronic diseases (multi-morbidities)
 - Compromised capacity for protection against COVID
(lack of access to communication channels, WASH, care dependence)
 - Lack of health systems responsiveness
 - Further constraints to health care access
(restrictions on movement, health personnel ageism-exclusion)

2. Social support, care, livelihoods

- Loss of employment
- Disruptions to long-term care, material, social support from kin

→ Reduced income, food security, health care for existing conditions

→ Heightened risk of neglect, abuse, isolation

- Mental, physical health effects?

What implications for scientific and policy debate?

- Wider (post) COVID context in SSA:
 - Huge overall ‘development losses’, necessary ‘reset’
 - Imperative to identify priority investments to reduce poverty, inequality
- Urgent need for effort to better understand nature, scope of old age poverty and inequalities
- What specific queries to consider?

1. How has the COVID crisis impacted (deepened?, levelled?) age-based multidimensional poverty inequalities? What role have intergenerational dynamics played?
2. What role does age now play as an axis of multidimensional poverty inequality (alongside gender, spatial, ethnic, disability and other axes)?
3. How are the above likely to evolve over the medium term?
4. What implications arise for the continuity, modification or expansion of old age focused social protection measures; care and other policies?

- Conceptual, methodological challenges...

...but important opportunity for concerted Africa-led research