

THE INVESTIGATION OF THE PREPAREDNESS OF AN AGING SOCIETY FOR A SUSTAINABLE WAY OF LIFE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

There were 727 million individuals aged 65 and above in 2020 worldwide with the number expected to more than quadruple in the following three decades, reaching more than 1.5 billion by 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). Aging populations seem to have begun to affect industrialized and emerging countries. Malaysia is now making steady progress toward becoming an aging nation as well. By 2030, the country's population will be people over 65 years old, accounting for 15% of the total. As part of an attempt to raise awareness about this problem and encourage the implementation of preventative measures to address it, this paper will discuss the obstacles experienced by the elderly and the difficulties faced by an aging society in their pursuit of a sustainable way of life. Preliminary, this study examines contemporary literature in the field of senior wellness, where the issues highlighted include a lack of funds, the need for a dependable infrastructure, and the need for strong social support.

Keywords: Aging Population, Sustainability, Retirement, Savings.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, there were 727 million people aged 65 years and above globally. The number is projected to be more than doubled over the next three decades reaching over 1.5 billion in 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). The increase in older adults will have significant social and economic impacts globally. Among them is the health care cost born by the individuals and the country.

Malaysia's demographic profile is steadily progressing towards a greying society. From top 50 list worldwide, Malaysia ranked 45th countries with the largest percentage of older adults. (United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects, 2019). Based on the current population estimates, the population aged 60 years old showed an increase from 3.4 million (10.3%) in 2019 to 3.5 million (10.7%) in 2020 (DOSM, 2020). The percentage of senior citizens (over the age of 60) is expected to increase drastically to 5.3 million in the next 10 years. In 2020, there will be 3.7 million senior citizens in the country and it is expected to

increase by 15.3 percent to 5.3 million by 2030. Hence, the government should pay special attention to the elderly in preparation for facing the status of the aging nation by 2030.

The increase in older adults in a country will affect a country's spending on health care. A country will have to allocate more money and resources to its health care system. Higher spending will result in a deficit in a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Most researchers agree that as a society becomes more industrialized and urbanized, the size of families shrinks (Bongaarts & Zimmer, 2002). Smaller family size means fewer children can act as caregivers to their parents. There will be an increase in demand for home care, and the government will have to compensate for the shortages of labour and skills in health care. The government will also have to invest in new technologies to cater to the elderly, whether in the medical line or assistance in doing their daily lives like public amenities designed for the elderly. The aging population requires housing that is well equipped with technological advancement, specifically in health care, and needs a home with comfort, freedom, and easy access to friends and family.

According to United Nation (2015), a country is defined as "aging" when the share of people aged 65 plus is above 7%, "aged" when it is 14% or more, and "super-aged" when it exceeds 20%. Based on the current situation, Malaysia is heading towards an 'Aged Nation' by 2030 since the country will have more than 14% of older population. This event will be projected to happen within less than 10 years from now. Population aging is a great achievement of development as it reflects the better healthcare system and quality of life in a country. However, the increase in older adults in a country will give implications on many aspects such as it will affect a country's spending on health, pension, infrastructures, welfare, deteriorating fiscal balance, changes in patterns of saving and investment, shortage in labor supply, lack of adequate welfare system particular in developing economies, a possible decline in productivity and economic growth and ineffectiveness of macroeconomic policy. Malaysia of course will experience some of these effects. The big question is to what extent Malaysia is prepared to face an aging society for a sustainable way of life? Therefore, the objective of the study is to discuss the obstacles experienced by the elderly and the difficulties faced by an aging society in their pursuit of a sustainable way of life.

CHALLENGES

Lack of funds/ Savings

The typical retirement age in Malaysia ranges from 55 to 60 years old. At the same time, the life expectancy of males and females in Malaysia who reach 60 years old is expected to live until the age of 78.9 and 81.8 years old, respectively (DOSM, 2021). Considering they retire at 60, males' elderly is expected to live 18.9 years and females' elderly 21.8 years post-retirement. A perfectly healthy elderly needs a steady income to survive the post-retirement period. What more the elderly with sickness/healthcare needs to be taken care of.

According to Aida (2022), most Malaysians will live in poverty after retiring because they do not have enough funds to survive. Usually, people who work hard and hustle at a young age can live comfortably when older. However, when Covid-19 happened, businesses could not operate as usual, factories closed, and people lost their jobs. To help the people tide over their financial strains, the government allows several withdrawals from the Employees Provident Fund (EPF), widely known as the place where people put their savings for their old age. However, due to these withdrawals, EPF reported that the median savings of all EPF members below age 55 stand at RM13,000, which translates to RM54 a month for their estimated 20 retirement years (Yeap, 2021). This is an alarming situation the people in the country are in. Note that the EPF is for the workers in the private sector who save money for retirement. Although the government servant will receive pension benefits when they retire, they are also exposed to future uncertainties. Any changes in the government pension program might change the lives of these future retirees entirely.

Therefore, the question remains is how much fund is enough for old age? Based on the previous discussion, the average life expectancy for male and female elderly would be 20.35 years. EPF suggested that the minimum retirement savings that everyone should have to live comfortably for 20 years after retirement is RM240,000 under the assumption that one was to spend a monthly living wage of RM1,000 (EPF, 2022). Having established that, to realize the need for having enough money for the old days, society first needs awareness and a basic level of financial literacy. However, in Malaysia, people are saving insufficiently for their increased lifespan. Saving habits play a crucial role in achieving the goal of having a comfortable life at old age. Financial planning for retirement is influenced by various economic variables, including current income, financial knowledge, and engagement in financial activities, among others (Morgan & Eckert, 2004). According to studies, many people do not save enough for their retirement years (Segel-Karpas & Werner, 2014). Many workers in the United States who are on the point of retiring do not have enough money saved up (Lusardi, Mitchell, & Oggero, 2018). However, in Nigeria, the elderly, who have reached the end of their productive economic period, are the ones who are most susceptible to financial distress. Most adults in Nigeria are neither socially nor economically secure since they have reached the statutory retirement age, the cut-off point for being categorized as an older adult. Financial planning and monetary value estimation are thus necessary (Animasahun & Chapman, 2017). Preparing for retirement in terms of financial and economic worth is essential for a sound retirement (Morgan & Eckert, 2004; Segel-Karpas & Werner, 2014).

The need for dependable infrastructure

Health care infrastructure is vital in countries where the aging population is increasing. Infrastructure here means the facilities that the government should provide. Currently, the care centers' structure in Malaysia comprises the ones provided by the government, private, and non-governmental bodies (NGOs). All care centers must be registered under Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM). A

previous study suggests that aging care centers in Malaysia are not up to the mark in terms of technology, health care services, and equipment (Noor et al., 2019).

To find a solution to these care centers' situation, first, they need to address their challenges. The previous study suggests that less technology, financial issues, no government support, staff training, licensing and issuance renewal, and initial funding are the main challenges faced by the operators of elderly care centers (Md Isa et al., 2020). From this study, it is clear that government assistance is needed to improve these centers. Aside from the allocation of the fund, the government perhaps could start a training center for caregivers of these elderly. In Malaysia, sending parents to an old folk center is still taboo. People find that children forget the deeds of their parents in raising them. After years of hard work, society perceives that it is the children's time to take care of their parents. A new question comes if the children are okay with the parents living with them. Who will the parent live with when the children go out working? There should be more elderly care centers like a nursery or kindergarten where the children can drop their parents there and take them home after work. This way, it will be a win-win situation for both parents and their children since the family can still live together. In addition, the parents get to meet and mingle with other elderly and perhaps do some activities at the care center to have better physical and mental health.

The need for strong social support

As the number of senior people increases, society will be confronted with physical, psychological, and social challenges and issues. Aging and specific conditions of the elderly and their mental and physical health are among the topics that require special attention. Other than providing good infrastructure and facility for the elderly, it is essential to make sure that the need for emotional and social support are not left out. The idea of social support is frequently articulated in terms of social networks and the emotional, informational, and instrumental assistance that these networks give (Cohen et al., 2000). Emotion is subjected to the environment people live in.

In Malaysia, almost 23% or 538,000 people out of 2.4 million senior citizens in the country suffered from the 'empty nest' syndrome (feeling of loneliness and sadness) as a result of living alone and away from children. This situation has brought loneliness and depression to the elderly and consequently affects their health as well as limits their role as members of society (Bernama, 2021).

In view of that, there is a need for companionship for the elderly to avoid ending up in loneliness. In a previous study done on the elderly living alone, those who have children or grandchildren stressed the importance of personal visits from children who live nearby as well as phone call conversations with those who live far away and friends of the same age, on the other hand, were frequently the essential source of companionship (Evans et al., 2018). This shows that these elderly enjoy having a companion and require human interaction and affection in their lives. Aside from friends and family, religion is one of the contributing social supports for the elderly. Regular participation in gathering for activities at places of worship like mosques, temples, and churches gives a sense of belonging while keeping the mind busy and active (Evans et al., 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This research will be investigated using both qualitative and quantitative approach pertaining to the wellbeing of senior citizens (grey power) on what are the personal and situational factors that have an impact on elderly social wellbeing. In addition, the research will investigate the relationship between the personal and situational factors as well as how these personal and situational factors impact the social wellbeing of the elderly. Good health and wellbeing are one of United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030. This research will also focus on not only the elderly but also the caregivers of the elderly, which was noted as an important aspect of the elderly policy. The situational factors are defined as all externalities (infrastructure; facilities; accessibility and availability; policy; governance) that have direct or indirect influence on changes of the individual behaviours and personal factors are defined to internal factors (demographic factors; family dynamic; self-efficacy; social norm; knowledge and experience) that have direct or indirect influence on changes of the individual behaviours. In addition, this research will also focus on the caregiving relationship between caregivers and the elderly. This research will utilise a mixed methodology method with qualitative interviews followed by quantitative surveys.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The findings of prior research confirm, in principle, the need for a better understanding of specific eco-system conducive to elderly communities that include situational factors (dependable infrastructures; funding and saving mechanisms) and personal factors (social supports) that are capable of promoting healthy aging in increasingly challenging urban environments (Evans et al., 2018). To give an example, some studies reported that more types of age-sensitive facilities should be considered in urban green areas, particularly in support of the physical activity for the elderly wellbeing (Noor et al., 2019).

So far, studies have mostly found only general associations between increased exposure to some situational factors (perceived environment, policies, technology) and improved elderly wellbeing (Bongaarts & Zimmer, 2002). However, this limitation has provided a much-needed evidence base on which to address and resolve existing boundaries to establish clear cause and effect relationships between situational and personal factors in the preparedness of an aging society for a sustainable way of life. In this regard, there is a need for case studies and critical assessment of existing and ongoing projects constitute a vital technique for recognizing and progressing age-sensitive infrastructures, raising awareness, and promoting stewardship of social supports (Cohen, Gottlieb & Underwood, 2000).

The purpose of this conceptual framework (Figure 1) is to understand better the relationships between situational and personal factors in the preparedness of an aging society for a sustainable way of life, as well as to provide valuable insights that will help to advance informed age-sensitive design and planning for the dependable infrastructures and age-sensitive community support programs in the years to come.

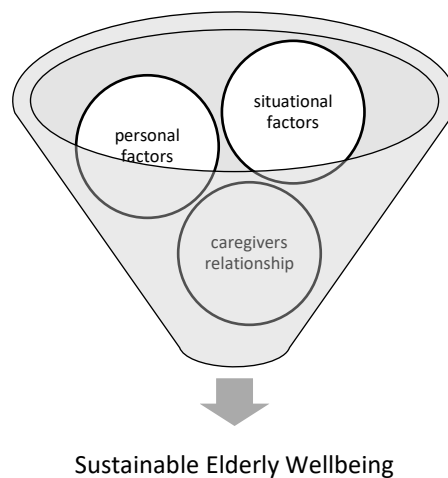


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework adapted and extended from Symbiosis Effect Framework (A-Jalil et al., 2016)

CONCLUSION

The growth in the number of elderly persons in a nation will have an impact on the amount of money that country spends on health care. A country's health-care system will need more money and resources, which will increase the cost of living. Demand for home care will rise, and the government will be forced to make up for the shortfalls of labour and skills in the health-care industry as a result of the shortages. As a result, the government will have to invest in new technology to better serve the old, whether in the medical field or in providing them with aid in their everyday life, such as public facilities created specifically for the aged. Ageing population presents both challenges and opportunities. It will increase demand for primary health care and long-term care, require a larger and better trained workforce and intensify the need for environments to be made more age-friendly. The specific framework developed from this study will be extended to a qualitative and quantitative inquiries pertaining the wellbeing of senior citizens (grey power) on the personal and situational factors that are critical to elderly sustainable wellbeing. The investigation will also focus on not only the elderly but also the caregivers of the elderly, which was noted as an important aspect of the elderly policy. It is hope that the framework will assist the governmental bodies and agencies in assessing the requirement of grey power community wellbeing and needs.

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