

The Aging Population of Sri Lanka

It has been stated that Sri Lanka's decreasing rates of fertility and mortality have been responsible for tipping the scale of the population age-balance, enhancing the relative proportion of elderly persons. While reduction in mortality may largely be due to our improved healthcare system, the specific reasons for the decline in fertility is not explained.

Apart from the economic considerations resulting from increasing dependency of an aging population, the observed epidemiological shift from the prevalence of communicable diseases to non-communicable diseases with the need for life long medical care, is indeed a cause for much concern.

However, a recent (2008) World Bank Report on Aging in Sri Lanka states that evidence from developed countries shows that increase in elderly population, if accompanied by prevention and active care of non-communicable diseases, could cause no alarm for a possible increase in the burden of disease.

This same Report states that in about two decades time, Sri Lankan population will grow to be as old as Europe or Japan of today (2008), for which Sri Lanka would need a spectacular growth in per capita income, to deal with dependency. This report makes a wide variety of policy recommendations that range from expanding social welfare and care services, to improved income support programmes, to increasing capacities of nursing homes, to harmonizing and integrating retirement schemes, to increasing participation rates of old workers by adjusting inflexible retirement age rules, and to improving the productivity of the labour force by enhancing skills of older workers through life long learning.

Although Sri Lanka is known world over, as a country that provides the most comprehensive social security system in South Asia, referring especially to schemes such as Samurdhi, it is clear that the coverage of these support services should be expanded to ensure that the most deserving are not left out even by oversight.

A hidden aspect of aging is the increasing sense of insecurity and the consequent affliction of psychological problems. In this context it is consoling to note that many of the causal factors of such psychological disorders are the result of misconceptions, and could be easily resolved through scientific counseling.

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