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Rapid Population Aging Will Raise Critical Challenges for Asian Governments

By National Academy of Sciences

Rapid population aging will raise critical challenges for Asian governments, says report released at international conference in China.

Responding to the challenges posed by a rapidly aging population will be one of the most difficult tasks for Asian governments in the first half of this century, says a report released today by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Indian National Science Academy, Indonesian Academy of Sciences, U.S. National Academy of Sciences, and the Science Council of Japan.

The report, which discusses these challenges and identifies needed research to help policymakers better respond to them, was released at the opening of an international conference on aging in Asia hosted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.

While the percentage of elderly people in nearly every nation is growing, this aging trend is particularly stark in parts of Asia, the report says. Projections indicate that the portion of the population age 65 and older will more than triple in China, India, and Indonesia and more than double in Japan between 2000 and 2050, based on data from the United Nations. Moreover, this demographic shift is coinciding with dramatic economic and social changes in Asia, including changing family structures and large-scale migrations from rural to urban areas.

These trends raise critical questions about how nations can develop policies that best support health and economic well-being in large and growing populations at older ages. And the longer governments wait to respond, the more constrained their choices will be, the report says. For example, policies that depend on the accumulation of assets -- such as programs that mandate or encourage private saving for retirement -- would need to be put in place many years before they can provide benefits. Generally, gradual adjustments are much easier for countries, especially low-income ones, to make than sudden policy changes.

Governments in Asia still have time to determine the best ways to respond to the unfolding demographic transformation, the report says, but taking advantage of this window of opportunity will require new research to shed light on the status and needs of the aging population. Currently the research base on aging in this region is relatively underdeveloped.

The report identifies several key topics for research to inform public policy:

* **Changing roles in the family.** For centuries the tradition in Asian societies has been for children to take care of their elderly parents. But parents today are having fewer children, and increasing mobility is leading to family members' living hundreds or thousands of miles apart. Potential questions for future research include: How much do older people currently rely on family members for support? How are family expectations and obligations changing? And how is migration affecting the well-being of older people?

* **Labor force participation, income, and savings.** In many Asian countries, older people currently have few retirement resources outside their families, and most of them lack formal safety nets. And because people's work-related skills may be rendered obsolete as they get older by the rapid economic changes, many may not even have the option to continue working. Possible research questions include: What resources will future retirees have to support themselves? How do the income benefits of economic growth vary across age groups? And how should public pension programs be structured?

* **Health and well-being.** Because older people generally require significantly more health care than younger ones, the coming demographic shift is likely to place great demands on countries' health care systems and to change the type of care required. In developing countries in Asia, health care systems that have largely focused on infectious disease and maternal and child health will need to be reoriented. Possible questions for future research include: What

are the prevalence rates of various diseases and chronic conditions among the elderly? And how does a person's socio-economic status affect his or her health, and vice versa?

Longitudinal studies, which gather data from the same group of respondents over time, can be especially effective in untangling causal relationships related to aging and can provide important information to policymakers, the report says.

Surveys will be most useful if they provide policy-related information on a variety of topics -- such as basic demographic information, family relationships, employment and income, pensions, health status, and use of health care -- and if they are designed to allow comparisons across countries. The report also recommends that research data be made public in a timely fashion, so that new studies can replicate and build on previous research, maximizing the power of the scientific method.

Although each country's approach to social policy is unique and influenced by different historical and cultural factors, nations can learn much from one another, the report adds. In particular, countries in the early stages of population aging may especially benefit from the experience of those in later stages. Coordinating research activity can compound the returns from investments made by individual nations.

The Beijing conference at which the report was released is intended to help researchers from many nations and disciplines share research results and explore possibilities for greater international scientific collaboration. More information about the conference and report can be found at <http://national-academies.org/AgingInAsia.html>. A second conference on the topic is planned for March 2011, to be held in New Delhi in collaboration with the Indian National Science Academy. The report was sponsored by the U.S. National Institute on Aging.

Preparing for the Challenges of Population Aging in Asia: Strengthening the Scientific Basis of Policy Development

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