

## **Why we need social protection in a country that holds older people in high regard.**

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Historically, older people were held in high regard in the Philippines. In principle, we still are, to this day. But, this is the reality. This is the irony. Times have changed. In the sixties, few ageing people loitered in the streets of Manila, begging. Now, more and more have taken to the streets and the dumps out of necessity. The need for social protection is very profound today, more than ever.

The reasons are more structural than cultural, though.

For instance, there is a total absence of employment opportunity for seniors. Youth and education being given greater premium as hiring criteria, leaves poor, uneducated, abandoned older people with no option but roam the streets and scour the dumps. Money to start small businesses is very hard to come by. Banks and other lending institutions made borrowing so difficult especially for the less educated, poor seniors with nothing to offer for collateral. Their last option is the usurers who collect payment daily but charge high interest rates. It is a hand to mouth existence for most.

The Government's focus on urban development has caused massive rural to urban migration. People who had long been content living simple rural lives suddenly develop a desire to leave for the city in the hope of landing better-paying jobs only to find that even menial jobs require a high school diploma, something most rural older people my age or older do not have.

Those who are lucky to have children working on daily wage rates find it difficult to make both ends meet much less provide for their medicines and other basic needs. The country's economic situation cannot even allow a wage hike of 125 Philippine pesos (roughly 3 US dollars) per day as demanded by labour groups or companies will either close or retrench.

Increased longevity has not contributed favourably either except increase the number of old people needing food and care.

Then there is the phenomenon of the nuclear families resulting from overseas workers leaving their children in the care of grandparents. It has obligated the older people to extend their child-rearing tasks long after their own children have grown. It is not that the oldies complain, though. On the contrary, they find some fulfilment out of the sacrifice. Never mind the physical strain on their frail bodies. Older people refer to this as "review" or "back subject". It's unconditional love at its best. Sooner or later, though, the stress will take its toll.

Hence, the need for another reference group older people can belong to, talk to, share experiences with, work with and laugh with without being chided for looking old and moving slowly.

For the people who had long been the least of government's priority, community organizing is a primary form of social protection. Strength lies in number. Waiting for society to take heed of the situation can take ages but when older people banded together and engaged government in one voice, things happened. On February 17, 2010, R.A. 9994 was signed into law by the President.

Since the Government response is minimal, if any at all, and most senior citizens have no money, COPAP members depend on the care of fellow members. Many of us don't go to community health centres anymore due to inadequate facilities, unavailability of health professionals and total lack of medicines. Why waste our time when the doctor seldom comes and all we get to bring home is a slip of paper?

Advocating for major issues of older people brought to the society's consciousness our plight and engaged the government to respond favourably. For a long time, the government and the society had been oblivious if not altogether insensitive to our misery. We had to march to the President's Palace and get stopped by barbed wires just to have our landmark legislation signed.

Now, a number of Congressmen and Senators have filed bills seeking to protect senior citizens from abuse. This is welcome news to us. But, hopefully, they will provide more for the prevention of elder abuse.

Our experience in advocacy, lobbying in the halls of congress and the senate and marching as street parliamentarians has made us more confident that our future engagements with government will be as successful.

Economic dependence can be most demeaning for older people, who, for the longest time, had supported their families. Finding ourselves dependent on our children for

our most basic needs shatters our pride and our self-worth. Therefore, income generating projects, however small, lifts our self-esteem and helps us treat ourselves with a greater sense of dignity. The COPAP's Livelihood Program includes micro-lending which helps enterprising members start a small business or project.

Being one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, the Philippines needs all the assistance anyone can give in order to rise from the rubble before another disaster strikes.

In the last and probably the worst calamity that struck Metro-Manila, COPAP and the local Older People's Organisations (OPO's) actively responded by distributing relief goods to members in affected areas in partnership with COSE and in collaboration with local government. In most areas the local OPO's gave the victims their own food and clothing. The Disaster Risk Reduction Program was adopted by the Organization. Members underwent seminars on disaster risk reduction (DRR) in preparation for succeeding calamities. Essential medicines have been bought and are on standby just in case another disaster comes along.

When older people share their wisdom and experience, everybody gets a chance to learn and improve their skills and competencies. People deciding for themselves, working to improve their plight and owning some responsibility over their lives, to us, is probably the best form of social protection.

However, before anyone here gets all excited about the things COPAP and the COSE do and develops the wrong notion that the entire older population of the Philippines are pretty self-sufficient and does not, after all, need any more care and protection from government, let me clarify. COPAP's total membership is only 8,500 to date, just a tiny drop in a bucket of 7 million senior citizens. What we have done is just the tip of the iceberg. Certainly, government has a lot of catching-up to do in order to make up for its long period of unresponsiveness and insensitivity towards and disregard for its older constituents. Us owning responsibility for our lives does not absolve government and the society. We hope they are listening.