

**The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)**  
**Inputs for the 14<sup>th</sup> session of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing**  
**Focus area: Social inclusion**

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) applies the human rights-based approach (HRBA) to its programmatic, normative, and technical work. This is done by placing the achievement of human rights as the overall objective or guiding framework of its development or emergency interventions; by respecting the human rights principles of “participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment and the rule of law” in all stages of programming; and by protecting the rights of women, Indigenous Peoples, and other vulnerable and marginalized groups,<sup>1</sup> including older persons.

FAO’s normative instruments and operational tools have the HRBA as their foundation.<sup>2</sup> The Strategic Framework 2022-2031 places a renewed emphasis on enhancing social inclusion in FAO’s work. A new corporate Framework on Inclusion aims to better target and prioritize people or groups that are disadvantaged, marginalized, subjects to discrimination, or in situations of vulnerability, including older persons.

FAO recognizes the important role that older persons play, and will increasingly play, in sustainable rural development, agrifood systems transformation, and in rural societies more broadly. Ageing is a defining trend in rural areas in the majority of developing countries, with significant implications for agrifood systems as well as food and nutrition security. Primarily as a result of out-migration of younger people in search for better opportunities in cities, rural areas in developing countries display an increasing ageing farm workforce and growing overall proportions of older inhabitants. At the same time, older persons are often left behind by migrating younger family members and take up caregiving responsibilities of children, the sick, and other dependent members, while their own care needs are increasing and their physical capacities declining. Furthermore, the work burden of older rural persons, their contribution to the society, and the challenges they face remain largely invisible.

Older persons are often victims of age-based stereotypes and prejudices. For example, there is a widespread misconception that older farmers and rural people are mostly economically inactive, unproductive, unfit for agricultural work, unable to learn new skills, and unwilling to adopt new technologies and innovations. Older persons may also be subject to inequalities and/or age-based discrimination, which in turn undermines their access to information, assets, resources, (digital) technologies, and opportunities, while inhibiting their participation in decision-making processes and community life. As a result, older persons often exhibit lower resilience to shocks and higher vulnerability to food insecurity. A recent FAO study showed that older rural households are substantially more vulnerable to extreme weather events and less able to adapt to climate stressors than younger households.<sup>3</sup>

When poverty, gender, and other factors such as disability or ethnicity intersect with older age, their compounded effect is magnified and may even lead to neglect, abuse, and gender-based violence. Older women, especially widows, tend to be among the poorest, as they face greater barriers to access assets, resources, and opportunities. They also have the primary caregiving responsibility which, combined with domestic work and farming activities, may make their workload overwhelming.

Ageing in rural areas and its social and economic implications require greater attention from policy makers and development practitioners. It calls for tailored interventions responding to the specific needs of, and challenges faced by, older farmers and older rural people in general.

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<sup>1</sup> FAO. *Exploring the human rights-based approach in the context of the implementation and monitoring of the SSF Guidelines*. Workshop proceedings. 24–26 October 2016 FAO, Rome. (<https://www.fao.org/3/i6933e/i6933e.pdf>), pp. 6-7

<sup>2</sup> These include: [Voluntary Guidelines on the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security](#) (Right to Food Guidelines); the [Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests](#) (VGGT); the [Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries](#); the [FAO Blue Growth Initiative](#); the [Free, Prior and Informed Consent](#) (FPIC); the [Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems](#) (RAI); and the [Framework for Environmental and Social Management](#) (FESM).

<sup>3</sup> FAO. 2024. *The unjust climate – Measuring the impacts of climate change on rural poor, women and youth*. Rome. (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cc9680en>), pp. xx and 8

FAO will sharpen its targeting strategies towards older persons, within the overall HRBA framework. While more work will be undertaken to take stock of and identify specific approaches to engage older persons, FAO will focus on:

- improving the collection, analysis, and use of age- and sex-disaggregated data and information, to better understand ageing trends and profile older persons to define targeting strategies and inform policy formulation;
- applying intersectional approaches to assess and respond to specific needs and vulnerabilities of people or groups, such as older women or older women with disabilities;
- assessing whether national legislations and policies sufficiently promote the rights of older persons and protect them against age-based discrimination, as a basis of providing policy advice to FAO Members;
- assessing the coverage and adequacy of existing social policies, including social protection, for older persons living in rural areas, especially the poor and those taking care of children, orphans, or sick family members;
- promoting awareness raising, education, and intergenerational exchange opportunities to eliminate misconceptions and stereotypes about ageing as well as discrimination against older persons;
- addressing and enhancing older rural persons' access to training, agricultural and rural advisory services, assets, productive resources, (digital) technologies, and labour-saving technologies (LSTs);
- promoting elderly-friendly rural environments, e.g. by building adequate infrastructure facilities or improving health and social care services responding to the needs of older persons; and
- implementing initiatives to enhance social participation of older persons (e.g. opportunities for older farmers to share knowledge; mentoring young farmers and rural entrepreneurs; facilitating the membership of older persons in community-level decision-making bodies and institutions; providing older farmers with training and skills-development opportunities, including on digital literacy).