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ETHIOPIAN HUMAN
RIGHTS COMMISSION

Submission of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission on Economic Security

12th Session of the UN Open Ended Working Group on Aging

11 - 14 April 2022

Ethiopia has some policy and legal frameworks that aim to guarantee respect for the economic, social and cultural rights of older persons, though there is not yet a statutory non-contributory social security system. The most recent pension proclamation enacted on 16 February 2022 sets the legal retirement age at 60 years for both private and government employees in the formal employment sector. This law brought the private sector into the pension contribution system by extending pension coverage to those who have been working in this sector. On the other hand, in the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) (2016), the elderly population who are 65 and above are covered as a part of vulnerable groups. The policy aims to provide decent standard of living for the elderly with no care and support. The National Plan of Action for Older Persons (NPAOP) adopted in 2006 for ten years specifically focused on addressing the rights and needs of older persons. The NPAOP outlines key issues and activities necessary to ensure rights and address the needs of older persons. Although NPAOP has lapsed long, the issues and strategies remain relevant.

Additionally, Article 41(5) of the Constitution of Ethiopia states that “the state shall, within available means, allocate resources to provide rehabilitation and assistance to the physically and mentally disabled, the aged, and to children who are left without parents or guardians”. Although this provision does not specifically address adequate standard of living, it is a useful starting point in discussing this right. Ethiopia has also ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Older persons that imposes obligation on Member States to provide adequate pension and other forms of social protection under its Article 7.

The Ethiopian National Poverty Reduction Strategic Framework (1998) defines poverty in terms of the income and consumption approach, which assumes that the access to income through employment entitlement or other means is the main factor that determines consumption. As per the framework the manifestations of poverty are, inadequate distribution of resources, access to basic social services like education and health, food scarcity, low life expectancy, and lack of participation in decision making processes. However, the NSPS and NPAOP policy frameworks do not define poverty but they focus on the need for poverty reduction. The NPAOP states that “Poverty become more acute among older persons because once they are exposed to it, it is much more difficult for them to come out of it; health problems, lack of balanced diet, shelter, unsuitable residential areas, absence of family and community support, absence of social welfare coverage, limited social security services, absence of education and training opportunities, limited employment and income generating opportunities are some of the factors contributing to the poverty of older persons.” A similar approach is followed by NSPS and it also touches upon poverty and multiple vulnerabilities as well as those living under the national poverty line with no specific definition.

Older persons living in Ethiopia face multifaceted challenges economically, socially and psychologically. Since it is very difficult to break the cycle of poverty especially for those who are not in the formal employment sector, achieving adequate standard of living is challenging because of unreliable sources of income, instability in their livelihoods, lack of diversified livelihood opportunities, and limited access to free social and health services.

Discrimination, segregation and exclusion from many social and economic activities are the worst for those with multiple vulnerabilities due to age, gender and disability. Additionally, understanding the magnitude of these challenges is complex because there is no available disaggregated and comprehensive data for older persons living in poverty.

The government has taken some steps to address economic insecurity and poverty in older age and to ensure (to some extent) the right to an adequate standard of living for older persons. These are the urban and rural SafetyNet programs designed under the SNSP, and the national pension schemes for both public servants and private sectors. In the national pension system approximately only 7.3% of the populations above the statutory retirement age of 60 are currently benefiting.

The Urban and Rural Safety Net Programs are not specifically designed for older persons but they benefit from the package as part of vulnerable groups. The Rural Productive Safety Net Program launched in 2005 while the Urban Productive Safety Net Program (UPSNP) started only in 2016. Both programs are currently funded by the World Bank to be eventually overtaken by the government. Although there is no recent disaggregated data, according to the study conducted by Help Age, in 2018/19 alone, a total of 310,352 older people (64% women) were covered by both Safety Nets, which accounted for about 7% of Ethiopia's elderly population. These leave the vast majority of older people in Ethiopia - an estimated 86% - not covered by any social protection intervention.