

# THE SITUATION OF OLDER PERSONS IN MYANMAR – AN OVERVIEW

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In Myanmar, as in most of Southeast Asia, not only are the numbers of persons in older ages rapidly increasing but their share of the total population is growing, resulting in population ageing. Yet little information has been available about older persons in the country due to a lack of empirical studies. To remedy this, HelpAge International sponsored the 2012 Myanmar Ageing Survey (MAS) with funding provided by the UNFPA and Age International. The survey serves as the primary source of data for the present article.

The MAS took place in March and April 2012 throughout Myanmar with the exception of Kachin state due to security reasons. It is the first largely nationally representative survey of its kind in Myanmar. A total of 4,080 persons aged 60 and older were interviewed in 150 rural villages and 90 urban wards within 60 townships. Results are weighted to account for the sample design which involved interviewing one respondent per household and a modest oversampling of persons 70 and older.

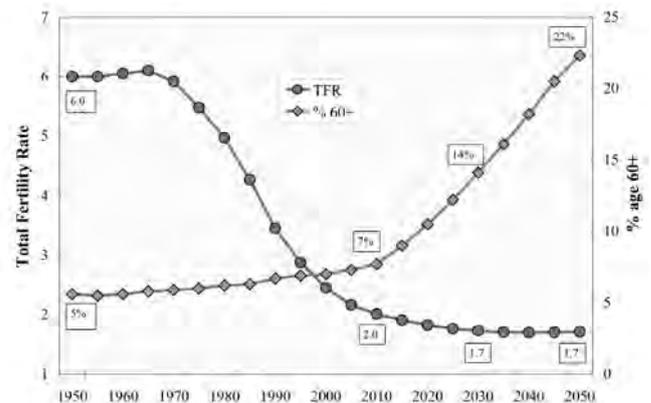
The situation of older persons in Myanmar is of particular interest given that it is the poorest country in Southeast Asia with the lowest per capita GDP (IMF 2013). It also has some of the worst health indicators and a very weak health sector (*The Lancet* 2013). Mortality is quite high, with life expectancy at birth for 2005-10 estimated by the UN as 64.2, six years below that for Southeast Asia overall (United Nations 2013a). Moreover, for the period 2010-15, life expectancy at age 60 is projected to be 16.6 years, well below that for Asia (19.3) and even below the average for all countries designated as least developed (United Nations 2013b).

## Ageing of Myanmar's population

Demographic information for Myanmar is very limited although this should change once results from the 2014 national census, the first since 1983, become available. Nevertheless, long-term estimates and projections are available from the United Nations Population Division. They show that the number of older people in Myanmar has virtually quadrupled over the past 60 years. Moreover, due mainly to the ongoing decline in fertility, the proportion of the population that is 60 years and older is increasing (*Figure 1*). Currently older people

account for almost 9% of the country's population. This proportion has grown at a gradual pace over the past 50 years but will accelerate over the next four decades.

*Figure 1. Total Fertility Rate and Population Ageing, Myanmar 1950-2050*



Source: United Nations 2012 (medium variant)

Note: The TFR is the number of births a woman would have if she went through the reproductive years experiencing the fertility rates at each age that prevailed in the year for which the measure is stated.

According to the medium variant of the most recent UN assessment, persons 60 and older are projected to constitute 14% of Myanmar's total population by 2030 and 22% by 2050. Although this proportion grew at a gradual pace over the past 50 years, it will accelerate rapidly in the coming decades. By 2040, the population 60 and older is estimated to outnumber children under age 15. Because women tend to live longer than men, women exceed men in the older population, particularly among the very old. The UN estimates indicate that women currently account for 56% of persons 60 and older and 62% of people 80 years and older in Myanmar.

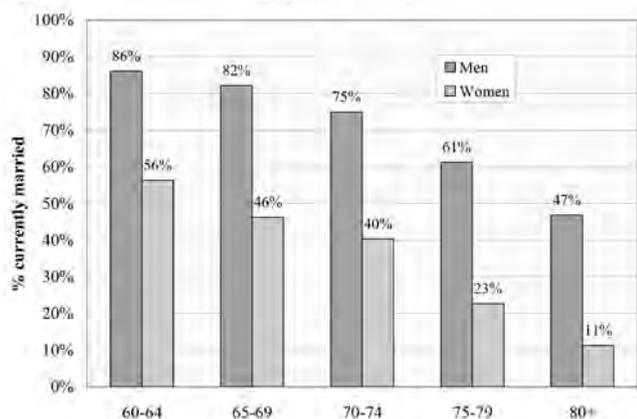
## Social characteristics of older people

An elderly person's marital status has important implications for well-being. Living with a spouse typically is advantageous since spouses can be primary sources of material, social and emotional support and provide personal care during times of illness or frailty. Only modestly more than half of Myanmar elders (54%) are currently married, 5% are never married and 2% are

divorced or separated. The remaining two-fifths (39%) are widowed. This is well above the 29% of persons 60 and older that are widowed in neighbouring Thailand and reflects the high mortality in Myanmar compared to most other countries in the region.

Pronounced age and gender differences in marital status are apparent (Figure 2). The percentage of those currently married declines sharply with age, reflecting the impact of mortality, dissolving marriages and reduced chances of remarriage with advancing age. Overall fully three-fourths (75%) of men 60 and older are currently married compared to only about two-fifths (39%) of women. Even among those in their early 60s a substantial difference is apparent, with 86% of men 60-64 currently married compared to only 56% of women. However, the relative gender gap increases with age, and among persons in their 80s, men are almost five times more likely than women to be currently married.

Figure 2. Percentage currently married, by age and gender, Myanmar 2012

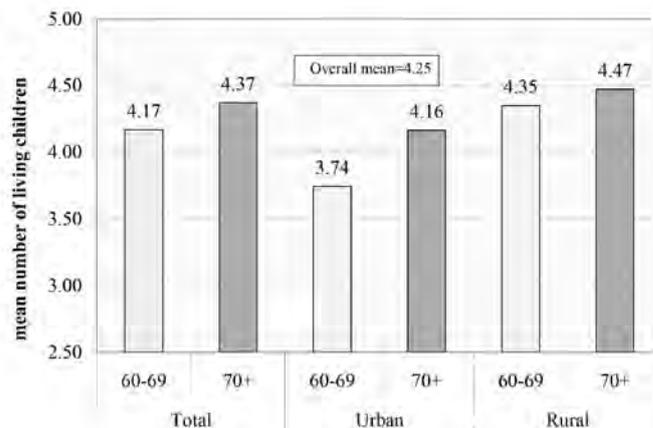


Source: 2012 Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar  
Note: Results are based on the household listing of all members aged 60 and older in the household.

Older people in Myanmar currently have an average of over four living children and only 6% are childless. But fertility rates have already fallen to two children per woman during the past several decades. Thus older people in the future will have far fewer children available to give support and provide personal care. A small decrease in family size can already be detected among older people in their 60s compared to those 70 and older, especially in urban areas where fertility started earlier (Figure 3).

A lack of education and particularly an inability to read and write fluently can place older persons at considerable disadvantage, impeding access to information. Only about a third of older people in Myanmar completed primary school. Over one-third of women have no formal education, compared to less than 10% of men. Only about half of older persons are fully literate, with women

Figure 3. Mean number of living children by age and area of residence, Myanmar 2012



Source: 2012 Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar

particularly likely to lack literacy (Table 1). The lack of education and literacy is particularly striking among persons aged 70 years and older and those in rural areas.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of ability to both read and write, by age, gender and area of residence, Myanmar 2012

	Can neither read nor write	Some literacy	Reads and writes easily
Total sample	25.8	21.9	52.3
Age			
60-69	17.7	20.8	61.5
70+	34.5	23.2	42.4
Gender			
Men	10.4	20.0	69.6
Women	38.9	23.6	37.5
Area			
Urban	17.0	16.3	66.7
Rural	29.8	24.5	45.7

Source: 2012 Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar

Access to information may be further compromised by limited exposure to mass media. Only 42% of older persons listen to the radio and only a third watch television at least weekly during the past month. In part this reflects the large numbers that lack a radio or television in their household (see below).

## Economic activity and income

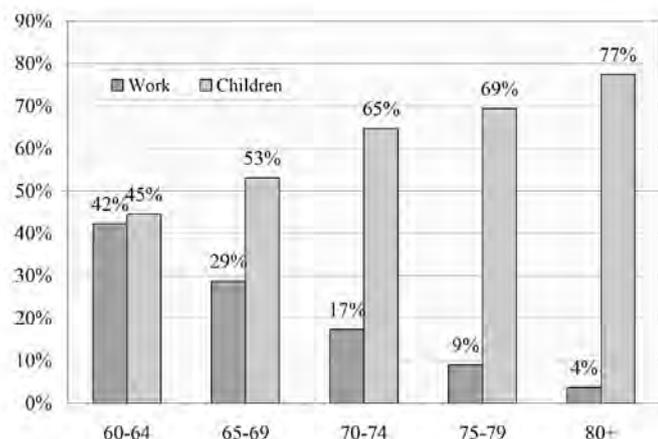
The vast majority of older persons in Myanmar (94%) have been economically active during their lives. Of these, 60% were primarily engaged in agriculture, either as farmers or agricultural labourers. Another

10% were engaged in non-agricultural labour and 11% were employed in formal sector jobs. Current economic activity declines rapidly with age. While about half (49%) of persons aged 60-64 worked during the previous year, less than a fourth (23%) of those aged 70-74 did. Older men are twice as likely as women to remain economically active and rural elderly continue to work longer than their urban counterparts.

Interestingly, compared to neighbouring Thailand, older persons in Myanmar are considerably less likely to have worked during the preceding year (30% vs. 43%). This contrast characterises both men and women. The difference may well reflect poorer health among older persons in Myanmar compared to Thailand where the government provides universal health insurance and the economy is far more advanced.

Although important, work is only one potential source of material support for older aged persons. In Myanmar, adult children are clearly the most common source. Over 80% of older persons report receiving some type of material support from children regardless. Moreover, 59% report children as their main source of income and

Figure 4. Work (own or spouse) versus children as most important source of support, by age, Myanmar 2012



Source: 2012 Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar

Table 2. Percentage of persons 60 and older living in households with selected possessions, by area of residence, Myanmar 2012 and Thailand 2011

	Myanmar 2012			Thailand 2011		
	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural
Radio	51.7	51.7	51.7	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Television	40.3	67.4	27.9	98.6	99.2	98.3
Telephone <sup>(a)</sup>	9.6	20.7	4.5	88.8	92.4	87.1
Refrigerator	6.7	18.3	1.5	92.5	95.9	90.8
Computer	1.0	2.9	0.1	22.5	39.6	13.8
Motorcycle	26.5	30.6	24.7	74.6	65.7	79.1
Car/truck/van	0.8	1.5	0.4	34.5	49.2	27.1

Sources: 2012 Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar and 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand

Notes: n.a. = not available

<sup>(a)</sup> Results for Myanmar refer to both cell and landline phones but in Thailand refer only to cell phones.

material support compared to only 24% that report work (by self or spouse) as their main source. As income from work declines with advancing age, support from children becomes increasingly significant (Figure 4).

Not surprisingly, among the small share of older persons with no living children, primary reliance on own or spouse's work is somewhat higher than those who have living children. Nevertheless, relatives are the main source of material support for 45% of childless elderly overall and for fully 60% of those 70 and older. This underscores the strong dependence on family for old age support in Myanmar even among those without children.

Pensions are uncommon as a source of income for older persons in Myanmar. Overall, 8% report any income from a pension and only 3% indicate a pension as their main source. In addition, pensions are largely limited to urban elderly. Only 3% of the rural majority report any pension income and only 1% indicate it as their main source. Almost no one reported receiving welfare support from government or non-government agencies.

## Material well-being

In terms of income and assets, it is clear that older people in Myanmar, especially those in rural areas, are generally quite poor. A large proportion of Myanmar's older people live in houses made with non-permanent materials. A third (34%) lack access to electricity and over half (56%) lack running water. These situations are particularly common in rural areas where 44% of elderly have no electricity and 63% have no running water.

On average the households of older people have few possessions even when including items that belong to other members. Comparison with Thailand underscores the stark lack of basic amenities in the households of Myanmar elderly (Table 2). Only 40% overall and less than 30% in rural areas live in households with a television while in Thailand televisions are virtually

universal. Moreover almost half in Myanmar lack even a radio. Refrigerators, which are commonplace in Thailand, are also largely absent in Myanmar with less than 2% of households of rural elderly having one.

Having access to a telephone is crucial not only for maintaining social contact with adult children who migrate or other family members living elsewhere but also for communicating when urgent matters arise. Cell phones are almost ubiquitous in households of Thai elderly but only 10% of elderly households in Myanmar have any type of phone. Computers are extremely rare in households of Myanmar elderly overall and virtually non-existent in rural households.

Access to motorised transportation is not only a matter of convenience but can also be critical if an urgent need for medical care arises. Yet barely over a fourth of households of elderly in Myanmar have a motorcycle and only 1% has a car, truck or van, quite in contrast to the situation in Thailand.

Older people in Myanmar typically live in low income households. Almost one in 10 report that their household monthly income is no more than 25,000 kyat, or less than US\$1 per day and just over 60% are in households with income no more than US\$3 per day. Only 55% feel that their income is adequate to meet their daily needs on a regular basis. Less than one in five older persons has savings in the form of money or gold.

## Living arrangements and location of children

Older people in Myanmar are generally surrounded by family and others at home (*Table 3*). Average household size approaches five. The large majority live in households of more than one generation and 45% live in at least three-generational households. Such multigenerational arrangements are likely to facilitate intergenerational exchanges of material and emotional support.

Only 5% of older persons live alone. More than three-quarters (77%) reside with at least one of their children. Interestingly this is the same percentage found in a 1990 non-national survey. In neighbouring Thailand, co-residence with children in 1986, when the first survey of older persons was taken, also stood at 77% although it has declined steadily since then and by 2011 was only 56%. In contrast to Thailand and many other countries in the region, traditionally high levels of living with children appear to have been maintained in Myanmar (Esteve and Liu, 2014).

As is common in many countries in Southeast Asia, living arrangements of older persons typically evolve as they age into a stem family form with a married child living with them. Unlike the patriarchal family system prevailing in East Asia, Myanmar and many other Southeast Asian countries are characterised by a flexible

*Table 3. Selected measures of household of persons 60 and older, by age and area of residence, Myanmar 2012*

	Total	Age		Area of residence	
		60-69	70+	Urban	Rural
Mean household size	4.71	4.71	4.71	4.87	4.64
Percent distribution of household generational composition					
One generation	14.3	15.3	13.2	11.9	15.4
Two generations	40.2	44.0	36.1	40.1	40.2
Three or more generations	45.5	40.7	50.7	48.0	44.4
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Percent distribution of coresidence					
Lives alone	4.9	4.0	5.9	3.5	5.6
Lives with spouse only	7.4	9.0	5.7	6.3	7.9
Lives with at least one child (with or without others)	77.2	75.6	78.9	78.6	76.6
Other	10.4	11.3	9.5	11.6	9.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Coresidence with married children					
% live with married son	20.6	19.2	22.0	20.5	20.6
% live with married daughter	28.8	24.3	33.7	30.4	28.1
Ratio (married daughter/son)	1.40	1.27	1.53	1.48	1.37
Percentage in skip generation households					
% only with grandchild	4.1	3.8	4.4	4.1	4.1
% only with grandchild <10	1.9	1.9	1.8	2.5	1.6

*Source: 2012 Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar*

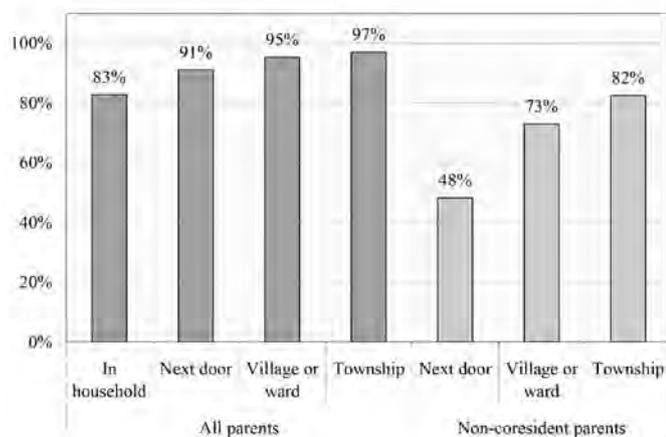
bilateral system in which daughters play an even more important role than sons (Mason 1992). Thus matrilineal residence is relatively common and the prevalence of living with a married daughter is higher than with a married son.

The phenomenon of ‘skip generation’ households consisting only of grandparents and grandchildren has attracted considerable attention (e.g. Timonen and Arber 2012). Although 49% of older persons in Myanmar live in households with at least one grandchild, only 4% live in a skip generation household and only 2% in such households with a young grandchild under age 10. Although co-resident grandchildren in general are more common in households of older persons in Myanmar than in Thailand (49% vs. 44%), skip generation households are less than half as common. This reflects the much lower rate of migration among adult children of Myanmar elderly compared to Thai elderly (see below).

Living arrangements involve more than just household composition. Location of children is of crucial significance particularly in societies where filial obligations to parents in old age remain strong. Among older people with living children, 83% reside together with at least one child, 91% have a child at least next door and 95% have at least one child living in the same village or ward (*Figure 5*). Only 3% of all elderly parents do not have any child within the same township. Moreover, even among older age parents who do not reside with children almost half have a child living next door, almost three-fourths have a child in the same village or ward and only less than one fifth has no child within the same township. In brief, very few older persons in Myanmar who have children do not have one at least reasonably close by.

Migration of children of older persons is quite modest. Only 20% of the children of persons 60 and older live outside their parents’ township. This is in sharp contrast

*Figure 5. Location of children among persons 60 and older who have at least one child, Myanmar 2012*



Source: 2012 Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar

to the situation in Thailand where 39% of children of older persons live outside the province of their parents. Given that a province in Thailand is a considerably larger geographical unit than a township in Myanmar, the contrast is all the more striking. The difference undoubtedly reflects the far more advanced Thai economy that has generated employment opportunities spurring much of the migration in contrast to the far less advanced Myanmar economy.

At the same time, the more advanced economies of nearby countries and especially Thailand attract migrants from Myanmar and particularly from areas on the border. Overall, 7% of elderly have at least one child currently outside the country but this varies considerably by location. For elderly who live in states that border Thailand (Mon, Kayin and Tanintharyi), the percentage with at least one child abroad ranges from 23% to 38%.

### Family support and intergenerational exchanges

Exchanges of material support and personal services between adult children and their elderly parents are extensive in Myanmar. Normative support for filial obligations to elderly parents is widespread. A large majority of older persons (82%) believe that children should provide financial support and personal care to parents in old age and most expect children to do so.

Two-thirds of adult children of elderly provided their parents with at least some material support during the prior year and just over a fourth provided at least 50,000 kyat or about US\$60 or more (*Table 4*). Co-resident children are most likely to provide material support although the funds may be for general household use rather than the parents’ own use. Among children who do not live with their parents, those abroad and to a more modest extent those in the two largest cities in Myanmar are most likely to contribute and especially to provide substantial amounts. Thus migration of children to these destinations can benefit parents’ material well-being as Thailand (Knodel *et al.* 2010).

There is little difference between sons and daughters in terms of providing material support. Co-resident sons are slightly more likely to do so than co-resident daughters but the gender difference is reversed for children who do not reside with their parents.

From the perspective of the parents, the vast majority (93%) receive material support from one or more children including 63% who received at least 50,000 kyat in the past year. Among those who have children who are not living with them, 71% received at least some material support from at least one and 28% at least 50,000 kyat. Over three-fourths (78%) of economically active elderly

Table 4. Percentage of children age 16 and older that gave material support to parents in the past year, by location and gender of child, Myanmar 2012

	% of children that gave parents in past year	
	Any money or goods	Money or goods valued at more than 50,000 kyat (about \$60)
Total	66.0	26.3
Location of child		
Same household	82.7	50.3
Same township	58.2	10.3
Outside township	50.3	15.8
Yangon/Mandalay city	61.0	27.2
Abroad	71.0	46.3
Gender of child		
Son	63.6	25.4
Daughter	68.1	27.0
Gender and co-residence status		
Co-resident son	83.1	54.0
Co-resident daughter	82.4	47.6
Non-co-resident son	55.8	13.9
Non-co-resident daughter	59.3	14.5

Source: 2012 Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar

parents receive help in their work from adult children, mainly from those who live with them. Adult children and particularly daughters also play a very prominent role in helping their parents with daily living activities and care while ill.

Older age parents only infrequently give financial support to their adult children on a regular basis especially to those not in their household. Just 20% of elderly who lived with their children gave or loaned money during the past year to a child that lived with them and only 6% who had a child who did not live with them provided money to at least one. Nevertheless over half (56%) who live with children report that they or their spouse contribute in some way to household support and with over a third (35%) providing at least half of the total household support. Older age parents who live with children also help with housework (56%) and with house maintenance (37%). Thus it is clear that in various ways many co-resident children benefit from the presence of their parents.

Another particularly important service that older persons provide is grandchild care. Currently 37% of those that have grandchildren provide care for at least one. Moreover, over half (54%) ever provided care for at least several months, including 15% for grandchildren whose parents were not present. In most cases the grandchildren's parents rather than the grandparents provide the main support costs for the grandchild; still almost one-fifth (19%) of older persons currently caring

for a grandchild bear the primary costs. Almost three-fourths (73%) of older persons who currently provide grandchild care consider it to be mainly an enjoyable experience; only 5% consider it mostly a burden, with the rest finding it both enjoyable and burdensome.

Family is also the source of personal care. Daughters are the main care providers for about half the older people who receive help with daily living activities and in case of illness or injured. Among older couples, wives are often primary caregivers for husbands. Husbands are less likely to be the primary caregiver for wives although they often assist to some extent. Children living nearby provide social support through frequent visits to parents. In sharp contrast to Thailand, however, telephone contact by those at greater distances is quite limited given that less than 10% of older persons live in households with a telephone.

## Health

Health can greatly affect quality of life, physical independence and financial security. Unfortunately many older persons in Myanmar are in relatively poor health. Only a third (34%) say that their health is good or very good compared to 43% of persons 60 or older in Thailand. Poor or very poor self-assessed health increases rapidly with age rising from 17% to 31% between ages 60-64 and 80 and older. Fully a third (34%) of older persons in Myanmar had an illness or injury during the past 12

months that prevented them from carrying out normal activities. The median length of incapacity was 10 days. Overall, 28% of older people indicated problems with sight compared to only 18% in Thailand. Those who wore eyeglasses reported better vision than those who did not, suggesting that wider access to glasses could substantially reduce sight problems.

Half of older people have limitations with at least one of four basic physical movements (*Table 5*). Moreover, one in six has difficulty with at least one of four common activities of daily living (ADL). Compared to older persons in Thailand, Myanmar elderly score worse on every functional limitation and ADL difficulty highlighting their poor physical health. Functional limitations and ADL difficulties increase sharply with age. Compared to respondents in their 60s, those 70 and older reported 2.5 times as many limitations on average with physical movement (1.86 vs. 0.74) and four times as many ADL difficulties (0.58 vs. 0.14).

Women are more likely than men to report problems with virtually all aspects of health addressed in the survey. For example, 24% of women compared to 19% of men reported their health as poor or very poor. Likewise, 57% of women compared to 40% of men reported at least one functional limitation while 19% of women versus 13% of men reported they had at least one ADL difficulty.

## Conclusions

The family and particularly adult children continue to be the bedrock of support and care for older people in Myanmar, reflecting the strong sense of filial responsibility embedded in cultures throughout much

of Southeast Asia. In many countries this traditional familial system of old age support is currently undergoing transformations (Croll 2006). Yet it appears to be particularly intact in Myanmar as findings from the 2012 survey of older persons in Myanmar clearly document. Its preservation, including extensive co-residence with adult children, undoubtedly derives not only from strong tradition but also from the country's lack of economic development and its international isolation during recent decades.

With the limited expansion of modern sector work opportunities compared to elsewhere in the region, there is less incentive for adult children to leave their parental communities to seek employment. Moreover the lack of social protection programmes as well as a comprehensive pension system leaves the vast majority of older persons with little choice but to depend on their family and to some degree on their local communities for their needs.

Intergenerational exchanges flow in both directions. Older persons in Myanmar also contribute in important ways to the younger generation's welfare. Many who live with adult children contribute to the household's economic support as well as help with housework and home maintenance. In addition, many assist with grandchild care, thereby helping their adult children to be economically more productive.

While few older persons in Myanmar are isolated from family and in general are socially integrated with their children and their kin, gaps exist within the system, often stemming from the severe poverty that afflicts both the elderly and their adult children. In addition, poverty combined with the lack of an adequate health care system results in widespread poor health among older persons.

*Table 5. Comparison of functional limitations and difficulties performing activities of daily life among persons 60 and older, Myanmar 2012 and Thailand 2011.*

	Myanmar 2012	Thailand 2011
Functional limitations (% having difficulty performing task)		
Lifting five kilograms	36.5	29.2
Climbing stairs	32.3	11.9
Walking 200-300 metres	31.8	15.7
Crouching or squatting	27.2	12.7
Any of the above	49.5	32.9
Activities of daily living (% having difficulty performing task)		
Using toilet	12.9	3.1
Bathing	9.3	2.9
Eating	6.6	2.2
Dressing	6.6	2.6
Any of the above	16.5	3.6

*Sources: 2012 Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar and 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand*

The current situation of the older population will not remain static. With the recent political liberalisation and associated opening up of the country, development may well take off in the future along with exposure to a broader environment of ideas and values. Already cell phones are spreading rapidly and will change the ability of elderly parents to keep in contact with migrant children (Fuller 2013). At the same time, demographic trends, especially declining family size and likely increased migration of adult children as the economy expands, pose challenges for the future generations of older persons. These changes together raise questions about how they will impact the elderly including the extent and forms of family support.

Myanmar has now a window of opportunity to develop and expand creative approaches to address the pervasive poverty and poor health that characterises the older population through initiatives by government, empowered communities and civil society. The predictability of the demographic changes that lie ahead and the extensive information provided by the Survey of Older Persons in Myanmar highlight the need for a social protection system that embraces the older persons, their families and communities. This window of opportunity is limited in time and should not be missed.

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