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Social service delivery for senior citizens in rural Philippines and secrets to longevity of Apo Whang-od

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Abstract

Access to social services such as healthcare, transportation, and financial support can be limited, leaving many elderly individuals vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. This paper examined the recent elderly demographics, status of social service delivery, the roles of traditional and cultural practices, and specific challenges faced by older persons in rural areas, using the case of Apo Whang-od and her community, Buscalan that is in the municipality of Tinglayan, Province of Kalinga, Philippines.

Using a mixed-methods approach, this paper revealed that almost 11% of Tinglayan's population is elderly, mostly indigenous people with a relatively low literacy rate, and low-income earners who are engaged mostly in subsistence farming and small-scale traditional craft-making. Also, there are substantial government programs and services offered by existing laws; however, access to these is challenged by limited access to education and healthcare services, with long travel distances and a lack of transportation being major barriers. Financial difficulties were also observed, with no or few having access to social security benefits and reasonable amounts of pensions. The challenges can also be attributed to an unfavorable geographical location, conflicts with neighboring tribes, limited local government funds, lack of knowledge, and inadequate social service centers within the locality. Tinglayan's cultural

values were also found to play a pivotal role in supplementing the scarce social services by fostering a supportive atmosphere for the elderly.

Analysing Apo-Whang-od's longevity, it was revealed that she lived a longer life because she ate organic and locally sourced food, slept well, laughed a lot, engaged in regular physical activity, nurtured her spiritual well-being, built strong relationships with her family and community, and kept a positive outlook.

In conclusion, social demographics shows that elderlies in rural areas are disadvantaged, which calls for more efficient and effective access, delivery, and availability of social services. Moreover, policymakers are enjoined to accelerate social infrastructures, expand social protection programs, and support intergenerational solidarity and resilience and cultural preservation. Lastly, Apo Whang-od's legacy lives on. Her popularity not only gained revitalization of the Kalinga tattoo culture, but it also inspired people to follow her steps to longer and happier way of life.

Az idősek számára elérhető szociális szolgáltatások a Fülöp-szigetek vidéki területein és Apo Whang-od hosszú életének titkai

Kulcsszavak: idősek, szociális szolgáltatások, kultúra és hagyományok, öregedés, Apo Whang-od

Absztrakt

A szociális szolgáltatásokhoz való korlátozott hozzáférés (például a nagy földrajzi távolságból adódóan) az idősebb személyeket még kiszolgáltatottabbá teheti.

Ez a tanulmány a Fülöp-szigetek Kalinga tartományának Tinglayan településén élő Apo Whang-od és közösségének, Buscalannak az esetét felhasználva vizsgálja az idősek demográfiai helyzetét, a szociális szolgáltatások igénybe vételének lehetőségeit, a hagyományok és a helyi kultúra szerepét, valamint a vidéki területeken élő idősek előtt álló sajátos kihívásokat és az azokra adott válaszokat.

Kevert módszertani megközelítést alkalmazva a tanulmány feltárta, hogy Tinglayan lakosságának közel 11%-a idős, többnyire öslakos, viszonylag alacsony írástudási aránnyal rendelkező, alacsony jövedelmű személy, akik főként önellátó gazdálkodást és hagyományos kézműipari tevékenységet folytatnak.

Kormányzati programok és a kormányzat kínálta szolgáltatások is léteznek; az ezekhez való hozzáférést azonban megnehezíti az oktatáshoz és az egészségügyi szolgáltatásokhoz való korlátozott hozzáférés, a nagy földrajzi távolságok, a hiányzó tömegközlekedés és az ebből fakadó korlátozott mobilitás. Jelentősek a pénzügyi nehézségek is, mivel nem, vagy csak kevesen jutnak hozzá a társadalombiztosítási ellátásokhoz és a megélhetést biztosító nyugdíjakhoz.

A kihívások a kedvezőtlen földrajzi elhelyezkedésnek, a szomszédos törzsekkel való konfliktusoknak, a korlátozott helyi önkormányzati forrásoknak, az ismeretek hiányának és a településen belüli nem megfelelő szociális szolgáltató központoknak is tulajdoníthatók.

Tinglayan kulturális értékei kulcsfontosságú szerepet játszanak a szűkös szociális szolgáltatások kiegészítésében azáltal, hogy támogató légkört teremtenek az idősek számára.

A törzs világhírnevet szerzett tagja Apo-Whag-od hosszú életét elemezve kiderült, hogy azért élt hosszabb életet, mert organikus és helyi eredetű élelmiszereket fogyasztott, jól aludt, sokat nevetett, rendszeresen testmozgást végzett, ápolta lelki jóllétét, erős kapcsolatokat épített ki családjával és közösségével, és mindvégig pozitív szemléletű maradt.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the unique challenges faced by elderly population in rural communities, particularly in developing countries such as the Philippines.

The Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2010 in the Philippines provides a range of benefits and services for elderly citizens. These include health and education services, employment facilitation, a 20% discount on goods and services, mandatory PhilHealth coverage, and a monthly stipend of Php 500 (apprx: 9 €, as of 2023) for indigent senior citizens. Additionally, senior citizens are eligible for income tax exemption if they meet certain criteria. Other services provided under the law include priority seating in public transportation, free vaccination against influenza and pneumococcal diseases, and the establishment of community-based senior citizens centers. These centers offer various activities and services, such as recreational activities, counseling, health and wellness programs, and skills training.

However, the above social services provided under the law may remain inaccessible to everyone especially among the population living in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. One notable case in Tinglayan is that of Apo Whang-od, a 106-year-old traditional tattoo

artist who has gained worldwide recognition for her art and cultural heritage. Apo Whang-od's popularity not only revealed her secrets to longevity and gained revitalization of the Kalinga tattoo culture but it also exposed the real face of social service delivery and access of older people in her village. She and her community were also able to gain the attention of lawmakers to realize the necessity for tailored policies and programs aimed at supporting the elderly population in rural communities, with due consideration of the distinct cultural and social contexts that influence access to social services.

By examining the case of Apo Whang-Od and the broader challenges faced by the elderly population in Tinglayan, this paper aims to contribute to the broader conversation on the need for targeted policies and programs to support elderly population in rural communities.

Objectives

This study aims to:

- Examine the specific challenges faced by older people in rural areas in the Philippines, using the case of Apo Whang-od and her community, Buscalan.
- Analyze the current state of delivery and access of social services among the elderly population and the roles of traditional and cultural practices in shaping the access of social services and determine its policy implications.
- Recommend changes and/or improvements in the policies based on the findings.

Literature background

The elderly population in rural areas of developing countries, such as the Philippines faces numerous challenges in accessing social services, including healthcare, transportation, and financial support. The literature on this topic emphasizes the importance of understanding the unique cultural and social contexts in which access to social services is shaped.

Studies have shown that rural areas in developing countries often lack adequate healthcare infrastructure and healthcare services, leading to limited access to healthcare for the elderly population (Chuma and Maina, 2018; Hong et al., 2017). Lack of transportation is also a major challenge for the elderly population in rural areas, often resulting in limited access to healthcare and other social services (Gulliford et al., 2002; Pharr et al., 2017).

Furthermore, financial difficulties faced by the elderly population in rural areas are a significant barrier to accessing social services. Limited access to social security benefits and pensions can leave the elderly population vulnerable to poverty and inadequate healthcare (Bloom et al., 2015; Niu et al., 2016).

The literature also emphasizes the importance of community support networks and intergenerational solidarity in providing a safety net for the elderly population in rural areas (Zhang et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2019, Bene and Mór , 2022). Community support networks can provide emotional and financial support and can help to address some of the challenges faced by the elderly population in accessing social services.

The case of Apo Whang-Od, a cultural icon and traditional tattoo artist in Tinglayan, Kalinga, Philippines, provides a unique perspective on the challenges faced by elderly individuals with health conditions. Her status has brought her significant social and financial support from the community, highlighting the importance of preserving cultural heritage and traditional practices in providing a sense of identity and belonging to the elderly population. In an article, written by A. Lago that was published in Rappler in 2021, she described that Whang-Od's craft helped trigger economic activities in her village by drawing thousands of tourists, which gave opportunities to locals to become paid tour guides, homestay rentals, souvenir shops, eateries, and other businesses that caters to the growing demand of visitors.

Overall, the literature underscores the need for targeted policies and programs to support the elderly population in rural areas of developing countries, taking into account the unique cultural and social contexts in which access to social services is shaped.

Methodology

The research methodology of this study involved a mixed-methods approach, combining different data collection techniques.

Data such as demographics were collected from existing reliable and latest surveys conducted in the community, particularly data from the Philippine Statistics Authority and other government institutions.

Qualitative data were collected through extensive document review of available information about Apo Whang-Od and other elderly individuals in Tinglayan. The review will explore the challenges they face in accessing social services, the coping strategies they have developed, and the role of traditional and cultural practices in supporting them. Available articles, publications, research, and others were also examined.

In addition to the above, the study also involved a desk review of existing laws and regulations on the available social services that can be accessed by the elderly population in the Philippines and determine services that have been already accessed and enjoyed by Apo Whang-Od.

Finally, the researcher's personal observations and direct experiences with the community of Tinglayan and Apo Whang-Od were also incorporated into the discussion to supplement the information gathered from the reviewed documents.

Overall, these mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the access to social services for the elderly population in Tinglayan, including the specific case of Apo Whang-Od, and will help to identify policy recommendations for improving access to social services.

Results

Demographics

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, the estimated number of senior citizens (60 years old and above) in Tinglayan, Kalinga as of 2020 is 1,356. This is equivalent to around 10.6% of the municipality's total population. The sex ratio of senior citizens in Tinglayan is approximately equal between males and females.

Most senior citizens in Tinglayan are Kalinga indigenous people, with other minority groups such as the Ilocanos and Tagalogs. The literacy rate among senior citizens in Tinglayan is relatively low, with many having limited formal education. This leads to lack of knowledge on what are the available social services and how to avail them.

Most senior citizens in Tinglayan are engaged in subsistence farming and small-scale industries. Many rely on their families and community support networks for their daily needs and access to social services. Unavailability of high-paying jobs and opportunities led most of the elderly to poverty and high dependence to their children for financial support especially in funding their health care needs.

Current state of access to social services for the elderly population

In the Philippines, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) provides the major services for older people, including social pension, assistance to individuals in crisis situations, assistance to people with disabilities (PWDs) and older persons in need of protection, and centenarian gift.

The Social Pension Program for Indigent Senior Citizens (SPISC) provides a monthly stipend of PHP 500 (approximately USD 10) to qualified indigent senior citizens who are 60 years old and above and have no regular source of income or financial support from their family. The program aims to provide additional support to older persons in meeting their daily needs and promoting their well-being. The DSWD also aids individuals and families in crisis situations, including older persons affected by natural disasters, armed conflict, or other emergencies. This includes provision of relief goods, cash-for-work, and other forms of assistance. In addition, the DSWD helps PWDs and older persons in need of protection through its Protective Services Program. This includes temporary shelter, counseling, medical and legal assistance, and other support services to address the specific needs of vulnerable older persons. Moreover, a program known as the Centenarian Act of 2016, provides a one-time cash gift of Php 100,000 to centenarians as a sign of respect and gratitude for their contributions to society.

The Department of Health (DOH) in the Philippines offers various health services for senior citizens. These include free vaccines for preventing illnesses, PhilHealth coverage for hospitalization and medical services, geriatric health program, elderly ward equipped with facilities tailored to their needs, and hospice care for those with terminal illnesses. These services are aimed at improving the health and well-being of senior citizens and providing them with access to necessary medical care.

However, though majority of the above services are available at the municipal level, access to it is challenged: limited access to healthcare services, with long travel distances and lack of transportation being major barriers. Financial difficulties were also observed among the indigent population, with no or few has access to social security benefits and reasonable amount of pensions. The challenges faced by the elderly population in Tinglayan can also be attributed to various factors, including their unfavorable geographical location nestled in the mountains, conflicts with neighboring tribes, limited local government funds, lack of knowledge, and inadequate social service centers within the locality.

Secrets to longevity and specific challenges faced by Apo Whang-od

Similar to the qualities observed in communities residing in blue zones around the world, Whang-od also embodies these same habits, which may hold the key to her remarkable longevity at the age of 106, outliving all her peers. Whang-od attributes her extended life to practices such as consuming locally sourced and organic foods, ensuring adequate sleep, embracing laughter, engaging in consistent and vigorous physical activities, nurturing spiritual well-being, fostering strong bonds with family and community, and maintaining a positive outlook—all contributing to a longer and more purposeful existence.

Nevertheless, like all human beings, Whang-od faces challenges that come with aging. Her health condition presents significant obstacles to accessing social services. She experiences limited mobility and relies on her community for transportation to medical facilities. Additionally, Whang-Od encounters difficulties with her eyesight, limiting her ability to create intricate tattoo designs. She also tends to tire easily and only practices her craft when she feels both inclined and physically capable. Nonetheless, her status as a cultural icon and traditional tattoo artist has garnered substantial social and financial support from her community.

As a senior citizen, Apo Whang-Od is entitled to all the benefits outlined in the Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2010. Reports indicate that she has availed herself of many social services, including PhilHealth insurance, centenarian gifts, AICS, vaccinations, disaster benefits, and others. However, she was deemed ineligible for one program, the SPISC (Social Pension for Indigent Senior Citizens). The reason behind this disqualification is that she did not meet the minimum criteria for indigency, particularly having no regular source of income.

Whang-Od was ineligible due to her income from tattooing and the financial support she receives from her family.

Cultural practices: Its role in accessing community social services

The population of Tinglayan, Kalinga, is characterized by a profound sense of community and mutual support, which serves as a crucial safety net for the elderly residents. Despite facing challenges related to limited access to formal social services, the community places a high value on respecting and caring for its older members. This cultural emphasis on elder care helps alleviate some of the difficulties encountered by senior citizens. Furthermore, this strong sense of community creates an environment where the elderly are not only cared for but also esteemed and acknowledged for their contributions to society, thereby reinforcing their support system.

However, it is important to note that tribal conflicts with neighboring communities in Tinglayan have hindered senior citizens' access to social services in the area. During such conflicts, community members often fear leaving their immediate surroundings, which further restricts their ability to access essential services.

Policy Implications

The data and information gathered that lawmakers and state leaders must take into consideration the following policy focus:

Accelerate social infrastructures

Policymakers should give priority to improving healthcare services in rural areas. This entails enhancements in healthcare facilities, transportation networks, educational institutions, and senior citizens' centers to better serve the needs of these communities.

Expand social protection programs

It is highly advisable to expand social protection programs, including increasing pensions and social security benefits, to provide substantial support to the elderly community.

Intergenerational solidarity and resilience

Policymakers should actively promote intergenerational resilience and solidarity while reinforcing community support systems to effectively address the unique challenges encountered by older adults in rural regions.

Improve social service delivery

In addition, there is a need to expand the door-to-door delivery of social services in rural areas, ensuring that essential support reaches those who may have difficulty accessing services due to numerous limitations.

Cultural preservation

It is crucial to prioritize the preservation of health, way of life, spirituality, and the environment while gradually embracing modernization. Furthermore, efforts should be made to promote the transfer of knowledge from older to younger generations, encompassing traditional crafts, cultural arts, and rituals, to ensure the continuity of important cultural heritage and practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study illuminates the challenges confronted by the elderly population in Tinglayan, Kalinga, Philippines, when it comes to accessing social services. It underscores the significance of identifying and removing the barriers that restrict the elderly's access to these services, such as a lack of transportation networks, underdeveloped health services and facilities, low literacy levels, susceptibility to disasters, limited employment opportunities, tribal conflicts, and other related factors.

In the case of Apo Whang-Od, despite her fame and the available financial and social support, she still faces challenges in accessing social services. These challenges arise from factors like declining physical health due to aging, limited mobility, eligibility restrictions in certain government programs, and the remote location of social service centers. Nevertheless, at 106 years old, she continues to inspire the world and stands as an epitome of healthy aging, a productive lifestyle, and a purposeful existence.

The cultural and traditional practices of the Buscalan community have played a significant role in addressing the social needs of older individuals. These practices involve offering them unconditional respect, providing physical and financial support, ensuring access to food,

ensuring protection, offering entertainment and recreation opportunities, fostering strong family bonds, promoting neighborhood care, and offering various other forms of assistance. These customs have effectively created safety nets for the elderly that have been in place for generations.

Based on the findings, the study offers several recommendations for policymakers. It suggests a focus on accelerating basic social infrastructures, expand social protection programs, promote intergenerational solidarity and resilience, cultural preservation, and improved delivery of social services by the government.

Lastly, Apo Whang-od's legacy lives on. Her popularity not only gained revitalization of the Kalinga tattoo culture but it also exposed the real face of social service delivery and access of older persons in her village. She and her community were also able to gain the attention of lawmakers to realize the necessity for tailored policies and programs aimed at supporting the elderly population in rural communities, with due consideration of the distinct cultural and social contexts that influence access to social services.

Recommandation

The study proposes recommendations to improve access to social services for the elderly population in Buscalan, Tinglayan and other rural communities in the Philippines.

The recommendations include investing in healthcare infrastructure and expanding healthcare services, enhancing transportation options, expanding social safety nets such as social security benefits and pensions, strengthening community support networks, and preserving cultural heritage. Also, identified gaps should also be provided with appropriate interventions on the level of the elderly, their family, community, and the whole country.

More importantly, enhancements in existing government policies as previously discussed in the results is highly suggested.

Finally, these recommendations aim to improve the well-being and promote active aging among the elderly population in Tinglayan.

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