Older citizens monitoring

Older citizens monitoring is a process that promotes dialogue between older people, civil society organisations, governments and service providers. Groups of older people monitor their access to services they are entitled to and lobby for improvements. These guidelines, aimed at programme managers, explain how older citizens monitoring works and what it can achieve.

Older people have the same right as anyone else to dignity, an adequate standard of living, health and social services, and participation in society. But they are often denied these rights because, for example:

• appropriate policies, laws and services do not exist, or, where they do, older people are not aware of their entitlements

• selection processes do not benefit the most vulnerable older people

• older people lack identification to prove their entitlement

• older people cannot afford to pay for services

• services are too far away or transport costs are too high

• waiting times are too long

• service providers discriminate against older people.

What is older citizens monitoring?

Older citizens monitoring empowers older people to claim their rights. It is based on the idea that evidence is needed to support arguments for change. Often, evidence is gathered by professional researchers, with older people playing a passive role. Older citizens monitoring turns this around, so that older people gather data on their access to services and use this evidence to lobby policy makers and service providers for improvements.

Older citizens monitoring reflects our "age helps" position, which recognises the critical role that older people play in their communities - as carers, advisers, mediators, mentors and providers of household income - and highlights their experience and expertise. It is based on the principle that older people are their own best advocates.

What does older citizens monitoring achieve?

HelpAge International developed the older citizens monitoring approach in response to the 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). Pilot projects in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Jamaica, Kenya and Tanzania showed that this was an effective way of enabling poor older people to hold their governments to account for the commitments they had made in adopting MIPAA. The projects helped to bring about positive change for older people themselves and their communities.

The process of older citizens monitoring is as important as the results. As well as bringing practical changes, older citizens monitoring has a range of other benefits, including increasing older people's confidence, promoting their participation in society and providing mutual support.

For example, in Bangladesh, older people, with support from the Resource Integration Centre, monitored their access to the government's old-age allowance and widow's allowance. They found that many people

"The government needs older people to advise on how to better run this country. Older people should tell the government what to do and even how to do it."

District councillor, Arusha, Tanzania

Case study: Jamaica and Colombia

Groups in Jamaica and Colombia found that an intergenerational approach worked well. Evaluations of projects in which older and younger adults worked together found this approach more sustainable, and reduced older people's sense of isolation from the community.

who were eligible for these allowances were not receiving them. They presented their evidence to local government officials, leading to a significant increase in the number of older people claiming these allowances.

More recently, groups of older people in Kyrgyzstan assessed how far the government's poverty-targeted cash transfer scheme was actually reaching the poorest people. They found that many poor people were missing out because they did not have documents to prove their eligibility, or they were seen as having too many assets (even though these were often very old cars or kitchen appliances that did not work properly and had no sale value).

This was the first time that older people in Kyrgyzstan had been involved in monitoring a specific cash transfer and analysing the results. It showed how, with training and support, older people's groups were well placed to provide evidence of the limitations of means-testing in a country with high poverty rates.

Older citizens monitoring has become a key methodology in many of our projects and a cornerstone of our advocacy and programme work. By 2011, our offices and partners were supporting 950 older people's associations to monitor older people's access to services and entitlements.

How does older citizens monitoring work?

Every older citizens monitoring project is organised differently, depending on local circumstances and the specific aims of the project. However, there are certain activities that all older citizens monitoring projects have in common. These do not necessarily take place in "steps" – they may overlap or take place simultaneously.

Getting started

With support from an NGO, groups of older people meet to discuss key concerns and agree what they want to change. For example, they may want to improve their access to healthcare, public transport, housing or social pensions.

They choose a specific issue and learn about their rights and entitlements in relation to this. For example, they may find that everyone over 60 is entitled to free healthcare, but that this does not happen in practice. They identify decision-makers they need to influence to get the policy implemented, and they may also identify media outlets that are likely to support their cause.

Training is a core activity. Older people's associations usually elect a committee of 5-15 people to lead the monitoring activities. These leaders are key to the whole process. They need to know about existing policies, how to collect and analyse data, how to facilitate meetings, who to lobby and how to communicate with them, and how to liaise with the media. The supporting NGO arranges training in these areas.

Monitoring and advocacy

The older people's leaders work out what data they need to collect and how to collect it, for example, through meetings, surveys, interviews, site visits or government statistics.

For example, in Tanzania, older people decided to monitor the quality of healthcare services by collecting data on:

• where the person had to wait (chair, ground or standing)

Tip: Represent everybody

The choice of topic should represent the views of men and women alike, along with potentially marginalised groups, such as disabled older people and members of minority ethnic groups.

Tip: Consider literacy skills

Literacy is important but it is not necessary for everyone in an older citizens monitoring group to be able to read and write. Participatory research techniques enable less educated older people to participate, for example, by producing diagrams on the ground. Some groups involve younger adults with literacy skills, or pair different language speakers together. In Bolivia, one older woman who led on communication did not know how to read or write, but spoke well on TV and radio.

- how well medical staff listened to older people (poor, average or good)
- language used by the doctor/nurse (good or bad)
- whether the staff greeted the older person (yes or no)
- whether they mocked them (yes or no)
- whether they received the medicine prescribed
- whether they were asked to pay (older people are supposed to be treated free of charge in Tanzania).

With support from the NGO, the older people's leaders then arrange meetings with key decision-makers to present their evidence and their demands. In many cases, they also engage the media to win public support for their campaign.

Throughout the project, the groups continue monitoring to check on progress, review their activities and plan how to take the work further.

Key points

- Older citizens monitoring is a process through which older people gather evidence about their access to entitlements and use this evidence to lobby for improvements.
- It has a range of benefits. As well as improving older people's access to services, it increases their self-esteem and helps NGOs, government officials and service providers to work together.

Find out more

Ageways 67: Older citizens monitoring
Shows how older people can demand better services.
HelpAge International, London, 2006
www.helpage.org/resources/helpage-newsletters

Older citizens monitoring in Ethiopia: a handbook
Provides guidance on older citizens monitoring in Ethiopia.
HelpAge International, Addis Ababa, 2009
www.helpage.org/resources/publications