

Ways of Healthy Ageing: Case Study of Community - Based Care Initiatives in South Korea

Zhansulu Issayeva
Graduate School of International Studies
Seoul National University

1. Introduction

South Korea is one of the top world economies that experienced rapid economic growth and development over several decades. In recent years, however, this global position has been hindered as a consequence of an impending threat of an ageing society. South Korea can be regarded as the fastest-ageing society in the world, with its elderly population doubling in number every quarter century. According to the 2017 Population and Housing Census, which Statistics Korea announced on August 27, 2018, elderly population in the country (those aged 65 years old and above) had reached 7.12 million by the end of the year, showing an increase in 340,000 people comparing to the year before. The elderly proportion of the total population also rose from 13.6% to 14.2%, completing South Korea's entrance into the ranks of aged societies.¹

The government has pledged to address the situation by proposing several reforms such as increasing pensions, providing more jobs for the elderly and building health facilities to help the country's seniors. Obviously the seriousness of the issue has been recognized, but there are many difficulties to implement appropriate policies that would adequately tackle those challenges. Meanwhile, several not-for-profit organizations and volunteer groups have been trying to help alleviate the ageing population crisis in their own ways.

South Korea stepped in the group of ageing societies relatively late, but the speed of reaching that status does not have analogue in the history of the developed states. It took only seventeen years to reach the status of an aged society, earning Korea the title of one of the most rapidly ageing society in the world.² An escalating number of people aged over sixty-five years has driven to increased awareness of the need for health care reforms. Mostly, it is the older population who resort to the help of health care system, but the existing system and models of care do not always meet older adults' comprehensive care requirements. Community-based care projects may improve service implementation for elderly people. Social networks play an immense role in helping older adults to monitor symptoms and manage chronic conditions. They can be helpful in identifying, preventing, and collaborating in the treatment of depression among community-dwelling older adults.³

This paper describes South Korea's attempt to build an active and healthy ageing society. Using particular cases and examples, the study is trying to evaluate performance of Korean

community-based care projects for older individuals. It brings out the necessity of the community-based services, which would increase access to work and volunteer opportunities, digital and health literacy, sporting exercises, and intergenerational exchange. Community-based welfare centres for the elderly still remain and are becoming even more important platforms to build an age-friendly cities, ensure long-lasting and sustainable impact on local communities, and spread health and active ageing in the society.

2. Literature review

Earlier studies on ageing in Korea mostly considered older adults as passive subjects of care and welfare beneficiaries, whose needs should be addressed and fulfilled. Senior citizens were not regarded as equal citizens who were able to contribute to making age-friendly communities.⁴ On the other hand, Western literature emphasized successful and productive ageing based on activity and continuity theories of ageing.⁵ In most of the Western studies, the older adults have been treated as contributing community members rather than just beneficiaries or recipients of care.⁶ Therefore, senior citizens were understood as individuals who can age “healthy in place” and “actively in the communities” instead of being detached from their earlier lives and being institutionalized. This kind of approach towards ageing in communities highlights a shift from dwellings towards relationships”.⁷

Gerontological society of the United States pointed out potentials of the community-based care for promoting elderly peoples’ health and well-being. Many argue that it is likely that cohousing, shared habitation, and other alternative models will one day become a common type of housing and lifestyle choice, partly due to the necessity brought on by rising health and long-term care costs.⁸ Blanchard indicated that ageing in the mutually supportive neighbourhoods make people feel integral parts of the community and active contributors to the well-being of the whole community.⁹

Multidisciplinary collaboration named “Mobilising the Potential of Active Ageing in Europe” brought up new knowledge on such aspects as late working lives and healthy ageing, mapping the steps required to realize active ageing. In the study of the community-based elderly care in China, Zhang demonstrated possible ways of overcoming the cultural dependence on the filial piety and rebuilding the social pact to show that elderly care are prominent issue. A group of Japanese scholars, in the study of the volunteer group of the older adults, showed that older Japanese people are now expected not only to be simply consumers, but also service providers. Japan had an attempt to establish a community-based integrated care system back in 1974 in Mitsugi, a rural town in Japan. This idea evolved due to the small but ageing population size and the initiative of some local leaders of medical care and politics. After running the system, the proportion of bedridden people and medical care costs for the elderly dropped in Mitsugi while it kept rising everywhere else in Japan. This system has influenced government and became a model for the nationwide system.¹⁰ Hong

Kong is also trying to build an age-friendly society. Many scholars emphasized that encouraging elderly people's participation in community activities, and promoting social inclusion is fundamental to the effective building of age-friendly city, as well as ensuring sustainable impact on local communities.

Research trends in South Korea have since been slightly shifting. The later issued articles emphasized the effectiveness of community-based care with more passion and assuredness compared to former ones. The concept of active ageing is being used more often in considering particular policies. There is baseline data concerning the nature and extent of scientific activities regarding the community-based care for senior citizens.¹¹ The majority of the studies were based on quantitative research, few of them were conducted as qualitative work, and even less have full research outcome description. Relatively most studies have the predictive and descriptive characteristics, and there are not many of them that are actually policy-oriented. Nevertheless, the idea of rethinking the whole concept of population ageing and shifting away from traditional mind-set about senior citizens is taking place. Many scholars and policy-makers started supporting age-friendly community initiatives as a fundamental or complementary way of enhancing the elderly people's health and well-being.

3. Concepts of Active and Healthy Ageing

3-1. Active Ageing

Active ageing is a concept deployed by the European Commission, the World Health Organization, and also used in Human Resource Management. The concept of active ageing was inspired by the idea that elderly people's well-being relies on them staying active in their later lives. The word 'active' refers to an extended participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs, not just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labour force.¹² It recalls the idea of longer activity with a higher retirement age and working practices that fit to the age of the particular employee. It also spreads to the social engagement of the elderly people in the collectivism. From this perspective, staying active is a key to the successful ageing. The emergence of active ageing and its transition from science to policy are connected with the broader transformation that has taken place globally in the policy discourses accompanying population.

Korean society offers a great example for us to examine the meaning of the ageing. In the Korean context, people leave or are forced to leave the formal labour market earlier, due to the dominant industrial model that was led by the large corporations. Korean understanding of ageing in general was based on the concept of "living quietly after leaving the workplace",¹³ which is quite in contrast with the notions of productive, successful or active ageing. However, from the beginning of this century Korean society has begun to comprehend population ageing from a broader and long-term perspective. Korea endeavoured to shape its policies for an ageing society the way that

would resemble those of advanced welfare states, but as welfare states no longer seem viable, Korean policy makers are searching for more effective and efficient measures to deal with its rapid ageing population.

3-2. Healthy Ageing

Healthy ageing is the new focus of WHO's work on ageing between 2015 – 2030, and it replaces World Health Organization's previous policy framework - active ageing.¹⁴ Healthy ageing means building environments and opportunities that would enable people to do what they value throughout their lives. Being free of disease or disorders is not a requirement for the "healthy ageing" since many older adults have one or more health conditions that, if well controlled, have little influence on their well-being. World Health Organization defines healthy ageing as "the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age".¹⁵ Healthy ageing, like active ageing, emphasizes the necessity for action across multiple sectors and enables elderly people to remain as a productive resource to their families, communities and economies. Although the concept of active ageing might be appealing for policy makers, there are still various political, societal and cultural obstacles in its acceptance and implementation. However, these barriers help to account for the fact that the concept is not yet reaching its potential in global policy term.

4. Key Policies and Programs

Korean society's "official" entrance to the era of an ageing society gave a huge impulse to the endless policy discussions related to the population ageing. This step into an ageing society induced the building up of a societal view of broad and durable implications of population ageing beyond the range of welfare policies for elderly people. From the turn of this century, several comprehensive policies have been developed in response to the advancement of an ageing society. There were efforts to reform the National Pension System, introduction of Long-Term Care insurance, and establishment of a Comprehensive Policy Plan for an Ageing Society.

4-1. National Policy Plan in Response to Population Ageing

National policy plan was approved as a social contract between government and civil society, which was composed from different non-governmental organizations. The general long-term objective for policies in response to low fertility and ageing society was set as "building a sustainable society for all ages".¹⁶ Two-stage sub-goals are set under this overall objective: "building societal bases corresponding to low-fertility and the ageing society" during 2006-2010, and "restoring higher fertility rate and respond successfully to the ageing society" during 2011-2020. Korean government enforced the First Basic Plan in 2006 as a comprehensive policy reaction in order to ensure the sustainable growth of Korea responding to low fertility and ageing population.

The First Basic Plan presents government's policy directions, based on which ministries of central and local governments establish annual action plans. The Second Basic Plan on Low Fertility and Aging Society 2011-2015 aimed at providing versatile countermeasures against low fertility and ageing population and at raising the effectiveness of the government policies encouraging participation of private sectors. Areas of the plan were divided into four key sections: childbirth and childcare-friendly environment, improvement of the life qualities in the ageing society, securing the growth engine, and improving the social atmosphere to tackle with low fertility and an ageing population.

Regarding the encouragement of the active ageing, they are still working on the implementation of such objectives for the social participation of the elderlies as building a systematic base for the longer employment, enhancing productivity of seniors through the lifelong education enlargement, activation of leisure and volunteer works. Overall, government program areas include civic engagement, lifelong education opportunities, and activation of leisure and volunteering for the elderlies through building infrastructure for social activities, and voucher for leisure and cultural participation.

4-2. Long-Term Care Insurance System

Korea introduced new social long-term care insurance (LTCI) in 2008. The experience of Korea, which was the second Asian country to introduce mandatory social LTCI, is significantly notable for a number of reasons. Compulsory social LTC systems in Western developed countries were built on existing local service delivery programs and gave central administrative and regulatory roles to the local authorities, but the LTCI system in Korea was developed with a very limited role for local authorities.¹⁷ Particularly, the Korean government adopted market-friendly and deregulatory policies in developing LTC service infrastructure, which in its turn led to the significant growth in the number of certified service providers and personal care workers. Use of market forces and the private sector has proved successful in rapidly increasing the numbers of service providers and personal care workers with minimal government financial intervention. It increased competition between service providers and gave service beneficiaries bigger choice, but those market-friendly policies have also created a number of new challenges, such as explicit profit-seeking behaviour of some service providers. Surplus of service providers and sharp competition between them led to the extreme financial difficulties, which provoked fraudulent behaviour of some of them in order to survive in the market.

The quality of provided services under the new system itself has been frequently criticized. This kind of issue could arise simply due to the inadequately trained personal care workers and lack of government control. The government left the training of personal care workers to the market forces, where many private sector training organizations issued certificates without providing sufficient

training or simply sold certificates for profit.¹⁸ There are enough challenges to mention and a huge room for the advancement of the system. In short, it seems that Korean government did not systematically prepare and develop the new LTC infrastructure in the first place, but rather looked for its introduction within the possible shortest time. We can witness that despite the establishment of the public long-term care infrastructure, the system is still excessively depended on the private sector to provide service and failed to impose an adequate regulatory system for the care workforce and LTC as a whole.¹⁹

4-3. Community-Based Long-Term Social and Health Care

Consensus exists on the importance of community-based care for older adults due to the complexity of the national long-term care system. Many suggest there is an excessive focus on acute care and too small on community-based care. Community-based care is considered to be relatively cost effective and provide quality care, but it would need significant up-front funding in order to work properly. The role and capacity of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as partner organizations is important in promoting the community-based care for the elderlies.

Senior citizens are no longer considered as people who should disengage from earlier life and be institutionalized, but rather as individuals who can age healthily in place and remain active in communities. Building age-friendly cities and communities became a mutual task facing common challenges in most Western aged societies, but this concept of age-friendly cities is relatively new to Korea. Transformation of the elderly people from public beneficiaries into participants and contributors can serve as a social movement that would change the general perception of older people from looking at them as passive recipients into viewing them as active community members.

The goal of age-friendly community is to strengthen older people's capacities to live in their communities safely and comfortably. Community-based organizations have many advantages. Their programs are usually conveniently located in the community and specifically tailored to the particular needs of the older population.²⁰ Community-based organization staff and volunteers are in most cases members of the same local community and acquainted with the cultural needs and preferences of the participants. Since the majority of such organizations develop long-term relationships with their clients, staff and volunteers often have insight into their living situations and social support networks.

5. Case Study: HelpAge Korea's Older People Self-Help Group (HAK-OPSHG) Initiative

The Older People Self Help Groups, in assistance with HelpAge Korea and local NGOs, generated an initiative that works in promoting ageing-friendly communities in Korea. The HAK-OPSHG initiative aims at, but not limited to the poor and socially isolated elderly persons. Broad objective of the initiative is to reach the social integration of the marginalized older people.²¹

It has four specific goals, which include fighting poverty, overcoming social isolation, promoting health, and eliminating discrimination. On top of attempts to turn the elderly people from public beneficiaries into participants and contributors, the initiative tries to serve as a social movement that would alter the general perception of older people. The HAK accentuates the necessity of elderly people leading the movement and being active participants.

The HAK-OPSHG initiative is simultaneously running more than fifteen cases. They are located both, in cities and city outskirts. One of the prominent cases referred by several scholars and actually recommended by the HAK president himself, is the initiative called Silver Wings.²² Silver Wings is located in Bucheon, Gyeonggi province, and started its activities together with the local NGO called Saerom Community in February 2009. The number of its members has reportedly been increasing.²³

Daily group activities of every community in HAK-OPSG start with morning physical exercise in groups, which makes members to remain healthy and become more active. Silver Wings offer several weekly programs, such as written Korean language, exercise, playing musical instruments and many more. One of the managers of assisting NGO shared his thoughts saying that members make performances and enjoy not only by themselves, but their community people also enjoy watching those performances. This contributes to the rise of intergenerational understanding in general and integrating elderly people into the community of all ages.²⁴

Reportedly, there was a case when the community members made a film, which later placed third at a film festival. With the money they got as a prize, they invited families of the Sewol ferry accident and local villagers. These kind of little moments make them feel proud, self-respected, and what is more useful for the others. Another activities to mention is Food Stand for Street-Teenagers initiative, where the community members prepare a meal once a month for the street teenagers. This is an example of the forming of a new image for senior citizens as active participants and contributors to the local community. This supports earlier findings that active intergenerational interaction and perceived respect lead to better well-being in the older ages.²⁵ The aforementioned activities definitely contribute to reducing social isolation in old age and there is a high need for further encouragement of such activities.

6. Recommendations

Promoting ageing in community should be a fundamental policy direction to face challenge of an ageing population effectively. There are undoubtedly more gains in promoting community-based elderly care. Nevertheless, simple provision of community space for elderly people to gather does not necessarily mean effective social integration. There is still high need for proactive efforts to build an ageing-friendly community, with capacity to intermingle with other age groups. Only then initiatives can be seen as contributing to both, integration and generativity. The case highlighted the need for more community-based care services, where elderlies can exercise the active ageing.

Although local communities and non-governmental organizations play a significant role in promoting ageing in community, they cannot substitute long-term care services. Public long-term care services, in their turn should take into account activities that promote ageing in communities. That would be helpful in delaying and reducing needs for care at later stages.

Another key consideration should be addressing diversity and inequity be it community-based or other types of elderly care systems. Elder people by widely accepted definition are those aged 65 years old and above, but in reality people in the “65+” range vary between each other, and there is no typical older person. Some 80-year-old individuals might have physical and mental capacity level that is much better than those in their 40-s. Others, the other way, might be in need of more extensive care and assistance for basic living activities like eating or showering. Policy should be framed to improve the functional ability of all older people.

In order to succeed in active and healthy ageing, there should be far better comprehension and insights on age-related issues and trends. Additionally, in many cases, it is necessary to get a feeling of what the real needs are before taking any actions. Awareness of different perspectives and sensitivity towards one’s own and the older person’s motives is most important. It should be recognized that the perception of needs and interests are subjective, and one must distinguish between urgent, short-term and long-term needs. Any organization staff, volunteers or affiliated people should be adequately trained and well informed about health in later life and investment in community long-term care services. Further research is necessary to identify what can promote healthy lifestyle behaviours, and whether approaches should be entertainment-base, educational-based, integration of both or something completely new. Such studies will better inform the delivery of particular programs and provide socio-culturally appropriate care to improve well-being of the elderly people. Finally, quality of care of all services and facilities be it public, private or community-based, needs monitoring and continuous improvement.

7. Conclusion

Since Korea is ageing at a faster pace than any other developed country, financial pressure of social security is near at hand. In particular, the number of young people who bear the finance is decreasing, which creates serious imbalances among generations. While Korea has a relatively well-developed health and social system, better coordination of appropriate services for older population with long-term care needs remains as a major challenge. Although long-term care services for the elderlies in South Korea are less developed than in Western countries, they have recently become a government priority. Simultaneously, the roles and capacities of local communities and nongovernmental organizations found to be crucial, in the sense that they could provide a meaningful space for marginalized individuals in the community.

Based on the case study of the community-based initiatives, this paper analysed the idea of

ageing within the community, and observations suggest that such initiatives can contribute to the improvement of the older adults' health and well-being, which would play a significant role in reducing long-term care needs. Those older individuals who actively participated in community programs have reportedly seen the value in being active, staying healthy, and engaging in positive social participation. Members of Silver Wings continually expressed their satisfaction and gratitude for joining and becoming community's member.²⁶ National and local policies should explicitly include the concepts of active ageing and ageing in community, and support relevant local initiatives and practices. There is a need to promote social inclusion and create friendly societies for the people of different ages, and it is a problem to be addressed not solely by the elderly care and medical sectors alone, but by the society as a whole. Therefore, South Korea is currently required to find a better practical policy for long-term care as well as to adopt healthy and active ageing philosophy.

Notes:

¹ KOSIS. Statistics Korea. "2017 Population and Housing Census."

² *Ibid.*

³ Lee, S.Y., Franchetti, Mary K., Imanbayev, A., Gallo, J., Spira, A. P., & Lee, H. B. (2012).

⁴ Cho, S.Y. (2001).

⁵ Johnson, K. J. & Mutchler, J. E. (2013).

⁶ Greenfield, E. A., Oberlink, M., Scharlach, A. E., Neal, M. B. & Stafford, P. B. (2015).

⁷ Thomas, W. H., & Blanchard, J. M. (2009).

⁸ Blanchard, J. (2013/14).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Hatano, Y., Matsumoto, M., Okita, M., Inoue, K., Takeuchi, K., Tsutsui, T., & Hayashi, T. (2017).

¹¹ Arita, K., & Ryu, H. (2013).

¹² World Health Organization. (2008).

¹³ Sung-Jae Choi. (1996).

¹⁴ World Health Organization. (2015) "Ageing and Life course:World report on ageing and health 2015", from <http://www.who.int/ageing/healthy-ageing/en/>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Choi, S. J. (2007).

¹⁷ Chon, Y. (2013).

¹⁸ Kim, J. H. (2008).

¹⁹ Kim, J. W. & Choi, Y. J. (2013).

²⁰ Coleman, Whitelaw, & Schreiber. (2014).

²¹ Yang, Y. (2018).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ HepAge Korea website <http://www.helpage.or.kr>

²⁴ Yang, Y. (2018).

²⁵ Tabuchi, M., Nakagawa, T., Miura, A., & Gondo, Y. (2015).

²⁶ Yang, Y. (2018).

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