

Ageing, Livelihoods and HIV/AIDS Briefing Notes.....No: 3

The role of the elderly in contemporary natural resource based livelihoods.

Key Points:

- Those in later life actually engage in a wide range of livelihood activities. Such diversification reduces vulnerability.
- Elderly poverty may hitherto not have been as pervasive as we are led to believe
- Ownership of some livelihood assets especially livestock reveal marked gender inequalities disadvantaging elderly female headed households.
- Despite these inequalities elderly FHHs are extremely resourceful in generating other forms of livelihood support

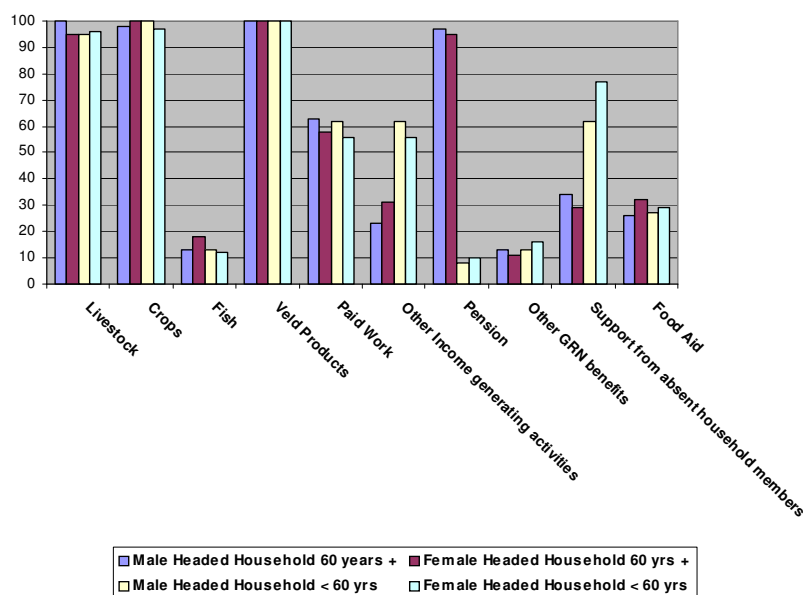
This briefing provides an insight into the livelihood activities of elderly headed household, highlighting the diversified nature of such livelihoods but also important gender differences in the activities undertaken. Subsequent briefings focus on the most important livelihood activities in greater detail.

The livelihoods of elderly headed households

Within the sustainable livelihoods literature scant attention has *focused* on the role of the elderly despite their characterisation as the poorest, most marginal groups, along with women and children, who are most susceptible to disadvantage and vulnerability. It was hypothesised at the outset of this research that the labour intensive nature of rural production disadvantages the elderly who have diminished capacity to work and therefore lack access to capital assets. However both the survey and interviews reveal that those in later life actually engage in a wide range of livelihood activities. **Such diversification reduces vulnerability to shocks** e.g. if crops fail, the elderly will rely on their livestock, their pension or other natural resources (fish, gathering veld foods). The breakdown of livelihood activities by age and gender (overleaf) reveals that elderly households are however less likely to have a source of cash income other than the pension and are less likely to receive remittances from absent household members. For all households studied, **cropping constituted the most important livelihood activity** with over 97% of all household engaged in cultivation. Among the elderly, the pension followed by livestock rearing were the next most important. If diversification is a measure of well-being then elderly poverty has hitherto not been as pervasive as we are led to believe. This situation is however changing dramatically with HIV/AIDS that implications of which are covered in subsequent briefings.



Livelihood Activities by age and gender of household head



Gender Differences

This broad grouping of activities belies important gender differences in the specific activities that households and their members engage in. Although the majority of households headed by the elderly owned livestock, only 28% of female headed households own cattle compared to 90% of elderly male headed households. For a number of female heads interviewed, cattle and other animals were removed by their husband's family following his death. Cattle are a valued household asset that can be sold to raise cash in times of crisis e.g. funerals.

Ownership of livestock, smallstock and poultry by gender of elderly household head

	FHH	MHH
Cattle	28%	90%
Goats	68%	84%
Pigs	63%	73%
Sheep	5%	29%
Donkeys	51%	79%
Poultry	94%	97%

(Household Survey 2005/6)

Cattle as well as donkeys are valued as draught animals and are used to pull a plough. Many elderly female householders are forced to pay from their pensions to borrow draught animals.

Despite these inequalities elderly FHHs are extremely resourceful in generating other forms of livelihood support. **Elderly women were frequently engaged in income generating activities** such as making baskets for sale or selling traditional brew. For these women (compared to men) the **harvesting of natural resources** ranging from fish to the gathering of Marula and Mopane worms was cited as being of importance. *'I go in the field to collect natural resources such as mopane worms which I can sell and buy food because I cannot feed all the household members since we are too many'* (Elderly Female Head Utsathima).

Population Ageing and Sustainable Livelihoods in regions affected by HIV/AIDS is funded by the ESRC (RES-000-22-1427). The project runs from August 2005 until November 2006.

Project website:

<http://www.ageingnamibia.group.shef.ac.uk>

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Briefing note 3, September 2006.