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**An Assessment of the Laws and Programs
for the Senior Citizens in Philippines***

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AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LAWS AND PROGRAMS FOR THE SENIOR CITIZENS IN PHILIPPINES

A paper prepared for the High-Level Meeting on the Regional Review
of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA)
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Prama Foundation, Inc advocates for the rights of the elderly people in the Philippines. It conducts forum, workshop, and seminars on Ageing with the collaboration of other non-government organizations and individuals. It aims to develop the Retirement Industry in the country and help consolidate services such as healthcare, geriatric clinics, activity centers, leisure clubs, training center for caregivers and social workers, memorial assistance, and others) for the benefit of the elderly people. Prama participates in meetings internationally and locally to gather new information on situations and best practices concerning the elderly people. It also occasionally supports activities for the elderly people through grants.

INTRODUCTION

Ageing is a concern for all. Our sensitivity to the issue is only heightened when we reach what we commonly refer to as the ripe old age. By then, we experience on a first-hand, hands-on basis the rudiments of being and growing old. And perhaps, upon reflection, actually glean on the blindness and without the knowledge of our parents and grandparents who became senior citizens way before us. What they continually told us was helpless and now we have made provisions for our twilight years and eventual sunsets. This regard brings us to the important point that the irony of the stages in life is that, oftentimes, realization comes with actual experience (Collado, 2001).

Several countries, whether developed or developing, are beginning to view ageing from a very different perspective than current concepts. The potential to live healthier for longer years has raised expectations about people's lifestyle beyond 60 and what may be possible. People are questioning and reviewing their attitudes to education, work, their community, personal living arrangements, health and fitness, relationships, and spiritual needs. Given this then, it can be said that there is a new paradigm of community care rising.

Even though that many improvements were made in the various areas, there should be a stronger commitment for the continuity of an effective provision of their needs and recognition of their existence as contributors to nation building and development. However, despite of these improvements, it shows that there are also barriers to older people with and without a disability with regards to enjoying a good quality of life within their families and within the communities as well.

The Philippines has a relatively young population. As of today, our senior citizens represent 8.4 percent of our total population. However, that number is growing at a faster rate than in many other countries and is expected to increase to 18.1 percent of the total population, or exceed 11.1 million by 2025. Rapid population ageing and urbanization will be accompanied by increased needs and demands for mainstreaming older persons in the society, income security, appropriate healthcare, housing, and other social services. All these have to be addressed by older persons themselves, their families, their communities by concerned members of civil society and by local and national governments. Measures have to be undertaken by all stakeholders now to cope with the mounting challenges posed by the population ageing phenomenon.

It is good to note that the Philippines' policy action on ageing includes also local governments in their scope so as to come up with commitments mobilized by all levels in addressing the issues on ageing. The roles of other partners such as the government and non-government organizations play an important role in the planning, organizing, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

A REVIEW OF SIGNIFICANT GOVERNMENT MEASURES/LEGISLATIONS THAT WILL MAKE AN IMPACT ON THE SITUATION OF THE FILIPINO SENIOR CITIZENS

In view of the ever-increasing population of older persons, as well as the challenges that this demographic transition brings about, an evaluation of past achievements with regard to legislative issues involving Filipino senior citizens is hereby discussed.

To date, two significant laws for the older persons sector have already been passed in the Philippine Congress. These are the:

1. Republic Act 9257 enacted on 26 February 2004 entitled “An Act Granting additional benefits and privileges to Senior Citizens amending for the purpose Republic Act 7432 (An Act to Maximize the Contribution of Senior Citizens to Nation Building, Grant Benefits and Special Privileges and for Other Purposes)

In February 2004, Republic Act 9257 was enacted to grant additional benefits and privileges to senior citizens amending for the purpose Republic Act 7432, other wise known as “An act to maximize the contribution of senior citizens to nation building, grant benefits and special privileges and for other purposes.” This motivates and encourages them to contribute to nation building and to mobilize their families and the community they live with and to reaffirm the valued Filipino tradition of caring for the senior citizen giving them full support to the improvement of their total well-being and their full participation in the society.

As this law provides, a senior citizen is defined as “any resident citizen of the Philippines at least sixty (60) years old, including those who have retired from both government offices and private enterprises.

The good thing about this law is that it carries the compelling clauses that would guarantee its enforcement compared to the previous laws. Amazingly, still, numerous complaints were filed against those who disobey this law particularly the granting of the discounts.

As a centerpiece provision of this law, senior citizens are entitled to

- Free for the following:
 - Medical and dental service, diagnostic and laboratory fees in all government facilities
 - Training fees for socio-economic programs
 - Educational assistance to senior citizens to pursue post secondary, tertiary, post tertiary

- Grant of 20% discount on the following:
 - all transportation means (air, sea, land)
 - establishments relative to utilization of services in hotels and similar lodging establishments
 - medical and dental service, diagnostic and laboratory fees including professional fees of attending doctors in all private hospitals and medical facilities
 - restaurants and recreation centers, theaters, cinema houses and other similar places of culture, leisure, and amusement
 - funeral and burial services for the death of the senior citizen

- Exemption from the payment of individual income taxes provided that their annual taxable income does not exceed the poverty level as determined by the National Economic and Development Authority
 - Continuance of the same benefits and privileges given by the Government Service Insurance System and the Social Security System and PAG-IBIG
 - Grant of special discounts in special programs for senior citizens on purchase of basic commodities
 - Provision of express lanes for senior citizens in all commercial and government establishments
2. **Republic Act 7876 (An Act Establishing a Senior Citizens Center in all Cities and Municipalities of the Philippines and Appropriating Funds Therefor) and other related provisions such Approving the implementation of the program “Provision of group/foster home for neglected, abandoned, abused, detached and poor older persons and persons with disabilities and its implementing rules and regulations.”**

The second law is “An Act Establishing a Senior Citizens’ Center in all Cities and Municipalities of the Philippines and Appropriating Funds Therefor” or otherwise known as the “Senior Citizens Center Act of the Philippines” (Republic Act 7876) which was enacted in 1995. The center is intended to be used as venues for the delivery of integrated and comprehensive social services to senior citizens with the supervision of the Department of Social Welfare and Development and the local government units. This is the way to localize the plans and programs of the government up to the lowest unit or group. DSWD in coordination with the Local government Units, the Department of Health and other government agencies, the Federation of Senior Citizens Association of the Philippines and other NGOs shall provide the necessary services.

Offices of Senior Citizens Affairs (OSCA) were established under the Office of the Mayor in practically all cities and municipalities in the Philippines. The OSCA is headed by an elected city/municipal councilor designated by the City/Municipal Council. Primarily, these offices are designated to issue nationally uniform identification cards to eligible Senior Citizens and to oversee or monitor the implementation of the laws.

In addition to these two enacted laws, there are various bills filed in the Congress addressing the needs and concerns of the Filipino older person sector. Among these bills include the:

- Parents Support Act of 1998,
- Maintenance of Parents Act,
- Increasing Penalties for Violations of RA 7432
- An Act Creating the Council for the Welfare of Senior Citizens, among others.

PROGRAMS, PROJECTS, AND ACTIVITIES OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT, OTHER NGOS AND PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATIONS FOR THE FILIPINO SENIOR CITIZENS

This section broadly sketches the existing programs and initiatives adopted by the national government in uplifting the welfare of Filipino senior citizens in consonance with the **Philippine Plan of Action for Senior Citizens 2006-2010**. The swift in paradigm is to give all approaches on over-all thrust towards a bias for community-based approaches.

The following PROGRAMS/PROJECTS/ACTIVITIES catering to the needs of senior citizens point to the various strategies that the national government and other agencies has undertaken and are undertaking in order to uplift the conditions of daily living among senior citizens in our society.

Older Persons and Development

- Promote/institutionalize intergenerational learning projects
- Ensure organization and functionality of the Office of Senior Citizens Affairs in 100% local government units (municipalities and cities)
- Establish and operationalize a volunteer program for senior citizens concerns
- Develop anti-poverty program for senior citizens or include them as a focused target group in poverty alleviation programs
- Ensure gender equality programs for women senior citizens in all government offices
- Enhance support for family and caregivers to promote quality home care for the senior citizens
- Develop/strengthen databanking on senior citizens with particular emphasis on geographical and sex-disaggregated data collection in every local government unit including researches
- Increase the number of pensioners by year 2010 by 10% of the total population of senior citizens
- Provide accessible microcredit/finance to senior citizens
- Develop program for retiring overseas workers who are senior citizens
- Provide enabling support for the passage of new senior citizens legislative agenda or Executive Orders by 2010 to address population ageing in relevant policy planning areas
- Pass/adopt/fully implement enabling ordinances for the implementation of RA 9257 by the local government unit
- Establish pre-retirement orientation program in every government and private agencies (to include orientation for younger people to help them prepare for old age)
- Ensure tri-media campaign in promoting positive images of senior citizens at national and regional level and strengthen advocacy to ensure that their concerns are responded to

Advancing Health and Well-Being into Old Age

- Conduct fora, workshop, seminar and short talk on ageing which is the process of optimizing opportunities for health, income, participation and security in order to enhance the quality of life as people age
- Establish Geriatric wards in every government and private hospitals

- Institutionalize Gerontology Training curricula and courses
- Ensure that all caregiver training school will require their students to provide community training and caregiving to frail senior citizens in the community
- Expand coverage/improve accessibility and affordability of social and healthcare to majority of indigent senior citizens

Ensuring Enabling and Supportive Environment

- Develop/implement/replicate new and existing innovative community-based programs addressing the independent living concerns of senior citizens particularly those abandoned, sick, unattached and homeless
- Enhance standards to ensure quality care in formal care setting as well as standards for licensing and accreditation of existing health care providers and facilities
- Institutionalize a school or training program for the elderly for their continuing education
- Enhance support to accredited residential/group homes/senior citizens center to be provided with 50% discount for utilities and technical assistance
- Make consumer services for senior citizens more accessible and responsive

AN HONEST ASSESSMENT OF THE PROGRAMS FOR FILIPINO SENIOR CITIZENS IN CONSONANCE WITH THE PHILIPPINE PLAN OF ACTION FOR SENIOR CITIZENS 2006-2010 AND THE EXPANDED SENIOR CITIZENS ACT OF 2004

This section is about our assessment of the programs for Filipino senior citizens in consonance with the Philippine Plan of Action for Senior Citizens 2006-2010 and the Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2004.

Older Persons and Development (Older Persons and the Family and Social Positions of Older Persons, Social Services and the Community, Older Persons and the Market, Continuing Education/Learning among the Older Persons)

Developing countries including the Philippines have a growing population of ageing individuals. And it is important that there are policies to address these issues and thus help ensure that all older people are included in their communities and provided with the opportunities to be participated that they deserve.

Public education on positive images of ageing and their contribution to nation building are carried out in every opportunity. The lack of awareness among the general public of the laws and implementing rules and regulations concerning ageing and senior citizens defeats the purpose of the policies created and mechanisms set up in these regard. Without the knowledge of the rights, services and infrastructures available to them, the senior citizens will forfeit by default what is legally due them. Likewise, ignorance among service providers and the populace as a whole would render the created laws useless and inutile. The most effective way in creating awareness among the populace about the laws and implementing rules and regulations regarding ageing and senior citizens is through the tri-media platform (print, television and radio broadcast). However, these media are non cost-effective and will drain any government's budget on ageing programs. To bridge this gap, pro-bono service must be provided by the private

sector, including media companies. Concerned government and non-government agencies and organizations must pro-actively enjoin the private sector in this direction.

The lack of information and data on Filipino senior citizens arise the need to develop data banking on senior citizens with emphasis on geographical and sex-disaggregated data collection in every local government units. This will be very useful in the conduction of studies and researches on ageing in Philippines. To achieve this, a profiling activity was conducted through the local government units. The senior citizens in every municipality have responded, however, there is a lack of manpower to facilitate encoding and summary of the collected data. One of the visualized project of our organization is the establishment of an Information Centre on Ageing in our country.

On employment, there is an issue of employment in the country as a whole. A healthy job creation environment promotes a healthy ageing society. Without an employed workforce among the younger population, social welfare cannot support an ageing society. The diagram that best illustrates this point is an inverted pyramid wherein a burgeoning population of older persons is greater than the number of social welfare contributors. It is therefore important that not only new jobs be created but also commensurate remuneration be given to the employed workforce, which is the very foundation of the country's social welfare system, to strike equilibrium in social services provision for the elderly. As for senior citizens and employment, opportunities for employment are limited both in the public and private sectors considering the financial requirement their employment would entail.

In Philippines, the family is the primary support system of the senior citizens. Most of the time, it is the other way around. The senior citizens are those who take care of their grandchildren. On institutionalization, Philippines rarely practice this. Centers that are set up by the government now are for those who have been abandoned, abused, are poor and do not have any income. The other centers are day care centers where the senior citizens can be entrusted while their children are at work. There are also volunteer programs as well. Majority of the older people remain in their own homes with support from family, friends and services if needed despite common perceptions that large numbers of older people live in supported accommodation. As they grow older, they may encounter some hindrance to activities and generation attitudes that were not present when they were younger and fitter but will eventually give an impact on quality life.

The tradition of care giving for the older persons is being threatened. Younger women who are traditional providers of older persons care have been joining the labor force in greater numbers, both in the country and abroad. This points to a decreasing number of caregivers for older persons and children, and a greater need for older persons especially women to substitute for their absent daughters. In the Philippines, most caregiver learning institutions and government agencies concerned with caregiver certification are geared towards employment abroad rather than domestic profession. This is generally evident in the medical field and its allied sectors. This situation could only be rectified by providing viable solutions to the endemic problem of employment.

As for income security, based on information from the government's Social Security System, for the period January to June 2007, it has paid PhP13.5 Billion in retirement benefits to 593,448 beneficiaries. As of end of June 2007, it is paying an average of PhP3,086 or USD66 to 572,054 retirees. SSS also pays a 13th month pension. Aside from the pension benefits, the SSS conducts the Pensioner's Day Program at least once a month in key cities all over the country

where pensioners are provided free medical check-ups and briefings, basic medicines, and snacks on these occasions. In spite of regular review of pension scheme and other benefits for the retirees, the desired and appropriate benefits for the senior citizens could not be granted because the social security systems have very limited funds. What will happen to the rest of the senior citizens population such as the indigenous groups, and those who are not covered by the social security systems in the country?

Governments should institute reforms and implement additional allowances to provide better pension and social security plans that will facilitate the increasing and changing need of older persons. Delivery services in terms of income security should provide pensions and social security schemes for older persons. These social security schemes should be implemented also in the municipal level to reach older persons in other areas. The government needs to be wise like in the developing countries that when they provide social and income security, they create instant employment for nurses, caregivers, practitioners and the like not to mention infrastructure, center for the older persons, clubs for entertainment. With this model, the resources are being recycled making the costs productive for the society.

Traditionally, reaching old age in the Philippines has been viewed positively. However, some recent studies show that an increase in longevity does not necessarily lead to a healthier life (Cruz, 1996). The health and medical expenditures of older persons are higher compared with that of younger people. This suggests that medical and hospital costs consume a significant proportion of the saving of the older persons. Moreover, as older persons age further there is a decline in employment opportunities which results in meager incomes. The older persons are at greater risk of being poor.

Regarding continuing education for senior citizens, the Department of Education, through its Alternative Learning System encourages the senior citizens who have had no access to formal education and have reverted to illiteracy. Most of the senior citizens in Philippines, and mostly are poor, do not feel the need to go to school and learn anymore especially those who are bothered by sickness and poverty.

Philippines as a developing country is challenged with the problem of poverty. Our country has pro-poor programs in order to uplift the lives of these people. Poverty affects all sectors of citizenry and one of which are the senior citizens. With the government's fiscal problems and the economic crisis brought about by rising oil prices, products and services providers for senior citizens cannot viably operate. Given that senior citizens are entitled to up to 20% discount on prices of medicine, other products and services and transportation fares, providers however cannot absorb this entitlement without putting at risk their own businesses. The situation is graver among small enterprises like the neighborhood drugstores or "botikas." The root of this problem is likewise endemic. This situation could only be rectified when viable solutions to the government's fiscal problems and to the national economic crisis as a whole are provided and acted upon thereby benefiting the service providers (pharmacies, hospitals, transport providers, stores for commodities, leisure establishments and the like) and the senior citizens themselves.

Advancing Health and Well-Being into Old Age (Health and nutrition)

Only a few hospitals in the country has geriatric wards and mostly are private and only rich people can afford to avail of the said service. Medical costs are very expensive that even the

long-earned savings of the senior citizens can be swept away instantly. Right now, the government's Philippine General Hospital has a Geriatric ward, and a few doctors are specializing in Gerontology and Geriatrics. A few senior citizens said that they had to be in queue at 4:00am in order to avail of the said free consultation and medication. Even with the free medical and dental treatment in government hospitals that the law provides, only a few can avail of it. It is worthy to note that government hospitals are ill-equipped with medical equipment to attend to the medical needs of the senior citizens. There may be available equipment and services in the country but they are offered only in private hospitals. Again what will happen to the rest of the senior citizens population who could not afford a single pill of medicine?

Compounding the employment and economic problems that hinder the development of services for senior citizens in the Philippines is the lack of Geriatric specialists. Without this kind of opportunities for geriatrics in the Philippines, services for senior citizens will always be substandard. The term Gerontology and Geriatrics are hardly heard. Even in universities and colleges, there are no courses specializing in those. There is a great need for experts to come in and start to educate Filipinos through new courses of study.

There is a manifestation that the quality of health care that is provided to the older persons plays a significant role to the older persons to enable them to remain in the community. It should also be realized that there is a need for a development of awareness in the society that **the concerns for older persons are not only the responsibility of the government, but also of the family and the community.** The value of education must be strengthened to change the attitude towards older people. It is an additional progress that the creation of studies and researches concerning older people was established. The government should take the challenge of raising awareness by means of incorporating information on ageing on educational programs. With the participation of non-government organizations in promoting ageing issues through advocacy measures, can stimulate learning and participation among the community.

Ensuring Enabling and Supportive Environment (Housing, Transportation, and Built environment)

The Philippine government is aware of the housing, transportation and built-in physical environment for the senior citizens however, it has difficulty in providing socialized housing as well as designed vehicles suited for them. Basic requirements such as pedestrian lanes, express lanes, elderly-friendly facilities like ramps are provided. It is good to note that some establishment, transportation vehicles such as trains have elderly-friendly and barrier-free constructions. In particular adaptable housing is a key factor in ensuring that older people will continue to live in their community even if they experience some level of disability as part of their ageing process. Housing can facilitate not only their remaining in the community, but also their social interaction and community inclusion.

There should be recognition that good design has the potential to enhance quality of life not only for those who are old but also for all members of the community. There should be an equitable use of the built environment by all members of the community. When considering appropriate planning for those who are ageing, planning for adaptable housing is as important as financial and legal planning. There should have a commitment to the provision of adaptable housing and the resultant changes to building practice if the housing needs of ageing individuals especially for those who have disabilities. Both State and Local governments need to legislate for

the provision of adaptable housing and include it in policy making and planning as has occurred in other developed countries.

Older people need to be able to live in the community in order to maintain a variety of communication partners and to be fully included as valuable members of the community. Access, including access to transport, should be on the agenda of many community groups. Older people with a developmental disability also increasingly live in the community. Many of them remain in the family home until their families are no longer able to care for them and then they must move to other options.

Similarly, people with a physical disability living in the community also encounter many barriers to full community participation that also impact on their quality of life. For example, transport public buildings and housing may not be easily accessible and community attitudes towards disability are not always positive. Thus, it can be argued that removing barriers for one group, which is those with disabilities will benefit the other.

The civil society must take part in the debates on ageing and contribute to the broadening of the discussion about respect and dignity for the aged. Needs for food, shelter, education, and employment are social rights that have strong acceptance in this society. For these are our needs for respect, dignity and honor---they refer to our sense of acceptance and belonging –and in this sense these refer to our solidarity as well as our individualism. It is important that making the rights of the aged be as much part of the ordinary as possible.

One of the challenges in the implementation of the Plan on Action on Ageing is the lack of funding and expertise of government staff. Particularly, the economic situation in developing countries is the cause of difficulty in addressing the issues on housing, income security and social welfare of the older people. Nevertheless, there are funding agencies all over the world that the countries can approach to facilitate the needs for the implementation of the Action Plans.

This should inspire all of us to pursue and work on the important progress that has been made on the issues on ageing. It is a good start that several countries have incorporated ageing issues in their plans, policies and programs. This shows that older persons are increasingly recognized as contributors to society rather than simply dependents.