Measuring Productive Aging

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Productive aging in developing Southeast Asia: Comparative analyses between Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand

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KEYWORDS
Older person contribution, intergenerational exchange, human capital, gender, Southeast Asia

ABSTRACT

Alarmists views regarding the burden that older persons pose for family and society are prevalent; yet, such views are not necessarily warranted. To fill the research gap, this study examines prevalence and determinants of intergenerational productive engagement in developing Southeast Asia with a focus on the roles of educational attainment and gender. Based on analyses of recent aging surveys in Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand, we assess three major dimensions of productive engagement among persons aged 60 and above, i.e. their economic activity, assistance to family members, and caring. Results suggest that elders in all three countries make important contributions to their families and communities, although their nature and extent vary from context to context. In general, elders are more likely to provide economic support to their families than to outsiders, but they are also more likely to provide non-economic contributions to family members. The findings have important policy implications for enhancing productive engagement among older persons with low educational attainment or limited resources.

1. Introduction

Reciprocal relationships between adult children and elderly parents are well documented in Southeast Asia (Cowell, 2006; Knodel and Teerawichitchawan, 2018). Children have responsibilities to support aging parents who in turn reciprocate by providing various forms of assistance to their children, including grandchild care, housework, and sometimes monetary support. Rapid social and technological change has led to an increase in employment opportunities in both the formal and informal sectors. The concept of productive engagement focuses on social and economic activities that older persons engage in, including both paid work and unpaid activities (e.g., caregiving, volunteering) (Hand, 2011; Morrow-Howell and Mail, 2013; Song and Fu, 2013). The concept of productive engagement is based on the idea that unpaid activities can be as valuable as paid work, and that productive engagement can enhance older persons' well-being (Cowell, 2006; Knodel and Teerawichitchawan, 2018). This study examines the prevalence and determinants of productive engagement among older persons in Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand, and discusses the implications of these findings for policy.

Data Mapping on Ageing in Asia and the Pacific

Analytical Report

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Presentation outline

• Productive aging in Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand: Key measures and findings

• Three lessons

• Recommendations
Working definition

• Concept of productive aging: Older persons can be effectively integrated and engaged in activities that generate contributions to family, community and society

• Critiques:
  • “Productivity” is subjective
  • Exploitation of older persons? Added burden?

• Common terms:
  • Productive activities, productive engagement, older persons’ contribution
Productive aging in developing SE Asia: Comparative analyses between Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand

• Key research questions

1. To what extent do older persons in developing Southeast Asia engage in **paid and unpaid productive activities**?

2. How is **human capital such as educational attainment** associated with productive engagement in old age?

3. How does productive aging vary by **gender**?

4. What are some of the **institutional factors** that enhance or hinder productive aging?
Data sources

• Nationally representative samples of persons age 60+
• 2012 Myanmar Aging Survey (MAS), n=4,080
• 2011 Vietnam Aging Survey (VNAS), n=2,789
• 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand (SOPT), n=34,173
Variable measurements

**Indicators of productive aging**

- Economic activity
- Assistance to family members
  - Provision of money to children
  - Household chores
- Caregiving
  - Grandchild care
  - Care for adult HH members

**Sociodemographic characteristics**

- Educational attainment
- Gender
- Age
- Marital status
- Number of children
- Residence location
- Functional limitations
Finding#1: Older persons in SE Asia make a variety of important contribution to their families.

Indicators of productive aging among persons 60+ in developing SE Asia:

- **% working**: Myanmar: 30, Vietnam: 39, Thailand: 43
- **% giving money to children**: Myanmar: 22, Vietnam: 15, Thailand: 15
- **% doing chores**: Myanmar: 59, Vietnam: 82, Thailand: 74
- **% grandchild care**: Myanmar: 33, Vietnam: 34, Thailand: 28
- **% caring for adult members**: Myanmar: 25, Vietnam: 15, Thailand: 15
Finding #2: Education is an important factor influencing productive activities among older persons.
Caveat: Better educated OPs in all three countries are significantly less likely to be economically active than their less educated counterparts.
Finding#3: Persistent gender differences in specific dimensions of productive aging (men: economic contribution; women: non-economic contribution)

Adjusted proportion of older men and women who performed specific indicators of productive aging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjusted proportions</th>
<th>Myanmar</th>
<th>Vietnam</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked last year</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial provision</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HH chores</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GC care</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care for adult HH members</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adjusted proportion refers to predicted probabilities of specific productive aging indicator which are derived from binary logistic regression analyses that control for age, area, marital status, education, number of children, location of residence, index of functional limitation, and employment status.

**Male-female differences significant at p<0.05 level or beyond are shown in bold face.
Three lessons

- **Lesson 1**: Existing data for measuring productive aging are limited

- **Lesson 2**: Harmonization of productive aging measures across cross-national surveys can be challenging

- **Lesson 3**: Lack of longitudinal data limits an assessment of determinants and consequences of later-life productive activities.
Lesson 1

• How we measure productive aging is constrained by data availability

• Tendency to view older persons as a burden rather than a contributor

• Tendency to dismiss 1) reciprocity nature of intergenerational support and 2) non-economic contribution of older persons
Significant data collection efforts have been allocated to where population aging is more advanced and less attention has been paid in countries with a younger age structure.

Number of ageing surveys for 2000-14 by % population aged 60+ in developing Asia
Significant data gap in the domain of intergenerational support

• Understanding intergenerational support system is critical for policy design and formulation

• Aging surveys provide much more comprehensive information about intergenerational support than censuses and DHS
  ➢ Less than half of the 25 countries examined have aging surveys
  ➢ Patterns and changes in intergenerational support system cannot be examined for these countries

• Even in aging surveys, the nature of reciprocity of intergenerational transfers and older persons’ contribution to the household tend to be absent
A tendency in aging surveys to measure older persons’ contribution in terms of financial support particularly cash transfers.
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Lesson 2

• Cross-country comparison is informative and particularly useful for assessing how policy and institutional contexts influence productive aging
  • How economic development and policy (e.g., universal healthcare) may have affected older persons’ economic activity
  • How fertility trends may have affected the availability of grandchildren and in turn older persons’ likelihood of providing grandchild care

• Harmonization of productive aging measures across cross-national surveys can be challenging
Australia (65+) 16.8
China (55+) 63.9
India (60+) 37.2
Indonesia (60+) 66.4
Myanmar (60+) 23.0
S. Korea (65+) 14.2
Thailand (60+) 38.6
Vietnam (60+) 37.3

Source: Ko & Yeung, 2019 (Table 1)
How economic activity was defined and probed in surveys can vary significantly

- **S. Korea (Time Use Survey, 2014):** Labor engagement which entails *income*

- **Myanmar (MAS, 2012):** Aside from housework, during the last year, did you work to support yourself or family?

- **Vietnam (VNAS, 2011):** Are you still working (at the time of survey)? How many months last year did you work?

- **Indonesia (Aging in Rural Indonesia Study, 2015-16):** Engagement in *paid work/income-generating* activities at the time of survey
Lesson 3

• Most developing Asian countries do not have any longitudinal aging surveys, thus restricting ability to measure causal relationships
Lack of longitudinal data limits our ability to examine the determinants and consequences of productive aging.

- Longitudinal data collection focusing on older-aged population is typically missing for countries in developing Asia
  - China is an obvious exception
  - Other countries with longitudinal/panel datasets e.g., India, Indonesia

- Longitudinal datasets have both advantages and disadvantages
  - They are costlier to collect and also more difficult to analyze
  - Based on longitudinal datasets, researchers can better determine causal relationships of related key life transitions and productive aging (e.g., health and economic activity)
Successive cross-sectional surveys allow for examining long-term trends in coresidence with a grandchild among elderly Thais.

Figure 3.3 Percentages living with a grandchild of any age and 10 or younger, persons 60 or older, 1994 to 2017

Recommendations

• Aging surveys should include measures that reflect *reciprocity* of intergenerational support system and should pay attention to both economic and non-economic contribution of older persons.

• **Cross-country collaboration** in survey design and data collection related to old-age productive activities is encouraged.

• More investment in **high-quality, longitudinal aging surveys** in developing Asia.

• As the composition (e.g., educational attainment) of older persons is shifting, **re-thinking and re-conceptualization of what productive aging means** may be necessary in the near future.
Thank you.
Questions and comments are welcome.

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