



Photo by Lisa Murray for CRS

Engaging Our Elderly

PROGRAMMATIC POTENTIAL FOR AN AGING POPULATION

THE CONTEXT

Over the past few decades, CRS and other humanitarian organizations have focused most of their activities on young people and their parents. Older people are not generally central to these projects. During this same period, however, the world's older population has been growing faster than any other age group, especially in developing countries (see Table 1). The role of older people is also changing. Although many older adults traditionally took on a family caregiving role, the migration by younger generations for job opportunities in urban areas often means that today, grandparents get left behind. While many older adults are living longer than before, increasingly they live alone or with just one or two family members nearby¹. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the isolation of many older people and further reduced programmatic attention to this age group, either as local leaders or as recipients of care.

LOOKING INWARD

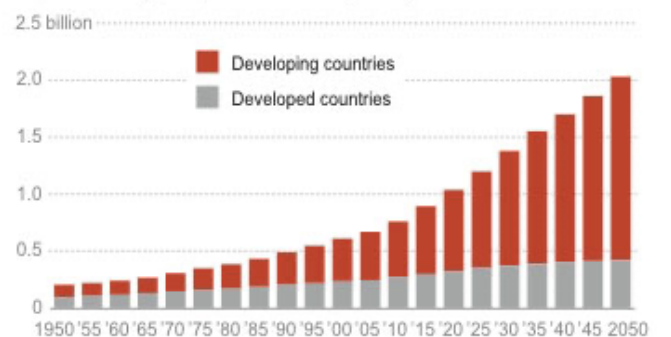
In early 2022, CRS undertook an internal assessment of its engagement of older adults, looking both at the number and percentage of CRS's own older staff and at its programs. This involved a three-part assessment:

1. An overview of CRS's own employee distribution by age.
2. A landscape review via Gateway of CRS programs that identified older people as a target or sub-target focus.
3. Key informant interviews with 18 field-based interlocutors and HQ-based technical advisors.

TABLE 1²

Global rise in aging population

The number of people in the world aged 60 and older is expected to grow past 2 billion by the year 2050.



SOURCE: United Nations Population Fund

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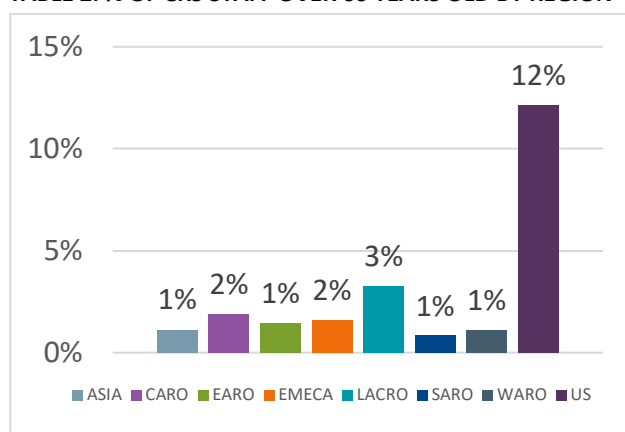
¹ World Health Organization, 2021 and <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/padr.12149>

² World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision

CRS STAFF DISTRIBUTION

Except for staff based in the United States, our staff is heavily weighted toward young people, with only 3% or less in the 60+ age-bracket. (See Table 2.) Of all staff—more than 7,500 in total—only 64 individuals are older than age 65 and only 15 are older than 70 (FY21 data). One contributing factor might be the restrictive laws in some countries that impose forced retirement. But even where this is not a factor, the percentage of older people on staff is very low. This is potentially detrimental, as the presence of older staff can offer an advantage when building peer relationships with government officials, tribal leaders, and religious clergy. We speculate that CRS is also losing significant historical and cultural knowledge by not having more older staff. To strengthen continuity within country programs, one recommendation is that CRS should adopt a mentorship strategy by older staff to younger colleagues.

TABLE 2. % OF CRS STAFF OVER 60 YEARS OLD BY REGION



IN PROGRAMS

We sought to learn how and when CRS programs highlight the intrinsic leadership roles that older people may take (either within their extended families or in their communities), and when and how older people were specifically targeted as service recipients, recognizing that this might require special accommodation due to the physical and mental frailties that frequently accompany advanced aging. Unfortunately, not much information could be found. Several informants explained that, until donors prioritize older people, it will be difficult for CRS to give this age group more attention.

Over the last eight years, CRS submitted to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the European Union Emergency Trust Fund five proposals in which older people would be primary beneficiaries. Not one of the proposals was funded.

During the same period, CRS implemented 44 projects spanning six countries (with a combined budget of \$23+ million) that specifically identified older adults as part of a broader service delivery goal. None of these projects disaggregated participants by age beyond grouping together

all beneficiaries over ages 25 or 30, and with three projects, at ages 45+. An additional 20 projects were identified as serving people with disabilities. Although increased disability correlates with increased age, none of these projects focused on people in upper age groups.

Given the way our MEAL data is structured (with adults usually grouped together), we cannot accurately determine how many older project participants are included as care recipients, local leaders, or “wisdom-givers.” Are the elderly disproportionately left out? Or are we engaging more than we think? To better monitor the age of participants in agency projects, CRS’s MEAL data would require more age bands, albeit recognizing that not all older people know their actual date of birth so approximations might be required. Although implementing this agency-wide could be costly and labor intensive, it is recommended that age banding be incorporated wherever feasible—especially for projects that target older age groups in their design.

In response to illness or disaster (e.g., during the AIDS pandemic or post-conflict) older people play a critical role in the care and support of orphans—but respondents indicate they rarely get the assistance they need to maintain this role. Age-sensitive interventions would offer dignity and critical support by addressing the physical limitations of sight, hearing, mobility, and overall health that affect many older adults. Literacy and technological support could also be offered. To overcome issues of loneliness and isolation, and to incorporate the benefits of “lived wisdom” that older people can provide, several respondents recommended that CRS actively seek ways to enhance the engagement of elderly participants in our projects, rather than wait for a donor’s request or a humanitarian crisis. Additional strategies for the engagement of older adults might be learned from the best practices of other organizations (e.g., by [HelpAge](#) and [IASC](#)).



Photo by Lorenzana, Dinorah, Guatemala