Population Ageing in Mozambique: Threat or Opportunity?

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Population ageing is one of the major achievements of modern humanity, but its potential benefits to society in general are neither automatic nor guaranteed in advance. 1) The fact that Mozambique is still at an early stage of its demographic transition offers a unique opportunity. Will the Mozambican society seize this opportunity? 2) The answer to the previous question will depend on the awareness and what is done in the coming decades. Mozambique has much to gain if policy makers start now to take the consequences of the coming population ageing more seriously and seek to guarantee a dignified human security for the existing elderly population, as part of a long term development strategy.

Ageing as a Conquest and the Longevity Paradox

In general, we all want to live longer. In this sense the ageing population is an achievement per se. In technical terms it is a phenomenon that results from an increase in life expectancy at birth and decreased fertility in a population. It is not a new research topic, and its increase in life expectancy at birth and decreased fertility in a population. It is not a new research topic, and its structural change is clearly visible in the age transition over time, as illustrated by the changes from the classical pyramidal structure to rectangular ones, resulting from the reduction in the younger age groups and increase in the size of older age ones (Figure 1).

The drastic reduction in the fertility rate, following or simultaneously with a significant reduction in mortality and an expansion of the longevity, has generated profound demographic changes from the bottom to the top of the population age structure, as illustrated in Figure 1, referring to Mauritius. These are global transformations that occur at different rates, observed in all regions of the world, over the past two and a half centuries. It is not clear whether such global transformations in age structure started as a result, or conversely, were one of the causes of the industrial revolution, urbanization, increased female labor participation, and numerous advances in modern medicine. Due to the fact that the demographic transition has often occurred simultaneously with economic growth, it is commonly assumed that it is a consequence of economic growth, a perspective that has been called into question (Dyson, 2010).

Although the proportion of elderly in the total population is substantially higher in developed countries, the pace of the observed changes in developing countries has been quite rapid. In the second half of the 20th Century, the Latin America and Asian regions experienced rapid and profound changes in vital rates, reaching recently fertility levels close to those observed in more developed countries. Sub-Saharan Africa is the only continental region that remains at an early stage of the demographic transition, albeit large intra regional variations; but when considering the disaggregated data for African countries, an increasing number of them are

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already experiencing the ageing population phenomenon (Francisco 2010:31, 2011:48; Sandell 2004). Figure 1 illustrates the difference between the populations of Mozambique and Mauritius. If the UN projections (medium variant) are confirmed, the median age of the Mozambican population will increase from 17.8 in 2010 to 24.3 in 2050. In turn, the population of Mauritius is already visibly more adult and aged with a median age of 32.4 years in 2010, expected to increase to 45.5 in 2050 (UN 2011).

Changes resulting from the demographic transition have direct impacts on the composition and organization of the family units, as well as in the relationships between labor and other production factors, working conditions and different forms of social protection, leading to a confrontation between the achievement of increased human longevity levels, and an “ideal” of “eternal youth”, a phenomenon described by Sugahara (2009:38-61) as the “longevity paradox”.

Towards a Mozambican Analysis: Ageing before or after getting richer?

In contrast to most developed countries, where the elderly population already represents a significant share of the total population, Mozambique is still at the very beginning of its demographic transition (Arnaldo 2007; Francisco 2011). According to INE (2010:10) the median age of the Mozambican population is 17 years, while the group of people aged 60 years and above represents 4.7% of the total population (around one million people).

At first glance it may seem out of sync or premature to promote a thorough reflection about population ageing in a country where the available demographic projections suggest that the proportion of elderly in the population will only increase slowly over the first half of the current century (Francisco 2011:52; INE 2010). However, only reckless naivety or irresponsible ignorance, would call into question the early consideration of a phenomenon as predictable and important as ageing population is. Indeed, despite the fact that the population ageing of Mozambique is still in its early stage, in fact, it is already in progress, resulting from a transition from high to low levels of mortality. This mortality transition has resulted in an immediate acceleration of the population growth. As long as the fertility transition is not generalized throughout the entire country, rapid population growth should override the ageing population, but then the latter will eventually overtake the former (Francisco 2011; Dyson 2010).

An increasing number of countries are now in the challenging situation of having aged faster than grown richer. That is the case of countries such as China, Brazil and many others that experienced rapid demog-