

## PRESS STATEMENT

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### Government urged to strengthen its efforts towards meeting the needs of older persons

Government is not adequately meeting its obligations towards the elderly. How can we then promote active ageing / ageing in dignity, in the spirit of Ubuntu, when older persons continue to struggle to survive in poverty?

These came after the Community Law Centre hosted a workshop, on 22 February 2011, on promoting the socio-economic rights of older persons in South Africa. Civil society organisations and institutions deliberated on the challenges older persons face in enjoying their socio-economic rights; the extent to which government considers their needs when working towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); and the relevance of ratification of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) for older persons.

Civil society organisations present voiced the concern that the socio-economic rights of older persons are far from being realised. Older persons continue to face problems in relation to accessing social grants, with the government terminating grants without giving the required notice. Deprivation, abuse and food insecurity is high among older persons. They also lack access to adequate and affordable housing and health care services. Social pensioners face accommodation crisis. Geriatric care that would address problems in relation to the quality of health care for older persons is sadly not prioritised. Dementia is also a serious concern but inadequate attention is paid to it.

While the need for cooperation amongst government departments is necessary in ensuring the protection and promotion of the socio-economic rights of older persons, civil society organisations present indicated that its absence has exacerbated the situation of older persons in South Africa. There is a strong need for effective cooperation between government departments at all levels and also with service providers and other stakeholders in ensuring that the rights of older persons become a reality.

Civil society organisations, with reference to the 2006 Older Persons Act (OPA) that was adopted to deal with the plight of older persons, underscored the fact that its impact has been riddled with implementation problems. The formal delegation of powers, for example, which would facilitate the implementation of the Act, has still not taken place. Without this, progress cannot be made in relation to its implementation.

Despite the equalisation of old age pension at 60 years, participants were concerned that this has not translated into an amendment of the OPA in order to do away with the 60 and 65 differentiation for females and males, respectively. The effect is that a man aged between 60 and 65 cannot benefit from services, programmes or the provisions protecting older persons from abuse, established in terms of the Act.

Emphasis was placed on the need for government to scale up its efforts towards improving the protection and promotion of the socio-economic rights of older persons, and addressing the challenges preventing them from enjoying their rights. The principles of equality, participation, fairness, inclusion, accountability, respect for rights, and recognition of dignity were seen as being at the core of any efforts taken by the government.

Participants warned that the fast growing aging population in South Africa is taking place in an uneven environment. It is important for the government to use international human rights standards to complement national standards and assist us in articulating what needs to be done for our elderly in South Africa.

Also, that effective realisation of the socio-economic rights of older persons is crucial to effectively and fundamentally reducing poverty and accelerating progress towards the MDGs. Ratification of the ICESCR also becomes relevant as it will provide a mechanism to monitor the MDGs with a contextual regard for older persons and their contribution to the MDG agenda. The ICESCR is the main treaty at the United Nations level on socio-economic rights, and pays particular attention to older persons.

**For more details and information on the workshop or key organisations to further speak to, contact Dr. Lilian Chenwi, Community Law Centre (Email: lchenwi@uwc.ac.za; Tel: 0721726346)**

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