

# Policy-in-practice case study: Iran

*National Policy on Ageing and National Document for Older Persons*



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**10%** of Iran's population were aged 60 years or older in 2019.

**3.5 million** people in Iran are expected to be 80 years or older by 2050.

**2nd** fastest ageing country in the world, after South Korea.

Iran's population of 85.8 million (2021) is ageing rapidly. In fact, Iran is the second fastest ageing country in the world (after South Korea) in terms of the percentage increase in the population aged 60 and over between 2015 and 2050. The proportion of older people in Iran increased from just 5 per cent in 1976 to 10 per cent by 2019, and the number of older people is expected to double in just 15 years' time. By 2050, it is estimated that around one-third of Iran's population will be aged 60 years or older. People aged 80 years and older would comprise around 3.8 per cent of the population (around 3.5 million people) in 2050 – almost four times the number as at 2015.

Cognitive and physical impairments could mean that a large proportion of older people are dependent on support from others just to maintain their activities of daily life. Increased life expectancy and reduced fertility could complicate the multi-faceted issue of population ageing even further. Gender inequalities and socioeconomic insecurity in old age are two key issues resulting from this rapid population ageing. Iran's government has

realised the need for a strategy to provide social and economic support to this ageing population that challenges views of ageing people as a burden. It has formulated a National Policy on Ageing and the National Document for Older Persons, both issued in 2020. The National Document, which is the focus of this case study, marks a turning point for all stakeholders involved in caring for older people and protecting their rights. It covers many areas, including: raising cultural awareness on old age; empowerment of older people; preserving and promoting older people's physical, mental, social and spiritual health; strengthening social support to enhance social capital; developing the infrastructures required for ageing; and sustainable financing for older people's support systems.

Article 29 of Iran's Constitution explicitly refers to the issue of ageing and older people's rights to social security: *"Every person is entitled to the enjoyment of social security. This covers retirement, unemployment, old age, inability to work, being without a caretaker, casual misfortune, accidents, and occurrences giving rise to the need for health services and medical care and treatment through insurance, etc. The Government is bound, in accordance with the laws, to use public revenues and*



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*the revenue drawn from individual contributions to provide the services and financial support mentioned above for every individual in the country.” This stipulates that all older people should be covered by social security and enjoy access to healthcare and medical services whether they are insured or not. In this respect, the National Document for Older Persons is based on the principle of securing the rights of older persons in its proposed activities.*

## **Elements of the life-cycle approach integrated into the policy intervention**

### **Promoting healthy ageing**

The National Document for Older Persons recognises that preserving and promoting health cannot be achieved without promoting healthy lifestyles and medical services across all age groups. It is a comprehensive policy intervention, touching on all aspects of ageing by protecting the rights of older people and adopting a life-cycle approach to ageing. The Iranian government is bound, by the Constitution, to use public revenues and revenues drawn from individual contributions to offer services and financial support to every citizen.



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### **Diversity in old age**

The National Document for Older Persons recognises that older people are a diverse group with different needs and challenges, and therefore no one ministry or other entity could be responsible alone for providing the services people may need in old age. Therefore, it calls for all the ministries and organisations represented within the National Council of Older Persons – especially associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), municipalities, and older people and their families – to engage actively in the process of implementing the National Document through the pivotal role of the National Council and its Secretariat. In this context, the National Document for Older Persons articulates an appropriate framework for the collaboration and participation of all groups to accomplish healthy ageing and a better quality of life for older people.

## **Drivers in the enabling environment motivating policy implementation**

### **Enhancing the health and social security system**

It is clear the rapid increase in Iran’s older population will have a substantial impact on individuals, families, communities and society at large. Iran understands that through proper planning and policy making, an ageing population can bring opportunities as well as challenges. The fact approximately 70 per cent of its population are aged 15–64 years means the country enjoys a ‘demographic window’ that is needed to accelerate economic growth through the support of a productive and healthy labour force. Many other countries have achieved economic leaps during such periods. Therefore, it is clear Iran needs to focus on the current labour force and manage it appropriately, with the right policies in place to reap the benefits of the future older population, which forms today’s labour force. This will prevent many of the socioeconomic problems that could emerge with an ageing population. Being aware of population age changes and developing appropriate political and economic plans may prove decisive in the success of these plans and policies. The emergence of the National Document for Older Persons is the result of comprehensive planning and policy making that reflects the multi-faceted specificities of this age group. The National Document attempts to establish equity in the provision of healthcare and social welfare for older people.



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## Key areas addressed

The National Document for Older Persons acknowledges that, when the right policies and services are in place, population ageing can be viewed as advantageous for both individuals and society as a whole. It includes plans to improve different aspects of life in old age such as leisure time, income security and economic empowerment. It also indicates that families should receive subsidies if they are taking care of their old-age family members.

The Iranian government acknowledges that despite significant improvements in public health and welfare and progress on indicators linked to primary healthcare and social welfare strategies, achieving equity in the provision of healthcare and social welfare for older people remains a key challenge. Therefore, the National Document commits to intersectoral collaboration and appropriate planning for the participation, health, independence and empowerment of older people to grant them equal opportunities with other age groups. It adopts a life-cycle perspective by bringing all other age groups into its planning strategy. It seeks to provide a coordinated response to the challenges and opportunities created by population ageing and ensure the best outcomes for all Iranians.

Moreover, the National Document for Older Persons has committed to improving the environment for older people in Iran by including age-friendly cities – a 10-year programme currently being implemented in seven metropolises across the country. This policy intervention creates age-friendly communities, policies, services and structures related to the physical and social environment that are designed to support older people to ‘age actively’ – that is, to live in security, enjoy good health and continue to participate fully in society. Public and commercial settings and services are made accessible to accommodate varying levels of ability. Many aspects of urban settings and services can contribute to the participation, health, independence and security of older people in an age-friendly city.

The National Document for Older Persons states six overarching goals:

- raising cultural awareness on old age;
- empowerment of older persons;
- preserving and promoting older persons’ physical, mental, social, and spiritual health;
- strengthening social support to enhance social capital;
- developing the infrastructures required for ageing;
- sustainable financing for older persons’ support system.

## Implementation strategy for the policy intervention

The main objectives of the National Document for Older Persons are:

- to determine the roles and duties of each organisation involved in caring for older people, to aid coordination at national and sub-national levels;
- to conduct an institutional mapping to enhance the effectiveness of planned collaborative interventions;
- to determine the best ways to empower organisations and assist them in implementing the activities contained within the National Document.

This suggests it has been a well-planned process, giving serious consideration to how the proposed actions could be implemented within an integrated approach, by bringing all stakeholders together during the planning.

The first goal (raising cultural awareness on old age) is implemented by using the media to revive and promote older people's status within society, and promote older people's dignity. Strategies for achieving the second goal (empowerment of older persons) include: providing education and skills training for the individual and their caregivers; establishing and developing enabling environments; and extending older people's social participation. The third goal (preserving and promoting older persons' physical, mental, social, and spiritual health) involves promoting quantitative and qualitative preventive measures and medical, rehabilitation, and spiritual health services for older people. Achieving this goal involves adopting a life-cycle approach, because this policy intervention acknowledges that preserving and promoting health cannot be achieved without promoting a healthy lifestyle and medical services across all age groups. The fourth goal (strengthening social support to enhance social capital) involves securing livelihood and financial services for older people, developing and consolidating care services, and supporting the development of social, religious, spiritual, cultural, artistic, sport, leisure and tourism services that meet older people's needs. Achieving the fifth goal (developing the infrastructures required for ageing) involves securing the required human capital, and developing technology for providing services to older people, as well as information and statistics management, and institutionalising the ageing domain. The sixth goal (sustainable financing for older persons' support system) is very important for any ageing policy intervention. Iran aims to achieve this by financing the implementation of the National Document for Older Persons and ageing services, with fair and optimal allocation of funds, and by reducing older people's out-of-pocket (OOP) payments for health and welfare services.



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Operationalisation of the National Document for Older Persons involves the National Council of Older Persons, the active participation of the Plan and Budget Organisation, the Supreme Council of Social Security and Welfare, and the Supreme Council of Health and Food Security. It is stipulated that:

- members of the National Council of Older Persons must develop their programmes and activities based on the National Document;
- the National Council and its Secretariat assume responsibility for intersectoral coordination;
- members of the National Council are mandated to introduce a plenipotentiary representative (preferably at the level of director-general or a director working on ageing in each institution);
- members are mandated to present their proposed operational plan for the subsequent year to the National Council by 20 August of the current year;
- institutions should adopt a prevention approach vis-à-vis duplication and parallel work;
- the National Council, with the pivotal role of the Secretariat and collaboration of member institutions, shall undertake the drafting of institutional mapping, stakeholder analysis, and methodologies for stewardship, for implementers and executive partners of the National Document at the level of governmental, non-governmental and community institutions.

## Expected outcomes of the intervention

During the preparatory stage of the National Document, researchers conducted a logic model approach to determine the possible outcomes and impacts. Anticipated impacts are as follows:

1. Raising awareness of the phenomenon of ageing within Iranian culture.
2. Improving older people's social and spiritual health.
3. Increasing the percentage of healthy older people.
4. Improving older people's physical health.
5. Reducing OOP payments by older people for healthcare services.
6. Moving older people from lower- to higher-income deciles.

The anticipated intermediate outcomes include the following:

- Membership of at least 10 per cent of people under 50 years in supportive care programmes for the elderly, increasing to 20 per cent after six years (of programme start-up) and 30 per cent after nine years from start-up.
- Continuous broadcasting of programmes related to older people in radio and television schedules, with specific support in terms of budget and staffing, one programme per week until 2024 and two programmes per week for another nine years.
- Approve at least 80 per cent of the predicted budget for programmes for older people by 2024, and 100 per cent of the budget by 2026.
- Establish coverage of 90 per cent of older persons currently without insurance by 2024, rising to 100 per cent by 2027, and its continuation to 2030.
- Achieve 100 per cent coverage of older persons in the health referral system by 2022, and its continuation until 2030.
- Achieve 40 per cent participation of older people in economic activities by 2027, rising to 60 per cent by 2030.
- Achieve 80 per cent of older people having access to information and communication technology (ICT) by 2027, rising to 100 per cent by 2030 (considering key dimensions such as access, availability and affordability).
- Increase in the number of older people covered by neighbourhood-based NGOs.

Performance to date on implementation of the National Document can be summarised as follows:

- It recognises the changing needs of older people as they age.
- It analyses relevant related laws, regulations, plans and programmes.
- It recognises the contributions of member organisations of the National Council of Older Persons.
- It provides a strategic analysis of stakeholder activities in relation to older people.
- It sets nine-year goals and strategies for members and partner organisations.
- It analyses the organisational situation for the principal responsible bodies in realising the implementation strategies and understanding the possible challenges and barriers.
- It determines the actual position of stakeholder organisations through institutional mapping.
- It measures the power (dependency and influence) of stakeholders for each strategy.
- It sets the hierarchy of goals based on the logic model, with objectives and programmes for member organisations for 2022, and outlines evaluation criteria.
- It sets the factors of budget allocation for member and partner organisations.

Furthermore, the National Council's Secretariat has performed analyses on the power of legal status, power of political influence, power of administrative influence, power of social support, economic and financial decision-making power, and power of technical and scientific authority. This aims to place the National Document for Older Persons and its related strategic plan within a proper framework that can draw on support from all stakeholders involved in the process.



## Conclusion

**Iran's National Document for Older Persons is a comprehensive policy intervention that seeks to address all aspects of ageing by protecting the rights of older persons and adopting a life-cycle approach to ageing.**

It acknowledges that with the right policies and services in place, population ageing can be regarded as a benefit both for individuals and for society. This means it can be regarded as adopting some key elements of a rights-based approach. It also adopts a life-cycle approach, because it acknowledges that preserving and promoting health cannot be accomplished without promoting healthy lifestyles and medical services for all age groups. The National Document recognises the importance of empowering older people through emphasising lifelong skills training (for older people and their caregivers), and establishing and developing age-friendly environments that empower and develop older people's social

participation. Promoting novel technologies for older people's education, including improving literacy, and informing them of their rights have also been identified as key areas that can empower older people in Iran.

The National Document has given rise to a legal document – a comprehensive Bill on the Rights of Older Persons in Iran. Furthermore, it has influenced the evaluation of women's organisations that are dealing with the feminisation of ageing, as well as the network of Older Persons Associations in Iran. Although the National Document and its activities have yet to become fully functional (since it still requires engagement of multiple ministries), the process involved in its preparation and related consultations, as well as the intermediate outcomes identified, can be seen as a good practice. It is one that could be replicated elsewhere, by countries wanting to engage in the preparation of a national ageing policy and related strategic plan.





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**HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.**

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