Old is Gold: What influences Older Persons’ Engagement in Income-generating Activities in Uganda?

By

Abel Nzabona
James Ntozi
Gideon Rutaremwa
Old is Gold: What influences Older Persons’ Engagement in Income-generating Activities in Uganda?

Abel Nzabona*1, James Ntozi2, Gideon Rutaremwa3

Makerere University, Department of Population Studies, P.O.Box 7062, Kampala Uganda.

Email: 1jntozi@isae.mak.ac.ug, Tel: +256777913265
Email: 2grutaremwa@isae.mak.ac.ug, Tel: +256772535621

*Corresponding Author’s Email: abel.nzabona@gmail.com / anzabona@isae.mak.ac.ug, Tel: +256772502405

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the engagement of older persons in income-generating activities in Uganda and examines factors that influence this involvement. Analysis is based on primary data collected from four randomly selected districts and one purposefully selected urban area of Uganda. A sample of 605 older males and females is used. Logistic regression is used in the analysis of factors influencing the engagement. Information from Focus Group Discussions and Key Informants is used to supplement the findings of the quantitative results. Findings indicate that relatively younger older persons (60-79) were more likely to be engaged in income-generating activities than their older counterparts (80 and over). In comparison with no education, older persons with primary and higher education were more likely to be engaged in income-generation. The elderly who owned any means of transport and domestic animals were more likely to be engaged in income-generation than those who did not own any transport facility and domestic livestock respectively. The elderly with feet joint ill-health were less likely to be involved in income-generation than their counterparts without such health challenge. The conclusion is that age, education, feet health status and ownership of domestic livestock and transport facility influenced engagement in income-generating activities.

Keywords: Older persons, Income-generating activities, Education, Transport, Health status.

INTRODUCTION

Labor force participation by older workers is relatively high in developing countries, though their employment opportunities and remuneration tend to decrease with age. Assumptions regarding a decline in the average productivity of workers with age have not been confirmed by empirical studies (Barrientos, Gorman, & Heslop, 2003). The contribution of older workers to economic activity is largely undervalued; a phenomenon that may render older people progressively more vulnerable to unfavorable socioeconomic conditions.

Common perceptions about older workers include beliefs that the elderly are physically unable to do their jobs, have a high rate of absenteeism, are less productive and are less receptive to innovations than younger people (Czaja, 2007). However, there are few actual data to support these assumptions and, in fact, some research studies indicate that these stereotypes are inaccurate (UNFPA & HAI, 2012).

Kajitani (2011) posits that, other things being equal, more work improves older persons’ health. He further argues that while the increase in income by working may also improve health, working would make the Japanese elderly have a motive to invest in their health in order to raise or maintain their productivity and income. Alternatively, social interactions and activities through or at work may promote health. Conversely, early retirement discourages and reduces these social interactions and activities and may thus have a negative impact on their health.

Although the proportion of older persons in Uganda is low in comparison with more developed countries, the country is also gradually experiencing the population ageing phenomenon. For example, the share of persons aged 60 years and over increased from 4.1 percent in 1995 to 5.0 percent in 2012 (UNFPA & HAI, 2012). While some studies on the subject of population ageing have been carried out in the country, these investigations have largely focused on the problems that arise as individuals age (Ebrahim, 1992; Golaz & Rutaremwa, 2011; Kikafunda & Lukwago, 2005; Najjumba-Mulindwa, 2003). Many of these studies have yielded rich data on the plight of the elderly, but comparatively less results have been produced on the value of older persons such as their engagement in
income-generating activities. Currently therefore, the precise nature of older persons’ engagement in income-generating activities is not well known. Specifically, there is limited understanding of factors that influence participation in these activities at old age in Uganda. This paper bridges the gap and investigates the determinants of engagement in income-generating activities among older persons in the country.

Data and methods

The paper is based on primary data collected from five districts of Uganda during March and April 2012. Stratification was used to select four study districts from the four strata that comprise the major national zones of the country namely; Central, Eastern, Northern and Western regions. Using simple random sampling, Mukono, Tororo, Lira and Kisoro districts respectively were selected from the four regions. In addition, Kampala City was purposively selected as the fifth regional stratum to represent the urban sector.

From each of the four rural districts, one sub-county was randomly selected and one municipality was similarly randomly chosen from the Kampala Urban Area. The randomly selected sub-counties were Nyakabande, Kisoko, Adekwokok, and Goma from Kisoro, Tororo, Lira and Mukono districts respectively. Makindye Municipality was the municipality randomly selected from Kampala Urban Area.

The Kish method of sample size determination (Kish, 1965) was used to select 605 males and females aged 60 and above. Computation of percent distributions of the sample population by background characteristics was done. Logistic regression model was used to estimate the interaction between the dependent variable and independent variables. Engagement in income-generating activities was the dependent variable while age, sex, education, marital status, religion and ownership of selected household assets constituted the independent variables. Child out-migration status, pension receipt status and feet health status were the other independent variables. The hypothesis that ‘engagement in income-generating activities do not depend on older persons’ level of education’ was tested.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted and Key Informants (KIs) were interviewed. Thematic analysis (Patton, 2002; Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003) was done to study data generated from these sources. The ideas expressed in each of the FGDs and the data provided by the KIs were systematically examined. Ultimately ideas from all FGDs and KIs were analysed to determine the emerging information pattern regarding the subject of older persons’ engagement in income-generating activities.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that overall, 27 percent of all older persons were carrying out at least an income-generating activity. The table further shows other background characteristics of the 605 older persons interviewed. As expected, the proportion of the older persons decreased with increasing age. Not surprising, almost two thirds of the older persons found in the sampled households were females (65 percent), leaving only 35 percent as males because of the higher female life expectancy relative to males.

Four-fifth of the respondents were living in rural areas while the rest were staying in Kampala metropolitan city, the area purposefully selected as an urban environment. Table 1 further shows that half of the respondents had never attended school. Just over one third (35 percent) attained primary level of education, 10 percent had secondary level of education while the proportion of those with tertiary and higher level of education was only 5 percent. It is further shown in Table 1 that although 44 percent of the respondents were married, the overall level of widowhood was high.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background characteristic</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement in income-generation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in activities</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not involved in activities</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>72.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>34.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80-89</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90+</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>35.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To determine the types of income-generating activities older persons were carrying out, respondents who reported being engaged in income-generating activities were asked to describe the nature of those activities. It is shown in Figure 1 that small scale farming (27 percent) was the leading economic activity in which older persons were involved. This was followed by selling basic utilities such as water and charcoal (21%). Some elderly men reported being in possession of tap water which they regularly sold out to their neighbours who were not fortunate enough to have it. Others had small stocks of charcoal that they regularly sold.

Small-scale business (15 percent) constituted the third most prevalent form of income-generating activity. It is shown in Figure 1 that some elderly were operating shops, kiosks and tea rooms. Though majority of the shops owned were very small retailer establishments, field evidence showed that there were some that could be described as medium sized-businesses having most of the basic goods required at household level.

Rendering physical labour services (14 percent) was another form of activity that enabled older persons generate income. Some elderly reported earning a living by doing a wide range of money-generating odd jobs such as shoe-repairing and washing clothes of richer persons. Others performed even more physically-strenuous activities such as crushing stone aggregates.

Figure 1 further shows that the management of rented premises (4.2 percent) was another income-generating activity that older persons were engaged in. Field interviews indicated that some elderly people either had their own property or were in charge of supervising children’s property from which they received rental income. Brewing and selling liquor (4.2 percent) and tailoring/cloth design (3 percent) were other income-generating activities performed. During the field data collection process, there were incidences in which making of local batik clothes was in fact observed. According to Figure 1, weaving and selling craft products (2 percent) was one of the income-generating activities older persons were able to engage in despite this being another physically-demanding task.
Logistic regression was used to determine the relative importance of the factors that influenced income-generation. The results in Table 2 show that in comparison with older persons aged 80 and over, the elderly aged 60-69 and 70-79 were more likely to be aged in income-generating activities (OR=4.5; p=0.000 and OR=2.1; p=0.033 respectively). Results further indicate that education was highly associated with older persons’ engagement in income-generating activities. In comparison with no education, the odds of engaging in income-generating activities were significantly higher for older persons with primary and secondary or higher education (OR=2.4; p=0.001 and OR=3.3; p=0.001 respectively). Ownership of any means of transport and domestic animals is a socioeconomic variable that was significantly associated with engagement in income-generating activities. Older persons who owned any means of transport (OR=2.2; p=0.004) and domestic animals (OR=1.6; p=0.046) were more likely to be engaged in income-generating activities than their counterparts who did not possess any transport facility and domestic livestock respectively.

Feet health status was also associated with engagement in income-generating activities. Results in Table 2 indicate that older persons who had feet joint pain/swelling/stiffness were less likely to be engaged in income-generating activities than their counterparts without such health challenge (OR=0.5; p=0.003).

**Table 2 Results of logistic regression analysis of factors influencing engagement in income-generating activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Coefficients</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Std. Err.</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>1.499</td>
<td>4.479</td>
<td>1.511</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>0.756</td>
<td>2.130</td>
<td>0.756</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80+*</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.328</td>
<td>1.389</td>
<td>0.358</td>
<td>0.202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female*</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.478</td>
<td>1.612</td>
<td>0.457</td>
<td>0.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural*</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No education*</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>0.856</td>
<td>2.354</td>
<td>0.590</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary+</td>
<td>1.205</td>
<td>3.336</td>
<td>1.186</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>-0.469</td>
<td>0.626</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>0.161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>-0.519</td>
<td>0.595</td>
<td>0.191</td>
<td>0.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced/separated*</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Radio ownership
Owns radio 0.014 1.014 0.243 0.952
No radio* 1.000

TV ownership
Owns TV 0.189 1.208 0.393 0.561
No TV* 1.000

Mobile phone ownership
Owns mobile phone -0.298 0.742 0.199 0.266
No mobile phone*

Ownership of means of transport
Owns any means of transport 0.806 2.239 0.635 0.004
No means of transport* 1.000

Ownership of land
Owns land 0.167 1.182 0.308 0.522
No land* 1.000

Ownership of domestic animals
Owns domestic animals 0.450 1.568 0.353 0.046
No domestic animals* 1.000

Child out-migration
Has out-migrated children 0.183 1.201 0.257 0.392
No out-migrated children* 1.000

Pension receipt status
Receives pension 0.196 1.216 0.508 0.639
No pension* 1.000

Feet health status
Has joint pain/swelling/stiffness -0.622 0.537 0.113 0.003
No joint pain/swelling/stiffness* 1.000

* = Reference category

DISCUSSION

The first finding is that, contrary to common perceptions that older persons are physically unable to do their jobs, some elderly were still able to carry out economic activities. Agriculture was one of the income-generating activities that older persons engaged in despite the physical nature of the activity. In spite of their age, the elderly were able to grow crops and rear livestock as one male informant commented:

“Engagement in economic activities varies from elderly to elderly. Some older persons are active. Personally I have land that I rent out and get money, have a Friesian cow that I look after and obtain milk for sale and grow ample potatoes on a commercial basis” (Key Informant, Kisoro district).

Similarly, a Key Informant from Lira district had this to say:

“Older persons are engaged in economic activities like commercial growing of cotton and oil seed crops while others are rearing cattle as well as keeping poultry”.

The elderly were also engaged in making assorted locally-required craft products. Data from qualitative interviews as well as questionnaires show that older people made various handcraft items for commercial purposes. Narrating the situation, one male FGD participant put it:

“We earn some money using our knowledge to make baskets, wooden handles for hoes and axes, local spears and knives using the blacksmith system. We also make chairs and tables from tree stems and branches” (FGD, Lira district).

Commercial transaction in handcrafts among the elderly has been found in other studies (Erb, 2008). In a study of post-conflict protection of older people in northern Uganda, it was found that the elderly were providers of income through selling handcrafts. Old grandparents from the district of Pader were in particular reported to be engaged in
making various craft items which contributed to household income. The elderly are said to have been playing a pivotal role in sustaining the livelihoods of the younger household members.

Overall, these results imply that older persons were ageing actively and the items they were making were contributing to the availability of required basic social goods. The tendency to continue working at old age has been observed in other studies done on productivity and age. According to Czaja (2007) most old workers say that they would prefer to continue being engaged in some kind of work following their retirement, and a significant number of full-time retirees say they would like to be employed.

Although our study has established prevalence of later life participation in income-generation, it can be assumed that the income older persons were earning was generally too small to sustain a household of four or more people, judging from the small scale nature of the activities. It can thus arguably be stated that engagement in small-scale activities was a coping mechanism to enable the older persons earn a living considering limitations in social protection mechanisms. Acute economic need and the absence of pension plans and formal old age support imply that many people simply have to continue in paid work even at old age (Barrientos et al., 2003).

The second finding is that age significantly influenced engagement in income-generating activities. Comparatively younger older persons were more likely to be engaged in income-generating activities than their much older counterparts. Focus Group Participants indicated that labour force participation and physical robustness declined with age as one male participant aged 83 put it:

“Age indeed reduces involvement in income-generating activities. For example in my younger days, I used to lift a jerry can, but now I can’t. I could easily dig an acre but now I am unable to dig up even a small area” (FGD, Mukono district).

Age was reported to be affecting engagement in income-generating activities indirectly through its limitations on movement. Focus Group Participants reasoned that increasing age hampered the capacity to travel and engage in economic activities away from home. One FGD female participant aged 76 had this to say:

“As age increases, the elderly get increasingly exhausted. Going to the city is unlikely since crossing the streets is dangerous and using boda-bodas (motorcycles) could be extremely risky”. (FGD, Kampala district).

The effect of age on income-generating activities is corroborated by similar studies such as the one done in Tanzania (Spitzer, Rwegoshora, & Mabeyo, 2009). This study found that whereas 37 percent of respondents aged 60 to 69 in the urban area of Dar-es-Salaam were engaged in small-scale business activities, this percentage decreased with increasing age and was 32 percent in the age group 70 to 79, and 18 percent among the elderly aged 80 and over. The decline in labour force participation with age is expected as it can be assumed that due to biological changes that naturally accompany the ageing process, there is a certain decline in physiological functions and abilities. The inevitable limited capacity to cope with their difficult life circumstances is suggestive of the need to offer financial assistance to the oldest old in order for them to continue living with dignity.

The third finding is that not only was education associated with engagement in income-generating activities but, in fact, being highly educated increased the odds of being engaged in income-generating activities. Older persons with secondary or higher level of education were more likely to be engaged in income-generating activities than those with no formal education. Education was deemed to be a powerful factor of engagement in income-generating activities as one female FGD participant commented:

“Education widens the vision and innovations of the elderly. It gives people opportunities to meet friends and connect with organisations. It also enhances the capacity to participate in seminars which sometimes open up chances for gainful work” (FGD, Tororo district).

This finding of the power of education is instructive of the need for all persons to access not only basic but also higher education since this could influence income-generation and the associated quality of life in later life. Similar results have been found in other studies (Davey, 2002; Hayward & Grady, 1990). Higher level of education can help older persons develop skills and confidence they need to adapt and stay independent as they grow older. On the contrary, low level of education is associated with higher rates of unemployment (WHO, 2002).

The fourth finding is that older persons who owned any means of transport were more likely to be engaged in income-generating activities than their counterparts who did not possess any kind of travel facility. Personal means of transport could have offered elderly individuals the convenient opportunity to travel to their respective places of work. Private ownership of means of transport at old age is particularly crucial in Uganda where the transport system is not only unreliable but also ‘age-unfriendly’. Older persons’ use of public means of transport tends to be hampered by the ad hoc and overcrowded nature of the transport system, as well as the rudeness and impatient characteristics of
some of the motorists. Such barriers, in turn, could work against later life participation in income-generating activities. Absence of personal means of transport can militate against older persons' travel to places of work, considering that the elderly sometimes have difficulty in crossing roads on their own (Langlois et al., 1997). This points to the importance of personal means of transport in enabling convenient movement to work places. Some studies have further shown that convenient and organised transportation can contribute to extension of quality of life for older people (Gilhooly et al., 2002). Similarly, findings indicate that owning a car increases independence and improves the quality of life (Rackliff, Nicolle, & Maguire, 2010).

The fifth finding is that ownership of domestic animals was associated with engagement in income-generating activities. Older persons who owned domestic animals were more likely to be engaged in these activities than their counterparts who did not possess any livestock. Possession of domestic livestock could have given the elderly the opportunity to stay active since animals (such as goats, sheep, chickens and cattle) and their products (eggs or milk) could be managed without necessarily having to travel long distances away from home. Studies have indicated that smallholder farmers derive significant financial benefits from rearing livestock such as cattle (Stroebel, Swanepoel, Nthakeni, Nesamvuni, & Taylor, 2008).

Older persons who had feet joint ill-health (such as feet swelling, stiffness and pain) were less likely to be engaged in income-generating activities than their counterparts without such health challenges. This association is perhaps not surprising considering that the complication could adversely affect walking to potential places of work. This finding resonates with the study done on impact of gout on work absence and productivity (Kleinman et al., 2007). This study established that employees with gout had more days of absence from work than their counterparts who did not have the disease. The conclusion was that gout had substantial effect on work absence and could negatively affect productivity. Similarly Stewart, Ricci, Chee, Morganstein, & Lipton (2003), established that pain led to lost productive time. Arthritis was one of the forms of pain that not only led to absenteeism but also reduced work performance.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In spite of their advanced ages, older persons have valuable contributions they are making for themselves, their households and communities. The paper has shown that close to 3 out of 10 older persons were engaged in income-generating activities. Highly educated older persons engaged more in income-generating activities than their less or non-educated counterparts. Since engagement in income-generating activities is strongly influenced by education, it is prudent for policy makers and planners to continue emphasising access to education at all levels right from primary to tertiary.

The association between ownership of means of transport and economic activity underpins the value of private means of transport in active ageing. For a large city such as Kampala, public transport may be available but quite unreliable in comparatively smaller upcountry urban areas. The situation is even worse in rural areas where transport availability, affordability and accessibility are huge issues. Lack of transport facilities could therefore limit and confine older persons to their places of residence and thus work against participation in income-generating activities. This calls for planning for later-life transportation system.

The positive association between ownership of domestic animals and engagement in income-generating activities is suggestive of the need to support older persons with a capital base that could facilitate engagement in commercial enterprises. There is need for strategies that ensure access to development credit and poverty reduction. This could be one way of engendering later life social security, particularly for older persons not provided for under the present national contributory pension scheme.

Lastly, there is need for programmes that address geriatric conditions in the country. Such interventions will not only be a way of improving later life health but also a long term strategy of improving economic participation of older persons. Geriatric health programmes can contribute to improvement in older persons' health and, ultimately, better socioeconomic well-being of the elderly.

Limitations

One of the limitations of our study is that while we were able to identify the types of income-generating activities engaged in, we were unable to quantify the amount of income earned. Determining the quality of 'financial life' that older persons were experiencing was therefore not possible. It therefore recommended that future studies incorporate a dimension of quantifying the amount of income that older persons in Uganda earn from income-generating activities. Another limitation is that the level of income-generation and types of activities done were based solely on self-reports. Using additional mechanisms of inquiry could probably have enriched the study.
REFERENCES


