

## **Social Engagement: Key to Sustainable Livelihood and Socio-Economic Wellbeing in Later Life**

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### **Abstract**

*Social engagement promotes successful ageing, sustainable livelihood and socio-economic wellbeing. Individuals who remain socially engaged make active contributions which helps in coping with role transition and ageing challenges. This study examined the impact of social engagement on sustainable livelihood and well-being in later life. Social engagement involved elders’ level of involvement such as engagement in religious activities or social events or volunteering in the last one month while reported health status and living arrangement were used as indicators of well-being. The life course perspective and activity theory were adopted as theoretical framework while Nigerians aged 55 years and above in Lagos state were sampled using multi-stage research method. Livelihood is considered adequate and sustainable when it bounces back after major shocks. Social engagement was associated with increased access to sustainable livelihood, improved living standards and better wellbeing. Older Nigerians should be supported to remain socially engaged and make tangible contributions.*

**Key words: engagement, elderly, ageing, livelihood, wellbeing**

**Background:** Older people and Gerontologists generally agree that remaining socially engaged in later life is a major predictor of successful ageing and wellbeing. Thus, access to diverse social networks is pivotal to physical and social wellbeing in old age. Social engagement involves active involvement of older people in the society which implies their willingness to participate in social activities. Most elders engage in activities that promote their livelihood and wellbeing while others are willing to expand the scope of their involvement. Thus, social engagement is a critical hallmark of successful ageing. The positive impact of having diverse supportive social networks (social engagement) on sustainable livelihood and well-being in old age is evident. Individuals who remain socially engaged in later life make active contributions which play a major role in coping with role transition and ageing challenges. With improved life expectancy, more Nigerians get to old age which presents a huge opportunity for older people to remain socially engaged. But in the absence of social support system, this demographic dividend will become a challenge and a burden in the upcoming years. This underscores the imperative of social engagement in boosting sustainable livelihood and wellbeing in later life. Social engagement is important in coping with age-related challenges synonymous with retirement, empty nest syndrome, ill-health or death of spouses or loved ones. Thus, lack of social engagement at this critical stage is often associated with negative implications such as declining health or functioning and mortality.

**Literature:** Research shows that socially engaged older persons are less likely to be at risk of sickness, disability and untimely death. Loneliness or social isolation is one of the key drivers of major diseases in

old age. But exercise and social engagement play a major role in reducing older persons' vulnerability and premature death since social isolation impacts negatively on health and well-being in later life. The nexus between good health and social engagement is still unclear but it can be deduced that social engagement reduces the onset of mental health issues and dementia (Allpass, et al., 2007). The impact of social engagement on health and other indicators of wellbeing is seen in its ability to improve social wellbeing. Social engagement, social relations and productive activity are closely linked factors that affect health and quality of life more than mere biological and genetic factors (Rowe and Kahn, 1997; Windsor, et al., 2014). Since social engagement does not take place in a vacuum, it is important to consider the social contexts within which social engagement takes place. Older people's levels of engagement and their social activities play major roles in influencing their physical and mental well-being. The living arrangement and location of older people also affect their opportunities to engage in social activity. Poor social welfare services, lack of income and poor health limit older people's access to opportunities to engage in social activities and restrict them from making tangible contributions to their families and communities (Baum and Palmer, 2002; Windsor, et al., 2014). This underscores the need to examine the nature of social engagement among older people and its effects on livelihood and well-being in later life. For instance, community service and volunteering provide opportunities for brain-stimulation, social interaction and chances of meeting of people from diverse backgrounds. Even in the face of chronic health conditions and physical disability that limit physical mobility, it is always important to stay engaged and socially involved. The motto of social engagement is "Do not stop", "maintain an active and engaged life". The importance of family, friends and social networks in coping with ageing challenges cannot be over-emphasized. Research establishes that decline in social engagement occurs with advancing age which is largely due to age-related changes in available resources or social motivation (Windsor, et al. 2011). Thus, social engagement can be explained from ageing-related changes, or resource-based factors or socio-cultural factors such as life course disadvantages that affect older adults' opportunities to remain active and socially involved. Shrinking social contacts and networks in later life are partly due to loss of significant others such as the death of family members and friends as well as the declining health, functioning and mobility of older people which greatly compromise their social activity, livelihood and wellbeing (Pinquart, 2003). Studies have linked poor health to reduced social engagement among older people with older persons who are socially disconnected reporting poorer health and limited social support (Stoykova, et al, 2011; Cornwell and Waite, 2009; Ashida and Heaney, 2008).

**Theoretical Underpinnings:** The life course perspective, activity theory and life span perspective were adopted as theoretical framework to explain the nexus between social engagement and well-being in later life. Experiences of older people over time affect their social engagement, social activities, livelihood and wellbeing. The theories were used to examine factors that influence older persons' social engagement and its effects on livelihood and wellbeing in later life.

**Methods:** Social engagement is a major predictor of livelihood and wellbeing in later life. But social isolation may be challenging to older people especially the vulnerable or dependent elders. This study examined the level of social engagement and its impact on livelihood and wellbeing of older people in

Nigeria. Nigerians aged 55 years and above were sampled using multi-stage research method. Livelihood was considered sustainable if it was adequate and bounced back after major shocks. Social engagement was determined by the level of involvement of elders (e.g. engagement in religious activity, serving as volunteers or attending social events) in the last one month while reported health status and living arrangement were used as proxy indicators of well-being. Older Nigerians resident in the 20 local government areas of Lagos state, Nigeria were sampled through questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed by 1321 older respondents who were willing to participate in the study. The questionnaire covered the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and some measures of social engagement, sustainable livelihood and well-being. The study probed the nature of social activities by assessing participants' involvement in family and community activities and the impact of these on sustaining livelihood and promoting well-being in later life. The study examined the social activities of elders by assessing participants' involvement in family and community activities and the impact of these on sustaining livelihood and promoting well-being in later life. Elders' level of engagement with children, close relatives, close friends or neighbours and significant others who are close to them was measured through the frequency of contact (rarely, occasionally or regularly). The attitude of elders to social engagement affects their levels of involvement and willingness in social activities. Thirdly, individuals' levels of involvement in everyday activities were also examined. Most longitudinal studies focus on the role of social support and social networks on wellbeing (Hajek and Konig, 2016). This study examined the effect of social engagement on sustainable livelihood and wellbeing in later life.

**Results:** the study investigated the role of social engagement in influencing sustainable livelihood and wellbeing. Social engagement included engagement in church activities, serving as volunteers or attending social events which were identified as a major predictor of wellbeing in later life. Most elders reported moderate level of engagement with family, friends and neighbours on a monthly basis but had less contact with the larger community because of social and cultural differences. Most respondents reported not being 'lonely' and that their health status was good which enabled them to engage in livelihood which promoted their well-being. Majority of the respondents rated their subjective health to be good or better and they also assessed their livelihood to be adequate and sustainable. Strong relationships were established between older people's sense of social involvement and their subjective quality of life (good health, adequate social support and sustainable livelihood). The findings indicate that social engagement was associated with increased access to sustainable livelihood, improved living standards and better socio-economic wellbeing in later life. Social support was associated with better living standards and positive subjective wellbeing in later life. The strength of the relationship between these variables was found to be statistically significant.

**Conclusion and Policy Suggestions:** The study findings corroborate the importance of social engagement in promoting sustainable livelihood and well-being. Promoting opportunities for older Nigerians to remain socially engaged in their communities is not only critical for their continued wellbeing, but it also contributes significantly to national development. It is imperative to encourage older Nigerians to embrace, start and maintain social engagement in later life in order to sustain livelihood and improve their wellbeing. The study corroborates the need for effective strategies to

promote the continued engagement of older people in their families and communities which will clearly boost their health, livelihood and well-being in later life. Intervention strategies aimed at reducing social isolation among older adults such as health related education, social group activities targeting vulnerable older people (widowed and poor older people) and community-based friendships and associations among older people in Nigeria will address the challenge of social isolation among elders.

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