

Key Findings:

The role of the elderly in household livelihoods

- **The elderly play a pivotal role in sustaining household livelihoods that has hitherto been ignored** in development discourse and practice where they are often constructed as vulnerable dependents. Despite constituting just 9% of the regional population, nearly half of all households in the study were headed by the elderly. Elderly households were typically female-headed (two-thirds) and large, with up to 21 members dominated by children.
- It is widely acknowledged that livelihood diversification can help mitigate livelihood shocks and stresses. **The livelihoods of elderly headed households were more diversified than younger households.** While the cultivation of the staple *Mahangu* (pearl millet) dominates livelihoods in the region, the elderly were also engaged in other cultivation as well as seasonal gathering, fishing, the sale of crafts and local brew.
- The other key livelihood resource, the Social Pension was found to sustain entire households constituting an important safety net particularly during drought years to purchase additional food. The social pension has never been used by the elderly for themselves, instead it is a **cash transfer to households through the elderly.**

Institutional constraints on elderly livelihoods

- Despite this apparent resilience, access to livelihoods for the elderly has been affected by key institutions. Significant among these are transformations in the social support system, (Endjabi) and discriminatory customary inheritance practices.
- The elderly, as 'guardians' of the social pension, the main source of cash in rural communities are increasingly being asked to pay for social support. This **commercialisation of social relations** is diverting the pension away from other livelihood activities resulting in fields left uncultivated.
- Elderly female heads were also affected by **discriminatory inheritance practices** that favour male relatives of the deceased. At worst, this included land grabbing by the relatives of the deceased male, at best this involved the stripping of household assets, in particular livestock, by extended family relatives.

- **The elderly also bear the burden of caring for those who are sick.** Many of those who contract HIV do so working away, often in urban areas returning to rural villages when their condition deteriorates to be cared for by the elderly.
- The role of the elderly in caring for those who are sick and for orphans is severely affecting household livelihoods. Financially, the pension is almost exclusively used as an HIV/AIDS grant to support the costs (medical, transport) of caring for the sick and supporting orphans through the purchase of supplementary food and school expenses.
- The commercialisation of social support means that the elderly cannot afford from their pension to pay for labour or the hire of draught animals and equipment resulting in a **decline in cultivation activities and an increase in household food insecurity.**
- This situation is exacerbated by **the loss of remittances and labour previously provided by the sick and those who have died** and the fact that elderly householders caring for the sick were taken away from productive livelihood activities.

The significance of policy in the livelihoods of the elderly

- With the exception of the social pension, **the elderly are an absent presence in policy**, recognised implicitly but not explicitly reflecting a failure to recognise the increasingly important role they are playing in rural livelihoods.
- The pension, in the absence of other accessible forms of support is now being exclusively used as **an AIDS grant to the detriment of household livelihood security.**
- Little attention has been paid to the impacts of

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