

The New Longevity: The World's Opportunity

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Not so long ago, the world's population looked like a pyramid: Lots of young people at the base and very few older people at the top. Suddenly that's changed; now the pattern is more like a rectangle, marked by even age distribution. Indeed, between 2000 and 2050, the number of people age 60 and up will double, reaching 2.1 billion people.¹

What an extraordinary opportunity! Not only do we have more older people, but advancements in health care and greater access to lifelong learning are enabling them to stay healthier and relevantly engaged in a rapidly changing world.

However, despite their education and willingness to contribute to society through paid and volunteer work, stereotypes about older workers continue to persist.² If we move beyond harmful stereotypes and instead embrace older people's desire to contribute, society could tap into an invaluable wealth of resources that would enrich everyone.

We need to stop telling older people that "they can't." Instead, we have to ensure that they have what they need to contribute — to be givers.

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Case Studies: Global Changemakers



TOP Dixon Chibanda, founder of Friendship Bench, with a group of “grandmothers” delivering community-based mental health care. **ABOVE** Manisha Ghule advocates for women with limited formal education to become rural frontline development professionals.

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Dixon Chibanda, an Ashoka Fellow from Zimbabwe, is a psychiatrist who brought free, effective community-based mental health services to over 620,000 clients. All one must do to receive a free therapy session is go to a “Friendship Bench” located in parks and local health clinics, or book for a session online,⁵ and talk with a “grandmother.” Over 2,000 grandmothers have been trained as community health workers to deliver basic Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, making mental health care more accessible at the primary care level.⁶ Friendship Benches are now spreading across Africa, Europe and North America.

Manisha Ghule, an Ashoka Fellow from India, turns the poorest rural women into leaders of village development when they are around age 40. They provide services in livelihoods, agriculture, education, and social protection, and have shifted from earning minimal wages to achieving a 30-50 percent increase in their annual household incomes.⁷

Sérgio Serapião, an Ashoka Fellow from Brazil, integrates older adults into a flexible gig economy that values their skills. He provides training, networking, and new roles, promoting social innovation and enabling older individuals to remain active in the workforce.⁸

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risk losing the opportunity to participate and becoming more marginalized and isolated.

Ashoka is the premier association of leading social entrepreneurs. (We need entrepreneurs in education and human rights every bit as much as in steel and electronics.) At Ashoka's heart are its Fellows, over 4,000 of the world's most extraordinary social entrepreneurs. Three-quarters have changed national and/or international policy within five to ten years of being selected as an Ashoka Fellow.³ Working together in Ashoka, this community is able to see the patterns of the future and to work together to make them happen. One of our most important entrepreneurial collaborations is around New Longevity. This work is laying out the scaffolding that will enable everyone — very much including older people — to be a changemaker.

A New Architecture: Lifelong Changemaking

Social entrepreneurs worldwide show us the path forward for society, demonstrating that everyone must have the power to contribute. The right to contribute is, in essence, the most fundamental of rights. The New Longevity collaboration, launched by Ashoka, unites key players across various sectors and regions to ensure that all older people have this right and the opportunity to exercise it. The New Longevity collaboration aims to remove barriers, beginning with challenging stereotypes about older people. This effort includes strategic partnerships with leading media organizations like Africa's Trace Television, Indonesia's KBR Radio Network, and Brazil's Globo. Additionally, the collaboration involves working closely with

key groups ranging from unions to universities and engaging families using a variety of effective tools developed by Ashoka and its community.⁹ As the pace of change accelerates in the world, it becomes increasingly urgent to ensure that older people have easy and meaningful access to lifelong learning and job opportunities. To ensure that those who wish to continue working can be employed as long as they want to, it is essential to create hundreds of millions of new, high-quality jobs worldwide. This is far from the current reality. Achieving the vision of the New Longevity requires a fundamental shift in the economy that significantly expands job opportunities. The New Longevity movement is exploring various ways of increasing overall demand for labor. This is one potential method to avoid fundamental losses of engagement, independence, connection, learning, and health that come from not having the choice to work across society and to live with purpose. We want nothing to do with approaches that help only one segment of society benefit from participating in the formal labor force. Unless the overall demand for labor increases, helping one group hurts the others and is ultimately, divisive. The opportunity here is to advance policies that will help all members of society and therefore will build a giant alliance that will greatly strengthen all its constituents, very much including older people. Here are some of those allies: Those with disabilities, women, young people, minorities, immigrants, and anyone who cares about any of the above. Not to mention those who would benefit from sustainable, substantial, faster growth.

There are also valuable opportunities for older people to contribute as volunteers, which can

be encouraged in various ways. For example, placing volunteer coordinators in schools and faith communities would greatly support and expand volunteer roles. Providing older people with the choice to work or volunteer empowers them to remain independent and pursue interests that might otherwise be inaccessible. Moreover, fostering these opportunities is a key way to enhance intergenerational collaboration and strengthen community bonds.

The New Longevity collaboration recognizes the vital role of caregiving, understanding that many older adults are caregivers or require care themselves. Caregivers, both paid and unpaid, are crucial in enabling those they support — whether young people, individuals with disabilities, or older adults — to become empowered contributors and changemakers. In doing so, caregivers themselves are changemakers, creating a virtuous cycle where their work enables others to realize their potential and drive change. By embracing this identity, caregivers not only add immense value to those they care for but also elevate their own societal and economic standing. Ashoka aims to support caregivers in recognizing and embracing this transformative role.

When policymakers struggle to find jobs for their young people, how can they think about doing so for older people? Then again, how can they possibly not do so? First, not doing so is unethical. Denying anyone the right to contribute is wrong. Moreover, if one considers some of the extraordinarily powerful tools we have available to us, we can create jobs not only for older and young people but also for those with disabilities, women, immigrants, and

minorities. This is what society can do. This is what society must do. •

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/desa/world-population-projected-reach-98-billion-2050-and-112-billion-2100>

² <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/re00225#:~:text=This%20paper%20examines%20six%20of,experience%20health%20problems%20that%20affect>

³ <https://socialinnovationsjournal.org/editions/issue-52/75-disruptive-innovations/2905-how-ashoka-fellows-create-systems-change-new-learnings-and-insights-from-the-2018-global-fellows-study>

⁴ <https://www.friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org/impactreports>

⁵ <https://www.friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org/need-help>

⁶ <https://www.friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org/about-us>

⁷ <https://www.ashoka.org/en-in/fellow/manisha-ghule>

⁸ <https://www.labora.tech/en/labora-english/>

⁹ <https://newlongevity.ashoka.org/en/resources>



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