

The Aging Population in Costa Rica and the Importance of Lifelong Learning

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In the Central American country of Costa Rica, individuals ages 60-plus currently represent 9 percent of the total population. By 2050, this proportion is expected to more than double, as older adults will account for approximately 20 percent of the population.^{2,3} Costa Rica's evident trend of accelerated aging will have diverse social, cultural, economic, health, and legal implications.

Fostering lifelong learning is a means of addressing some of those implications, and in fact Costa Rica has made strides in creating learning opportunities targeted specifically for older adults. In particular, Programa Institucional para la Persona Adulta y Adulta Mayor strives to promote older adult's right to access education as well as the development of intergenerational communities. But first, a look at certain characteristics and trends impacting the country can provide appropriate context.

Costa Rica's Aging Population

Life expectancy at birth in Costa Rica is 75.5 years for men and 81 years for women.¹³ However, it is relevant to analyze disability-free life expectancy as well, given that it is often a more reliable indicator of

a population's health situation. A research team at the University of Costa Rica points out that at age 65, life expectancy free of disability — that is, the number of years a person lives without requiring a certain level of physically enabling services and supports — is 12.8 years for men and 10.5 years for women. In general, 35 percent of individuals over 65 report having a disability — a percentage that increases with age.²

Regarding the economic status of older Costa Ricans, in 2019, 68.2 percent had a pension and 23 percent lived in poverty.¹⁴ By 2020, poverty increased by 22 percent for metropolitan areas and by 34.3 percent for rural areas.³

In the social sphere of Costa Rican society, there are a number of concepts associated with old age and the aging process. While some positive images are linked to old



age, such as maturity and respect, there is also ageism, which leads to discrimination and the exclusion of the older population.² Although Costa Rica's legal norms criminalize violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect of older people, 43 percent of older persons report having suffered some form of violence (45 percent of men and 40 percent of women), and 9.6 percent report having suffered some form of discrimination, mainly in their family environment, their neighborhood, and public transportation.²

Nevertheless, multiple milestones have laid the groundwork for the recognition of the rights of older Costa Ricans — some of which came at the global and regional level to inspire action while others occurred at the national level.

That foundation starts with 1949's Political Constitution of Costa Rica, which

established the duty of the State to seek the greatest welfare for all its inhabitants.⁴ In addition, since the 1982 International Plan of Action on Aging was outlined in Vienna, there has been growing interest in developing policies and strategies to respond to the needs of older people.⁵ In 1999, Costa Rica's Comprehensive Law for Older Adults was enacted, marking the first time that national legislation would specifically target this population with the aim of improving their quality of life.⁶

Next, following the creation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging in 2002, the Regional Implementation Strategy for Latin America and the Caribbean (2003) was developed. This regional strategy has the goal of enhancing the protection of the human rights of older people, their economic security, social participation,

and education.⁷ Then, in 2007, the Brasilia Declaration required the promotion of dialogue and strategic alliances among Latin American and Caribbean countries in order to address the regional population's aging process.⁸ In 2012, the San José Charter on the Rights of Older Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean further established the need to eradicate all forms of discrimination against older people and to seek ways of creating networks to augment their protection.⁹

Progress has continued from there. In 2016, Costa Rica ratified the Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Adults, which includes as some of its principles the protection of human rights, dignity, participation, self-realization, physical, economic and social security, and the respect and appreciation of cultural diversity.¹⁰

Finally, in 2020, the Law Criminalizing the Abandonment of Older Adults was passed.¹¹ Consequences for abandonment under this law vary based on the severity of an infraction. Generally, a caregiver who commits abandonment of a vulnerable older adult will face either a fine or up to six months in jail. In the most severe cases, if death is the result of the abandonment, the prescribed penalty is six to ten years in prison.

Overall, this collective policy framework enabled the development of laws, institutions, and initiatives that aim to support and protect Costa Rica's older adult population. The National Council of the Older Adult (CONAPAM) is the governing body on aging in Costa Rica, and it leads the creation and implementation of comprehensive public policies focused on older adults.¹² Simultaneously, numerous public and private organizations, institutions, and groups — including the Comprehensive Care Program for Older Adults (PAIPAM in Spanish) at Costa Rica's Universidad Nacional, the Costa Rican Gerontological Association, and the Program for Older

Adults at Costa Rica's Universidad Estatal a Distancia — also work to provide social and educational opportunities to the older adult population.

PIAM: A Space for Lifelong Learning

The Programa Institucional para la Persona Adulta y Adulta Mayor (PIAM, Institutional Program for Adults and Older Adults) was founded in 1986 and is part of the University of Costa Rica, the country's main public university. It is an informal education program for people over 50 years old. Since its inception, PIAM has aimed to foster lifelong learning and the development of intergenerational relationships by incorporating students of older age in university classrooms.¹⁵

PIAM currently offers courses under two modalities. The first refers to courses offered to matriculating students by the university where younger students share classrooms with students of other generations. By contrast, additional courses are exclusively offered to individuals over the age of 50. These 50-plus specific courses are divided into eight modules: art and culture, handicrafts, general knowledge, healthy lifestyles, artistic groups, languages, human movement, and information and communication technologies. Participation in either type of course does not lead to a degree.¹⁶

In addition to offering courses, PIAM advises research projects focused on aging and educational gerontology and trains the university's professors to utilize an age-inclusive teaching approach. This has been a pioneer program in education for seniors in Latin America, and it has connected with multiple networks at the international level, including the International Association of Universities of the Third Age (AIUTA in French) and the Ibero-American Network of University Programs with Older Adults (RIPUAM in Spanish).¹⁶

Given the expected growth of Costa Rica's aging population in the coming years,

it will remain imperative to continue PIAM, the normalization of aging as part of the life course, the promotion of healthy aging, and, above all, continuous and meaningful learning opportunities for older adults as central drivers of transforming society. ●

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³ National Institute of Statistics and Census. Adult Day 2021. INFOGRAPHIC [Internet]. [cited 2021 Dec 2]. Available from: <https://www.inec.cr/multimedia/dia-de-la-persona-adulta-mayor-2021-infografia>

⁴ National Constituent Assembly. Constitution of the Republic of Costa Rica [Internet]. 1949. Available from: https://www.pgrweb.go.cr/scij/Busqueda/Normativa/Normas/nrm_texto_completo.aspx?nValor1=1&nValor2=871

⁵ United Nations. Report of the World Assembly on Aging [Internet]. Vienna; 1982 Aug [cited 2021 Dec 2]. Available from: <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/documents/Resources/VIPEE-English.pdf>

⁶ Legislative Assembly of the Republic of Costa Rica. Law 7935. Comprehensive Law for the Older Adult [Internet]. 1999 [cited 2020 Aug 17]. Available from: http://www.pgrweb.go.cr/scij/Busqueda/Normativa/Normas/nrm_norma.aspx?param1=NRM&nValor1=1&nValor2=43655&nValor3=95259&strTipM=FN

⁷ CEPAL. Regional Implementation Strategy for Latin America and the Caribbean of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging | Publication | Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [Internet]. Santiago; 2044AD Mar [cited 2021 Dec 2]. Available from: <https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/2786-estrategia-regional-implementation-america-latina-caribe-plan-accion>

⁸ CEPAL. Brasilia Declaration: Second Regional Intergovernmental Conference on Ageing in Latin America and the Caribbean: towards a society for all ages and rights-based social protection [Internet]. Brasilia: ECLAC; 2008 Jan [cited 2021 Dec 2]. Available from: <https://repositorio.cepal.org/handle/11362/21457>

⁹ CEPAL. San José charter on the rights of older persons in Latin America and the Caribbean | Publication | Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [Internet]. San José; 2012 May [cited

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¹⁰ Legislative Assembly of the Republic of Costa Rica. Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Adults [Internet]. Law 9394 Sep 8, 2016. Available from: http://www.pgrweb.go.cr/scij/Busqueda/Normativa/Normas/nrm_texto_completo.aspx?param1=NRTC&nValor1=1&nValor2=82573&nValor3=0&strTipM=TC

¹¹ Legislative Assembly of the Republic of Costa Rica. Law 9857. Law criminalizing the abandonment of older adults [Internet]. Jun 15, 2020. Available from: http://www.pgrweb.go.cr/scij/Busqueda/Normativa/Normas/nrm_texto_completo.aspx?param1=NRTC&nValor1=1&nValor2=91739

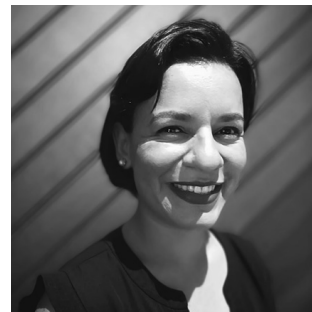
¹² CONAPAM. CONAPAM - National Council of the Older Adult [Internet]. [cited 2021 Dec 2]. Available from: <https://www.conapam.go.cr/inicio/>

¹³ Cordero M. The life expectancy of Costa Ricans was reduced by more than a year because of the impact of the pandemic. University weekly [Internet]. 2021 Sep 15 [cited 2021 Dec 2]; Available from: <https://semanariouniversidad.com/pais/la-esperanza-de-vida-de-los-costarricenses-se-redujo-en-mas-de-un-ano-por-el-impacto-de-la-pandemia/>

¹⁴ National Institute of Statistics and Census. International Day of Older Adults. Elderly vs COVID-19 [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2021 Dec 2]. Available from: <https://www.inec.cr/sites/default/files/infografias-pdf/imgadultomayor-2020.pdf>

¹⁵ PIAM. Historia | PIAM [Internet]. 2017 [cited 2021 Dec 2]. Available from: <https://piam.ucr.ac.cr/qui%CA9nes-somos/historia>

¹⁶ Masís Fernández K, Brenes MR. Characteristics and challenges of the Institutional Program for the Adult and Older Adult (PIAM) of the University of Costa Rica: 1–15.



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