THE SITUATION OF RETIRED OLDER PERSONS LIVING ALONE UNDER THE POVERTY LINE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE STUDY REPORT
The research report has been prepared within the framework of the UN Joint Programme “Assisting the Georgian Government and Local Communities in Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19”. The research has been supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Country Office in Georgia. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

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In twenty-first century, the issue of aging is gaining more and more urgency. Consequently, states and international organizations have put health and well-being of old persons high on their agendas. In addition to provision of health care services for older persons, great importance is attached to the protection of their fundamental rights and to the promotion of their social inclusion in the policies aimed at older persons.

Older persons represent one of the most vulnerable groups today, especially in developing countries. Therefore, any state of emergency in a country, whether caused by a war, a natural disaster or an epidemic, puts senior citizens at particular risk of being left behind or excluded - often giving them less priority in providing medical or other services. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. The United Nations has analysed the possible negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older persons. The UN Policy Brief identifies the following six areas in which the impact of the pandemic on older persons may be reflected: economic well-being, mental health, responders, life and death, vulnerability, abuse and neglect. The document also highlights an extremely negative impact of stigma and ageism on older persons during the pandemic; the focus is on older persons living alone - the negative impact of physical isolation and the lack of access to necessary services on their mental health is analysed.

Data of the study of the impact of the pandemic on the older persons in Georgia are not yet available. However, the above-mentioned risks are also real and relevant for the older persons living in Georgia, as senior citizens form one of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in the country. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to study the situation of older persons in Georgia under the pandemic. It is especially important to analyse the needs of the older persons living alone in the regions and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their daily lives.

The purpose of this research is to study the situation and needs of older persons living alone, under the poverty line during the pandemic, registered in the database of Targeted Social Assistance of the Social Service Agency in four municipalities: Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tianeti and Kaspi municipalities. In particular, the research aims at analysing the following:

1. Basic socio economic needs of the older persons;
2. Access to medical and social services;
3. Older persons attitudes towards COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic on the daily lives of older persons and their mental health;
4. The needs of older persons during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results of the research will be used in programmes designed to improve the situation of older persons; in addition, research data will be
used for planning measures to mitigate the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older persons.

Research methods used included desk review and a survey. The general situation of the older persons in the country/municipalities, the results of the survey on issues associated with COVID-19 and reports were analysed using desk review. The survey collected primary data from retired older people living alone under the poverty line in all four municipalities.

The survey was conducted in 4 municipalities: Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tianeti and Kaspi municipalities, in July-August 2020. In all four municipalities, the total number of older people living below the poverty line (with a score below 100,001) registered in the database of Targeted Social Assistance of the Social Service Agency was 2,276. Total of 475 respondents participated in the survey (95% confidence level, credibility interval 4).

The study used available sampling ensuring representative sample: sex (strata). 20.4% of the study population were male and 79.6% - female, and 78.6% female and 21.4% male respondents finally participated in the survey. Based on the sample of the study (high confidence level, small credibility interval, sex representation) it can be said that the trends observed in the study generally reflect the trends among the older persons living in the target municipalities. The research tool was a questionnaire consisting mainly of closed-ended questions and 3 open-ended questions. The questionnaire consisted of 8 parts. A working version of the questionnaire was agreed with the donor organization. Fifteen volunteers from Georgia Red Cross Society were involved in piloting the tool prior to approving the final version of the questionnaire. Interviewers were trained and provided with detailed information on conducting the survey and completing the questionnaire, prior to the survey.

475 respondents participated in the survey, though the data received in case of 11 respondents were discarded due to technical deficiencies (2 - from Bolnisi municipality and 9 - from Kaspi municipality). The analysis was performed using the data received as a result of surveying 464 respondents: 98 - from Bolnisi Municipality, 88 - from Dmanisi municipality, 77 - from Tianeti municipality and 201 - from Kaspi municipality. The interviews were conducted in the respondents’ homes in the form of face-to-face interviews, with interviewers themselves asking respondents questions through reading them out loud and filling out the questionnaire. The interviews lasted about 25-30 minutes. The SPSS 26 programme was used for processing the survey data and content analysis of open-ended questions was conducted.

Due to the fact that only quantitative methods were used, the research couldn’t conduct an in-depth study of such a sensitive topic as violence against older persons. In addition, the research couldn’t obtain comprehensive information on a number of issues, such as, specifically which aspects of the lives of the respondents were affected by the pandemic and to what extent. It is necessary to study these issues using a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques, which was due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the research findings and secondary data, the following conclusions can be made:
The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the daily lives and well-being of older persons

Based on the research data, it can be said that COVID-19 has more or less changed the daily lives of the majority of older persons living alone in the target municipalities. However, the situation in this regard is not the same in different municipalities – according to the respondents living in Kaspi municipality, the pandemic had hardly changed the daily lives of the older persons, whereas according to the respondents living in Dmanisi municipality, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the daily lives of all the older persons. The older persons living in the target municipalities are well informed about the pandemic. The older persons received information through magazines, newspapers, television, and the local authorities. The information and recommendations provided by the authorities and relevant agencies regarding the pandemic were understandable to almost all respondents. However, for some of the older persons living in Bolnisi municipality, the information turned out to be difficult to understand; the situation throughout the country in this regard cannot be analysed due to the fact that relevant secondary data are not yet available.

The majority of the older persons interviewed believe that COVID-19 is an infectious disease which is dangerous for everyone, however, the majority of respondents in Dmanisi Municipality believe that it is only dangerous for older people. Overall, a large proportion of the older persons interviewed followed the key recommendations on basic personal hygiene practices - wearing face masks washing their hands and, in addition, only leaving homes when it was absolutely necessary. Importantly, older people who think that COVID-19 is a dangerous infection are more likely to follow the infection prevention recommendations. Overall, there is a very small number of older persons who think that COVID-19 is not dangerous for anyone and the panic is exaggerated and unnecessary.

During the state of emergency (March-May) the biggest problems in the target municipalities were associated with the financial crisis, fear of contracting the disease and related stress and anxiety; however, very few of the respondents used relevant psychological services, although the research couldn’t identify the reasons.

More than half of the older persons interviewed had required consultations with physicians and more than half of them had called emergency medical services (EMS); Kaspi municipality had the highest percentage of older persons referring to the EMS services, whereas Dmanisi municipality had the lowest; 30.7% of respondents used the medical services in Bolnisi municipality, and only 5.5% - in Tianeti municipality, which requires some measures to be taken in this regard in the future. Most of the older persons interviewed are satisfied with the medical services received, while they were less satisfied with psychological support services.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the older persons became to a certain extent more dependent on others, as they found it even more difficult to cope with their daily activities. Although it was recommended for senior citizens over the age of 70 to stay home during the pandemic,
they had to leave home to buy groceries, collect their pensions, and buy medicines; but there were also the cases of older persons being helped by their neighbours, local authorities and volunteers. During the pandemic, neighbours turned out to be the most helpful for the older persons interviewed, which is not surprising in Georgia and is likely to be largely due to territorial proximity and close relations between neighbours. During the pandemic, the older persons received various types of assistance from local authorities as part of the commitment made by the State with regard to the fight against the pandemic. Based on the research data, it can be said that the local authorities in the target municipalities had been mobilized to meet the needs of senior citizens - respondents had been asked about their needs first by the local authorities, then by neighbours and family members/relatives.

In the case of the second wave of COVID-19, the absolute majority of the older persons interviewed still associated their much-needed assistance with solving their economic problems; this is especially true in Dmanisi, Kaspi and Bolnisi municipalities, and less so in Tianeti municipality. The older persons interviewed believed that their economic problems would be solved through some financial assistance i.e., through allocating funds to cover expenses such as their expenses for food, medicines and utility bills. Only a small number of respondents named services such as medical care, consultations with a psychologist, home care, and even fewer - access to hygiene products (disinfectant solution, facemasks) among the services required by older persons. This trend is not surprising given the substandard housing conditions and poor economic conditions the older people live in.

Based on the findings given above, the following is recommended:

- It is essential to continue to regularly inform older persons about COVID-19 and the epidemiological situation in the country. Particular emphasis should be placed on the regions populated by ethnic minorities, in our case on Bolnisi municipality, where the majority of senior citizens had failed to understand the recommendations on what to do and how to behave during the pandemic. Majority of the older persons interviewed were aware of COVID-19 and the need for older people to observe the personal hygiene rules - wearing facemasks, washing hands, maintaining physical distances; therefore, it is important for local authorities and international organizations to continue to inform older persons not only about the disease but also provide them with additional information about what to do and how to behave in case of the second wave of the pandemic, to protect themselves from being infected and to cope with the disease in case of contracting the infection. It is recommended to use channels available to older persons, such as magazines, newspapers and central and local television, for informing them about COVID-19. The representatives of local municipalities in villages can also play an effective role in disseminating information.

- Given a direct correlation between age and mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the mortality rate being 5 times higher in old persons aged 80 years or older than the mortality rate of the older persons aged 60-69, the central as well as local authorities should continue to prioritize timely detection and response to the medical needs of the older persons. It is also important to develop effective prevention mechanisms and to improve access to medical services, especially for the oldest old.

- It should be noted that a fairly large number of older people experienced stress and
anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, which gave them the feeling that COVID-19 had changed their lives considerably, although a very small number of old persons had consulted a psychologist. In case of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is recommended to increase access of older persons to services such as psychological consultations, which is crucial for their mental health. It is also recommended to introduce an online psychological helpline and disseminate information about the service availability. Related to this is the improvement of older people's access to mobile telephony and modern technology in general, which is discussed in details below.

- Ensuring respect for the autonomy and dignity of older persons should be a priority when planning and taking measures by the State during the pandemic. Isolation should be voluntary and the restrictions proportionate to the risks. Cardiovascular diseases (CVD) are one of the most common causes of death among the older persons living in Georgia, which should be considered during the pandemic. Given that CVD have been linked with worse outcomes and increased risk of death in patients with COVID-19, it is important to modify restrictions concerning the isolation of older persons and make medical services and medications more accessible for them, during the second wave of the pandemic. Isolation also has a negative effect on older persons’ mobility and consequently on their general health.

- In terms of access to medical and other services, during the pandemic, it is important to give older persons the same priority as to other age groups to prevent age-based discrimination and ensure equal and equitable distribution of resources. The importance of managing chronic medical conditions and their treatment in older patients should not be overlooked or underestimated during the pandemic. Older persons should be provided with the necessary medical services without interruption, both at the central and local levels. It should also be noted that prolonged inactivity in isolation adversely affects older persons’ musculoskeletal system and their mobility; therefore, it is important to promote their physical activity.

- Local authorities should continue supporting older persons during the pandemic. It is true that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the older persons received significant support from their neighbours, volunteers, local authorities, though during the second wave of the pandemic it is important to mobilize more support and assistance in different directions, such as purchasing products, paying bills, etc.

- Owing to the dire social and economic situation faced by many older persons and their main problems being related to the lack of finances, it is important to develop additional financial assistance mechanisms tailored to the needs of older persons, especially in the case of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- According to studies carried out in different countries worldwide, for the purpose of reducing ageism in societies during the COVID-19 pandemic, avoiding presentation of older persons as the only high-risk group for COVID-19 on social and other media is recommended, as this increases their vulnerability by further strengthening their image of being insecure and helpless. When speaking of the risk groups, focus should be made on the chronic diseases.

- Based on international studies, the increase in cases of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic requires studying the situation of older persons living in Georgia, timely detection and response to cases of violence, as well as, informing older persons in detail about how to act in cases of abuse committed against them.
1. General situation and well-being of older persons

General information about respondents, their living conditions and economic situation

Since the survey was conducted among retired persons living alone under the poverty line, the peculiarity of sampling resulted in the majority of respondents representing the age-group of 70-79-year-olds; almost half of them are widows or widowers and even more live alone (the sampling resulted in including senior citizens who do not actually live alone but are registered as living alone); widowhood and living alone increase the risk of stress, isolation and economic vulnerability among older persons; older persons have to live in unfavourable living conditions. The majority of respondents assessed their living conditions as unsatisfactory.

Assessment of their living conditions as unfavourable and their dissatisfaction with these conditions is logical considering that most of the old persons have bathrooms and latrines in the yard. In addition, almost all of them use wood stoves for winter heating. The older persons interviewed have regular access to electricity and natural gas, and are mostly able to pay bills. They seem to prefer wood stoves as they help them save financial resources.

Overall, the older persons form a vulnerable group in the target municipalities as well as throughout the country. The main source of income for the survey participants is social assistance and various types of pensions; thus, the older persons are financially dependent on government assistance. None of them earn income from employment. Only a few senior citizens receive some income from selling their own agricultural products. Based on the above, it can be concluded that the older persons living in the target municipalities have fewer opportunities for economic activities. Secondary data analysis indicates that the lack of the opportunities is prevalent across the country. In view of all the above, it is natural that the majority of respondents assessed their economic situation as bad or very bad; it is noteworthy that none of them assessed their economic situation as very good or good. The economic situation was assessed as the worst in Dmanisi municipality, while in Kaspi municipality it was assessed as average.

Most of the older persons living in the target municipalities suffer from restricted movement due to lack of funds - almost 60.3% of respondents often cannot get to their destination because they do not have money. This circumstance may have a negative impact on meeting the daily needs of older persons, as well as on their mental health and social and political activity.

Despite the current economic situation, the older persons living in the target municipalities do not have difficulty paying utility bills, likely owing to consumer utility subsidies introduced by the Government of Georgia during the state of emergency. In addition, the situation of socially vulnerable families in this regard has been mitigated to a certain extent due to them being eligible for a one-time payment assistance programme introduced in the municipalities. It should be noted that paying utility bills for gas is easier for respondents than paying electricity. In this respect, the situation in the municipalities is more or less similar; however, the best situation is in Bolnisi municipality and the worst is in Tianeti municipality.
Based on the findings given above, the following is recommended:

- Policies affecting older persons should be guided by a commitment to dignity of older persons and should promote active aging. The findings of the given as well as of other studies confirm that special emphasis should be placed on the socio-economic well-being and health of older persons. The policies should address a variety of key issues, such as differences by region, gender or capability.

- Local governments should study the needs of older persons living in socially vulnerable families, as well as the needs of single older persons and older persons living alone. The databases of older persons living alone in the State system should reflect the actual situation and should not include those older persons who do not actually live alone. In order to identify the needs of older persons, resources and support from Georgia Red Cross Society volunteers and organizations providing home care services in the municipalities may be utilized.

- It is important for local governments to continue economic assistance programmes for vulnerable older people and make assistance more tailored to their individual needs – the needs of some older people may be confined to financial support, and others may require improvement in their living conditions - home repairs, bathrooms, etc. It is very important for older persons to have access to running water and bathrooms in their homes.

- Living conditions of older persons with disabilities should be studied individually and the environment should be adapted to their needs as much as possible;

- Local governments should promote economic activities of older people, in particular, they should make lifelong learning programmes more accessible for older people, enabling them to acquire new knowledge and skills, which in turn will make their economic activities more productive.

2. Health, access to health services and cases of violence

Majority of older people have different health conditions; 33% of respondents reported having visited a medical facility at least once in the previous 12 months. They usually walked to medical facilities or got there using public transport. Older persons had not always been able to undergo medical examinations prescribed by a doctor, especially older people living in Tianeti and Bolnisi municipalities. The situation is the same in case of persons with disabilities.

Older persons have ongoing health needs that require medication, however more than half of them are not always able to buy medicines prescribed by their doctors, which may have a negative impact on their health.

Cardiovascular diseases are most frequent health conditions among older persons not only in the municipalities studied as part of the survey, but also nationwide and worldwide; they are also one of the leading causes of mortality among older people. Cardiovascular problems were particularly prevalent among the respondents in Dmanisi and Bolnisi municipalities.

On the positive side, older persons have access to the State Universal Healthcare Programme, and approximately 64.4% of survey participants had benefited from the programme in the
previous 12 months. However, the State Universal Healthcare Programme does not meet all medical needs of older persons, whereas programmes available at the local government level manage to only partially fill this gap. Due to their dire economic situation, older persons are unable to cover out-of-pocket medical expenses, which are not covered by the programmes implemented at central or local levels. Consequently, it can be concluded that the medical needs of older persons in the target municipalities, as well as in the whole country, are only partially met, which increases the vulnerability of this group. During the COVID-19 pandemic, poor health and unmet medical needs put the older persons at particular risk, which can have a serious effect on the mental health of older persons. Persons with disabilities and with underlying health conditions are at particular risk.

Only a few respondents reported either ever having been victims of various forms of violence or having witnessed an act of violence against other older persons, which is inconsistent with existing local and international data, according to which, older persons are often victims of abuse and neglect. The discrepancy between the research data and the secondary data can be largely due to the research method used - quantitative research, by its very nature, does not allow for in-depth study of the issue. Along with quantitative methods, an in-depth study of sensitive issues requires the use of qualitative techniques that was impossible within the frames of the given research project.

Based on the findings above, the following is recommended:

- Access to health-care services and medicines should be increased; effective intervention mechanisms and proper prevention efforts will significantly reduce the burden of health care costs on the State and families. Municipalities where older people were unable to receive medical care for health conditions unrelated to COVID-19, during the COVID-19 pandemic, need to take appropriate actions in this regard. In particular, additional measures to provide health-care services to older persons in Bolnisi, Dmanisi and Tianeti municipalities is advised.

- The health needs of vulnerable older persons should be studied and assessed at the local level. Although according to the decision of the Government of Georgia, older persons are able to buy 35 medicines for the treatment of 6 chronic diseases at a symbolic price - GEL1, many older persons still have to pay for essential prescription medications out of pocket. It is therefore important that local governments identify and support provisions of free medications that are routinely consumed by the older persons living in the municipalities due to prevalent chronic diseases, and are not covered by the above mentioned State Programme. In addition, to cover the cost of medical examinations that cannot be covered by the State Universal Healthcare Programme, it is recommended for local governments to annually allocate limited amount of funds (in the form of vouchers) for each older person, which can be used for medical examinations.

- Older persons should be informed in details about the State Universal Healthcare Programme and the medical and social services available at the local level, in a way that is understandable and convenient for them. For this purpose, preparing special brochures and distributing them among older persons is recommended.

- In order to ensure that medical and social services provided to older people are based on the principles of human rights, it is important to periodically monitor the services they receive, which is possible by interviewing older people directly and analysing their feedback.
It is very important for older persons to be aware of their basic human rights. For this purpose it is advisable to prepare special leaflets and distribute them among older persons. The leaflets should provide information on whom older people should turn to in case of their rights being violated.

It is imperative for older persons to be informed about violence and its forms in order to identify an act of violence or abuse committed against them in a timely manner and take appropriate actions. For this purpose it is recommended to prepare special flyers and distribute them among older persons. The flyers should provide information on who the older persons should contact in case of abuse committed against them.

3. Daily life and social interactions of older persons

Social interactions of older persons are limited; they rarely interact with neighbours, with even fewer relatives and with even fewer friends. Older persons rarely visit the city or village centres. Limited social networks as well as social activities affect mental health of older persons. The situation in this regard is especially exacerbated by pandemic conditions.

In the target municipalities, the older persons have almost no access to mobile telephones, computers or the Internet - only 1/5 of the survey participants have a mobile phone, and only a few older people have a computer and access to the Internet. As technology takes an increasingly prominent place in modern economic and social relations, the lack of technology or the ability to use it further aggravates the vulnerability of older people.

The older people living alone or with their spouses in the target municipalities have difficulty running a family and household - about half of those surveyed are almost unable to handle household chores and even fewer can run a household.

The biggest challenge for older persons is economic hardship - in all target municipalities, survey participants named economic problems as the biggest problem. Secondary data show that the situation is fairly much the same across the country.

Based on the findings given above, the following is recommended:

- Local authorities should promote the social contacts of older persons and the development of intergenerational solidarity. The examples include: organizing volunteer groups of high school students to help the local old persons who are single or live alone with household chores and running the households; ensuring the attendance of old people at various cultural events; involvement of senior citizens in local government activities or decision-making processes, etc.

- It is important to raise awareness of modern technologies among older persons - to help them develop the skills related to using mobile phones and the Internet. The above-mentioned groups of young volunteers can be of great help in this regard; local authorities should support provision of necessary equipment to the older persons. Volunteers working with older persons should receive special training on key issues related to gerontology in order to be able to communicate with and treat older persons with respect and dignity.

- It is important to establish clubs for older persons at the local level, to encourage and support their activities - to organize discussions on various social and political issues and arrange cultural events and anniversaries for older persons.
კვლევის ანგარიში

სიღარიბის ზღვარს ქვემოთ მყოფი, მარტო მცხოვრები პენსიონერების ზოგადი მდგომარეობა COVID-19-ის პერიოდში