

Community Centre and the Elderly in Obio- Akpor Communities, Rivers State, Nigeria

Heoma Gladys Nsirim-Worlu

*Department of Sociology,
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Port Harcourt*

Abstract

The study assessed the effect of the presence and utilisation of community town halls on the elderly in Obio-Akpor Communities of Rivers State. The research design is a descriptive cross-sectional survey and employed questionnaire as the primary source of data and articles from written materials as its secondary source of data collection. The study area is Obio-Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State where some communities were purposively chosen. The convenience sampling technique enabled the researcher to select 3 communities; which are Choba, Ozuoba and Rumuokoro and 30 respondents from each of the communities totalling ninety (90) respondents. The data was tested utilising simple percentages and frequencies and the generated results were presented in tables and charts. It was concluded that the purposes of creating centres/arenas in communities which include holding community meetings, celebrating community festivals, and chieftaincy coronation and other events of significance have been defeated because most community centres/arenas in contemporary times are used for other events; for instance, church services and other business activities that are not purely community oriented and elderly friendly; and as such the elderly are deprived from participating in the social activities that go on in the designated places. It was therefore, suggested that community leaders should ensure that the symbol of the centres/arenas should not be eroded by their activities as the transmission of knowledge and sharing of ideas/ history of the people by the elderly are not eliminated and thus make for continuity of the culture which the elderly are the drivers.

Keywords: *Community, Centre and Elderly.*

Corresponding Author: Heoma Gladys Nsirim-Worlu

Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijarppads.v5.i1.02

Background to the Study

In the past, a community centre/arena was a spot or place where all a sundry (the young and the elderly) gathered for different community functions, these community functions stretch from community meetings, inaugurations, chieftaincy coronations, customary recreations, arts, and the likes. The arena is a common ground whereby all the social classes of the community participate in matters that are interconnected with the community and beyond; in line with this thought process is the work of Kinsella and Phillips (2005), which states that generally, the objectives of community engagement are to build trust, pass first-hand information, solicit innovative resources and allies, and create better communication. By definition a community is a group of individuals with something in common and are non-passively engaged with one another in a kind manner. The most common event often carried out in a community that emboldens the active engagement of both the old and young in a community is the community town hall meeting which seems to be waning out as a lot of people view it as old practice with the advancement in technology and adoption of the foreign lifestyles by the people in most communities. Not only has the community recreation centre which gave everyone in community the leverage to meet and discuss community-based matters and thereafter proffer appropriate solutions, as well as adopt community-based policies being relegated as an old practice, the arena in most of these communities are observed to be converted to hosting other social but not unswervingly community affected functions.

Additionally, it is observed that most community centres are currently housing quality buildings that are used for diverse programmes and events. To support this view is Agrawal (2005), who refers to such buildings as community town halls, which are used as football viewing centres, religious crusade centres, youth empowerment programmes, event hosting centres and the likes. This new turn of event in communities seems to affect the elderly negatively since the activities in the town halls in the community centres are of little or no importance to them. Meetings that were formally held in community town halls involving the youths, men and even women and elderly in the community are now being held on social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram etc.; thus, disengaging the elderly from active participation in decision making process in the community because most of them are not internet savvy and have no access to smart phones.

A study by Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton (2010) posits that when the elderly ones maintain social participation there is a lot of positive stimulus on their quality of life, psychological health, over-all wellbeing, perceptive functions and life expectancy. However, with the trend of evolvement of things in present day communities, the elderly ones are at risk of negative stimulus resulting from less participation in social matters. It is in this wise that this study aims to assess the effect of the presence and utilisation of community centre/arenas on the elderly in Obio- Akpor Communities of Rivers State.

Study Area

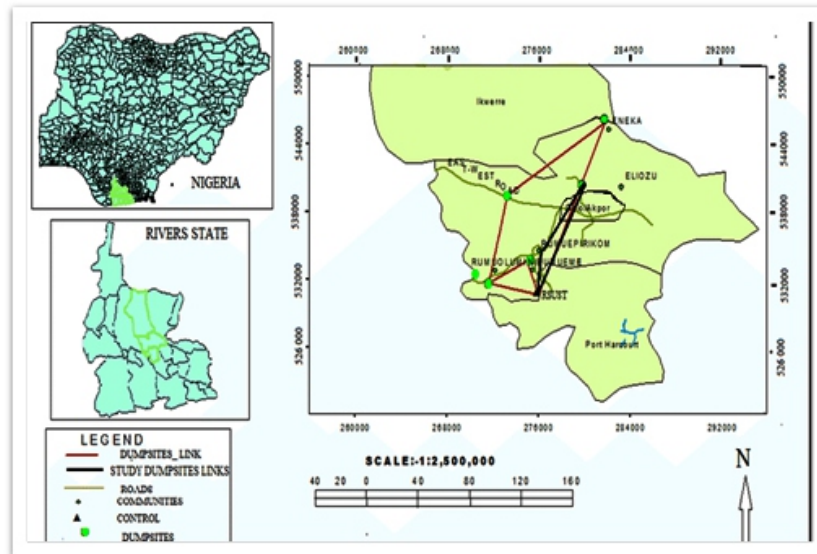


Figure 1: The Map of the study Area showing Obio-Akpor LGA
Source: Agbemuko, Tamunobereton, and Ngah, 2018

This study area is Obio-Akpor Local Government Area, it is one of the twenty-three local government areas in Rivers State, Nigeria. It is in the interior part of Niger delta region of Nigeria. The study area is located in the middle of the longitude $06^{\circ} 54' 30''$ E, and $07^{\circ} 03' 09''$ E and between latitude $04^{\circ} 45' 27''$ N and $04^{\circ} 58' 22''$ N. All communities comprising it are urban in outlook and the population of the area according to the 2006 census reads..... And which we think that it has increased doubly. The economic activities in the area are mixed as there is oil industry presence, civil service, education, and buying and selling going on there.

Literature Review Community

Community refers to an assembly of people who share similar features like dwelling in the same territorial environment and are very much involved in the similar activities, showing benevolence to one another and enjoying the resources of the community. In other words, a community, is the grouping of individuals into different strata that can be determined by filiation, religion, education and even residence and their varied activities are geared toward the development of the area and its people. The German Sociologist, Max Weber views community simply as "a sense of belonging together". The term community is mostly used to refer to a group of persons or a location and thus, it is defined by nothing more or less than this subjective state. To Agrawal (2005), a community is a necessary tool for government to get closer to the people uniting members of villages, community heads, state officials posted to rural communities. Intimate government shapes practice and helps to knit together individuals in villages, their

leaders, state officials stationed in rural administrative centres, and politicians interested in classifying existing ecological practices.

Murphree (1994), opines that communities are not, however, monolithic, undifferentiated entities. They contain categories of people distinguished by age, sex, interest, and power. Nor do they exist in a political or economic vacuum; they are linked in various ways with the larger society that surrounds them. Furthermore, it was added that cultural traditions can be used to help strengthen local organisations and build a sense of community or shared identity at the village or regional level. A strong sense of shared identity can energise people and inspire them to collective action to improve their lives.

To buttress the connectivity of community is Kleymeyer (1994), which argues that without a sense of community, individuals retreat into their families or themselves, to the detriment of collaborative efforts at survival and betterment in the community. He again presents that community no longer displays the "vegetative" character that it used to have, rather, in the new world of community-based sustainability, this sense of shared identity and interests must be strengthened and built, in order to energise and inspire members of the community including the youths and the elderly.

Community Centre

According to Hornby (2015), a community centre is a place where people from the same area can meet for social events or sports or to take classes. It therefore means that a community centre is an important tool in the socialisation and transmission of norms and mores to its citizens in that, it is a place to inform citizens about emerging issues, gauge where a community stands and identify and implement solutions to existing problem(s). It is an effective place to get your message across to the public, generate news media coverage, jump-start community planning efforts and identify issues that matter to your constituents. Community centre therefore, is a place where meetings are held and fora organised for citizens to express their views as opposed to an opportunity to just conduct regular level government business. The holding of meetings in this place according to Brown and Wocha (2017), offer opportunities for citizens to provide feedback to government officials and community leaders on the most pressing and concerning issues that face the people.

Town hall meetings, like all constituent engagement activities, can serve a range of purposes. Typically, they most often facilitate the middle three stages of the citizen-governance, for instance; a true town hall meeting is where people show up to discuss issues, come up with solutions and possibly vote on policies. People are expected to be given unhindered opportunities to talk at the events. When organising town hall meetings, speakers are not invited rather members of the community are encouraged to state complaints, give their opinions and suggest possible solutions. Town hall meetings are meant to involve everybody, especially taxable adults.

Elderly in Nigeria

There are regional differences with regard to definitions of old age. In Africa, for example, chronological age is often a poor indicator of being old, particularly in rural areas. Older persons are more likely to be defined in relation to an individual's functioning, physical appearance and social role transitions; Kinsella and Phillips (2005). Absence of social infrastructures makes it impossible for the young and old to participate in same social activities. In that wise Bowling and Dieppe (2005), and Henkin and Zapf (2007), reiterates that before an aging person can be termed successful, the individuals must partake in social functions and be satisfied with the life he or she is living.

World Health Organisation (WHO) (2002), also sees maximising health opportunities, participation and safety as the support system of active aging. Its major goal is to improve the life expectancy and standard of living of people as they get older. Nevertheless, third world nations have not been able to meet the needs of the aged in the society, contrary to the advanced nations and as such the position of WHO as captured above has a lot left to be desired.

Social participation refers to the commitment of all participants of the community in regeneration, socialisation and cultural, scholastic and religious events, World Health Organisation (2007). Among a national representative sample of the British population, the predominance of lack of social integration is 7% and almost one-third of adults 65 years and older reported being occasionally isolated; Victor, Scambler, Bowling, and Bond (2005).

Greater rates of social involvement are linked with the accessibility of social resources. In a practical outlook, social relations permit the elderly to gain substantial and symbolic resources through; 1) emotional support provided by someone to dialogue to and listen to, 2) substantial and active support that aids resolving applied problems and performing the activities of daily living, and 3) information, that helps older persons to comprehend the world and adjust to variations in society. Insufficient social support is associated with an increase in death, illness, psychological distress and with a reduction in general health and wellbeing; World Health Organisation (2002). Again, WHO (2002) states that the aged must participate in social and creative events which produce optimistic consequences such as intergenerational harmony; decrease of the individualisation of lifestyles in old age; financial and social added value through the industrious impact of the elderly in the community in formal and informal works; and abridged request for health services due to the preserved independence of the aged.

Lastly, civic engagement of the elderly in the view of Henkin and Zapf (2007), permits the people to use their services, knowledge and experience as a cost-effective strategy to revitalise societies, enhance community life, progress the worth of life for all, meet the needs of persons through the life course and encourage an effective aging.

In the light of the foregoing, Brown and Wocha (2017), highlighted some goals of public involvement which comprise of;

1. Building up the existing interpersonal relationships among members of the group (community).
2. Improve the decision-making process for the people and by the people.
3. Guaranteeing suitable demonstration of a variety of social groups in decision making. This position this article agrees to in that, the worth of transferring knowledge from one generation to another is clearly recognised in certain cultures, and most especially among indigenous communities. This is why UN-DESA (2005), posits that prehistoric cultural norms, principles and customs are often reserved by a non-organised system of intergenerational transmission, adapted to the local culture and atmosphere; and as such traditional knowledge is typically thought verbally, and can take the forms of stories, songs, artistic impressions, cultural events, rituals, languages and agricultural practices.

In tandem with the above stand point, WHO (2007) argues that older persons may feel estranged in a changing society, not identifying with cultural events that reflect altering values and morality with the speed and the priorities of modern society (e.g., consumerism and materialism). They may also feel marginalised due to the rapid technical development of society (e.g., automation of daily life and internet). In order to allay the fears of the elderly, it is wise that the society can support the social participation of older persons by providing them with services and welfare facilities, like home maintenance and personal transport services that can allow older persons to save time and perform activities that promote social contact. This is necessary because, it is observed that older persons face various difficulties dealing with technology due to age-related functional limitations like deteriorating eyesight, motor functions and cognitive abilities and level of education or literacy.

Empirical Review

Cachadinha, Pedro and Fialho (2002), identified factors that hinder or support the social participation of older persons living in the community. The importance of older people's engagement in physical, social and productive activities was studied. They discovered that social participation of older adults has multiple advantages for the society and engagement in social activities appears to be particularly beneficial to the health, wellbeing and empowerment of older adults. However, personal restrictions associated with aging and determinants related to the social and physical environment can hinder the social participation of older persons. As people age, the housing environment may become more relevant to their social participation; and as such, Brown and Wocha (2017) assessed the level of participation of communities and community development committees in the provision of public infrastructure in selected communities of Abua/Odual Local Government Area in Rivers in order to identify existing mechanism for public participation in rural development process; ascertain the nature and extent of participation in rural development, ascertain the participation level of Community Development Committee (CDC) in implementation of development projects. It was

discovered that the community development committees (CDCs) in the respective communities were effective in the dissemination of information with respect to projects embarked upon by the government to encourage community participation; there is a dearth of information and lack of synergy between the government agencies charged with the responsibility of planning and implementing rural/community development policies and the beneficiaries of such development. The study thus recommended that members of the CDCs should form part of members of planning and implementation committees in their respective communities, and also immediate establishment of local planning authorities.

Methodology

The research design for this study is a descriptive cross-sectional survey. It utilised questionnaire as the primary source of data and research articles as the secondary source of data collection. The questionnaire was divided into two sections, Section A, was the demographic data and Section B, addressed the issues relating to community centre and the elderly. The study area was Obio-Akpor Local Government Area in Rivers State. The simple random sampling technique was used to draw out 3 wards from the 17 wards in Obio-Akpor Local Government. From the three (3) wards selected, 1 community was selected from each making 3 selected communities (Choba, Ozuoba and Rumuokoro). From each of the 3 selected communities, 30 respondents were conveniently selected making the sample size to be 90. Thus, the data collected was tested utilising simple percentages and the results were presented in tables and charts.

Results and Discussion

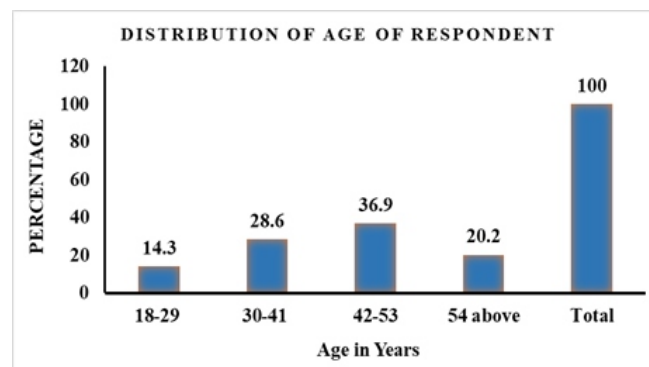


Figure 2: Age distribution of Respondents.

From figure 2 above, the age distribution of respondents is reflected showing 14.3% of respondents are between ages 18-29, 28.6% of respondents are between ages 30-41, 36.9% of respondents are ages 42-53 and 20.2% of respondents are 54 years and above.

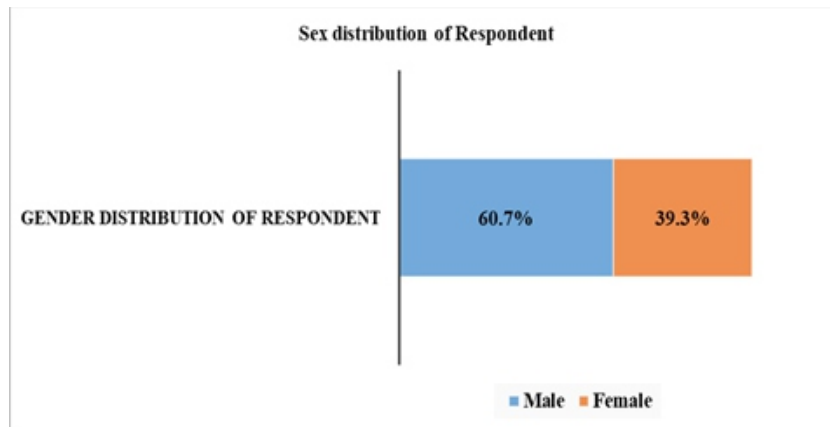


Figure 3: Gender distribution of Respondents.

Figure 3, reveals the sex distribution of respondents. 60.7% of respondents are male and 39.3% of respondents are females indicating that male respondents represent the majority group.

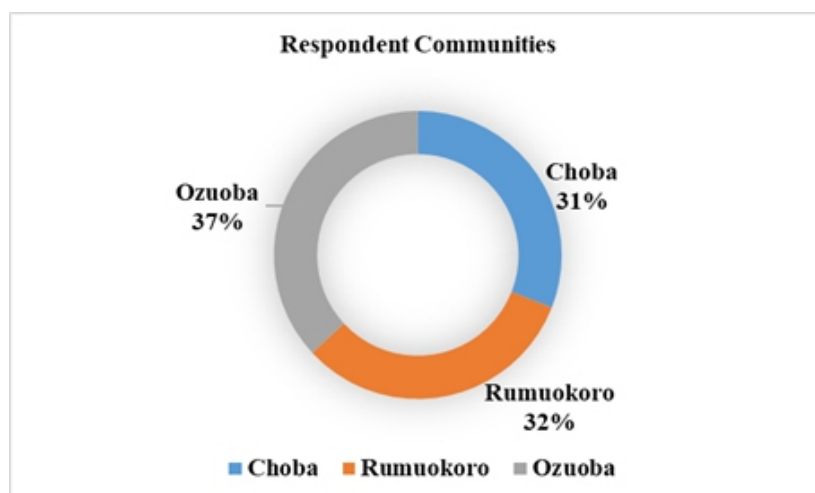


Figure 4: Distribution of Respondent Community.

Figure 4, shows the communities of respondents and the return rate of the questionnaire. 37% of respondents are from Ozuoba community, 31% of respondents are from Choba community and 32% of respondents are from Rumuokoro community in Obio/ Akpor, Local Government Area, Rivers State. This is an indication that majority of the respondents who completed the questionnaire are from Ozuoba community.

Table 1: Distribution of community centre/town hall and elderly participation

S/No	Questions	Yes F(%)	No F(%)
Number Respondents (N) = 84, Percentage (%) = 100.			
1.	Does your community have a centre/town hall?	78(90.5)	6(9.5)
2.	Is your community centre/town hall accessible to every member of the community?	31(36.9)	53(63.1)
3.	Meetings addressing community issue is often discussed in my community centre/town hall	43(51.2)	41(48.8)
4.	Is your community centre/town hall still as functional in accommodating everyone's participation as they used to be?	23(27.4)	61(72.6)
5.	Does the elderly ones participate in community centre/town hall meetings?	38(45.2)	46(54.8)
6.	Does the elderly ones have cogent reasons to access the community centre/town hall as much as the young ones in this present age?	19(22.6)	65(77.4)
7.	If No, to question 6; do you think this has any negative effect on the elderly ones?	72(85.7)	12(14.3)

Source: Researcher's survey, 2020.

Table 1, indicates that 90.5% of respondents have community centre/town hall, 63.1% of respondents said community town hall is inaccessible to every member of the community, 51.2% of respondents opined that meeting addressing community issues are often discussed in community centres/town halls. 72.6% of respondents answered that their community centre/town hall is not functional in accommodating everyone's participation as they used to be. 54.8% responded that the elderly does not participate in community centre/town hall meetings. 77.4% of respondents said the elderly do not have cogent reasons to access the community centre/town hall meetings. 85.7% of respondents stated that not having access to community centre/town hall as much as young ones has a negative effect on the elderly.

Table 2: Distribution of community centre/town hall and elderly participation

If No to question 4 of table 1, why?		
Options	Frequency(F)	Percentage (%)
They are used for other activities.	41	48.8
The building is dilapidated	16	19.0
Issues concerning the community is discussed and settled on social media platforms.	27	67.8
Total	84	100

Source: Researcher's survey, 2020.

With respect to responses from table 1, question 4 (is your community centre/town hall still as functional in accommodating everyone's participation as they used to be?), why?

67.8% of respondents said issues concerning the community is discussed and settled on social media platforms.

Table 3: Negative impact on the elderly

What obvious negative effect can you say the non-accessibility to the community centre/town hall and non-participation in community matters have on the elderly?		
Options	Frequency(F)	Percentage (%)
Reduced life expectancy	22	26.2
Declined /reduced psychological health	49	58.3
Depreciation/reduction in social life	13	15.5
Total	84	100

Source: Researcher's survey, 2020.

Table 3, shows that 58.3% which is majority of respondents experience declined psychological health as a negative impact on the elderly. 26.2% said it reduces the life expectancy of the elderly and 15.5% said it reduces their social life with members of the community.

Discussion of Findings

The discoveries of this study express that the studied areas have community centres/town halls, unfortunately these community centres are not readily accessible to everyone in the community; this is because most of the community centres in this present time are being converted to serve other functions or purposes such as wedding and burial ceremonies, crusades, political party meetings, school, religious activities, etc. with economic gains as the main goal; while participation of members of the community in town halls are not prioritised. The inability of everyone to have access to the community centre/town hall has affected its functionality as it used to be in the past where every community members (young and old) had a platform to participate in community issues. It is also discovered that most elderly ones do not have easy access to the present day community centres as most activities carried out therein are youth-based activities, for example youth empowerment programmes, and other commercial activities, these thus leads to exclusion of the elderly in certain activities that are of benefit to all a sundry. The exclusion of the elderly from certain community activities is due to conversion in the functionality of community centres and transformation in medium of communication where the youth employ different forms of social media platforms in interactions, such as Facebook, and WhatsApp and this stemmed on technological advancement. This has a lot of negative effect on the elderly. This study also found out that non-participation of the elderly in certain community issues is capable of causing a decline/reduction in their psychological health.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, the purpose of creating community centres which currently house town halls in Communities includes but not limited to meetings, festivals, and chieftaincy coronation, recreation, etc. has been utterly modified as most activities that are

carried out at the designated centres are not purely community-based events; which then accounts for why the elderly are seen to be excluded and their voices of wisdom and truth are seen not to be adequately tapped. This condition has abridged the elderly from participating in certain community social activities and decision-making process, and this in turn has adverse effect on the psychological health and wellbeing of the elderly.

Suggestions/Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are proffered:

1. Community leaders should ensure premium should be placed on important community related activities while considering the use of the community centre/ arenas, as this trend will bring about rapid development within the area.
2. Any events or activities that will involve the use of social media platforms and thereby excluding the elderly from participating effectively should not be taken to the community centres, as they will be antithetical to the elderly' psychological wellbeing and the reasons for which they were created.
3. Furthermore, it is suggested that following the transformation that has crept into Obio/ Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, that certain days should be set aside for the elders to meet at their community centres in order to discuss issues that will be beneficial to all the people both indigenes and non-indigenes like, this will go a long way to giving the elderly a sense of warmth and belonging and also help in the transmission of norms and mores.

References

- Agbemuko, O. S., Tamunobereton, I. & Ngah, S. A. (2018). Determination of the effect of dumpsites on aquifer at Port Harcourt Metropolis, Rivers State, Nigeria, *IOSR Journal of Applied Physics (IOSR-JAP) e-ISSN: 2278-4861*. 9, (6) Ver. I, 41-54 www.iosrjournals.org.
- Agrawal, A. (2005). Environmentality: Community, intimate government, and the making of environmental subjects in Kumaon, India: *Current Anthropology* 46, 161-190.
- Bowling, A. & Dieppe, P. (2005). What is successful ageing and who should define It?. *The British Medical Journal*, 331, 7531, 1548-1551.
- Brown, I. & Wocha, C. (2017). Community participation: Panacea for rural development programmes in Rivers State, Nigeria, *Asian Journal of Environment and Ecology*. 3(1), 1-13.
- Cachadinha, C., Pedro, J. & Fialho, J. (2002). Social participation of community living older persons: Importance, determinants and opportunities, *Psychological Sciences and Social Science Journals*. 67-89.
- Henkin, N. & Zapf, J. (2007). How communities can promote civic engagement of people age 50-plus, *Generations*, 30, 4, 72-77.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., Smithand, T. B. & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality Risk: a meta-analytic review, *PLoS Med*, 7, 7.
- Hornby, A. S. (2015). *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English*, United Kingdom, Oxford University Press.
- Kinsella, K. & Phillips, D. R. (2005). Global aging: The challenge of success, *Population Bulletin*, 60(1), 1-40.
- Kleymeyer, C. D. (1994). Cultural traditions and community-based conservation, in *Natural connections: Perspectives in community-based conservation*, ed. David Western and R. Michael Wright, 323-346. Washington, D.C., Island Press.
- Murphree, M. W. (1994). *The role of institutions in community-based conservation, in natural connections: Perspectives in community-based conservation ed*, David Western and R. Michael Wright, 403-427. Washington, D.C., Island Press.
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs UN-DESA (2005). *Background Note. international workshop on traditional knowledge*, Prepared by the Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Division for Social Policy and Development. Panama City, 21-23 September.

Victor, C., S. Scambler, A. B. & Bond, J. (2005). The prevalence of, and risk factors for, loneliness in later life: A survey of older people in Great Britain, *Ageing & Society* 25, 357-375.

World Health Organisation (2002). *Active ageing: A policy framework*, Geneva, WHO

World Health Organisation (2007). *Global age-friendly cities: A guide*, Switzerland: World Health Organisation.