

In the past decade, there has been considerable growth in non-government organisations and charities concerned with the well-being of the elderly. This is in response to the rapid demographic change occurring in the world, which, even in the developing countries, will lead to a doubling of the percentage of over-60s in the population in less than a generation.

By 2028, India is forecast to have almost 180 million people above 60, which will represent 13 per cent of the population. This is in part a consequence of improvements in health-care, the existence of drugs such as antibiotics which can cure infections from which people would formerly not have been expected to survive. It is also a result of better nutrition, and higher living standards. Yet the idea of a growing "burden" of non-productive humanity inspires great anxiety.

Most workers in the field point out that this is far from a catastrophe. A distinction has to be made between the "young-elderly" - that is, people from approximately 60-75 and the "old-elderly" (the over 75s). The former will constitute by far the larger group. The point is

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that most of them, with some exceptions, are still independent, energetic and capable of contributing significantly to the work of society. The latter group are - on the whole, but by no means completely - less robust, more dependent, and enjoy less good health and mobility.

For many, the question is, how to deploy the energies and capabilities of the young elderly in constructive ways, so that they do not feel purposeless, and waste away from lack of useful activity, from a feeling of superfluity. Many NGOs have inaugurated programmes which are looking into ways to reclaim and retrieve what is at present a largely wasted resource - the intelligence and energies of those who have passed what is becoming an increasingly arbitrary retirement age of 60.

Indrani Chakravarty is director of the Kolkata Metropolitan Institute for Gerontology (CMIG), perhaps the most innovative and comprehensive organisation of its kind in India. From studies and surveys, research and development through to service delivery to some of the poorest of the poor of the elderly in Kolkata, the Institute works in unique partnerships with the elderly of the city. There are about 300,000 people over 60 in Kolkata, about 75,000 in slum areas: the relatively low figure in relation to the total is