Long-term care for older people in contexts of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa:
recognizing and addressing a ‘cultural lag’

Isabella Aboderin, PhD,
African Population and Health Research Center, Nairobi, Kenya and
Centre for Research on Ageing, University of Southampton, UK

Jacobus Hoffman, DPhil,
African Unit for Transdisciplinary Health Research, North West University, South Africa and
Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, University of Oxford

As part of an intensifying research debate on issues of ageing, health and well-being in sub-Saharan Africa, findings from a number of representative surveys have highlighted a substantial prevalence of functional impairment and disability in the older population. Concurrently, a small body of investigations into the realities of long-term care for functionally dependent older persons in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has accumulated in recent years. In underscoring the broad absence of comprehensive formal care provision in most SSA countries, the evidence highlights not only the overwhelming role of ‘informal’ care provided by family members of all ages. It also documents the existence of profound inadequacies in care, and to clear negative impacts of current care arrangements on caregivers’ employment opportunities and economic circumstances as well as their - and care-recipients’ - physical and mental well-being. These adverse conditions arise particularly within contexts of poverty – i.e. of low, insecure incomes and lacking social security, inadequate housing, lack of basic amenities and access to information and training as well as poor and costly essential services (health, education, transport). Within such, as well as more affluent settings, research points, moreover, to a clearly emerging demand for formal care, and a slow ‘organic’ growth of charitable or private care support services.

Thus far, the extant realities of long-term care for older people have received little, if any, consideration in dominant African policy discourses on this issue. These underline the ‘asset’ of traditional family care as part of a broader emphasis on customary African family values as a bedrock for ‘homegrown’ development in the continent - and remain essentially uncontested. Indeed, there appears to be a remarkable disconnect between such discourses and actual experiences of such care.

Drawing on a review of existing empirical research on long-term care for older people in SSA, as well as content analysis of key regional- and selected national-level policy documents on ageing or families in Africa, this paper critically examines the nature and extent of the policy-reality gap and distils implications for further research and debate.

The analysis suggests that there exists a ‘Cultural Lag’ between actual ‘material’ conditions of long-term care for older people in SSA and dominant ‘cultural’ prescriptions on it. It argues that such a ‘lag’, if not challenged, will continue to impede
effective debate on, as well as urgently needed policy action to mitigate caregiver strain and care inadequacies in the region. To address it, the paper proposes a number of ‘directions’ for future research. These include more (i) explicit engagement with existing policy debates and frameworks (ii) large-scale research to establish and quantify impacts (health, social, economic) of current informal care arrangements (iii) sound investigation of public perspectives, rationales on the role of formal care and (iv) conceptual development, possibly drawing on parallel experiences in Asian societies, of perspectives on how formal care provision can be reconciled with ‘traditional’ African values of respect for older people and family obligations.