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ORIGINAL

Population aging, Chair of Older Adults in the Isla de la Juventud and development

Envejecimiento poblacional, Cátedra del Adulto Mayor en la Isla de la Juventud y desarrollo

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: this research projects a current topic related to population aging and the functioning of the University Chair for the Elderly on the Isle of Youth.
Objective: to analyze the aging process in Cuba, as well as the functioning of the University Chair for the Elderly on the Isle of Youth.
Development: a qualitative approach was used, combining methods to obtain data through observations, interviews, documentary analysis, personal experiences and narratives to explore objectives, nature, possibilities and limitations of the program. The educational program is highly valued in increasing the self-esteem of the elderly, resulting in positive success in the elderly people who make up the chair, increasing awareness of the importance of caring for the elderly.
Conclusions: adult education in Cuba favors the continuous and permanent education of this population sector to put them at the level of technological, social and scientific changes and developments in the current context, thus enabling the increase in their well-being and quality of life. The participants of Isla de la Juventud demonstrate personal successes in the development of skills to face aging and cooperate with the development of society.

Keywords: Population Aging; University Chair; Older Adult; Development.

RESUMEN

Introducción: la presente investigación proyecta una temática de actualidad relacionado con el envejecimiento poblacional y el funcionamiento de la Cátedra Universitaria del Adulto Mayor en la Isla de la Juventud.
Objetivo: analizar el proceso de envejecimiento en Cuba, así como el funcionamiento de la Cátedra Universitaria del Adulto Mayor de la Isla de la Juventud.
Desarrollo: se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo, combinando métodos para obtener datos a través de observaciones, entrevistas, análisis documental, experiencias personales y narraciones para explorar objetivos, naturaleza, posibilidades y limitaciones del programa. El programa educativo es altamente valorado en el aumento de la autoestima de los adultos mayores teniendo como resultado un éxito positivo en las personas de la tercera edad que integran la cátedra, aumentando la conciencia de la importancia de cuidar a los adultos mayores.
Conclusiones: la educación para las personas adultas en Cuba favorece la educación continua y permanente de ese sector poblacional para colocarlos a la altura de los cambios y novedades tecnológicos, sociales y científicos en el contexto actual, posibilitando de esa manera el incremento del bienestar y calidad de vida de los mismos. Los participantes de Isla de la Juventud demuestran éxitos personales en el desarrollo de habilidades para enfrentar el envejecimiento y cooperar con el desarrollo de la sociedad.

Palabras clave: Envejecimiento Poblacional; Cátedra Universitaria; Adulto Mayor; Desarrollo.

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INTRODUCTION

Population aging is the main demographic characteristic of Cuba, and it is predicted that by 2050 almost one in four Cubans will be an elderly person. By then, the average age will be around 44 years old and Cuba will have all the characteristics of an aging country.[1]

In 2019, 20,8 % of Cubans were 60 years old or older; at the end of 2022, that indicator was 22,3 %, two percentage points more in three years, according to the National Office of Statistics and Information (ONEI); these figures give a rounded estimate of an elderly population of about 2 500 000 inhabitants. In its recent report Population Aging, Cuba and its Territories (May 2023 edition), ONEI maintains that the aging of its population is the main demographic challenge for the Cuban territory.[2]

This increase in the proportion of older adults with respect to the rest of the population is associated not only with an increase in the proportion of older adults but also with a decrease in the proportion of children and young people between 0 and 14 years of age, which impacts the "economy, family, services, replacement of human capital, social security and the high costs of medical and epidemiological care."[2] In correspondence with the degree of aging, the Isla de la Juventud Municipality is located in group III (GE-III), having more than 15 % of the population aged 60 and over, with respect to the total in the period 2016-2020. [3]

When carrying out this analysis in 2022, Isla de la Juventud shows an increase in its degree of aging, with a total of 17 378 older adults, with the female population being older than the male population, 9 183 adult women and 8 195 men.[3] The progress of the aging process is evident within the working-age population since its impact is noticeable, due to the fact that the cohorts that enter it are less numerous than those that leave or move to non-active ages, sharpening the deterioration of these indicators; making old age a reality of attention and management from the socioeconomic structures given its sustained advance.

Within the structural determinants of health, the socioeconomic and political context appears, which refers to structural factors of the social system that significantly affect the social structure in addition to public policies on education and health care. [4]

The increase in the number and proportion of older adults makes necessary a significant increase in training. Higher education, through the creation of the University Chair for the Elderly (CUAM) founded in 2000, has sought a space to encourage a better condition and quality of life for the elderly throughout the country.[5] In this sense, this study shows the achievements obtained in the CUAM program, and its link with the well-being and quality of life of those who participate in it, as well as with the development of society.

The objective of this research was to analyze the aging process in Cuba, as well as the functioning of the University Chair for the Elderly of the Isla de la Juventud, taking into account its influence on the development of society.

DEVELOPMENT

A study was conducted with a qualitative approach, combining theoretical and empirical methods to obtain data through observations, interviews, documentary analysis, personal experiences and narratives with the aim of analyzing the aging process in Cuba, as well as the functioning of the University Chair for the Elderly of the Isla de la Juventud by exploring the objectives, nature, possibilities and limitations of the main program of said chair, taking into account the role that these phenomena play in local and regional development.

Regional Development is an academic and public policy issue, whose origin and diffusion in Latin America arose in the second post-war period: a) associated with the thinking on development-underdevelopment, b) supported by developmentalist, structuralist and dependency theories, disseminated mainly by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) based on the regional inequality existing between the different spaces that make up the Latin American nations.[6]

Regional Development is a localized process of sustained social change that has as its ultimate goal the permanent progress of the region, the territory, the locality, the community and of each individual resident in it. This term is understood as the socioeconomic development of a single unit as well as of a territory, which is formally built by several units, which form a set or group of regions.[6]

There are eight components of local and regional development: physical capital, economic activity, human capital, social capital, institutional capacity, management of financial resources, transparency and political participation.[6]

Currently, the number of people aged 60 and over in Cuba amounts to 2 478 087. The latest population projection made by ONEI estimates that by 2050, the elderly population will reach 3 343 520 people, which would represent a degree of aging of 35,9 %. In addition to the increase in the population aged 60 and over, the country has experienced a simultaneous reduction in the percentage of people under 15 years of age as a result of fertility below the replacement level - less than one daughter per woman - since 1978, 44 years ago. This replacement level corresponds to a rate of 2,1 children per woman, and at least one daughter at the end of her reproductive period, which would ensure the replacement of the number of women of reproductive age.[3]

"At the end of 2022, the country's population aged 60 and over increased by 79 976 more people than in the same period of the previous year, which represents an average annual growth rate of 33,3 %. The behavior of this segment of the population by sex shows that men are growing by 35 565 people for an average annual rate of 32,3 %, while the female population is growing at a higher rate by 44 411 with a rate of 34,3 %."[3] This means that aging is feminized, since women live longer than their male counterparts. Thus, in 2023 there were 214 000 more women than men, a figure that by 2055 would rise to 287 000.[3]

The demographic dependency ratio, which explains the possible dependency of potentially inactive people in relation to the potentially active population between the ages of 15 and 59, stood at 613 in 2022. This indicator, although not totally unfavorable so far, does alert us to how it has been progressively increasing, if we take into account that in 2015 it stood at 559.[3]

Regarding life expectancy at birth, in 2022, 95 403 people were born, compared to 99 096 in the previous year, while 120 098 died, 47 547 fewer people than in 2021. Life expectancy was in the period 2018-2020 at 77,70 years, which represents a decrease compared to the 2014-2016 period, which was 78,1 years.[3]

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According to the balance of the Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) in this last period, the calculated indicator expresses a life expectancy at birth of 80,15 years for women and 75,33 years for men, while in 2014-2016 it was 75,9 for men and 80,3 for women. The observed reduction is related, among other causes, to the high degree of population aging; the increase in risk factors that increase mortality from Non-Communicable Chronic Diseases; the upward trend of premature mortality in young adults under 60 years of age, where deaths from accidents, cardiovascular diseases and malignant tumors play a significant role, as well as the impact of the pandemic caused by COVID-19.[3]

At the end of 2022, Cuba's population was 11 089 511 people, 23 704 less than at the end of 2021. At the end of March 2023, Cuba's preliminary population was 11 082 964, and the trend was downward due to low fertility, the negative balance between birth and death rates, and the external migration balance. Taking into account the statistical variables, some alternative scenarios have been developed for years and in none of them could the country reach 12 million inhabitants. Projections show a tendency towards demographic decline and estimate that by 2025 the country's total population will fall below eleven million inhabitants.[3]

During the past year, 95 403 births and 120 098 deaths occurred, which confirms the tendency towards population decline (more people die than are born, a trend that has been present for four years) and places the negative growth rate at -2.1 per thousand inhabitants.[3]

Another indicator presented in the report is the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), which stood at 1,41, a figure that makes Cuba the nation with the lowest fertility rate in Latin America and the Caribbean; while the Adolescent Fertility Rate (AFR) is 50,6.[3] Although the AFR has generally decreased over the years, it differs between territories, showing worrying patterns and even rising above the national average. The main disarticulation of Cuban fertility in the authors' opinion is expressed in its low TFR and the AFR above what was expected and desired.

Taking advantage of the possible advantages of the demographic transition depends on the capacity to generate productive employment and investment opportunities, as well as the existence of political and social conditions that can offer a favorable climate for sustainable development and growth. Rapid population ageing can pose specific challenges for public policy, as major adjustments are needed in a number of areas to cope with the shrinking workforce and increased demand in the areas of health care and support for the elderly.

The truth is that if you want to see how a country is changing, there is no better way than to look at its demographic dynamics, a process that forces us to rethink the way society is organized to respond to the care that these changes entail, and which involves specific policies aimed at addressing each element of this dynamic.

Public policies linked to the development process in nations that are already experiencing accelerated population ageing, such as Cuba, are essential. Demographic dynamics are, sensibly and as required, placed among government priorities, but their attention cuts across each of the components and sectors of society. Hence, insisting on this vision of feeling part of it is imperative, because there is no other way to learn to live with changes, to be resilient to them and not stop sustainable development with the population at the center, as the subject of this process and not just the object of policies. The reading and analysis of the data offered above make it clear that as a society we must find a way to balance productive roles, in its broadest sense, which involves maintaining a life course in the healthiest way and ensuring that it is as dignified as possible.

In line with this demographic transition visible in Cuban society, Higher Education created an extension program with the aim of raising the quality of life in older adults. It involves a considerable number of actors and is developed from the Municipal University Centers under the name of the University Chair for Older Adults (CUAM).

These chairs are made up of multidisciplinary groups with research objectives, project development and gerontological training, as well as the development and direction of universities for the elderly in each province. Currently, the essential work of the same has been the elaboration and development of education for the elderly as a university extension activity.[7]

The fundamental work in this sense has been the creation and development of the Education Program for the Elderly, as a university extension activity, which from the teaching point of view is developed through three systems. The first is the so-called basic course, which lasts one school year, and is aimed at older people, and is modular in nature, perfected in 2010. The second teaching system consists of the so-called continuing courses, which are broad in their thematic diversity and also aimed at older adults, graduates of the basic course, and the third system is training and postgraduate studies in the gerontological subject and related subjects, aimed at human resources who participate as teachers in the educational process with older people.[8]

At the University of the Isle of Youth, continuing adults select complementary courses based on their preferences and needs, which include Crafts, Computing, Film Appreciation, Wine Culture, Popular and Traditional Culture, Traditional Dances, Breadfruit Cultivation and its qualities, Vinegar Making, Nutrition, Medicinal Plants, Diseases in the elderly and Oral Health. In addition, outreach activities are carried out with them on the first and last Friday of each month and collective birthdays and significant dates are celebrated.[9]

CUAM was started at the University of Havana in the 2000 academic year in the Faculty of Psychology. On the Isla de la Juventud there is only one Chair for Senior Citizens, which began in 2001 in the Faculty of Medical Sciences and on October 3, 2006 at the University of the Isla de la Juventud in the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences.[9]

Currently, this chair supports: the research project "Education: a factor in active aging and citizen participation on the Isla de la Juventud", the symposium "Symposium of the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences", the national event "Honorary Chairs for Senior Citizens" and the international event "Longevity"; In addition to interacting and collaborating with other institutions in the territory.[9]

In terms of research and science, 11 Diploma Theses, one Master's Thesis and ten scientific publications have been produced, with only ten member professors. The Senior Citizen classrooms in the municipality had an enrollment in the 2015-2016 academic

year of six University custodians, making up the official enrollment of one classroom and 15 from Nueva Gerona in the second classroom. In the 2016-2017 academic year there were two classrooms, one in Nueva Gerona with an enrollment of 10 senior citizens, of which 2 were new students and 8 were continuing students, and another classroom in the town of Santa Fe with an enrollment of 26, all new students.[9]

In the 2017-2018 academic year, the enrollment was 14, of which 2 were new entrants, 12 were continuing, and a single classroom in the town of Nueva Gerona. In the 2018-2019 academic year, the program continued with a single classroom in Nueva Gerona and an enrollment of 15, of which 3 were new entrants and 12 were continuing. In the 2019-2020 academic year, the Local Agricultural Innovation Group (GIAL) was created in the town of Santa Fe on September 28, 2019, and was made up of 12 senior citizens and 10 teachers.[9]

This agricultural innovation group for senior citizens created in Santa Fe belongs to an international collaboration project called the Agricultural Innovation Project (PIAL). In the 2020-2021 academic year, the enrollment of the 12 continuing students began without new entrants due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the 2022 course, the enrollment began with 26 older adults, of which 15 were new entrants and 11 were continuing, since one of the 12 continuing students died. In the 2023 course, there was an enrollment of 23, of which 15 were continuing and 8 were new entrants.[9]

23 older adults have graduated from the basic course and 15 of them are enrolled in the continuing courses,[9] so active participation in continuing courses with topics that are necessary, but at the same time motivating, is necessary, without failing to take into account the peculiarities of the municipality and the needs of the older adults themselves for the development of their life projects.

Currently, this chair seeks to broaden the horizons of older adults by reviving and improving the educational and sociocultural spaces they have, based on the main objectives: improving their lives through higher education, allowing a dignified old age and adequate family and community reintegration, allowing those enrolled to grow more as human beings, as well as carrying out their life projects.

Results of the interviews conducted with older adults about the program

Individual interviews were conducted with fifteen older adults from the Isla de la Juventud University Chair on June 16, 2023, at the Julio Antonio Mella Municipal Library. The data from the interviews are presented as an illustration to indicate the opinions of the participants on specific aspects of the education program for older adults in the Cuban context.

Emilia described how she got involved: "While I was going through a difficult time – having been widowed and feeling incredibly alone – I saw the president on a programme on the Islavisión TV channel (Isla de la Juventud) explaining what the Chair consisted of and when and where it would begin, and I invited a neighbour to accompany me."

Loneliness and having the closest family in distant places on the island of Cuba is a factor that also motivates participation in the Chair, as Teresita pointed out: "in the Chair group I interact with other people, it allows me to continue learning and it gives me support to have a reason to live since loneliness is overwhelming."

Positive and negative experiences

Making new friends and strengthening ties among members stands out as an achievement of the Chair for the Elderly. For Ramona, this is an unexpected but very positive result from her point of view. "For me, meeting new friends has been a blessing. We have formed a family and I have learned many new things. Meetings and talks with doctors from different specialties have been very valuable. I am listened to when I give my opinion."

The negative experiences are related to the lack of resources and a fixed meeting place. Emilia says: "For each group meeting, we have to go to a different place, and that causes many difficulties since transportation in Cuba is very poor, and the arrangements that have to be made in advance change with the meeting place."

Influence of the Chair for the Elderly

In Norma's opinion, a very important factor is the spiritual aspect that she has found by belonging to the Chair for the Elderly. She highlights this aspect as a very positive influence in her life. "I have a son in prison and I felt isolated, and I have found spiritual support and made new friends. I can count on them at any time."

Francisca says that feeling useful has a positive influence on her life. By feeling valuable in and of herself, she recognizes her value as a human being. "I feel more valuable and I don't just go to the grocery store to buy bread or take care of the grandchildren. My eating habits and my daily life have improved, and I have become more communicative in my area of residence. I talk to the neighbors about different topics."

Learning

Sofia expresses what seem to be unintended consequences of her participation. Even though the Chair carries out multiple activities of talks, workshops and conferences ranging from medicine to crafts, Sofia expresses what seem to be unintended consequences of her participation. "I have learned to be calmer when difficulties arise in my life. I have also learned to communicate more and to express myself more assertively. To be optimistic, to live, to be patient, to be happy, to work with others, to be supportive and to share."

Legacy for future generations

Juanita sums up the legacy to future generations in the transmission of skills to live well in the community and lifelong learning.

"The experiences and motivation that I have acquired must be transmitted to children and grandchildren to try to communicate them to future generations because studying is fundamental, and what one learns is to develop knowledge and a more just society. The legacy that I transmit is that learning here costs nothing, regardless of age or sex, to continue learning."

Role of the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the Isla de la Juventud

Poor oral health has a negative impact on quality of life and healthy aging, both physically and mentally, and is highly associated with cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancers and pneumonia,[10] affecting especially vulnerable people and risk groups such as the elderly. The above indicates the need for a Project that inserts innovation and technology in a way that contributes to knowledge about oral health from the didactic and social network perspectives, to the development and comprehensive analysis of health with a synergistic approach from the education of this population group and postgraduate training.

In 2024, the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the Isla de la Juventud, as part of the activities of the research project "For a healthy smile" approved by the territorial Delegation of Science, Innovation, Technology and Environment, has implemented educational and community interventions in this population group in several communities, in the nursing home of Nueva Gerona, as well as continuing courses that are part of the program of the Chair for the Elderly of the territory, with results even above what was planned in terms of knowledge about oral health and positive change in ways and styles of life.

CONCLUSIONS

Population aging poses important challenges, especially in relation to the financial viability of pension systems, the cost of health care systems and the full integration of older people as active participants in the development of society. The education program of the Chair for the Elderly has the nature of a university extension for the education of older adults in Cuba. Participants from Isla de la Juventud demonstrate personal successes in developing skills to cope with aging and cooperate with the development of society.

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