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***Age Acceptance:  
Implications and Opportunities for Emerging Markets***

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Good afternoon. I'm delighted to be here to talk about social isolation as it affects elderly populations in emerging markets.

Let me start with definitions.

My Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) colleagues and I recently described isolation as “the inadequate quality and quantity of social relations with other people at the different levels where human interaction takes place (individual, group, community, and the larger social environment).”<sup>i</sup>

And in the Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index (MPI), the multi-dimensional poor are those who are deprived of one-third or more of ten indicators.

Clearly, the multi-dimensional poor are a major factor in emerging markets around the globe.

Yet, interestingly, while the MPI identifies high rates of poverty within 'Least Developed Countries' – when we use this more comprehensive definition, we see the impact of multidimensional poverty in 'Middle Income' and 'Most Developed' countries too.

Beyond these academic definitions, social isolation is a deeply human, deeply personal experience.

To me, isolation is a loss of connectedness. A break in the bonds of belonging. It's the feeling of sitting alone at the bottom of a well, where no one sees your suffering or pain.

Social isolation feeds on itself. The more alone you feel, the harder it is to connect with others. Worse still, isolation has serious consequences for emotional and physical health. Research has shown that social isolation creates as much risk of early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.<sup>ii</sup>

I think we can all understand why senior citizens are especially vulnerable.

They face multiple risk factors: The death of a partner. Disability. Chronic illness. Reduced or unstable income. Loss of vision or hearing. Frailty. Fear of falling. And fear of forgetting.

Any one of these occurrences can be traumatic. Combined, they can be devastating.

And none of us has to look very far to see it playing out.

Perhaps you've heard of The Silver Line—a telephone help line for UK pensioners. In its first year, The Silver Line received nearly 300,000 calls ... with more than half coming from people who said they had no one else to talk to.<sup>iii</sup>

That isn't surprising. According the UK's Office of National Statistics, 36 percent of people aged 65 and older live alone. Nearly half of all older people say their primary form of company is the television or pets.<sup>iv</sup>

In my home country, Canada, one health survey found that one in five seniors participated in no frequent social activities whatsoever.<sup>v</sup>

Put simply, too many older people, in too many places, feel desperately alone.

And when we allow the elderly to suffer this way, our entire society is diminished... not just because we are wasting their gifts, but because human connectedness runs in both directions. Whenever those bonds of belonging are fractured, everybody loses out... a reality many advanced economies are starting to understand.

When we focus on emerging markets, the challenges and the implications become even more acute.

Ageing populations in developing countries are facing a new world order.

Urbanization, globalization, and technology are drawing children away from their parents, upending traditional family structures and obligations.

In China, for example, families used to be tied to their land. As recently as 1990, 70 percent of China's rural seniors lived with their grown children.

Yet, by 2006, that figure was only 40 percent<sup>vi</sup>.

Pursuit of new opportunities and jobs is pulling children into cities, away from ageing parents in the countryside.

Reports suggest that 40 percent of China's 185 million elderly show significant symptoms of depression<sup>vii</sup>. Many of these elderly are not only socially isolated - they are poor, illiterate, or lack access to medical treatment. Sometimes, all of the above.

The situation is so dire, Chinese officials have tried to legislate a solution, by requiring children to visit their parents, and letting parents sue them if they don't.

Similarly, a quarter of India's population will be over 60 years old by 2050<sup>viii</sup>...and Indian family structures are being disrupted as children seek opportunity far from home.

Multiple generations used to live under the same roof – learning from and leaning on one another.

Yet, according to the Population Reference Bureau, and I quote, “the share of older Indians living with only a spouse or alone doubled between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s.”<sup>ix</sup>

As cultural mores shift, the expectation of personal care for one's parents is being replaced by the provision of financial care, where possible—and, in too many cases, with the elderly left to manage for themselves.

In one study, *more than a third* of older persons in and around Delhi reported feeling socially and emotionally isolated.<sup>x</sup>

And because the majority of India's seniors are women, it only increases the likelihood that they will be poor, illiterate, disadvantaged, and thus at even greater isolation risk.

Even in a developed country like Canada, our indigenous peoples, First Nations, form an "emerging" community. With the fastest growing populations, yet the poorest socio-economic indicators across the spectrum, we see evidence of the very 'pockets of poverty' identified in the MPI released last week.

For centuries, elders were venerated as sources of wisdom and experience in these communities. There was nothing more meaningful for young people than to hear the stories of those who'd come before them.

In fact, some of my friends from Canada's indigenous communities have told me they used to *look forward* to getting old, because of the respect that came with it.

But today, the challenge of geographic isolation, combined with the legacy of forced assimilation, has shaken traditional culture to the core. And among the social ills that plague First Nations communities is the erosion of family stability and the consequent neglect of older people's well-being and care.

So, what can we do?

How can we ensure that development, prosperity, and progress don't come at the expense of millions of socially isolated seniors around the world?

This is a complex question—too broad for a single panel session.

But one thing we know is that advanced and emerging markets can learn from one another.

We can learn from valuable traditions of care and respect for older people.

We can find better ways to avoid unintended consequences of economic growth.

And we can learn from each other's best practices, as we tackle this common challenge.

Combating the social isolation of the elderly begins on the front lines—in cities, in neighborhoods, in the homes, and at the bedsides of people who feel alone.

It can be something as simple as ensuring the elderly have someone to talk to—or something to care for, like a garden or pet.

But some of the most exciting programs I've seen are the ones that aim much higher; that keep older people engaged in the world around them, not just as beneficiaries of support, but as contributors.

Programmes like the Gogos (Grannies) of the Othaweni Children's Home in Johannesburg, where older women work each day with underprivileged boys and girls...

Or Speaking Exchange, set up by the CNA Language School in Brazil, which uses video technology to link young Brazilians learning English with elderly people in the United States... exchanging knowledge and forging friendships that span geographic and generational divides...

Or on the east of Canada, as the Mi'kmaq peoples re-claim and re-build their communities – the first aspect of designing new schools places an elders' teaching room right at the heart of every new elementary school.

These programmes make a difference because they're built around *purpose*—and having purpose gives meaning to life. One of the best ways to combat social isolation among the elderly is to help them preserve that sense of purpose as fully and as long as they can.

At the same time, we need to encourage more academic engagement and forums like this one... and continued research on what's working and what's not.

And finally, we need to urge city planners, policy shapers and lawmakers to factor the needs of the elderly into government planning and programs. That means designing communities that actually reinforce and build connection... making public transportation more accessible ... strengthening social safety nets... and simply raising awareness of isolation as a problem, and encouraging every citizen to help combat it.

There's no silver bullet. Making a difference for older people will take many efforts, from many directions.

But improving the quality of life for the elderly is an issue in which everyone has a stake.

Fortunately, as sociologist Anne Karpf recently described in the New York Times, there is growing awareness, and even embracing, of ageing.<sup>xi</sup> In her words, "The emerging age-acceptance movement neither decries nor denies the ageing process. It recognizes that one can remain vital and present, engaged and curious, indeed continue to grow, until one's dying breath."

As Karpf writes, it may be that we can join in expressing and achieving the aspiration of the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott: "May I be alive when I die."

Thank you very much.

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<sup>i</sup> Samuel, K et al, "**Social Isolation and its Relationship to Multidimensional Poverty**" <http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/OPHIWP080.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/council\\_and\\_democracy/council\\_information/media\\_hub/media\\_releases/previous\\_media\\_releases/media\\_releases\\_december\\_2014/winter\\_wellbeing\\_-\\_loneliness.aspx](http://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/council_and_democracy/council_information/media_hub/media_releases/previous_media_releases/media_releases_december_2014/winter_wellbeing_-_loneliness.aspx)

<sup>iii</sup> UK Pensioners Flood Helpline Due to Loneliness, Isolation and Neglect, Lianna Brinded, IBTimes UK, November 25, 2014.

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/Factsheets/Later\\_Life\\_UK\\_factsheet.pdf?dtrk=true](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/Factsheets/Later_Life_UK_factsheet.pdf?dtrk=true)

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/2012004/article/11720-eng.htm>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2012/04/09/new-bank-report-looks-at-china-rural--elderly>

<sup>vii</sup> China's transformation frays traditional family ties, hurting many seniors, Simon Denyer, *The Washington Post* September 18, 2013

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128196971>

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Reports/2012/india-older-population.aspx>

<sup>x</sup> "Delhi ignoring its elderly, reveals study," Smriti Kak Ramachandran, *The Hindu*, November 12, 2012.

<sup>xi</sup> The Liberation of Growing Old, New York Times, January 3, 2015