



# NSINDAGIZA ORGANIZATION

Po.Box: 5573 KIGALI, Tel: (+250) 0788509060 & (+250) 0788749692  
E-mail: nsindagiza2014@gmail.com; www.nsindagiza.org

## A Historic Day for Older People and Human Rights Across Africa

*By Elie Mugabowishema and Jane Buchanan*

Today marks a historic day for older people across Africa. A new protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights enters into force that obligates governments on the continent to ensure the fundamental rights of older people. With it comes hope that more people can enjoy healthy, safe, and secure lives on an equal basis with others and without discrimination, regardless of age.

The [Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons](#) aims to affirm and secure the fundamental rights of older people across Africa, recognizing their value to society while addressing their specific needs and risks. Among other protections, the protocol prohibits discrimination against older people and guarantees the rights to work and to pensions, to support services, and to long-term care. It also highlights the particular experience of older people in situations of risk, a point painfully relevant as many African countries face new and entrenched [armed conflicts](#) and [refugee crises](#), as well as [drought](#), famine, and [other disasters](#) induced by climate change.

Importantly, the protocol recognizes the intersectional identities that many older people experience, and which can put them at particular risk of abuse and hardship. Specific articles relate to older women and older people with disabilities. The protocol also articulates specific guarantees to those who take care of orphans and other vulnerable children. One important role that older people play in Africa and around the world is that of caregivers and support providers for children, adults, and other older people, contrary to assumptions that older people are typically dependent on others.

The protocol comes at an especially crucial time. Rapid [population aging](#) is happening all around the world, including in Africa, which might surprise many people. Africa's [youth population](#) receives prominent attention in the current global development agenda. Indeed, the continent of Africa has the fewest older adults and lowest proportion of older adults of all regions of the world. However, in just the next 30 years, growth in [Africa's older population will outstrip growth](#) in any other world region. The continent's growth in the population of older people is set to exceed 200 percent in the next 30 years and [is projected to triple](#) from 74.4 million in 2020 to more than 235 million in 2050, according to the National Institutes of Health.

This rapid shift underscores the need for sustainable systems and policies that will be able to support an aging population.

Population aging in Africa and elsewhere is attributed to many development successes, including increasing [life expectancy](#), vaccine access and other healthcare improvements, and better maternal and newborn care. At the same time, many countries in Africa face significant challenges in terms of poverty, health, and social services and care, including poor infrastructure, limited [access to medicines](#), high rates of infectious [disease](#), and a shortage of [healthcare workers](#). As the number of older adults increases in these countries, the [pressure on these already limited resources](#) will only increase, putting strain on the health and social care systems.

**Fight for the rights and welfare of older persons, [www.nsindagiza.org](http://www.nsindagiza.org)**



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## Population Aging Requires a Shift in Thinking

In order for Africa's growing population of older people to truly enjoy the rights guaranteed under the AU Protocol, it is essential that national governments, regional bodies, and countries and institutions investing in Africa's development urgently shift their thinking and approaches to ensure effective support that meets the demographic moment.

For example, the U.S. government [has yet to develop any policy](#) or engage expert staff to guide its development and humanitarian assistance and global diplomacy to contend with global population aging, a biological phenomenon that will not be reversed. The United States risks its significant commitments to human rights, equality, and health unless it responds to one of the most pressing global transformations underway. And as a global leader in human rights and humanitarian aid, the U.S. government's engagement in addressing global aging could help catalyze similar support from other countries.

International [financial institutions also](#) have an important role to play through their partnerships and assistance with countries around the world aiming to create more equitable and fair societies.

Assistance to organizations of older people and to civil society organizations that support them is also essential to ensure societies are prepared for demographic change. The new AU Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons would not have come into force without the persistent and strategic efforts of civil society.

For example, [NSINDAGIZA](#), a Rwandan organization dedicated to advocating for the rights of older persons, together with Rwanda National Commission for Human Rights, helped lead a campaign to persuade the Rwandan government to ratify the AU protocol in 2020 and, adopt a National Older Persons' Policy in 2021 in order to put the protocol into effect nationally. The organization (where one of us, Elie, is president) also joined forces with other groups and aging networks across Africa to urge their respective governments to ratify the protocol and incorporate it into domestic legislation.

NSINDAGIZA builds the capacity of older people and their organizations to do their own advocacy, in partnership with other national, regional and global aging networks. It also creates alliances with youth organizations to facilitate intergenerational relationships that enable younger generations to prepare for aging and also support older people, who are custodians of cultural values in Rwanda.

The work of NSINDAGIZA and others represent clear evidence of how local organizations, who are best attuned to the local context, both support populations at risk and champion influential advocacy. NSINDAGIZA's achievements demonstrate the power of grassroots advocacy in achieving policy change, showing how local efforts can inspire broader changes.

## Next Steps

The AU Protocol was adopted in 2016 and required a minimum of 15 AU member States to ratify it for it to come into legal force. On October 4, 2024, the 15th ratification was officially submitted by Nigeria. Other states ratifying are Rwanda, Angola, Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ethiopia,

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Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Togo, Sao Tome and Principe, and Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic.

The AU Protocol is the second regional human rights instrument to take effect. The [Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons](#) has been in force since 2017.

These regional treaties are testament to the fact that there is a growing global consensus that binding legal instruments are necessary for the protection of the rights of older people, including by combatting structural and social ageism. The persistence and prevalence of ageism should worry us all, as we are all aging and, if we are so fortunate, will live long lives, which should be healthy, secure, and active. An August 2024 [United Nations General Assembly resolution](#) has paved the way for U.N. human rights mechanisms to begin the development of a U.N. Convention on the rights of older persons. This outcome is the result of 14 years of joint efforts by older people, civil society organizations, governments, and others. A convention will not happen, however, without continued and new support and leadership from governments around the world, including from the United States and many others.

The AU protocol marks a significant milestone in the journey toward protecting and promoting the rights of older people in Africa. It's crucial that the international community support its implementation and builds on this momentum to make guarantees for the rights of older people a reality worldwide. Donors and diplomatic partners of African governments and civil society should support the protocol's implementation and leverage this momentum to ensure a global convention that guarantees the rights of older people. These are critical steps in meeting this moment of rapid population aging and the importance of guaranteeing the rights of all, at all ages.

Elie Mugabowishema is President of [NSINDAGIZA](#), Rwanda. NSINDAGIZA is a member of the HelpAge Global network.

Jane Buchanan is the Senior Advocacy Advisor at [HelpAge USA](#), which is also part of the HelpAge Global Network.