Ageing without family support: A qualitative study

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Management Summary

Life expectancies as well as the proportion of older adults in the total population are rising, and more and more people are ageing at home. However, not everyone can count on the support and especially the psychosocial care of close family members (partners and children) in old age. This does not automatically imply vulnerability, but in view of inadequate welfare regulations regarding psychosocial care, it can become a problem in case older adults lack financial or social resources. Good care in old age is based on «relationships of care». It enables older adults to lead a self-determined life by focusing on their individual psychosocial needs, regardless of whether or not a person is already in need of functional care. Yet while older adults in Switzerland are entitled to support in the forms of functional care and help, there is no such right regarding psychosocial care—in fact, the state implicitly takes for granted the unpaid care work by family members and informal networks in this respect.

This situation presents a challenge for society as a whole that needs to be dealt with. At present, however, there are still two important knowledge gaps pertaining to the target group of people ageing without family support: On the one hand, there is a lack of in-depth and comprehensive insights into the lived realities and subjective perspectives of these older adults themselves. On the other hand, there is a lack of studies that relate the needs, desires, and fears of the target group to the framework conditions determining their life in old age and translate empirical findings into concrete recommendations for action. The present study, which was commissioned by a consortium of eight charitable foundations and organisations operating in Switzerland, therefore aims to make a contribution in two respects: On the one hand, it intends to contribute to a more diverse image and a better understanding of the target group. On the other hand, it pursues a clear action orientation, with the aim of contributing to the preservation or improvement of the quality of life of older adults without family support. In both regards, we assume that our findings will also be relevant beyond the context of Switzerland.

To reach these goals, this study uses Amartya Sen's Capability Approach as a theoretical framework. In a first sub-project, we conducted qualitative interviews as well as go-along interviews with older adults living at home without family support in five locations in Switzerland in order to examine how the target group manages its everyday life and what ideas, needs, desires, and fears people associate with their life situations. In a second sub-project, relying on interviews with stakeholders from the fields of old-age policy and work with older people, we conducted an environment analysis in the same five locations to find out what strategies are employed and what support services already exist in the local contexts with regard to our target group. In a third sub-project, we integrated the results of the first two sub-projects by means of a «matching analysis» to assess the extent to which the current framework conditions are suitable for addressing the needs of older adults without family support. As part of the third sub-project, we also developed a qualitative typology which not only visualises the heterogeneity of the target group but can also serve as a basis for concrete and targeted recommendations for action for old-age policy and work with older people. These recommendations for action conclude the present study.

What the first sub-project illustrated first and foremost is the heterogeneity of the target group as well as of their lived realities, needs, desires, and fears. Because individual ideas of a good life vary greatly, objective life situations cannot be equated with subjective life satisfaction. Furthermore, being alone in old age is not a problem in and of itself and is not the same as loneliness. Depending on the extent of people's needs for social inclusion and whether or not those needs are already being fulfilled, the desires of older adults without family support regarding (more) psychosocial care, which were most often implicitly expressed, vary a lot. Despite obvious differences, however, there are also significant similarities. For example, the majority of the target group has few expectations towards the welfare state and

emphasises the individual's personal responsibility for his or her own life. Moreover, while most of the needs, desires and fears expressed by older adults without family support seem to essentially correspond to those of older people in general, some issues and questions are more accentuated when it comes to our target group. For instance, without family members they can rely on, many older people especially worry about a more «fragile» future, yet sometimes shy away from dealing with difficult issues due to various fears, most notably the fear of losing autonomy.

In the second sub-project, it could be observed that despite significant local differences between our five research locations, similar challenges as well as similar points of tension between stakeholders exist everywhere. First of all, our target group is not yet explicitly recognised as such in all locations. If older adults without family support are already conceived as a target group, it is mostly by means of emphasising their particular vulnerability, unless the discourse focuses on the responsibilisation of older people. Second, the topic of psychosocial care in old age is given different priority in different locations, regarding both the questions of the «vital necessity» or «urgency» of psychosocial care and the questions of who should provide and finance it. Third, there is a heated debate about who should be responsible for ensuring that older people receive the support they need when they need it, with some stakeholders arguing for an «obligation to collect» support on the part of the people themselves and others for an «obligation to provide» support on the part of work with older people as well as the welfare state. Fourth, cooperation and coordination among the different stakeholders in the field of ageing is regularly cited as challenging and at times problematic, since under the current conditions there is often competition that can stand in the way of working in the best interests of older people.

The matching analysis showed that there are both «matchings» and «mismatchings» with regard to various topics. The «mismatchings» in particular can provide important points of departure for identifying needs for action, for example pertaining to inclusive and age-appropriate information strategies or a more consistent orientation towards the older individual and his or her specific needs. Through the development of a qualitative typology, it became possible to make the target group with its different needs and life situations tangible on a higher level of abstraction. By relating older adults' subjective feelings of (dis-)satisfaction in their respective status quo with their objective support situations, four types could be distinguished: Types 1 and 2 (satisfied in the status quo, without or with regular support) represent desirable situations that should be preserved at all costs, while types 3 and 4 (dissatisfied in the status quo, without or with regular support) describe undesirable situations that need to be improved. Thus, the typology provides us with an important basis for identifying needs for action not only in the present, but also in view of the future, so that individual situations can take the desired course.

The basis of all recommendations for action in order to maintain or improve the quality of life of people ageing without family support is the orientation towards the needs of the individual. Nevertheless, it was possible to identify several fields of action that are of importance to all people in our target group. These fields of action include conceptually and legally anchoring psychosocial care in old age, expanding efforts regarding prevention and information, further developing mechanisms for the (self-)assessment of needs, as well as fostering coordination and cooperation in the field of ageing. A basic conception of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being as defined by the WHO can, for example, contribute to the recognition of the important role of psychosocial care in old age at the political level. On this basis, the field of work with older people would gain more possibilities to be responsive to the heterogeneity of the target group and meet their different needs through various measures (such as the establishment of independent consultation centres, the development of suitable tools for the assessment of needs, the professionalization of psychosocial care, or the formation of caring communities).

The subject of ageing without family support is increasingly gaining in importance, both in Switzerland and internationally. A deeper understanding of the target group of older adults without family support can help to no longer view the people belonging to this group as a homogeneous unit, but as part of older people in general who can be confronted with different challenges depending on their respective life situations. Accordingly, the mandate for action for old-age policy and work with older people is to find solutions for good (psychosocial) care in old age for everyone. In this sense, through the present study, we also hope to encourage a more inclusive approach to old-age policy and social work with older adults.