



The Better Vision, Healthy Ageing Program Toolkit

March 2016

GUIDE TO ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY ELDERS' CLUBS



**The Fred Hollows
Foundation**
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Burnet Institute
Medical Research. Practical Action.

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'Because of this program there is unity among elders, we have happiness.'
(Older woman)

INTRODUCTION

WHAT ARE ELDERS' CLUBS AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Elders' Clubs are community organisations of elders. After retirement elders often become socially isolated. They may have no money to visit other elders or take part in social activities, or are kept busy at home with domestic responsibilities. The death of a spouse can also lead to loneliness and social isolation. There is strong evidence that social isolation and loneliness increase the risk of both mental and physical illnesses.

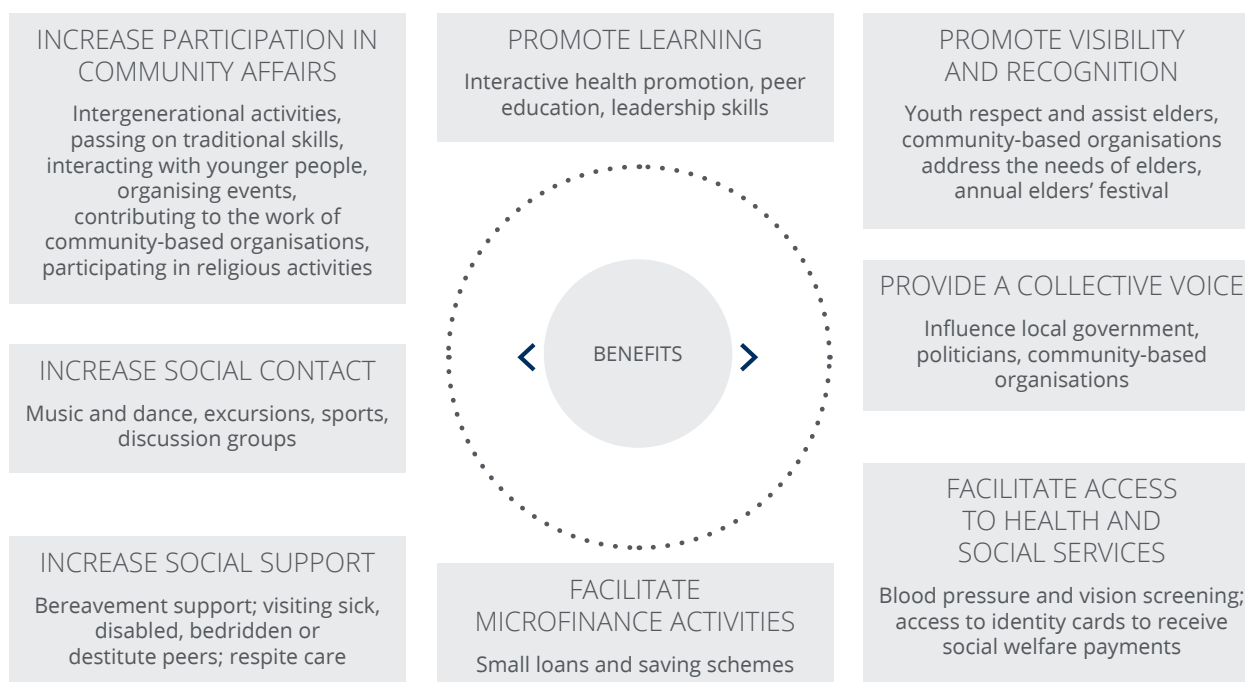
There are many benefits to establishing and supporting organisations for elders. The United Nations Population Fund recommends 'support for the development of older people's associations as an effective community mechanism for hearing the voices of older people, building livelihood security, improving health care, facilitating meaningful participation of older persons and supporting disaster responses.'¹ HelpAge International has established Older People's Associations in several South-East Asian countries.

Elders' Clubs at the community level can help to keep older people active, healthy and happy and prepare them for healthy ageing. Social participation helps to protect against chronic

conditions. Income generation activities and savings schemes can increase financial independence. Elders can learn new skills. They are better able to use their existing knowledge, skills, wisdom and experience to participate in and contribute to family and community life. They can give each other support when bereaved or in need. It is easier and more efficient for health and social welfare services to reach elders when there is a common meeting place. Elders' Clubs provide greater visibility and recognition for elders. They provide a collective voice and opportunities to influence local government, politicians, and others. Finally, elders can simply enjoy themselves together through dancing, playing music, reading poetry, drama and watching films.

1. UNFPA (2012) Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), New York, and HelpAge International, London.
2. Qualitative evaluation of a healthy ageing project that included establishing Elders' Clubs in tea estate communities, and some adjacent villages, in Nuwara Eliya district in Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2012
3. Qualitative and quantitative research from the Better Vision, Healthy Ageing Program, funded by Fred Hollows Foundation.

BENEFITS FROM THE ELDERS' CLUB STRATEGY^{2,3}



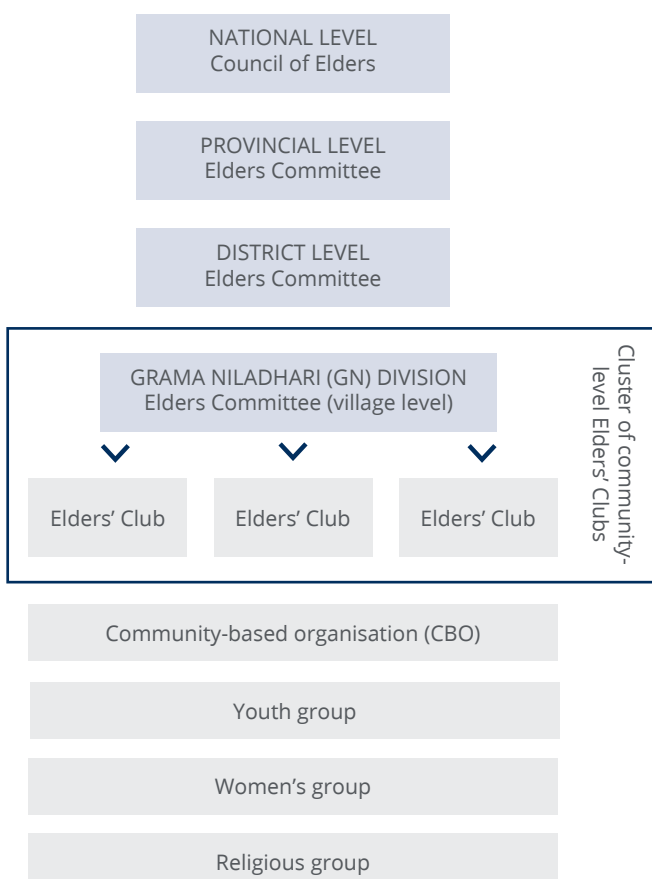


ELDERS' CLUBS AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

Elders' Clubs seem to work best at a local community level. The advantages of having Elders' Clubs at the community level include:

- Fostering a sense of identity, belonging and local ownership.
- Promoting local social activities and mutual support
- Improving access to meetings. Elders may find it difficult to walk far or access transport, and domestic responsibilities may limit the time they can be away from home
- Keeping the size of a club manageable (between 30 – 60 elders) to promote genuine participation and make finding a venue easier

Community-level Elders' Clubs should be linked to existing structures such as, community-based organisations, women's groups, youth clubs, temples and church groups, to improve sustainability and interaction with the wider community.



ELDERS' COMMITTEES AT DIVISIONAL, PROVINCIAL, DISTRICT AND NATIONAL LEVELS

Beyond the community level, the leaders of Elders' Clubs need to share ideas, provide support, raise awareness of the contributions and needs of elders, undertake joint evaluation of clubs and plan new activities.

In Sri Lanka, the National Secretariat for Elders recognised the value of elders' organisations and lobbied for the strategy of Elders' Committees at every administrative level to be adopted into law. The Protection of the Rights of Elders (Amendment) Act (2011) includes the directive 'to establish an Elders' Committee in every Grama Niladhari Division, Divisional Secretary's Divisions, Administrative District and Provincial Council area.'

The Better Vision, Healthy Ageing Program has developed a cluster model for representation of community level clubs at Elders' Committee level. In this model two leaders (one male and one female) from each Elders' Club in the Grama Niladhari Division (local government division, GND) make up the Elders' Committee at GND level, supported by the Grama Niladhari.

They meet monthly to share experiences and ideas. In this way the committee is representative of the elders in the division and not just those who live nearby or hold particular positions.

In the cluster model, the Elders' Committees can fulfill the following functions:

- Provide mutual support to leaders of Elders' Clubs
- Register community-based Elders' Clubs to ensure legal recognition
- Coordinate activities. For example, coordinate an vision screening activity, peer education, or plan for an elders' day celebration or an inter-Elders' Committee sports competition
- Communicate about government initiatives. For example, elders can inform their families and communities about government efforts, such as mosquito control
- Communicate from elders to local government. Messages can then be referred through the committees at each administrative level to the National Council for Elders and the Secretariat for Elders
- Evaluate the progress of Elders' Clubs
- Advocate for the rights and needs of elders, for example in relation to transport, social welfare and health care services
- Improve access to services and welfare entitlements

ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY ELDERERS' CLUBS

STEP 1. PLANNING

Select the first geographical area that you will work in. Identify the communities within that area on a map and find out the distances involved. Establish who will be the most appropriate person to undertake consultations and introduce the Elders' Clubs. Consult with the local government administrators for that area. Ask them if there are already any kinds of clubs or official structures for elders. If there are, ask about the members and function. Explain the cluster model for Elders' Clubs at community level and the Elders' Committee.

Prepare a brief profile of each community. Consider:

- What is the size of the population?
- How many elders are there?

- Is the population database up to date? If the population database for the area is not up to date, work with local government representatives to update it
- What are the main sources of income?
- What community structures are there? For example, community-based organisations, women's groups or youth groups
- Are there any existing social activities for elders?
- What is the nearest town?
- What transport is available?
- Where is the nearest health service?

Whenever possible, keep track of the costs of establishing an Elders' Club. This will be very useful information for others planning similar projects and for the government. Prepare a notebook with a table to record all expenses associated with establishing the clubs.



STEP 2. CONSULTATIONS

The next step is to consult with leaders in the community. You might meet with leaders individually or in groups.

Suggested leaders to consult with

- Village leaders
- Religious leaders
- Local trade union officials
- Health and social welfare staff
- Leaders of community structures such as community-based organisations, women's groups or youth groups

INFORMATION TO SHARE AND QUESTIONS TO ASK

Check if they have already heard about your organisation or your program. Tell them about the program and give them a copy of the program summary and any other relevant materials about your organisation.

- Are there any existing social activities for elders? Print out and give them the description above 'What are Elders' Clubs and why are they important?'
- Do community structures, such as women's and youth groups already exist?
- What joint activities might be possible between the existing community groups and the Elders' Club?
- Explain the health promotion activities planned through the Elders' Clubs. Are there ways they could support the clubs and health promotion activities?
- Are there tasks that the elders could usefully do as a collective?
- Is there is any suitable building where the elders could have a monthly meeting? Note the state of the building and whether painting or any other work needs to be carried out
- Can religious leaders provide assistance for elders to attend religious services and rituals?
- What systems currently exist to support destitute elders? How could they provide additional help to support elders in need?
- Is there scope to have a childcare centre at the local temple, church or mosque, or a community building?
- Mention that community elders are in a good position to help workers to prepare for a healthy and active retirement
- Are there are any younger people who would like to volunteer to assist the Elders' Club?

Thank the community leaders for their support and tell them you will update them about the Elders' Clubs once they are established, and invite their involvement.

STEP 3. THE FIRST MEETING WITH ELDERS

SETTING UP THE MEETING

Chose a day and time when it is likely that many elders will be available. Try to arrange for some members of existing Elders' Clubs to join the first meeting of the new club to describe their experience.

Ask an appropriate local leader to inform elders in the community about the meeting and invite them to attend. Also invite community leaders and other relevant people.

CHOOSING THE VENUE AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

If a suitable place for regular club meetings has not yet been identified, choose a suitable place for the first meeting. Consider access issues for elders, try to locate somewhere that is close to transport and easy for elders to reach. Offer to help with transport, if you are able to.

Practical considerations include:

- Arrange for refreshments for the elders to enjoy during the meeting
- Prepare stationery (pens and large sheets of paper, notebook for club records)
- Take a camera or video camera to document the meeting. Ask permission before taking photographs or filming
- Ensure that there are sufficient chairs for the elders. If this is not possible, provide comfortable clean mats for them to sit on, and some chairs for those who cannot sit on the floor
- Ensure that there are accessible latrines or toilets and inform elders where they are located
- Arrange for a young person from the community to be available to play with any small children that the elders bring with them and supply a few toys

Refer to the document *Ethical and practical guidelines for working with elders*.

RUNNING THE FIRST MEETING

- Welcome the elders and officially open the meeting in a culturally appropriate way. Tell the elders about your organisation and introduce the idea of the Elders' Clubs. Explain that you want to start an Elders' Club in their community. Ask for their advice about whether this would be welcome
- Next, if members from existing clubs are attending the meeting, ask them to talk about their experience with their club, the activities they have taken part in, leadership, and the successes and the challenges that they experienced. If not, a staff member from your organisation could describe the experiences of other clubs locally or in other countries. Allow plenty of time for the elders to ask questions
- Ask the elders what sort of activities they might be interested in
- Explain that sometimes elders first attended because they were expecting material benefits from the clubs. It is important for the elders to know that they can be supported to get started with activities in the first year, with some funding in the second year, but there is only a small amount of funding
- Explain that this is not a 'welfare' program but there are many other benefits. Ask the elders from the existing club to describe some of the benefits
- Next, explain to the elders that a second meeting will be arranged in one or two weeks. Show them the list of elders in their community and ask if they know of any other elders or to correct any errors
- Ask them, if they are willing, to give their names, addresses and a mobile phone number, if they have one, or the number of family who could give them a message. Ask them to tell any elders who could not come for the first meeting about the club and invite them to attend the second meeting
- Explain that at the next meeting you will discuss leadership, a name for the club, activities, health promotion and evaluation
- At the end of the meeting encourage some singing or another culturally appropriate activity before the elders have their refreshments and go home
- Tidy up after the meeting and return the key of the meeting place to the person responsible
- Clean and return any equipment or dishes that were borrowed and used
- Write up a report of the meeting

***'My heart gained courage and relationships with elders increased.'* (Older man)**



STEP 4. LEADERSHIP AND RECORDKEEPING

LEADERSHIP

Invite as many elders as possible in the community to attend the second meeting of the Elders' Club. Try to make this one to two weeks after the first meeting.

After greeting the elders, introduce the topic of leadership. Explain that good leadership is very important for the club to function well.

Ask the elders what they think are important characteristics for leaders? Ask an elder who can write well to write up the suggestions on a large sheet of paper. These might include:

- Interested in the club and the community
- Good listener
- Time to devote to being a club leader
- Well-organised
- Able to keep good records
- Good communication skills
- Knowledgeable about their community
- Respected
- Confident and willing to speak to community leaders and officials

COMMON PROBLEMS

Leadership of an Elders' Club may involve challenges and conflicts. The common problems are:

- Illness, disability or domestic responsibilities that prevent the leader from attending meetings and playing their role
- The leader moving away from the community for work or other reasons
- Conflicts, particularly in relation to savings and small loan schemes
- Lost or poorly kept club records

'Because I could work with elders [and] take part in cultural events, my leadership improved.'
(Older woman)

LEADERSHIP MODELS

It is important to have both male and female leaders and for leadership to be shared rather than having a single leader.

Many organisations have a leadership committee consisting of a chairperson, a treasurer, and a secretary. However, it is possible to have different leadership models. These might include:

- Rotating leadership; for example, four or more elders could take it in turns to be the club leaders, with a change every three months
- There could be two treasurers to ensure accountability and protect against accusations of bad practice or cheating
- A small group of three or four leaders could be elected
- Two leaders could be elected – one male and one female – each with a deputy leader in case the leader is unable to attend

Encourage discussion among the elders about the advantages and disadvantages of different models of leadership.





RECORDKEEPING

An Elders' Club will function better if records are kept. Ask the elders what sort of records need to be kept. These might include: attendance, savings, income and expenditure, activity reports and club correspondence. The program team can organise training sessions in leadership and recordkeeping skills for elders.

STEP 5. NAMING THE CLUB

At the second meeting ask the elders to think about a name for their club. Sometimes elders choose names of inspirational leaders, gods and goddesses, film icons, or names of historic importance.

Give them time to discuss different names. Suggest that they might want to wait until the next meeting to make their final choice. Collect all the suggestions and then let the elders vote for the one they prefer.

They might also like to choose a symbol or logo for their club. The name and the logo can be used to design a letterhead for club correspondence.

Write up a report of the second meeting, including the discussion.

STEP 6. CHOOSING ACTIVITIES

Explain that each club will choose their own activities. The club will meet monthly to participate in activities. Explain that it is also possible to encourage smaller groups to participate in specific activities between the monthly meetings; for example, a group of elders might like to get together to sew, to talk about and write poetry, or to learn how to use computers at an Internet café.

Ask the elders to form small groups of four to six members. Suggest that some of the groups have only men or only women, and some mixed. Encourage the groups to discuss activities they might like to participate in. Then encourage them to join together to list and discuss all the suggested activities. Explain that they do not need to decide all their activities now, other activities can be added later.





After they have had this discussion you can explain that it would be ideal to see at least one activity in each of the following categories (one activity might fit in more than one category):

- Enables learning of new skills or knowledge
- Promotes health
- Includes and promotes some form of regular physical activity
- Improves knowledge and practice about good nutrition
- Promotes good mental health and relaxation
- Advocates for elders' rights and needs
- Enables elders to better understand and apply for their entitlements
- Makes elders more visible to the general community
- Encourages intergenerational contact, with both youth and small children
- Helps others in the community
- Supports the bereaved
- Encourages fun
- Allows opportunities for artistic and cultural expression, such as painting, drama, music, singing, poetry or dance
- Enables opportunities to practice religious rituals
- Supports microfinance activities, such as savings or small loan schemes, and stimulates income generation

Go through this list with the elders to see where the suggested activities fit. This list may also prompt them to think of other activities.

Some popular activities for Elders' Clubs in previous projects have been:

- Dancing and singing
- Playing musical instruments
- Discussing and recording oral history. For example, in small groups the elders discuss their memories and stories from a particular decade, such as the 1960s
- Visiting sacred or historical sites
- Sporting competitions
- Reading and discussing the newspapers
- Watching films together
- Visiting the sick or bereaved
- Meditating
- Writing letters to government or estate management about their needs
- Learning how to use the Internet
- Learning to read and write
- Savings and loan schemes
- Making crafts together to sell
- Peer educators promoting health

***'More than taking part in sports and winning the joy we gained was more important.'* (Older woman)**

STEP 7. FIRST MEETING OF THE ELDERS' COMMITTEE

When all the Elders' Clubs in a local area have had their first two meetings and chosen their leaders, arrange the first meeting of the Elders' Committee. The Elders' Committee should be within the government structure, if possible. This step will vary considerably from context to context depending on what structures are already in place to support elders.

STEP 8. REGISTRATION AND EVALUATION

REGISTRATION

In the Sri Lankan experience, Elders' Clubs functioned better when they were officially registered. This process gave the club authority and helped to ensure its members were receiving their government entitlements. If there is a process to follow for a community club to become officially registered, it is recommended that Elders' Clubs be supported to undertake this process.

LEVEL OF FUNCTIONING OF CLUBS

The strength and functioning of an Elders' Club may change over time. For example, the leader of a club that is functioning well may leave the community for work and the club may become weak. If another good leader is elected then the club can become strong again. Some clubs gradually weaken over time and need support to start to function well again. Linking clubs to other community structures can be helpful. It can also be helpful for weaker clubs to visit stronger clubs to learn from their members.

INDICATORS OF A CLUB FUNCTIONING WELL

Based on the experience of the Elders' Clubs in Nuwara Eliya, clubs worked best when:

- Both males and females actively participated
- Both males and females shared responsibilities
- Elders had clear understanding of their needs and of the objectives and activities of the club
- The club was registered to give it legal status
- Elders organised special events or found solutions for problems independently
- The club built healthy external relationships, for example with government bodies and political leaders
- There was an effort to enroll new members
- Other community members were aware of the Elders' Club

- The club maintained records such as attendance, reports and financial records
- Discussions among members were carried out in a methodical way that encouraged participation and respect for the views of all
- Decisions were made based on the preference of the majority
- Club members participated in review meetings and presented their club's progress
- Clubs had a constitution and all members benefited according to the constitution

INDICATORS OF A CLUB NOT FUNCTIONING WELL

- Little or irregular participation in meetings
- No clear understanding of the club objectives
- Expectation of a particular activity continuously
- No confidence in club activities
- Conflicts and lack of unity among club members
- No proper records of meetings, income or expenditure
- No consistent leadership
- Inadequate resources

PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

Evaluating the clubs in a participatory way can help the elders to strengthen their own club. An example of participatory evaluation is provided in Appendix 1. Clubs could try this method using the same criteria, or develop their own.



CHALLENGES WITH ESTABLISHING ELDERS' CLUBS

AGEIST ATTITUDES

Some people may believe that there is no point in having clubs for elders simply because they are old. It is important to address this by explaining that the proportion of elders in most populations is now large and growing rapidly. Elders make significant contributions to their families and communities. But this is reduced when they are disabled or ill, or socially isolated. Then they can become a burden to their families, who will be less productive if they have to care for a dependent elder. Elders also have the same rights as everyone else, and these need to be respected. These attitudes mean that it is important to consult with and win the trust of the community. Families of elders need to be willing to support them to attend Elders' Club meetings and not tell them to stay at home to look after small children or undertake domestic duties.

***'We gained social recognition.'** (Older woman)*

CASTE DIVISIONS (IN CONTEXTS WHERE THIS IS RELEVANT)

Awareness of caste divisions may be greater among older people. If a gathering is arranged in the house of a 'lower' caste elder, 'higher' caste elders may not attend or may avoid eating or drinking. When appointing leaders to the clubs the elders may at first propose the names of elders who belong to a 'higher' caste. If the name of a 'lower' caste person is proposed it may not be approved. They may only show their disapproval through facial expressions and gestures. Such caste divisions can be overcome if awareness is raised. Encourage a discussion about caste divisions. Ask the elders if they think that these differences are important in old age. Ask them what effect these divisions will have on the functioning of the club. Ask them what can be done to reduce these issues.

GENDER IMBALANCE

Gender influences the functioning of clubs. Clubs with a balanced proportion of the sexes tend to function better. The Sri Lankan experience

found that women tend to participate well in saving schemes and revolving loans, while men were more confident at establishing external links and completing documents to open bank accounts. If older men continue to work their participation in the club may be limited. When the majority of members are women, men may feel uncomfortable and think twice about coming again. At the beginning the women may be less likely to speak than the men, but this usually changes over time.

***'I could talk without fear, participation is more important than anything.'** (Older woman)*

POOR PARTICIPATION

The Sri Lankan experience found that those who have held positions in their working life were generally the first to actively participate in early Elders' Club meetings. Many other elders did not participate during meetings. However, after about 10 meetings, all the elders felt comfortable enough to talk freely and to participate with enjoyment. Participation can be difficult when clubs are first established and often require patience, time and encouragement to get the clubs functioning effectively.

SIGNING THE ATTENDANCE SHEET

It can take a long time for elders to sign the attendance sheet. Illiterate elders may only place their thumbprint. Women may be confused about whether their initials should be their husband's or their father's name. Many elders may take a long time to write their name. It may be helpful to have a younger volunteer to make the attendance record, write the name of the elder and ask them to sign.

GETTING TO MEETINGS

In some communities people live quite close together. But in others, there are greater distances between the places where people live. Sometimes there are geographical obstacles that make communicating with the elders difficult. You might be able to pass on messages to elders

through others in the community. Now many more elders have mobile telephones, or are able to get a message from a family member who has a telephone. Discuss this with the elders and try to record contact details.

MEETING PLACES

It can be very difficult to identify a suitable space to hold meetings where all the elders can sit comfortably. Consult with community members as much as possible to identify a suitable location.

GRANDCHILDREN AT CLUB MEETINGS

Sometimes elders have to bring their small grandchildren with them to meetings if there is no one else to look after them. Small children can be distracting and noisy, interrupting the meeting. If possible, arrange for one or two younger volunteers to play with the children in a group and provide some simple games and toys.

QUALITIES NEEDED BY FACILITATORS

Some of the qualities that facilitators mentioned they should have when working with elders include the need to:

- Be patient
- Listen and accept the opinion of the elders
- Be careful not to show any bias
- Use simple language and speak clearly
- Show initiative
- Communicate well with external stakeholders, such as government representatives
- Show dedication, honesty and a genuine interest in the elders
- Be persistent - it's not always easy
- Be careful not to make promises and raise expectations
- Encourage the participation of children and young people together with the elders
- Be kind



'The love and respect of members were obtained, likewise with outside people too we were able to establish relations.'
(Older man)






APPENDIX 1. PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

The leaders in Sri Lanka developed their own set of criteria to evaluate the Elders' Clubs, which were written up on the left hand side of large sheets of paper.

The names of the clubs were written along the top to form a matrix.

Paper circles with one of three symbols    were stuck on the paper to show the rating for that criterion.

CRITERIA	STRONG 100-75%	FAIR 75-50%	WEAK <50%
			
1 The Elders' Club being a body with two leaders – a male and a female leader - and members			
2 The members of the club understanding the objectives and activities of the program			
3 Strong leadership – judging the leading members on their ability to gather elders, organise events, support NGO Staff, guide other members etc.			
4 Documentation to show the activities conducted			
5 Self-initiation to take up leadership, to organise and to participate			
6 Cordial relationships amongst the elders themselves			
7 Cooperation of members when conducting activities			
8 Attendance for activities (regular, occasionally, rarely)			
9 Linked to the community-based organisation. For example, the constitution of the CBO acknowledged the club and identified other services for the elders			
10 Linked to other government bodies which provide services to elders (Social Services Department etc.)			
11 Able to carry out planned activities continuously in the absence of NGO staff			
12 Identifying and carrying out their own activities in support of their fellow elders			

