

Elderly Care in Crisis? Evaluating the Role of Policy in Addressing Demographic Challenges in Thailand and the Philippines

Hoang-Nam Tran, Tokushima University, Japan
Kanchana Piboon, Burapha University, Thailand
Kaori Watanabe, Tokyo Healthcare University, Japan
Omar Maningo Rodis, Tokushima University, Japan

The European Conference on Aging & Gerontology 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper evaluates the role of policy in addressing demographic challenges impacting elderly care in Thailand and the Philippines. Both nations are experiencing demographic transitions, with Thailand seeing a rapidly aging population and the Philippines poised to experience similar shifts in the coming decades. Using a comparative and literature review approach, the research identifies the key demographic pressures, explores existing policies, and highlights gaps in care provision. Thailand has developed robust national programs, including Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and community-based elderly health volunteer programs, inspired by international models such as Japan's community health framework. Meanwhile, the Philippines remains heavily reliant on family-based care, with minimal government intervention and fragmented social support structures. International collaborations and cultural adaptations are limited, highlighting the need for cross-sectoral cooperation and innovative approaches. The study underscores the influence of cultural values, such as filial piety in Thailand and the Filipino concept of *bayanihan*, in shaping caregiving practices. It also emphasizes the need to align policy with these cultural dimensions while addressing modern challenges, such as urbanization and economic constraints. The results call for enhanced policy integration, public-private partnerships, and sustainable funding mechanisms tailored to the socio-economic and cultural contexts of both countries. By examining these differences and their implications, this study provides actionable insights into how policy can address the growing demands of elderly care in Thailand and the Philippines, ensuring equitable and sustainable outcomes.

Keywords: aging population, cultural values in caregiving, demographic challenges, elderly care policies, Thailand, Philippines

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Population aging is a global phenomenon, with nearly every country in the world experiencing growth in the proportion of older people. By 2050, 1 in 6 people globally will be over the age of 65, compared to 1 in 11 in 2019 (UN ESCAP, 2022). In developed countries such as Japan and Germany, aging has already stressed long-term care (LTC) systems, resulting in caregiver shortages, high financial burdens, and social isolation among older persons (OECD/EU, 2013; WHO & AHPSR, 2017). In response, these countries have developed formal LTC insurance systems and invested heavily in eldercare infrastructure (Colombo & Mercier, 2012; Ikegami & Campbell, 1999). Developing nations face a more complex challenge: they are aging before they grow rich. Countries like China, Vietnam, and India are seeing rapid increases in elderly populations, but lack the institutional frameworks and fiscal capacity to deliver adequate care (Feng et al., 2012; Giang et al., 2023). Informal caregiving remains dominant, but is increasingly undermined by urbanization, outmigration, and economic strain.

The demographic landscape in Southeast Asia is undergoing a significant shift, with Thailand and the Philippines facing distinct but related challenges in elderly care. Thailand is one of the fastest-aging societies in Southeast Asia, projected to become a “super-aged” society by 2030, with over 25% of its population aged 60 and above (UN ESCAP, 2022). Though the country has made strides in elderly healthcare, including Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and community health volunteer programs, it struggles with workforce shortages, low pension adequacy, and weak LTC financing (ILO, 2014; WHO & AHPSR, 2017). The Philippines, though demographically younger, is on a similar path. With declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy, it is poised to face a demographic shift without sufficient formal care infrastructure (Cruz, 2025). Care for the elderly in the Philippines remains largely family-based, and government support is fragmented and underfunded (Abalos, 2020; Moncatar et al., 2024).

Despite these pressing concerns, certain aspects of elderly care remain understudied. Research on the impact of globalization and cross-border elderly care models, particularly involving migrant workers providing care services, is limited (Yeoh & Huang, 2010). Additionally, while the role of cultural values such as filial piety (Sringernyung et al., 2020) and bayanihan (Hernandez et al., 2024) is acknowledged in shaping caregiving practices, little attention has been given to how these traditional norms evolve in response to modern economic realities. While comparative studies on elderly care exist, few focus on Thailand and the Philippines together, two culturally similar yet structurally different systems. This gap in literature underscores the need for a deeper exploration of how policy can align with cultural expectations while addressing contemporary elderly care challenges. The aim of this paper is to evaluate and compare the elderly care crises and policy responses in both countries. It also seeks to situate both within the broader global context to determine what lessons can be adapted or localized, and where policy innovation is most needed.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative approach, utilizing literature reviews and policy analysis to assess the current state of elderly care in Thailand and the Philippines. Sources include government reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, international policy assessments, and case studies on aging and healthcare systems. The research focuses on demographic data, existing care models, and the influence of cultural values in shaping policy responses.

Elderly Care Systems and Challenges

Thailand is projected to become a super-aged society by 2030, with over 25% of its population aged 60 and above (UN ESCAP, 2022). The country has introduced UHC and several community programs but faces serious shortages in geriatric professionals (HelpAge Int'l, 2013). Over 33% of older people rely solely on low pensions (ILO, 2014; WHO & AHPSR, 2017), and isolation is rising, with 23% living alone (UN ESCAP, 2022). The Philippines, with a still-young demographic, is aging rapidly due to lower fertility and longer life expectancy (PSA, 2023). Elder care remains over 90% informal (Abalos, 2020), and less than 20% of seniors receive any pension support (DSWD, 2023). Meanwhile, healthcare migration severely limits domestic care capacity (Yeoh et al., 2023). Table 1 summarizes key indicators highlighting the scale and nature of the elderly care challenge in Thailand and the Philippines, including demographic projections, workforce shortages, pension reliance, and caregiving structures.

Table 1

Elderly Care Challenges in Thailand and the Philippines

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Thailand</i>	<i>Philippines</i>
% of population aged 60+ by 2030	25% (UNESCAP, 2022)	Aging trend accelerating (PSA, 2023)
Geriatricians per 100,000 elderly	~1 (WHO, 2021)	Care workforce gap due to migration (Yeoh, 2023)
Elderly relying solely on pensions	> 33% on minimal support (ILO, 2023)	< 20% covered by social pensions (IFA, 2022)
Informal/family caregiving reliance	Declining but still dominant	92% of elderly care (ADB, 2022)
Elderly living alone	23% (UNESCAP, 2022)	Rising in urban areas (IFA, 2022)

Comparison of Policies

Thailand has implemented UHC and launched pilot LTC insurance programs (ILO, 2014; WHO & AHPSR, 2017), supported by community volunteer systems (Cohen & Cohen, 2024). In contrast, the Philippines has partial health coverage and no structured LTC (DSWD, 2023). Social pensions are limited and poorly administered (DSWD, 2023). Thailand's policy coherence is stronger, whereas the Philippines exhibits fragmented and uncoordinated care strategies (Abalos, 2020; Olshansky & Carnes, 2010). Table 2 provides a comparative overview of the elderly care policies in Thailand and the Philippines, outlining key differences in healthcare coverage, long-term care infrastructure, policy coordination, and cultural influences shaping each country's response (ADB, 2020; Felipe-Dimog et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2024; Moncatar et al., 2024; UN ESCAP, 2022; Yeung & Thang, 2018).

Table 2
Elderly Care Policies in Thailand and the Philippines

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Thailand</i>	<i>Philippines</i>
Healthcare Coverage	Universal Health Coverage (UHC) provides nationwide elderly care	Limited public healthcare support for elderly-specific services
Elderly Care Model	Government-driven programs (community health, elderly volunteer programs)	Predominantly family-based caregiving
Long-Term Care Infrastructure	Pilots for long-term care insurance and geriatric services	Fragmented programs, minimal institutional care support
Policy Coordination	Strong national strategies, integrated with global best practices	Lack of cohesive strategy, reliant on ad-hoc assistance programs
Cultural Influence	Filial piety remains a strong influence but shifting due to urbanization	Bayanihan (community support) is a key value but strained by migration
Challenges	Funding sustainability, shortage of geriatric professionals	Reliance on informal caregivers, absence of a structured elderly care framework
Future Policy Needs	Enhanced funding mechanisms, expanded workforce training	National policy framework, integration of formal elderly care systems

Discussion

Aging is a global phenomenon, but its impacts are unevenly distributed due to differing economic capacities, demographic timelines, and institutional readiness. Japan and Germany, while leading in elderly care systems, face similar challenges such as rising costs, caregiver shortages, and cultural mismatches (Colombo & Mercier, 2012; OECD/EU, 2013)(Campbell et al., 2010). Conversely, developing and middle-income countries like China, India are only beginning to grapple with the systemic demands of aging (Feng et al., 2012; Goel & Ramavat, 2018).

Thailand is currently facing an urgent elderly care crisis driven by rapid demographic shifts and limited infrastructure, while the Philippines, though demographically younger, is at serious risk of falling behind unless it proactively builds formal systems. Both countries, unlike their Western counterparts, embed strong cultural caregiving norms such as filial piety in Thailand (Sringernyuang et al., 2020) and bayanihan in the Philippines (Hernandez et al., 2024) that continue to shape eldercare expectations. However, these traditions are increasingly strained by urban migration, economic pressures, and changing family structures. Effective policy must bridge traditional values and formalized systems. In terms of system formalization, developed countries like Japan and Germany offer models for institutional long-term care, national insurance systems, and caregiver training. Thailand could consider adapting Japan's Community-Based Integrated Care System (CBICS), which

emphasizes coordinated health and social services within local communities to support aging populations (Machida & Miyashita, 2021). This model has been effective in Japan and has influenced similar initiatives in Thailand aimed at enhancing elderly care through community involvement. Similarly, the Philippines might benefit from examining Germany's Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) system, established in 1995, which provides mandatory public or private long-term care insurance for all citizens (Geraedts et al., 2000). This system ensures comprehensive coverage and could offer valuable insights for the Philippines in developing a sustainable and inclusive approach to elderly care. The Philippines may also apply structured LTC experiments like those in other Asian countries (Feng et al., 2012; Giang et al., 2023). Workforce shortages remain a pressing issue across the region, but in the Philippines, the outmigration of nurses and domestic helpers creates a dual burden of shrinking capacity amid growing elderly needs. Financing mechanisms also diverge significantly; while developed nations rely on taxation and insurance, both countries have yet to fully leverage public-private partnerships or community-based funding models. In this regard, ASEAN countries have an opportunity to collaborate by developing regional caregiver training standards, sharing policy innovations, and establishing mutual recognition frameworks. Such regional cooperation could play a critical role in alleviating cross-border workforce shortages and promoting more resilient eldercare systems.

This paper is subject to limitations. First, there is a lack of up-to-date data on the caregiver workforce in both countries. Publicly available statistics often fail to capture caregiver-to-elder ratios, employment conditions, or the training and certification status of care providers. Second, many government and institutional policy documents, especially those relating to budget allocations, implementation monitoring, or local-level adaptations, are either unpublished, archived in local languages, or inaccessible to the public. This restricts the depth of policy analysis, particularly in evaluating the consistency between policy design and real-world execution. Third, this study does not fully capture the scope and impact of undocumented informal caregiving practices, which constitute a major component of elderly care in both countries. Such care, often provided by untrained family members, remains unrecorded yet deeply embedded in community life. Given these limitations, future research should prioritize the development of reliable data on caregiver workforce capacity, including training levels and distribution. It should also investigate how national policies are implemented at the local level and examine the lived experiences of informal caregivers. These would bridge the gap between policy frameworks and caregiving realities, offering more practical and culturally grounded solutions.

Conclusion

Elderly care remains a pressing issue in Thailand and the Philippines, albeit at different stages of urgency. While Thailand has made significant progress in policy-driven care initiatives, it still faces funding and workforce challenges. The Philippines, with its reliance on family-based care, needs to develop a structured and sustainable approach before demographic pressures escalate. This study underscores the necessity of policy integration, innovative funding models, and international cooperation to create equitable and culturally appropriate elderly care systems. Addressing these challenges proactively will ensure that both nations are prepared for the demographic realities ahead, fostering a future where aging populations receive the care and dignity they deserve.

References

- Abalos, J. B. (2020). Older Persons in the Philippines: a Demographic, Socioeconomic and Health Profile. *Ageing International*, 45(3), 230–254. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-018-9337-7>
- ADB. (2020). *Lessons From Thailand's National Community-based Long-term Care Program for Older Persons*. 25.
- Campbell, J. C., Ikegami, N., & Gibson, M. J. (2010). Lessons from public long-term care insurance in Germany and Japan. *Health Affairs (Project Hope)*, 29(1), 87–95. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2009.0548>
- Cohen, A., & Cohen, P. T. (2024). Paradigm Conflict: Village Health Volunteers and Public Health in Thailand. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 25(3), 251–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2024.2357104>
- Colombo, F., & Mercier, J. (2012). Help Wanted? Fair and Sustainable Financing of Long-term Care Services. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 34(2), 316–332. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23273827>
- Cruz, G. T. (2025). *Chapter 1 The Shifting Demographics of the Philippines : Towards an Ageing Society*. 1–13.
- DSWD. (2023). *Reports (BFARs)*. <https://www.dswd.gov.ph/>
- Felipe-Dimog, E. B., Realce Tumulak, M.-A. J., Garcia, A. P., Liang, F.-W., Silao, C. L. T., Hsu, M.-T., Saragih, I. D., & Sia-Ed, A. B. (2024). Caring Behavior of Filipinos toward their Elderly Family Members. *Acta Medica Philippina*, 58(15), 6–10. <https://doi.org/10.47895/amp.vi0.6880>
- Feng, Z., Liu, C., Guan, X., & Mor, V. (2012). China's rapidly aging population creates policy challenges in shaping a viable long-term care system. *Health Affairs (Project Hope)*, 31(12), 2764–2773. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2012.0535>
- Geraedts, M., Heller, G. V., & Harrington, C. A. (2000). Germany's long-term-care insurance: putting a social insurance model into practice. *The Milbank Quarterly*, 78(3), 340,375-401. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.00178>
- Giang, L. T., Nguyen, N. T., Pham, T. T. H., & Phi, P. M. (2023). Factors associated with receipt of informal care among the Vietnamese older persons: Evidence from a national survey. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, 1065851. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1065851>
- Goel, A., & Ramavat, A. S. (2018). Absence of a formal long-term healthcare system for a rapidly ageing population is likely to create a crisis situation in the near future. *Medicine and Society*, 31(2), 103–104.
- HelpAge Int'l. (2013). *Care in Old Age in Southeast Asia and China*. June, 1–54.

- Hernandez, C. J. D., Gozum, I. E. A., & Delgado, C. A. A. (2024). Community pantry as a form of bayanihan in the light of albert camus' concept of rebellion. *XLinguae*, 17(3), 13–23. <https://doi.org/10.18355/XL.2024.17.03.02>
- Ikegami, N., & Campbell, J. C. (1999). Health care reform in Japan: the virtues of muddling through. *Health Affairs (Project Hope)*, 18(3), 56–75. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.18.3.56>
- ILO. (2014). Social protection for older persons: Key policy trends and statistics. In *Social Protection Policy Paper No. 1*. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_310211.pdf
- Jiang, N., Wu, B., & Li, Y. (2024). Caregiving in Asia: Priority areas for research, policy, and practice to support family caregivers. *Health Care Science*, 3(6), 374–382. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/hcs2.124>
- Machida, M., & Miyashita, Y. (2021). For further collaboration on strengthening Universal Health Coverage (UHC): Partnership project between Japan and Thailand. *Global Health & Medicine*, 3(1), 11–14. <https://doi.org/10.35772/ghm.2020.01095>
- Moncatar, T. R. T., Vo, M. T. H., Siongco, K. L. L., Han, T. D. T., Seino, K., Gomez, A. V. D., Canila, C. C., Javier, R. S., Vo, T. Van, Tashiro, Y., Lorenzo, F. M. E., & Nakamura, K. (2024). Gaps and opportunities in addressing the needs of older adults in the Philippines and Vietnam: a qualitative exploration of health and social workers' experiences in urban care settings. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12, 1269116. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1269116>
- OECD/EU. (2013). *A Good Life in Old Age?* OECD Health Policy Studies.
- Olshansky, S. J., & Carnes, B. A. (2010). Ageing and health in the Philippines. *The Lancet*, 375(9708), 25. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(09\)62177-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(09)62177-2)
- PSA. (2023). *Philippine-Statistical-Yearbook*.
- Sringernyuang, L., Felix, M. S., Torut, B., Wongjinda, S., Chaimongkol, U., & Wongjinda, T. (2020). Thailand: Case studies of filial piety, family dynamics, and family finances-unexpected findings of a country-wide research of the evaluation of project performance supported by older persons fund. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 20(1), 145–158. <https://doi.org/10.59588/2350-8329.1289>
- UN ESCAP. (2022). *Asia-Pacific Report on Population Ageing 2022*.
- WHO & AHPSR. (2017). *Primary health care systems (primasys): case study from Thailand: abridged version*. World Health Organization.
- Yeoh, B. S. A., & Huang, S. (2010). Foreign domestic workers and home-based care for elders in Singapore. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 22(1), 69–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420903385635>

Yeoh, B. S. A., Jian An, L., Elaine Lynn-Ee, H., & Huang, S. (2023). Migrant domestic workers and the household division of intimate labour: reconfiguring eldercare relations in Singapore. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 30(5), 619–637.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2021.1956435>

Yeung, Wei-Jun Jean, & Thang, Leng Leng. (2018). Long-Term Care for Older Adults in ASEAN Plus Three: The Roles of Family, Community, and the State in Addressing Unmet Eldercare Needs. *Journal of Aging and Health*, 30(10), 1499–1515.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0898264318796345>

Contact email: tran@tokushima-u.ac.jp