

ACCESS TO COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL SERVICES AMONG OLDER ADULTS IN VIETNAM: EVIDENCE FROM HANOI, QUANG NINH, AND YEN BAI

ACESSO A SERVIÇOS SOCIAIS COMUNITÁRIOS ENTRE IDOSOS NO VIETNÃ: EVIDÊNCIAS DE HANÓI, QUANG NINH E YEN BAI

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Abstract

Population ageing has become a major demographic trend in many countries, including Vietnam. As the number of older adults continues to increase, access to community-based social services plays an increasingly important role in supporting their health, well-being, and social participation. This study examines the accessibility of community-based social services among older adults and identifies the barriers that affect service utilization. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 360 older adults aged 60 years and above in three provinces in Vietnam: Hanoi, Quang Ninh, and Yen Bai. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. The study examined socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, types of social services accessed, and barriers to service accessibility. The findings show that health care services were the most commonly accessed services among older adults, followed by recreational activities and religious or spiritual services. However, access to other social services such as psychological counseling, legal consultation, and employment support remained relatively limited. Several barriers were identified, including lack of information about services, financial constraints, limited service availability, and mobility limitations. The study highlights the importance of strengthening community-based social service systems to better support the needs of older adults. Policy efforts should focus on improving service availability, enhancing information dissemination, and reducing structural barriers that limit access to services.

Keywords: Older Adults. Community-Based Social Services. Service Accessibility. Population Ageing. Vietnam.

Resumo

O envelhecimento da população tornou-se uma importante tendência demográfica em muitos países, incluindo o Vietnã. À medida que o número de idosos continua a aumentar, o acesso a serviços sociais comunitários desempenha um papel cada vez mais importante no apoio à sua saúde, bem-estar e participação social. Este estudo examina a acessibilidade dos serviços sociais comunitários entre os idosos e identifica as barreiras que afetam a utilização desses serviços. Foi realizada uma pesquisa transversal com 360 idosos com 60 anos ou mais em três províncias do Vietnã: Hanói, Quang Ninh e Yen Bai. Os dados foram coletados por meio de questionários estruturados e analisados utilizando métodos estatísticos descritivos. O estudo examinou as características sociodemográficas dos entrevistados, os tipos de serviços sociais utilizados e as barreiras à acessibilidade dos serviços. Os resultados mostram que os serviços de saúde foram os mais acessados entre os idosos, seguidos por atividades recreativas e serviços religiosos ou espirituais. No entanto, o acesso a outros serviços sociais, como aconselhamento psicológico, consultoria jurídica e apoio ao emprego, permaneceu relativamente limitado. Várias barreiras foram identificadas, incluindo falta de informação sobre os serviços, restrições financeiras, disponibilidade limitada de serviços e limitações de mobilidade. O estudo destaca a importância de fortalecer os sistemas de serviços sociais comunitários para melhor atender às necessidades dos idosos. As iniciativas políticas devem se concentrar em melhorar a disponibilidade de serviços, ampliar a divulgação de informações e reduzir as barreiras estruturais que limitam o acesso aos serviços.



Palavras-chave: Idosos. Serviços Sociais Comunitários. Acessibilidade aos Serviços. Envelhecimento da População. Vietnã.

1 INTRODUCTION

Population ageing has become one of the most significant demographic trends worldwide. According to the United Nations (2020), the number of people aged 60 years and above is increasing rapidly and is expected to reach more than two billion by 2050. This demographic transition poses new challenges for social protection systems, health care services, and community support structures.

Vietnam has entered the stage of population ageing since 2011 and is considered one of the countries experiencing the fastest ageing processes in Asia. The increasing number of older adults has created growing demand for health care, social services, and long-term care support. Many older adults face multiple challenges related to declining health, limited income, and reduced social participation. Therefore, ensuring access to appropriate social services has become an important policy priority.

Community-based social services play a critical role in supporting older adults to live independently and maintain their quality of life. These services include health care, psychological support, recreational activities, social assistance, and community engagement programs. Compared with institutional care models, community-based services enable older adults to remain integrated within their families and communities while receiving necessary support.

Previous studies have shown that access to social services can significantly influence the physical and psychological well-being of older adults. However, many older individuals continue to face barriers in accessing these services, including financial limitations, lack of information, and limited service availability. These barriers may lead to inequalities in service utilization and reduce the effectiveness of social welfare programs.

Although population ageing has attracted increasing attention in Vietnam, empirical research on the accessibility of community-based social services remains

limited. In particular, there is a lack of studies examining how older adults access services at the community level and what factors influence their service utilization.

Therefore, this study aims to examine access to community-based social services among older adults in Vietnam and to identify the barriers affecting service accessibility. Using survey data collected from three provinces representing different socio-economic contexts, the study provides empirical evidence that may contribute to improving social service policies and promoting active ageing in Vietnam.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Population ageing has become a significant demographic trend worldwide, posing new challenges for social welfare systems and community-based services. According to the United Nations (2020), the global population aged 60 years and over is projected to double by 2050, reaching approximately 2.1 billion people. This demographic transition requires governments and communities to develop effective social services that support the health, well-being, and social participation of older adults.

Access to social services is often examined through the behavioral model of health service utilization developed by Andersen (1995). This framework suggests that individuals' access to services is influenced by three groups of factors: predisposing characteristics (such as age and education), enabling factors (including income and availability of services), and need factors related to health conditions. The model has been widely applied in studies examining older adults' access to healthcare and social support services (Aday & Andersen, 1974).

Community-based services are increasingly recognized as an essential approach to supporting ageing populations. Rather than relying solely on institutional care, community services aim to enable older adults to remain active and independent within their communities (Walker, 2002). These services may include health care, psychological support, recreational activities, social participation programs, and livelihood assistance. Research has shown that community-based services play an important role in promoting active ageing and improving quality of life among older adults (Beard *et al.*, 2016).

Several studies have examined the utilization of community-based services among older adults. For example, Yu *et al.* (2024) found that home- and community-based

services significantly improve older adults' physical and mental well-being while reducing the need for institutional care. Similarly, Liu *et al.* (2025) reported that access to community services is positively associated with life satisfaction and self-rated health among older adults. Community engagement programs also contribute to strengthening social networks and reducing loneliness among older populations (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011).

Despite the benefits of community-based services, many older adults face barriers in accessing these services. Previous studies have identified several structural and individual barriers, including lack of information, financial constraints, mobility limitations, and inadequate service availability (Cabañero-Garcia *et al.*, 2025). Access disparities are particularly evident among vulnerable older adults living in rural areas or low-income communities (Jiang *et al.*, 2024).

In addition, social isolation and loneliness remain important concerns among older adults. Research has demonstrated that strong social networks and community participation are associated with improved psychological well-being and reduced risk of depression (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001). However, limited access to community support services may exacerbate social isolation among older populations (Victor *et al.*, 2005).

Recent studies have also emphasized the role of community organizations and social programs in improving service accessibility. Programs such as community connectors and social prescribing have been shown to effectively link older adults with available services and community resources (Giebel *et al.*, 2022). These initiatives highlight the importance of strengthening community-based support systems in ageing societies.

Overall, existing literature highlights the growing importance of community-based social services in addressing the needs of ageing populations. However, many studies indicate that access to such services remains uneven due to structural barriers and individual constraints. Therefore, further research is needed to better understand how older adults access community services and what factors influence their utilization. Such evidence is particularly important for developing policies that enhance social service accessibility and improve the well-being of older adults.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design and study sites

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative research design to examine access to community-based social services among older adults. The research focused on understanding the types of social services available in communities, the extent to which older adults access these services, and the barriers that affect their accessibility.

The study was conducted in three provinces in Vietnam representing different socio-economic and geographical contexts: Hanoi, Quang Ninh, and Yen Bai. Hanoi represents a major urban center with relatively developed social services and infrastructure. Quang Ninh represents a coastal province with a mixed urban–rural socio-economic structure. Yen Bai represents a mountainous and rural province where access to social services is often more limited. Selecting these three localities allowed the study to capture diverse contexts of community-based service provision for older adults.

3.2 Sample and data collection

The study surveyed a total of 360 older adults aged 60 years and above. Participants were selected from community settings across the three study sites. The sample included older adults living in both urban and rural areas, as well as those receiving services from community-based social service providers.

Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered directly to respondents. The questionnaire collected information on socio-demographic characteristics, types of community-based social services accessed, frequency of service utilization, sources of information about services, and barriers encountered when accessing these services.

In addition to the survey, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in order to gain deeper insights into the experiences of older adults and service providers. A total of nine older adults, twelve service providers, nine family members of older adults, and six local administrators

participated in in-depth interviews. Furthermore, three focus group discussions were conducted with community stakeholders in the three study areas.

3.3 Measures

The questionnaire included several groups of variables related to access to community-based social services. These variables included:

- Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, such as age, gender, education level, marital status, and income sources.
- Types of social services accessed by older adults, including health care services, recreational activities, psychological counseling, nutrition support, legal consultation, employment assistance, and religious or spiritual activities.
- Accessibility of services, including frequency of use and channels through which respondents obtained information about services.
- Barriers to accessing services, such as lack of information, financial constraints, health limitations, and service availability.

These variables were designed to capture both structural and individual factors affecting service accessibility among older adults.

3.4 Data analysis

Quantitative data collected from the survey were processed and analyzed using SPSS software (version 20.0). Descriptive statistical analysis was used to summarize the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and to examine patterns of access to community-based social services. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to present the distribution of responses across key variables.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were used to support the interpretation of quantitative findings and to provide contextual explanations of the barriers and challenges faced by older adults when accessing social services.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

A total of 360 older adults participated in the survey. As shown in Table 1, females accounted for a slightly higher proportion of respondents (57.2%) compared with males (42.8%). Regarding age distribution, nearly half of the respondents were aged 60–69 (46.7%), while the remaining participants were aged 70 and above (53.3%).

In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents had secondary education or below (72.2%), while only 27.8% had completed high school or higher education. With regard to marital status, most older adults were married (59.4%), whereas 40.6% were widowed or had other marital statuses.

Income sources varied among respondents. Pension or social allowance was reported as the primary income source for 40.6% of participants, followed by family support (30.3%) and income from work or other sources (29.1%). These findings suggest that a considerable proportion of older adults rely on social protection mechanisms and family support for their livelihood.

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 360)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	154	42.8
	Female	206	57.2
Age group	60–69	168	46.7
	≥70	192	53.3
Education	Secondary or below	260	72.2
	High school or above	100	27.8
Marital status	Married	214	59.4
	Widowed/Other	146	40.6
Main income source	Pension/social allowance	146	40.6
	Family support	109	30.3
	Work/other	105	29.1

4.2 Types of community-based social services accessed by older adults

Table 2 presents the types of community-based social services accessed by older adults. Health care services were the most commonly accessed services, with 79.7% of respondents reporting that they had used such services. This reflects the increasing health care needs among older populations.

Participation in recreational and social activities was also relatively common, reported by 56.7% of respondents. In addition, 46.4% of older adults participated in religious or spiritual activities organized in the community.

However, access to other social services remained limited. Only 36.9% of respondents reported receiving nutrition support services, and 32.8% had benefited from social assistance or resource mobilization services. Psychological counseling services were accessed by only 20% of respondents, while legal consultation services (16.1%) and employment or livelihood support services (13.6%) were the least utilized.

These findings indicate that while health-related services are relatively accessible, other forms of social services for older adults remain underutilized in community settings.

Table 2

Types of community-based social services accessed by older adults

Type of social service	(n)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Health care services		287	79.7
Recreational and social activities		204	56.7
Nutrition support services		133	36.9
Psychological counseling		72	20.0
Legal or policy consultation		58	16.1
Employment or livelihood support		49	13.6
Resource mobilization/social assistance		118	32.8
Religious/spiritual activities		167	46.4

4.3 Barriers to accessing community-based social services

Despite the availability of various community-based services, older adults still face several barriers when accessing them. As illustrated in Table 3, lack of information

about available services was identified as the most common barrier, reported by 45.0% of respondents.

Financial constraints also posed a significant challenge, affecting 38.3% of participants. Additionally, 33.6% of older adults indicated that the limited availability of services in their communities hindered their access.

Health-related issues also played an important role, with 31.7% of respondents reporting that poor health or mobility limitations restricted their ability to access services. Other barriers included lack of transportation (26.7%), complicated administrative procedures (22.8%), and lack of family support (18.6%).

Overall, these findings suggest that both structural and individual factors contribute to limited access to social services among older adults.

Table 3

Barriers to accessing community-based social services

Barriers	(n)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of information about services		162	45.0
Financial constraints		138	38.3
Limited availability of services		121	33.6
Poor health or mobility limitations		114	31.7
Lack of transportation		96	26.7
Complicated administrative procedures		82	22.8
Lack of family support		67	18.6

5 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into the accessibility of community-based social services among older adults. Consistent with previous research, health care services were the most commonly accessed services among older adults. This result reflects the increasing health care needs associated with ageing populations (Beard *et al.*, 2016). As people age, the prevalence of chronic diseases and functional limitations increases, which leads to greater demand for medical services and health-related support.

However, the findings also reveal that access to other types of community-based social services remains limited. Services such as psychological counseling, legal

consultation, and livelihood support were accessed by only a small proportion of respondents. This pattern is consistent with previous studies suggesting that non-medical social services are often underdeveloped or underutilized in many communities (Yu *et al.*, 2024). These findings highlight the need for a more comprehensive system of social services that addresses not only health needs but also the social and psychological well-being of older adults.

Another important finding of this study concerns the barriers to accessing social services. Lack of information was identified as the most common barrier among respondents. This result aligns with previous research showing that many older adults are unaware of available services or do not know how to access them (Cabañero-Garcia *et al.*, 2025). Improving communication and information dissemination may therefore play a crucial role in increasing service utilization among older populations.

Financial constraints and limited availability of services were also significant barriers reported by respondents. Similar findings have been reported in other studies examining service accessibility among older adults (Jiang *et al.*, 2024). These structural barriers may disproportionately affect older individuals with limited financial resources or those living in underserved areas. Addressing such inequalities requires policy interventions that expand community-based services and improve their affordability.

Health and mobility limitations were also identified as barriers to service access. As older adults experience physical decline, mobility restrictions may prevent them from accessing services located outside their immediate communities. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of developing age-friendly environments and community support systems that facilitate service access for older adults (World Health Organization, 2015).

Furthermore, the results suggest that social support networks play an important role in facilitating access to services. Older adults who receive support from family members or community organizations may find it easier to access available services. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating the importance of social networks in promoting well-being and reducing social isolation among older adults (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011).

Overall, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of strengthening community-based social services to support ageing populations. Policymakers should

prioritize expanding service availability, improving information dissemination, and reducing financial and administrative barriers to service access. In addition, promoting community participation and strengthening social support networks may further enhance older adults' ability to access necessary services and maintain active and healthy lives.

6 CONCLUSION

This study examined access to community-based social services among older adults in Vietnam using survey data collected from 360 respondents in Hanoi, Quang Ninh, and Yen Bai. The findings provide important insights into the types of services accessed by older adults as well as the barriers that limit their ability to utilize available services.

The results show that health care services remain the most commonly accessed services among older adults, reflecting the increasing health needs associated with population ageing. Recreational activities and religious or spiritual services were also relatively common among respondents. However, access to other types of social services, such as psychological counseling, legal consultation, and employment support, remains limited.

The study also identified several key barriers affecting service accessibility. Lack of information about available services was the most frequently reported barrier, followed by financial constraints, limited availability of services, and mobility limitations. These findings indicate that both structural and individual factors influence older adults' ability to access community-based social services.

The findings highlight the need to strengthen community-based social service systems in order to better support ageing populations. Expanding service availability, improving communication and information dissemination, and reducing financial and administrative barriers are essential steps toward enhancing service accessibility. In addition, strengthening community networks and promoting family and community support can further improve the well-being and social participation of older adults.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on population ageing and social service accessibility in developing countries. The results provide

empirical evidence that may help policymakers and service providers design more inclusive and effective social service systems for older adults in Vietnam.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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