

# Older adults, social inclusion and recreational spaces in the city of Latacunga, Ecuador

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## Abstract

Ensuring recreational spaces that provide psychosocial support and prevent isolation is a key strategy to ensure the quality of life of older adults. This research analyzes the participation of older adults in recreational spaces to strengthen the right to social inclusion with the program “Mis Mejores Años” in the Once de Noviembre parish, Latacunga City, Cotopaxi Province. Interviews and observation were used as a qualitative methodology. Qualitative methods, interview techniques, focus groups, and observation were used. From a universe of 80 people who regularly attend the group, 30 elders were selected, and with them, three focus groups were formed. After this experience, ten profiles were designated to apply for individual interviews.

The observation sheets were explicitly designed to analyze the dynamics of participation of the sample of older adults in terms of cognitive stimulation and the development of playful exercises that enhance their abilities. Additionally, two project managers were interviewed. Preliminary findings report benefits, especially in the mental health of older adults who attend the group and the possibility of socializing with their peers.

**Keywords:** Older adults; Recreational spaces; Psychosocial support; Social inclusion; Cognitive stimulation; Playful exercises; Mental health.

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# Adultos Mayores, inclusión social y espacios recreativos en la ciudad de Latacunga, Ecuador

## Resumen

Garantizar espacios de recreación que brinden apoyo psicosocial y prevengan el aislamiento es una estrategia fundamental para velar por la calidad de vida de los Adultos Mayores. La presente investigación analiza la participación del Adulto Mayor en espacios recreativos para fortalecer el derecho a la inclusión social con el programa "Mis Mejores años" de la parroquia Once de Noviembre, ciudad de Latacunga, Provincia de Cotopaxi. Con metodología cualitativa, se trabajaron las técnicas de la entrevista, grupos focales y observación; de un universo de 80 personas que acuden regularmente al grupo, se seleccionó a 30 Adultos Mayores, con ellos se conformaron tres grupos focales, posterior a esta experiencia se designaron 10 perfiles para aplicar entrevistas individuales.

Las fichas de observación se diseñaron específicamente para analizar la dinámica de la participación de la muestra de Adultos Mayores en cuanto a la estimulación cognitiva y el desarrollo de ejercicios lúdicos que potencien sus capacidades. Adicionalmente se entrevistó a dos personeras a cargo del proyecto. Los hallazgos preliminares dan cuenta de los beneficios, en especial en cuanto a la salud mental de los Adultos Mayores que acuden al grupo y la posibilidad de socializar con sus pares.

**Palabras clave:** Adultos mayores; Inclusión social; Espacios recreativos; Ejercicios lúdicos; Apoyo psicosocial; Estimulación cognitiva; Salud mental.

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**Summary:** 1. Introduction, 1.1 Right to Inclusion in Elder Adults, 1.2 Participation and Elder Adults, 1.3 Elder Adults and Recreational Spaces, 1.4 Elder Adults and Skills, 1.5 Projects and Programs, 1.6 Interpersonal Relationships, 2. Methodology, 3. Findings, 4. Conclusions, 5. Bibliographic references.

## 1. Introduction

Population aging is a global phenomenon that challenges contemporary societies in the physical and psychological aspects of aging and in older adults' social integration and participation (WHO, 2015). The importance of recreational spaces and leisure activities for the well-being and social inclusion of older people has been highlighted in scientific literature (Menec, 2003). Social inclusion of older adults is a priority in social and health policies worldwide (Levitas *et al.*, 2007).

The variation in population aging is evident globally due to prevalence and trends between regions by demographic, socioeconomic, and health factors. A steady increase in the proportion of grown-up people 65 years old has been observed in Europe. According to Eurostat Statistics Explained (2020), it is estimated that by 2100, almost one in three people in the European Union will be 65 years of age or older. On the other hand: "In 2060, the population aged 60 and over will be 220 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean and will approach 248 million in Europe" (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2023).

In the Ecuador case, the growth in the proportion of elderly adults poses important implications for the country's health, economic, and social security policies. The percentage of the population who is 65 years or older has increased from 6.2% in 2010 to 7.2% in 2020 (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos [INEC], 2020). In July 2024, the National Statistics Institute and Census published the following demographic data:

- 1.520.590 are older adults; that is, they represent 9% of the total population.
- 54% are women (815.136).
- 46% are men (705.454).
- More than 18.000 older adults are 95 years or older.
- 2.738 (1.2%) people are centenarians. (INEC, 2024)

In parallel to these aging trends, some barriers limit the social inclusion of older adults, especially regarding access to playful spaces and activities. These may include transportation lack, physical limitations, and recreational spaces that are safe and accessible (Stathi *et al.*, 2012).

Diverse studies have researched the elderly adults' participation in these spaces, revealing that a large percentage of this population has not reached the recommended physical activity levels. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2015), more than 60% of people over 65 worldwide are in this situation. This problem is also reflected in Canada, where only 26% of older adults regularly participate in recreational activities (Statistics Canada, 2018). These figures highlight the urgent need to eliminate these barriers to improve the quality of life for the elderly group.

Likewise, scientific literature has highlighted the existence of socioeconomic inequalities in the participation of older adults in recreational spaces. A study in England found that people with a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to participate in physical and recreational activities than those with a lower socioeconomic status (Breeze *et al.*, 1999).

In the last decade, there has been a growth in research focused on the social participation of elderly adults and its relationship with health and well-being (Holt-Lunstad *et al.*, 2015). Social interactions in community contexts and participation in recreational activities contribute positively to the health and life quality of elderly adults (Bath & Deeg, 2005). In this sense, to promote the adoption and maintenance of healthy practices, it is necessary to work with Elder Adults in: “self-knowledge, assertive communication, interpersonal relationships, critical thinking, and emotions management and feelings” (Arias-Jiménez & Gutiérrez-Soto, 2020, p. 12).

In this context, recreational spaces have received special attention. Levasseur *et al.* (2010) highlighted that participation in recreational activities increases the independence of older adults and improves their emotional well-being. Additionally, recreational activities: “provide them fun, company, rest, harmony, a sense by belonging to groups, distraction and time to reconcile with nature, which has an impact on their life quality” (Árraga-Barrios & Sánchez-Villarroel, 2007, p. 741).

4 In a study made at the San José Hospital in Chile, it is stated that the life meaning and the life purpose (such as regularly participating in recreational activities with their peers) increase well-being in greater adulthood, reduce the mortality risk, have fewer functional limitations, and are facilitated coping processes in stressful situations (Molina-Codecido, 2021, p. 19).

Likewise, in a 2022 study with an Ecuadorian retirees' association, it was observed that “the life low-quality perception was positively related to low self-esteem, that is, as the life quality perception decreases, self-esteem will also be affected” (García-Cervantes & Lara-Machado, 2022, p. 105). A fact that, as has been explained, is directly related to feeling or not included, for example, in recreational activities.

In summary, it has been determined that participation in recreational spaces benefits older adults' physical and mental health. However, despite the recognized benefits, participation by older adults in recreational spaces remains limited, even socially, due to myths and beliefs about the ability of older adults to participate in recreational and productive activities.

The World Health Organization (WHO) active aging theory has that opportunities for social participation and physical activity are critical factors that contribute to life quality in old age (World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). With respect, to have optimal active aging, the Elder Adult must comply with a daily routine, which includes: “normal physical exercise, healthy eating, and the basic techniques used to work the brain and executive functions, through exercises

or cognitive training” (Betancourt-Zambrano *et al.*, 2020); all which can be achieved in spaces, what further, they have recreational activities, such as in the “Mis Mejores Años” program, from Once de Noviembre parish.

It is important to highlight that the older adult population has experienced a progressive increase in recent decades, which has sparked a growing interest in the demographic study of this age group. Within the promulgation framework of the new Republic Constitution in 2008, the Ecuadorian State assumed the commitment to become a State Rights Guarantor (Republic Constitution from Ecuador, 2008). This implies that the State is responsible for fulfilling its obligations towards society, including implementing the Equality Agenda for elderly adults.

This agenda, articulated in the National Plan for Good Living, was established as a public policy instrument activated through citizen participation and other government levels. Its implementation allowed the development of support and social cohesion programs for the collective of Elder Adults (Republic Constitution from Ecuador, 2008).

Finally, the Ecuador government has designated institutions responsible for ensuring the rights of the services and priority groups by including older adults and generating spaces that promote self-realization, independence, and dignity for older adults, encouraging their participation and social inclusion. These measures seek to mitigate problems affecting their functioning in family, community, and social environments (Republic Constitution from Ecuador, 2008).

## 1.1 Right to Inclusion in Elder Adults

The right to social inclusion for elderly Adults has sparked interest through debates and discussions at both political and social levels. Cecilia Morel, the first Chile lady in 2021, referenced this at the launch ceremony for the Americas the Decade from the United Nations for Healthy Aging 2021-2030. There, she states that:

Older people are at the heart of the decade. Therefore, their voice is essential for a more equal society by guiding policies, plans, and programs towards healthy and positive aging and breaking down myths and prejudices concerning old age and aging. (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2021)

This factor is essential for social integration and the empowerment of their constitutional rights, given the need to create inclusion spaces that seek to change the paradigm of assuming elderly adults are weak people. In the Republic Constitution of Ecuador, the Art. 36 establishes that “Elder Adults will receive priority and specialized attention in the public and private fields, especially in the social and economic inclusion fields, protection against violence” (Republic Constitution Ecuador, 2008, p. 18).

Likewise, within the Organic Law Elder Adults People (2019), among its fundamental principles and provisions, it is provided:

Art. 3 literal d) To promote the co-responsibility and participation of the State, society, and family to achieve the inclusion of elderly adults and their autonomy, taking into account their life experiences and ensuring the whole exercise of their rights. (p. 5)<sup>1</sup>

Understanding the social inclusion of third age is analyzing from reality the elements that are presented within the research since the participation of the Elderly allows them to find and generate tools for working against stereotypes, which have limited their active role in society; it is worth highlighting, who the Elderly is the social actor and the primary entity its transformation.

## 1.2 Participation and Elder Adults

The participation of elderly adults People in recreational spaces promotes social dynamics, provides psychosocial support, and prevents isolation. According to Gallardo-Peralta *et al.* (2016), "From social gerontology, social participation is an intervention strategy with older people, which ensures to improve well-being conditions in this group of age" (p. 107).

6 The active role of Elderly Adults improves the vital development process, demonstrating new skills and knowledge, being part of a group, and sharing experiences and activities planned especially for Elderly adults people where they can establish new relationships and strengthen existing ones within recreational and free spaces, according to their needs for their comprehensive well-being.

Additionally, for participation to be executed in distinct areas and in a positive way, the Organic Law Elder Adults People (2019), among its principles, provides: Art. 3 literal e) Guarantee and promote integration, active citizen participation, and complete and adequate inclusion of Elder Adults People in public policy construction and political, social, sports, cultural, and civic activities (p. 5).

## 1.3 Elder Adults and Recreational Spaces

Talking about Elder Adults is not synonymous with a sedentary lifestyle, as is the belief; rather, it implies promoting activities generation, which benefit and complement the life quality, promote the participation of Elder Adults' People in all the programmed areas for their integration and inclusion, making tasks, which involve making decisions in daily personal life and group.

<sup>1</sup> Translation by the authors.

Recreational spaces must be designed in an accessible and formative way for elderly adults. This may include adapting facilities and equipment to meet their physical needs, as well as offering activities that are relevant and interesting to them: "Promoting healthy old age is not only about ensuring food, health, housing comfort, and hygiene; very important is also a useful, productive and independent life" (Jarque-Nieto *et al.*, 2022, p. 90).

Within these spaces, the diverse actions must be oriented according to the conditions and needs of participating Elder Adults, which reinforce cognitive stimulation, such as memory, language, concentration, and attention, among others; in the same way, playful exercises enhance their capacities for creativity, effort, productivity making positive use their free time for promoting their integral development.

## 1.4 Elder Adults and Skills

During elder adulthood, several changes happen, not only physical but also social, both in lifestyle and daily habits; for example, it reduces participation in the formal labor market. On the other hand, at advanced ages, illnesses or health conditions present a decrease in their physical, psychological, and cognitive abilities.

"Economic difficulties are increasing (social security coverage lack and/or meager pensions), they are conducting to less autonomy and social integration" (Del Popolo, 2001, p. 21). It is then projected that the need for stimulation enhances the functioning of their different faculties, allowing them to have better well-being in old age, delaying aging conditions, and preserving their independence and autonomy for longer.

## 1.5 Projects and programs

Art. 38 of the Republic Constitution of Ecuador mentions,

The State will establish public policies and programs for the care of elderly adults' People, which will take into account the specific differences between urban and rural areas, gender inequities, ethnicity, culture, and the people's differences, communities, towns, and nationalities; likewise, it will also encourage the highest possible personal autonomy degree and participation in the definition and execution these policies. (Republic Constitution from Ecuador, 2008, p. 19)<sup>2</sup>

In regard, in Ecuador, there are several current programs, such as:

- My best years.

<sup>2</sup> Translation by the authors.

- Residential gerontological centers.
- Daycare gerontological centers.
- Alternative spaces for revitalization, recreation, socialization, and encounter.
- Home care.

The National Government is committed to establishing comprehensive programs and projects efficiently and effectively for active aging, encouraging values ,such as respect and dignified treatment of elderly adults, and reinforcing family and social relationships, forming inter-ministerial support ties or networks of the Ecuadorian State.

## 1.6 Interpersonal relationships

During this stage, healthy social relationships contribute to well-being: Consuelo Undurraga, PhD in Psychology, highlights what the interrelationship with closer and more significant ties: "They can be reinforced, through activities, highlighting the fact, which a healthy linkage enables a better life quality in the period elder adulthood and in general throughout life" (Undurraga-Infante, 2012, p. 18).

Interpersonal relationships play a fundamental role in elderly adults' People as a protective factor; in the same way, they are bridges to energize activities collectively, creating new interpersonal links to facilitate positive and enjoyable healing experiences before loneliness and isolation. During social interactions, elderly adults' People manage to adapt and learn their social environment; further, they find greater confidence in themselves and decision-making, thus, regarding capacities they did not know to have.

## 2. Methodology

The current work analysis was made with the elderly people attending the "My Best Years" program in the Once de Noviembre parish; this parish is Latacunga city part, Cotopaxi Province capital, in the north-central from Ecuadorian highlands. It was a social protection program for elderly adults designed by the Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES) Ministry from the Ecuador Government to ensure the fundamental rights of this age group; it is found in several parishes nationwide, in charge of the decentralized autonomous governments (GAD).

The research adopted a qualitative approach with inductive logic, as it facilitates observation and direct contact with the testimonies and experiences of elderly adults in the "My Best Years" program. Moreover, the sample size allows for more detailed and personalized fieldwork and, in particular, facilitates the emergence of new perspectives from the collected data.

The universe, that is, the total number of regular attendees in the “My Best Years” program, is 80 people; a sample of 30 elderly adults determined this number. Among the participants were married, widowed, and single people, with a primary education level predominance; their ages ranged between 74 and 91 years; prior to the fieldwork development, the project was socialized, explaining the purpose and study scope.

The inclusion criteria were the disposition for participating in the focus groups voluntarily and health condition; additionally, it verified the selected group's demographic diversity and active participation in recreational activities, which allowed obtaining a representative view of the elderly adult population.

As research techniques were used: non-participant observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews; in summary, they addressed issues around the frequency and recreational activities type what participated the group members, the barriers they faced when trying to access recreational spaces, the benefits, perceived when participating in said activities and, finally, they were requested suggestions to improve social inclusion, through the recreational spaces.

The non-participant observation was applied during the events and “My Best Years” project meetings. For the focus group development, they were organized into three groups with 30 elderly adults as the sample; later, in the focus group experience, a group of 10 people was selected to conduct individual interviews. On the other hand, it was also interviewed the Social Development representative from *GAD Once de Noviembre* parish does a program face-to-face follow-up.

The 10 individual interviews with the elderly adults were conducted in an appropriate and comfortable environment for the participants, ensuring the shared information's privacy and confidentiality. Subsequently, there was a content analysis to identify patterns, frequent themes, and categories related to participation in recreational spaces and social inclusion of elderly adults.

A feedback session was held with the participants to validate the results. During this session, the study findings and additional comments participants wished to provide were discussed, facilitating results.

### 3. Findings

During the interviews, the elderly adults reported, for example, how they spent their free time, how they felt about attending the “My Best Years” program, how they benefited from the activities, how often they attended, and how they got around, among other aspects. Next, it summarizes the testimonies of the participants.

1. L.E., 74 years old, is married and has primary education. In her free time, she is engaged in household activities. When she attended the club, she felt good and relaxed. The club activities provided her with more skills for daily life, such as painting and old cooking recipes. She attended meetings occasionally and moved in her vehicle. She did not experience any difficulties in the activities.
2. M.M., 75 years old, is married and has primary education. She is dedicated to caring for animals in the countryside. She feels good about attending the program, which she contributes through the meetings between the community. She attends occasionally and lives with her husband, son, and granddaughter. She gets around on foot, and her favorite activity in the program is painting. She does not find any difficulties in any activity, and the program has provided help in occupying her free time with things she enjoys.
3. L.A., 76 years old, is a widow and has primary education; she lives alone but receives visits from her grandchildren. In her youth, she worked in agriculture and now raises animals. When she attends meetings, she is distracted by the activities; she feels comfortable and happy that being part of the club brings her joy. The program helps her mood. She always attends meetings, gets around by walking, and has a favorite activity, kitchen conversations. Her experience in the program is positive.
4. L.T., 75 years old, is a widow with a primary education. Most of the time, she does her housework; in her free time, she does farm work and takes care of animals. She felt fun, danced, and enjoyed the food when she attended the meetings. However, she had to withdraw due to difficulties getting to the place. She always attended the meetings, and the program helped her. She does not mention a specific activity she liked but focuses on questions about their lives.
5. A.T., 91 years old, is a widower and has primary education. In his free time, he does household chores. He feels good about meeting with friends when he goes to meetings, which makes it enjoyable. Attending meetings helps him feel more joyful and educated. His favorite activity is lectures. He always goes to meetings, lives alone, and gets around on foot. He does not encounter any difficulties in club activity and feels good about participating.
6. D.A., 74 years old, is single and has a secondary education. In her free time, she was a seamstress and currently does activities at home. She feels good with the therapies and games when she attends meetings. She goes occasionally, and the activities have helped her feel better since she spends a lot of time alone. She always goes to the club when called, gets around on foot, and her favorite activity is talking to the neighbors. She is amused and enjoys participating in the program.
7. M.P., 80 years old, is single and has a secondary education. In her spare time, she does household chores. When she went to the club, she did embroidery and drawing, which made her feel good. However, she found it difficult to pay for transportation. She enjoyed all the club activities and always went to the meetings. The activity that she

found difficult was baking cakes. She concludes that the program helped her too much, but her mobility is difficult.

8. T.S., 72 years old, is married and has a secondary education. In her free time, she does housework. When she goes to the club, she feels happy for the people's company; she always goes when communicating with her and gets around on foot. She lives with a daughter and two granddaughters. She likes making chemical fertilizer. The program has helped her learn new things and reinforce what she already knew. The activity she likes most is making traditional foods, such as quimbolitos.
9. M.M., 90 years old, is a widow with incomplete primary education. In her free time, she does housework. When she goes to the club, she feels good and enjoys asking questions among neighbors. She likes to go to the meetings, although she does so occasionally due to transportation problems. She lives with her four children and feels good every time she participates in the program.
10. E.S., 81 years old, is married and has a primary education. In her free time, she relaxes at home and does household chores. When she goes to the club, she feels pleased and stress-free. She enjoys talking with her friends and always attends meetings in her car. She lives with her husband, granddaughter, daughter and son-in-law. However, when the meetings go on too long, she wants to go back home. Although the program activities help her, she only experiences benefits for a few days.

11 The diversity of profiles presented in these interviews shows that the “My Best Years” program is designed to serve people from different circumstances and life experiences. It is confirmed that people from diverse situations find a space in this program and can share experiences in an enriching environment.

Regarding participation in the program, some interviewees attend meetings regularly, and others occasionally. This variation may be due to factors such as family responsibilities, mobility, or availability. However, it is positive to see that, despite these limitations, people find value in participating and feel good about doing so.

The activities in the program have a positive impact on the daily lives of the participants. It is mentioned that it provides new skills, improves mood, provides relaxation moments, and encourages learning. This indicates that the program provides tangible and emotional benefits to participants, strengthening their overall well-being.

Moreover, it is important to highlight the importance of community and the sense of belonging generated at these meetings. It is mentioned that they meet with friends, colleagues, and neighbors who have known each other for a lifetime, creating a camaraderie atmosphere and mutual support. These social interactions are fundamental for emotional well-being and human connection, especially at life stages in which it is possible to experience isolation or loneliness.

In mobility terms, each participant travels to the meetings differently: some use their vehicle, while others travel on foot. All come off free will because they enjoy their time in the program.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that there are no significant obstacles to the activities undertaken. This indicates that the program has been designed in an inclusive manner, considering the participants' capacities, interests, and limitations. Avoiding unnecessary difficulties ensures a more positive and accessible experience for all.

The participation of elderly adults in recreational spaces is a key element in strengthening their right to social inclusion; likewise, promoting social support networks contributes positively to their well-being and quality of life. The research by Márquez-Terraza (2024) confirmed that third-age people who use spaces designed with cultural and recreational practices have a better perception of their life quality.

It is necessary to promote programs and services adapted to the needs and preferences of this population by promoting accessibility and eliminating physical and social barriers. Furthermore, coordinated action is required between the health, social welfare, and urban planning sectors to ensure inclusive and friendly environments for elderly adults. In this sense, "Recreation offers the possibility by creating a permissive-tolerant climate with the creative expression of the subject, softening old rigidities in a flexibility process, which personal assessment has the possibility by emerging without old fears" (Martínez-Verde *et al.*, 2021).

In fact, according to Walker (2015), participation in recreational activities and social support can significantly impact the life quality of elderly adults. In their study, the authors examined the relationship between daily living activities, social support, and the well-being of elderly adults in England. They discovered what activities of daily living, such as participating in recreational spaces, were positively associated with better life quality in this population.

Further, those elderly adults with a higher social support level reported greater satisfaction with their lives. These findings highlight the importance of encouraging participation in recreational activities and strengthening social support networks to improve the well-being of elderly adults:

Participating socially increases the general mental health of older people, who interact in different contexts, whether in sports, neighborhood, cultural groups, or volunteering. However, this effect is mediated depending on the frequency, activity type, and person's sex. (González-Bravo & Sepúlveda-González, 2020, p. 35)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Translation by the authors.

Study participants reported that volunteering allowed them to interact with different people and establish new friendships, contributing to a greater sense of connection and belonging. These results suggest that volunteering can effectively promote social inclusion and improve the life quality of elderly adults.

It was also found that older adults' physical and mental health mediated these relationships. That is, those who actively participated in recreational spaces had better physical and mental health levels, which in turn was related to greater satisfaction with life. In another research, it is argued similarly:

People who participate in these activities type report multiple benefits. Among them is the creation of the product, which allows them to earn an extra income or give them to their relatives and strengthen the bond. They also perceive benefits on a physical level since they report that they stay active and strengthen their body. On a psychological level, they perceive a double improvement: the activities make them more active on a cognitive level and improve their emotional State. Finally, one of the most notable benefits occurs on the social level since sharing activities with other people their age strengthens social ties. (Márquez-Terraza, 2024, p. 178)<sup>4</sup>

The WHO (2015) report on aging and health highlights the importance of social participation in promoting older adults' health and well-being. The report emphasizes the need to create inclusive environments that encourage the active participation of elderly adults in society. This includes promoting recreational spaces that are accessible, safe, and adapted to the needs of this population. By providing opportunities for elderly adults to participate actively in recreational accessible spaces, they strengthen their right to social inclusion and promote healthy and active aging.

In line with this research, the studies by Rodríguez *et al.* (2019) highlight the importance of implementing specific programs and services to promote the participation of elderly Adults in recreational spaces. Further, these programs may include physical, cultural, educational, and volunteer activities adapted to the capabilities and preferences of elderly adults. Moreover, it is essential to have trained professionals, such as social workers and sociocultural animators, who facilitate the active participation of elderly adults and promote their social and emotional well-being.

Another relevant aspect is the importance of accessibility and the elimination of physical and social barriers to guarantee the equitable participation of older adults in recreational spaces.

At a social level, the interest of other older people in activities is an obstacle since the services end up closing due to attendees' lack. This hurts those who are interested. Some also perceive

<sup>4</sup> Translation by the authors.

it as an obstacle, in which the activities or services are used by other people who do not care for or do not respect people of age. This makes them feel uncomfortable and insecure, and they do not attend. (Márquez-Terraza, 2024, p. 179)<sup>5</sup>

In this regard, it is stood out the report by Rodríguez *et al.* (2018) states that it is important to implement inclusive policies that promote equal opportunities and equitable access to recreational spaces for all older people. This involves the adaptation of infrastructures and services and the awareness and training of professionals who work in these spaces to ensure a friendly and welcoming environment for elderly adults.

#### 4. Conclusions

Participation of elderly adults in recreational spaces promotes social inclusion and improves/life quality, defined as “the state general well-being, measured through the dimensions: physical, social and emotional” (Duran-Badillo *et al.*, 2020), particularly the interviews revealed what elderly adults found in the program an opportunity to occupy their free time in a meaningful and satisfactory way.

Elder Adults have the qualities to confront the third age satisfactorily; they need help; when they have a space to spend the day in rehabilitation activities, they entertain themselves and relate to each other (Tortosa-Martínez *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to promote a paradigm shift that recognizes the importance of the active participation of elderly adults in society and recreational spaces.

It is essential to implement appropriate interventions and policies to promote this participation and inclusion. According to the evidence, it is suggested that recreational infrastructures be improved to make them accessible and safe for elderly adults, specific programs that adapt to their needs and interests should be developed, and healthy lifestyles should be promoted through awareness campaigns (WHO, 2015).

Physical activities, which have a recreational tone and not just physical exercising, improve psychological well-being. Usually, Elder Adults feel “happier, less tired, and more vigorous than applying for the physical and recreational activities program” (Charchabal-Pérez *et al.*, 2020). Participating in recreational activities allows elderly adults people to enjoy their free time and, at the same time, strengthens their skills and abilities. Moreover, interaction with their peers and the possibility of establishing new social relationships contributed to their emotional well-being.

That is, recreation promotes thought clarity and creativity. A lucid brain in adulthood can help to keep memory and cognition in good shape, which is fundamental to maintaining a healthy

<sup>5</sup> Translation by the authors.

and enriching lifestyle. Likewise, Elder Adults experienced an improvement in their mood, felt more active, and had a greater independence sense.

At the same time, recreational activities facilitate interaction between peers, as in the case of participants in the "My Best Years" program, mostly among neighbors who have shared several life years, diminishing the feeling of loneliness. Participation in the program also generated a sense of belonging to the community and strengthened social ties among participants.

These barriers may include the lack of physical accessibility in recreational facilities and the need to adapt environments to ensure the safety and comfort of participants. It is also essential to have inclusive policies that address the specific needs of this age group and promote their active participation in society.

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## Authors' Contribution statement

Lizbeth Alexandra Galarza-Masabanda: conceptualization, data curation, research, methodology, writing (original draft). Sonia Maribel Toaquiza-Vega: conceptualization, data curation, research, methodology, writing (original draft). Magaly Lucia Benalcázar-Luna: conceptualization, formal analysis, research, methodological proposal, writing (draft review and revision/correction).

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in the writing or publication of this article.

## Ethical implications

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