

# Elders: A Cultural Resource for Promoting Sustainable Development

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*Judi Aubel*

There is considerable discussion in western industrialized societies of the need to reexamine the predominant global cultural paradigm of consumerism, which is clearly unsustainable. In efforts to address current challenges to survival, the focus has been on halting environmental degradation and promoting the economic survival of communities around the globe. Unfortunately, the degradation of the social environment and the breakdown in social connectedness have received much less attention.<sup>1</sup>

Another less frequently considered issue is the relevance of the global cultural model of consumerism for other societies that face not only environmental and economic challenges but also problems specific to their history and cultural worldviews. Non-westernized and unindustrialized societies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific are threatened by less tangible forces that are undermining cultural identities and decreasing social cohesion.

One negative consequence of globalization is that western individualistic, consumer-oriented, youth-focused values—communicated through multiple international and national media and institutional channels—are under-

mining positive traditions and values of more collectivist sociocultural systems. In many cases, these traditions and values provide the basis for the society's sustainable use and development of both natural and human resources.

## Respecting the Wisdom of Elders

A community elder in southern Senegal recently lamented the fact that development programs rarely pay attention to local cultural values: "There have been so many programs carried out in our community: to build more school classrooms; to construct a health center; to teach us how to grow more vegetables, how to prevent disease, about the importance of sending girls to school, and of planting trees." His testimony reflects the trend toward carefully targeted development programs that aim to produce "tangible and quantifiable results" corresponding to donor and government priorities but that may fail to address other less tangible cultural parameters that may be equally important for the survival of the communities the programs aim to support. In spite of rhetoric about the need for "culturally adapted" approaches, development policies

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*Elder and infant in a village in Rajasthan, India.*

and programs often unknowingly convey a set of western values that may be counterproductive to the long-term social development and survival of non-western societies.<sup>2</sup>

One specific and decisive facet of non-western cultures that is rarely even dealt with in discussions on culture and development is the central role played by elders in socializing younger generations, passing on indigenous knowledge and cultural values, and ensuring the stability and survival of their societies. The late Andreas Fuglesang, a well-known leader in development communication, referred to the essential role played by elder community members in more traditional societies as the “information processing unit” of a community. As Malian philosopher Amadou Hampâté Bâ notes, “When an elder person dies in Africa, it is as though a whole library had burned down.”<sup>3</sup>

There is clearly incongruity between the centrality of elders in non-western societies and the centrality of young people in development programs—a problem that has gone largely unnoticed. There is a growing clash of cultures between younger members of society, who embrace more global values, and older

community members who are holding on to more traditional ones. The tension between the two cultural orientations is seen in the decreased communications and learning between young people and elders. In the past, for example, throughout Africa members of different generations would sit under a large tree in the community to discuss the past, the present, and the future. In French, the designated tree was referred to as “l’arbre à palabres.” Today in many communities, while elders still sit and discuss under such trees, young people are more

likely to gather around a radio or television to look at images and hear stories of other places.

Yet continuing respect for the wisdom of elders is reflected in a proverb heard widely across Africa, “What an elder sees sitting on the ground, a younger person cannot see even if he/she is up in a tree.” In a study in Senegal, community respondents of various ages stated that knowledge is related to age and, consequently, elders are viewed as “knowledge providers” in key domains such as agriculture and health. And in India, Narender Chadha of the University of Delhi finds that, in spite of vast economic and social changes, elders continue to command high respect as “they are considered as the storehouses of knowledge and wisdom within the family and community contexts.” This respect for traditional wisdom is similarly found in other collectivist, non-western societies in the Pacific and Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

Respect for the wisdom of elders is also evident in a new effort at the international level to help find solutions to global problems that was initiated in 2007 by Nelson Mandela. He brought together a small number of distinguished world leaders and established a group called The Elders. Mandela’s idea was

inspired by the role of elders in traditional societies: to bring people together, to encourage dialogue, to provide guidance based on their experience. The Elders are currently working on helping to solve several complex and conflict-ridden problems, including the Israeli-Palestinian situation.<sup>5</sup>

In western individualist societies, however, attitudes toward elders are generally tainted by negative images of aging. With the globalization of culture, increasingly ageist attitudes are being disseminated and slowly permeating non-western cultures as well. And it has been observed that older women suffer from ageist biases even more than men do: they are said to be a bad influence on children and families, illiterate and therefore unintelligent, or too old to learn and to change.<sup>6</sup>

## Threats to Intergenerational Relationships

Globalization involves a virtually one-way dissemination of western cultural images and values toward non-western societies. Only recently has there been some concern at the international level about globalization's role in spreading consumerist cultural images and values and the resulting breakdown in intergenerational relationships in non-western societies.

The 2005 *World Youth Report* from the United Nations cautioned, "Young people are increasingly incorporating aspects of other cultures from around the world into their own identities. This trend...is likely to widen the cultural gap between the younger and older generations." Similarly, an analysis of the impact of globalization by the Youth Commission on Globalisation calls attention to an alarming situation: "The youth of the developing world are attracted, lured or forced into non-traditional ways of being by a great many factors...and alienated from their traditional communities. Such cultural disintegration is the primary cause of problems such as

the loss of linguistic, historical and spiritual traditions, the break down of family support structures and the loss of a locally organised political voice."<sup>7</sup>

Similar concern about the negative effects of globalization on young people in particular are expressed by Akopvire Oduaran of the University of Botswana, who laments the loss of "the rich African tradition of intergenerational relationships...daily being weakened by the increasing change in our value systems as our communities are opened up to cultural globalization." He argues that with consumerism has come the loss of cultural traditions and weakened bonds and cooperation between family and community members—all disturbing signs of diminished social cohesion.<sup>8</sup>

Yet there is some evidence that young people perceive the dangers of globalization. Members of a Ghanaian youth club noted that "globalisation has brought us a life surrounded by mass-production and mass-consumption....We see our own cultures giving way to a consumerist monoculture. There is an urgent need to revisit, appreciate and participate in the evolution of our own cultures, which are community-oriented, non-materialistic, eco-friendly and holistic in their worldview." Mamadou, a 20-year-old Senegalese man, stated: "I am part of a whole generation of young people who are lost. We play soccer and watch television but we don't really belong to the western world. Our parents sent us to school but there we didn't learn about our culture and our parents didn't teach us where we came from either. We are lost between two worlds."<sup>9</sup>

How are consumerist values communicated to society at large and specifically to young people in developing countries? Three major institutions are responsible: the mass media and advertising, development organizations and programs, and formal schools.

Mass media and advertising are the major vehicles for diffusion of western values into non-western societies. While there is increased

national production of television programs, and even greater local radio programming that integrates local opinions and values, the predominant force remains the global media beamed into the tiniest of villages. The Youth Commission on Globalisation report notes the media's prevalent role in spreading individualist and consumerist values, stimulated by transnational corporations: "Youth are bombarded by advertisements, programming and other media that invite them to seek happiness through the accumulation of wealth and commodities."<sup>10</sup>

Development programs aim to make a positive contribution to communities. But program planners are not always aware of the underlying western values that such programs are inadvertently conveying. A older Malian woman and leader in her community described what happens: "Before the development agents get out of their four-wheel-drive vehicles, we know who they want to talk to, those who have gone to school and who know how to write, i.e. the youth. They almost never ask to see us." While working to improve hygiene or schooling, the attitudes of local development agents like these are inadvertently communicating culturally foreign values regarding who is valued (young people) and who is not (elders). Maternal and child health programs, for instance, invariably focus on women of reproductive age and rarely involve their culturally designated advisors: the senior women (or grandmothers).<sup>11</sup>

Schools are also key institutions in passing on cultural values in society. In a World Bank report, Deepa Srikantaiah maintains that in many countries school curricula do not reflect the cultural values and knowledge of local communities. In Botswana, for example, Pat Pridmore of the University of London analyzed the child-to-child approach used in many developing countries, in which schoolchildren are expected to learn and then teach their parents about "modern" health and hygiene prac-

tices. This notion is diametrically opposed to the attitude of hierarchical and collectivist non-western cultures, in which young people are expected to learn from their elders, and it undermines their culturally designated role.<sup>12</sup>

## Programs Involving Elders Promote Intergenerational Learning

Numerous intergenerational preschool programs across the United States and Canada involve older adult community members who share their knowledge and provide social support to young children on a volunteer basis. The results include increased self-confidence on the part of children and an increased sense of self-worth on the part of older adults, many of whom are retired but who have extensive knowledge and compassion to share.<sup>13</sup>

In British Columbia, the Elders in Residence program at the Lelum'uy'lh Child Development Centre has helped integrate cultural values and traditions of the Cowichan Tribes into the curriculum with the support of elders through activities such as storytelling, language teaching, and basket-weaving. The program has contributed to greater appreciation of Cowichan culture and to respect for elders' knowledge of Cowichan traditions.<sup>14</sup>

But in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific, few organizations or programs explicitly involve elders and promote intergenerational communication. Some that do take this approach are described here.

In Ghana, in a program supported by the United Nations Population Fund entitled "Time with Grandma," grandparents serve as resource persons in educational activities with adolescents dealing with HIV/AIDS prevention and teenage pregnancy. Both young people and elders find these intergenerational activities beneficial as they build on the traditional role of elders as teachers and promote positive cultural values, including

abstaining from sex before marriage and respecting elders.<sup>15</sup>

In Malawi, the Ekwendeni Hospital trains grandparents to promote improved family practices related to prenatal care for women and care of newborns. A project review showed that the elder-inclusive strategy has contributed to improved family health-related practices while at the same time improving communication between younger and older community members. This is the first program in which elders have been actively involved, and they say that it has restored their place in society as “teachers of the younger generations.”<sup>16</sup>

In Australian Aboriginal communities, building on the traditional teaching role of elders, senior women leaders in the Yolngu tribe work with alcoholic and drug-addicted teens to increase their pride in their cultural identity by teaching them about Yolngu history and practices, such as hunting and weaving.<sup>17</sup>

Over the past 10 years, grandmother-inclusive and intergenerational approaches have been developed by the Grandmother Project (GMP), a small U.S. nonprofit, and implemented in various countries, including Laos, Uzbekistan, Djibouti, Senegal, Mali, and Mauritania. The programs have dealt with various aspects of women’s and children’s health and development that older women, or grandmothers, are heavily involved in, including nutrition, newborn care, home care for sick children, early childhood development, and female genital mutilation (FGM). GMP has developed an approach in which multigenerational groups analyze community problems and identify collective actions that can lead to positive and sustainable changes within their



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*An elder of the village Olo Ologa, Mauritania, shares a story.*

own cultural systems.<sup>18</sup>

In Mali (with Helen Keller International) and Senegal (with the Christian Children’s Fund), GMP guided development of grandmother-inclusive non-formal health education activities. In both cases these led to improvements in the advice older women gave to pregnant women regarding diet and rest during pregnancy and infant feeding practices. In Mauritania, in both rural and peri-urban areas, GMP in collaboration with World Vision has trained informal grandmother leaders to promote positive nutrition and health practices in their communities.<sup>19</sup>

In Senegal, in a program with World Vision to discourage FGM, participatory educational activities with grandmothers and intergenerational dialogue are key elements of an approach to promote holistic development of young girls. Most programs aimed at decreasing female genital mutilation focus on young people and do not involve grandmothers, who are usually those who do the cutting. In GMP’s

approach, grandmothers are key actors in promoting abandonment of this practice, while recognizing their positive role within the family as guardians of tradition and a stabilizing factor within the community. One leader in Senegal noted at the end of a two-day workshop that “we never practiced cutting maliciously but rather to educate the girls. Now we understand that as grandmothers we have a responsibility to put an end to this practice.”<sup>20</sup>

Even in rural villages in Senegal, western values related to consumerism and sexuality are felt through western-produced television, films, and the Internet. GMP activities have encouraged the use of traditional communication media, such as story-telling, music, and dance in schools and communities in activities that bring young people and elders together. Recognition of grandmothers’ story-telling skills has greatly increased this after-dinner activity, and it is reported that children’s knowledge of traditional stories has increased while their television watching has declined. Broadcasts of grandmothers’ telling stories on the local radio station have also increased the women’s self-esteem and young people’s interest in traditional knowledge. A young girl named Fatoumata said, “We are happy because now we are learning the traditional stories. If we don’t spend time with our grandmas, when

we become adults we will be empty inside.”<sup>21</sup>

As the urgency to deal with global challenges increases, UNESCO has called for giving more attention to existing cultural realities and resources: “When development recognizes culture it produces change rooted in a community’s own values, knowledge and lifestyle and thus tends to be more successful. When development imposes external cultural values it damages the operating system by devaluing indigenous knowledge, and local capacity on which the community is built...the challenge is to find ways of unlocking the cultural resources and assets of the community, to connect with people’s own ways of being and enable them to use these creative capacities as a route out of poverty, exclusion and dependency.”<sup>22</sup>

Programs that explicitly involve elders and that promote intergenerational learning capitalize on two valuable assets of non-western societies. As the few efforts in developing countries just described have shown, programs that have built on these cultural resources have contributed to positive and sustainable changes in nutrition, health, and education practices while at the same time curbing the spread of consumerism and strengthening the cultural identities and social cohesion of families and communities.

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