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*"In Africa when an elder person dies it is as though a whole library had burned down."*

Malian philosopher, Amadou Hampate Ba

*"Always be grateful for the advice you receive from elders."*

Bengali proverb, India

*"The wave in the back pushes the smaller waves in front of it."*

Chinese proverb

## ***Elders: a cultural resource for sustainable development***

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***Judi Aubel, Co-Founder & Exec Dir, Grandmother Project – Change thru Culture***

In western, youth-focused societies cultural traditions and elders are often viewed as old-fashioned and given limited attention, and communication between elders and youth limited. In non-western societies, the wisdom of the elders and intergenerational learning, have always been viewed as critical ingredients for survival, especially when those societies have been faced with threats to their environmental, economic and social well-being. <sup>1</sup>

There is a growing consensus that the values and practices associated with the current predominant global cultural paradigm constitute a threat to the physical and social well-being of all human beings. In efforts to address these challenges to survival, the focus has been on halting environmental degradation and promoting the economic survival of communities around the globe. The degradation of the social environment has been given much less attention. <sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this paper is: to call attention to the incongruity between the policies and programs of both international and national institutions aiming to promote the development of non-western societies and the socio-cultural infrastructure and values of such communities; to discuss the neglected role of elders and of intergenerational learning as cultural resources both to promote change and to preserve social cohesion; and to present examples of programs that explicitly promote inclusion of elders and intergenerational learning in efforts to promote positive and sustainable change at the community level.

In western, industrialized societies there is much discussion of the need to reexamine the predominant global cultural paradigm with its strong consumerist orientation, which is clearly unsustainable and which may also contribute to the breakdown in social connectedness. Another less frequently considered issue concerns the relevance of this global cultural model for non-western societies which face certain common environmental and economic challenges, but which are also confronted by other challenges specific to their history and cultural worldviews. <sup>3</sup>

The survival of non-western and unindustrialized societies in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific is also threatened by other less tangible forces that are undermining cultural identity and decreasing social cohesion. A negative consequence of globalization is that western individualistic, consumer-oriented and youth-focused values, communicated through multiple international and national media and institutional channels, are undermining positive traditions and values of more collectivist socio-cultural systems.

It is argued here that current development policies and programs for non-western, economically developing countries do not sufficiently acknowledge and strengthen positive aspects of existing cultural systems and values. In a recent discussion with a community elder in southern Senegal, he 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 classrooms for the school; 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. This is the first time we have seen a project that came to help us think about our cultural identity and about what we can do to preserve our positive cultural values." (Ref. GMP/WV) 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 of equal importance for survival of the communities that those programs aim to support. <sup>4</sup>

In spite of the rhetoric about the need for "culturally-adapted" approaches, development policies 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.

Over the years, various international development organizations and forums have elicited debate on the critical interface between culture and development. This issue was debated in 1982 at the World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico and by the joint UNESCO-UN World Commission on Culture and Development that published, "Our Creative Diversity" in 1995. The commission's report argued that sustainable development can come about only if multiple cultural voices are heard. In the 2004 Human Development Report there was a similar call *cultural liberty* to encourage development of a multiplicity of culturally-informed strategies to emerge. <sup>5</sup>

A major constraint, however, associated with development strategies proposed by both international and national institutions is that the notion of *culture* is generally nebulous and fails to take into account certain fundamental differences in the structure and values of non-western, developing societies and those of the western, industrialized world. This critique is articulated by Nigerian academic Airhihenbuwa, who criticizes prevailing development programs in Africa that are based on an overly-simplistic view of culture that fails to capture the underlying cultural identity and logic of non-western societies. One specific and decisive facet of non-western cultures that is rarely dealt with in discussions on culture and development is the central role played by elders in the socialization of younger generations, in passing on indigenous knowledge and cultural values and in 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. There is clearly incongruity between the centrality of elders in non-western societies and

the centrality of youth in development programs. This problem, however, has gone largely unnoticed.<sup>6</sup>

A feature of non-western societies that has been given limited attention is the **growing clash of cultures** between younger members of society, who embrace more global values versus older community members who are holding on to more traditional ones. The tension between the two cultural orientations is manifest in the decreased communication and learning between youth and elders.

What are the core cultural values, roles and attitudes in non-western societies in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific that should be taken into account if programs are to be truly “culturally-adapted?” A useful framework for understanding the socio-culture dynamics of western and of non-western societies, developed by anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists, distinguishes between *collectivist* and *individualist value systems* associated with non-western and western cultures. (See Table I.)<sup>7</sup>

**Table I:** Key features of individualist and collectivist cultural systems

Individualist and western cultural systems	Collectivist and non-western cultural systems
Foster independence and individual achievement	Foster interdependence and group achievement
Encourage individual decision-making	Encourage collective decision-making and consensus
Nuclear families predominate and weak intergenerational ties	Multigenerational families predominate and strong extended family ties
Young people learn primarily from peers, but also from adults	Elders pass on learning to younger people
Ageist attitudes and a focus on innovation, youth and the future	Respect for elders and a focus on cultural traditions, intergenerational relationships and the past

Research has shown that more collectivist values predominate in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific, as well as among peoples whose cultural heritage derives from those parts of the world, whereas in North America, Europe and Australia, the individualist value system prevails. Between the two contrasting value systems, significant differences stand out regarding both the status of elders and the relationships between younger and elder members of society. Whereas western, youth-focused cultures reflect ageist attitudes toward elders, in non-western cultures, especially in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, elders are to be respected for their age and experience.<sup>8</sup>

*Elders’ status and role as teachers in non-western societies*

The traditional status of elders in African societies is revealed through various proverbs and writing by African authors. Respect for the wisdom of the 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.” Educationalist, Fasokun, writes, “In many African societies experience is regarded as being more important than knowledge.” (p. 26). 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 including agriculture, health etc. <sup>9</sup>

In a similar vein, Chadha states that in India, 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.” <sup>10</sup>

These examples provide evidence of the traditional role and status of elders in these areas of the world, that are similar to those found in other collectivist, non-western societies in the Pacific and Latin America.

#### *Ageist attitudes permeate non-western societies*

In western individualist societies, attitudes toward elders are generally tainted by negative images of ageing, or *ageism*. 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 senior women suffer from ageist biases even more than men. A series of biases against senior women in non-western societies have been documented: they are a bad influence on children and families; they are illiterate and therefore, unintelligent; and they are too old to learn and to change. A second western attitude derived from the concept of the independence and potential of youth is that they can teach or influence elder family members to adopt “modern” attitudes and practices. This notion is diametrically opposed to the attitude of hierarchical and collectivist non-western cultures wherein young people are expected to learn from their elders. <sup>11</sup>

#### *Globalisation threatens intergenerational relationships*

Globalization involves a virtually one-way dissemination of western cultural images and values toward non-western societies. The clash between western and non-western value systems accelerated through globalization was inevitable and is far-reaching. It is only recently that concern has been expressed at the international level regarding a critical manifestation of this clash of cultures, the break-down in intergenerational relationships in non-western societies. The 2005 UN World Youth Report cautions, “Young people are increasingly incorporating aspects of other cultures from around the world into their own identifies. 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 International Youth Parliament calls attention to an alarming situation that is unfolding. “The youth of the developing world are attracted, lured or forced into non-traditional ways of being ... 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 breakdown of family support structures and the loss of a locally organized political voice.” <sup>12</sup>

Similar concern about the negative effects of globalization on youth in particular are expressed by Oduran 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 westernization has come the loss of cultural traditions, weakened bonds and cooperation between family and community members, all disturbing signs of diminished social cohesion. <sup>13</sup>

There is evidence that youth, as well as adults and elders, perceive these dangers of globalization. Members of a Ghanaian youth club state, “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>14</sup>

How are western, individualist values communicated to society-at-large and specifically to young people in developing countries? Three major institutions are identified namely, the mass media and advertising; formal schools; and development organizations and programs.

### ***Western values in the media and advertising:***

Development communication expert Servaes maintains that mass media and advertising are the major vehicles for diffusion of western values into non-western societies, “the international flow of communication has become the main carrier of cultural globalization.” 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 many of the smallest villages. The International Youth Parliament report on globalization and youth discusses 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.” A teary-eyed community leader in rural Senegal explained that he is no longer respected by young people in his village, because he doesn’t wear expensive clothes like those they see on television.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Western values in development programs:***

Development programs, initiated either by national governments, local NGOs, or international agencies aim to make a positive contribution to the development of communities. However, are program planners, be they expatriates or nationals, always aware of the underlying western values that such programs are inadvertently conveying that may be at odds with local cultures and traditions.

A social work professor in Senegal articulates concern about the unintended **negative impact of development programs based on western values**. “For more than twenty years we have observed development programs addressing a multiplicity of issues facing our society related to natural resource management, agriculture, health, education, agriculture, democracy, etc. In all cases, these programs have focused on the younger members of our society and have not explicitly involved the elders. I sincerely believe that these well-meaning, youth-focused programs constitute one factor that has contributed to the ever widening gap between the generations that we observe today in our society.”<sup>16</sup>

A senior Malian woman, and leader in her community stated, “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 are inadvertently communicating to communities culturally-foreign values regarding who is valued (youth) and who is not (elders).

The western youth bias in development programming is flagrantly observed in maternal and child health programs across developing countries. Invariably the focus is on women-of-reproductive-age and programs rarely involve their culturally-designated advisors, the senior women, or grandmothers, who are “mangers of indigenous knowledge systems on health.” The limited impact of many community health programs can partly be explained by this western individual-focused approach that ignores the socio-cultural systems of which they are a part and in which senior women play a leading advisory role. <sup>17</sup>

HELPAGE International reports on ageist biases experienced by elders in Africa who resent not being included in HIV/AIDs prevention programs given their role in educating youth on reproductive health issues. “Older people are excluded from HIV/AIDS education campaigns...(that) tend to be youth-oriented.” <sup>18</sup>

### ***Western values in schools:***

Schools are key institutions in passing on cultural values in society. The extent to which school curriculum in non-western countries reflect local cultural knowledge and values varies from country to country. In a World Bank publication, Srikantaiah maintains that in many countries school curriculum do not reflect the cultural values and knowledge of local communities. Omolewa contends that in Africa school curriculum and methods are not sufficiently Africanized. He argues that since independence from colonial rule, African countries have not done enough to contextualize, or adapt, educational curriculum to local values and learning modes. He laments the fact that formal educational institutions often contribute to the “generation gap” between younger and elder members of the society. <sup>19</sup>

To what extent do educational policies and programs in non-western societies, promoted either by international or national institutions, consciously build on cultural knowledge and values including the role of elders, intergenerational learning and other collectivist values?

There are various examples of approaches that are widely used in schools in non-western societies that are based on western values that conflict with those of local communities. In Botswana, Pridmore analyzed the Child-to-Child approach, implemented in many developing countries, in which school children are expected to learn and then teach their parents about “modern” health and hygiene practices. She concluded that the notion of ‘children teaching parents’ directly conflicts with cultural norms regarding who teaches whom and at that the same time it undermines the culturally-designated role of elders. She asserts that the idea of “children promoting health to their elders goes against the tradition of wisdom being passed down from the older to the younger within a strongly hierarchical social structure.” <sup>20</sup>

Another example of a program that has been extensively used in non-western societies to promote adolescent development, the “life skills approach,” has been critiqued by Antonopoulos insofar as it is based on Western assumptions about development and learning that conflict with values revered in more collectivist cultures. <sup>21</sup>

### ***Programs that involve elders and promote intergenerational learning***

In North America there are many programs, especially in schools, that involve elders and promote intergenerational learning, with observed benefits for children and elders alike. However, in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific there are few programs that explicitly involve elders in development strategies and promote intergenerational learning. Several programs that have adopted this orientation are described below. <sup>22</sup>

In Ghana, in a program supported by the United National Fund for Population Activities 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 state that intergenerational activities are beneficial insofar 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>23</sup>

In Malawi, the Ekwendeni Hospital provides training to 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 it has improved communication between younger and older community members. This is the first program in which elders have been actively involved and community members state that it has restored their place in society as "teachers of the younger generations." <sup>24</sup>

In Australian Aboriginal communities, building on the traditional teaching role of elders, senior women leaders in the Yolngu tribe work with alcohol and drug addicted teens to increase their pride in their cultural identity by teaching them about Yolngu history and practices (e.g. hunting and weaving) . <sup>25</sup>

Over the past ten years, grandmother-inclusive and intergenerational approaches have been developed by The Grandmother Project, and implemented in various countries including Laos, Uzbekistan, Djibouti, Senegal, Mali and Mauritania. These programs have dealt with various aspects of women and children's health and development in which senior women, or grandmothers, are heavily involved 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 identifying collective actions that can lead to positive and sustainable changes within their own cultural systems. <sup>26</sup>

In both Mali with Helen Keller International and in Senegal with the Children's Fund , GMP guided development of grandmother inclusive non-formal health education activities. In both cases these lead to improvements in senior women's advice to pregnant women regarding diet and rest during pregnancy and *concerning* infant feeding practices. <sup>27</sup>

In Mauritania, in both rural and peri-urban areas, in collaboration with World Vision GMP has trained informal grandmother leaders to promote positive nutrition and health practices in their communities. A statement from one of the grandmother leaders shows how grandmother-inclusive activities have contributed to strengthening the neglected *grandmother resource*.

*Before, the NGOs did not involve us. When you have knowledge on a subject and others do not involve you in the discussion of that subject you feel hurt in your heart. Today, as GMs, we have a feeling of great satisfaction in our hearts. You have*

*recognized our role, you have given us new knowledge and we are going to renew our efforts to guide younger people.”<sup>28</sup>*

In Senegal, in a program with World Vision to discourage female genital mutilation (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 FGM focus on young people and do not involve grandmothers who are usually the “cutters.” In GMP’s approach grandmothers are key actors in promoting sustainable abandonment of this practice while recognizing their positive role within the family as guardians of tradition and a stabilizing factor within the community. A grandmother leader, Kujiji, who has participated in the intergenerational workshops talks about her attitude toward FGM and grandmothers’ role in discouraging this harmful practice, “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>29</sup>

### **Conclusions:**

The survival of non-western, developing countries is threatened on several fronts. As the urgency to deal with global challenges increases, UNESCO has called for more attention to be given 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>30</sup>

Programs that explicitly involve elders and that promote intergenerational learning capitalize on two valuable assets of non-western societies, heretofore overlooked by those who wear western-tainted glasses. The available evidence shows that 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 they have strengthened cultural identity and social cohesion within families and communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Seminal report on global environmental degradation and development of the Bruntland Commission. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future. Published as Annex to General Assembly document A/42/427. United Nations, New York. 1985.

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- <sup>11</sup> Ageist biases against senior women greater than against senior men, Sweetman, C. (ed.) “Editorial.” *Gender and Lifestyles*, Oxford, 2000; Biases against senior women in non-western societies, Judi Aubel, Ibrahima Touré & Mamadou Diagne. “Senegalese Grandmothers improve maternal and child nutrition practices: The guardians of tradition are not averse to change” *Social Science & Medicine*, 2004, 59, 945-959; Notion that youth can teach elders: G. Mishra article entitled, “When Child Becomes a Teacher” *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 2006, 31, 4, pages 1-2: Children are expected “to spread health messages to their siblings, parents and neighbors” pg. 1, and Academy for Educational Development (missing reference to be inserted).

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- <sup>12</sup> World Youth Report 2005, Dept of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, New York, 2005, quote in text page 76; An OXFAM publication (2008) entitled “Highly Affected, Rarely Considered” contains the Youth Commission Report into Globalisation produced by The International Youth Parliament, and it contains a chapter entitled, “Global Youth Culture and Youth Identity” contains the quote on the impact of globalization on youth (page 154), OXFAM, Oxford, UK.
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- <sup>14</sup> The quote from the Haatso Youth Club of Ghana appears in the OXFAM publication (2008) entitled “Highly Affected, Rarely Considered” contains the International Youth Parliament report (listed in Endnote no. 12),(page 157); The quote from a Senegalese man, Mamadou, is from the Report on an Intergenerational Forum, December 23,2008, Grandmother Project and World Vision/Senegal, Dakar.
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- <sup>21</sup> Antonia Antonopoulus, “Know Thyself: Conscious Inter-Cultural Communication for Western Development Workers” Proceedings of 3<sup>rd</sup> World Conference on Communication for Development, Rome, November 2006.
- <sup>22</sup> Description of many intergenerational programs in North America is found on the website of Generations United, an American non-profit organization, [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org).
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- <sup>24</sup> Judi Aubel, Kistone Mhango, Maggie Munthali, Agness Hara & Evelyn Zimba. The ‘Custodians of Tradition’ Promote Positive Changes for the Health of Newborns: Rapid Assessment of Ekwendeni Agogo Strategy. Save the Children-US, Lilongwe, 2006.
- <sup>25</sup> Ian S. McIntosh, “Nurturing Galiwin’ku Youth in Northeast Arnhem Land: Yalu Marmgikunharaw” *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 2002, 26, 2.
- <sup>26</sup> The Grandmother Project (GMP) is a small American, 501c3 non-profit organization created in 2005. GMP’s mission is to provide support to other governmental and non-governmental organizations in Africa, Asia and Latin America to develop community programs that are: grandmother-inclusive, that promote intergenerational learning and that use participatory communication and education approaches that empower communities, [www.grandmotherproject.org](http://www.grandmotherproject.org)
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