"Elders: a cultural resource for sustainable development"

*Judi Aubel*
Grandmother Project -Change through Culture, Italy

In western, youth-focused societies, cultural traditions and elders are often viewed as old-fashioned and given limited attention in social policies and programs. In non-western societies, the role and wisdom of elders are critical ingredients for survival, especially when economic, environmental and social well-being are threatened.

There is a growing consensus that the effectiveness and sustainability of development programs will be greater if they build on cultural realities. However, development policies and programs rarely explicitly give attention to the culturally-designated role of elders, and often view them as an obstacle to change.

The purpose of this paper is: to highlight the incongruity between policies and programs to promote positive change in non-western societies and the cultural values and infrastructure of those societies; to discuss the role of elders as a critical cultural resource for promoting systemic change and strengthening social cohesion; and to present examples of elder-inclusive education, health and child protection programs in West Africa in which elders are positioned as a cultural resource for promoting positive and sustainable change in communities.

Many development policies and programs reflect a bias in favor of youth and ageist attitudes toward elders. This orientation explains why many development programs across the non-western world, in societies where age and experience are revered, focus on youth and totally ignore the critical role and influence of elders.

Based on the assumption that elder-inclusion is necessary for harmonious and systemic change in communities, an action-research NGO, Grandmother Project-Change through Culture, has developed a methodology in which elders are involved in programs promoting education, health and protection of women, children and especially girls. Elders are involved as "teachers" in classrooms. In maternal-child health programs grandmothers are catalysts for changing socio-cultural norms. And grandmother inclusion contributes to: decreased early/forced marriage and teen pregnancy; and increased school attendance by girls.

**Keywords:** elder-inclusive, cultural resource, elders, non-western societies

*Presenting author*