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A brief exploration of unique issues in intergenerational
relationships in Sub-Saharan Africa*

By

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Abstract

Prior to the establishment of contacts with the outside world beginning from the 11th century AD, Sub-Saharan Africa had always cultivated and maintained a vigorous and sustained intergenerational relationships through its well known and extended family institutions and philosophy of extensive communal living. Today, whatever was left of our intergenerational relationship has been affected on one part by dramatic demographic transformation largely because of the HIV/AIDS pandemic we are faced with and then migration surge and globalization on the other in terms of how these factors have been altering, to a large extent, our values and norms. This brief paper explores the dominant and unique issues in intergeneration of relationships and action in Sub-Saharan Africa with a view to highlighting, in the main, the contextual evolution, patterns, trends, policy contexts, best practices, emergent major challenges and their implications for policy formulation.

Introduction

Oral traditions in African history are replete with accounts of avid concerns for and actual cultivation of communities built on the foundations of intergenerational solidarity. For Africans, in general, believe firmly in the ethos of establishing healthy inclusive societies where we share very warmly in our achievements and challenges as they come. Our people have, therefore, established, maintained and cherished intergenerational relations fostered by the dependence of the young on the elderly at some point in the life-span and the dependence of the elderly on the young in a reciprocal manner. In those days, it was common to find that anywhere anyone went in the Sub-Continent elderly persons contribute financially, physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually to the upbringing of the younger generations. In those days, the informal learning systems and curricula relied extensively on the machinery of intergenerational relationships as knowledge was freely shared between the young and the old during moonlight stories at the village square. In those days, the cultivation of our inclusive societies was the duty of everyone, young and old, grandchildren and grandparents alike, and social tensions and frictions were rare. Then, our informal family and community-based care systems were so treasured that we had little or no need for the dominant structuring of formal public welfare systems as they are today being coveted and canvassed for in the face of mounting challenges.

Intergenerational relationships in Sub-Saharan Africa are currently being threatened and almost eroded by modernism, post modernism, globalisation and numerous socio-economic challenges. Intergenerational relationships and action in Sub-Saharan Africa is today being dwarfed in importance and visibility by the combination of urbanisation with its exclusivity in family relations. The extended family ties and intergenerational ties that made us very proud in the past are almost always being thrown over-board. The emergence of urbanisation and industrialization has meant that our younger ones seek economic solace in the big town and cities, leaving the rural areas almost exclusively to the aged. Intergenerational ties are daily being weakened by the increasing change in our value systems as our communities are opened up to cultural globalisation. Whilst intergenerational ties are being weakened by some dominant factors mentioned above,

Sub-Saharan African communities and families are currently being confronted by a new reality; that is the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The middle generation is the most affected, and that also means that the older and younger generations compulsorily would have to live together again as they join hands in living with the problems imposed upon them by HIV and AIDS. Moreover, the development of the modern public welfare system in Sub-Saharan Africa is coming along like an old tortoise that is not in any hurry to get somewhere. That means there is so much that needs to be done in terms of strengthening the almost weakened intergenerational connections and whatever negative impacts they may have had on our children, youth and adults.

This paper has been intended to contribute ideas to the pool of knowledge that is being generated to provide a global basis for actions aimed at strengthening economic and social ties for the promotion of intergenerational relationships. As it was clearly stated in the instrument commissioning this contribution, the key objective is to develop specific strategies to promote social inclusion and enhance solidarity between generations. This paper intends to contribute, from an African perspective, some ideas that would help in global policy adaptation and change by way of exploring briefly:

1. the concept of intergenerational solidarity
2. the evolution of intergenerational solidarity in Sub-Saharan Africa
3. Sample current patterns and trends
4. Policy context with regard to intergenerational solidarity
5. Best practices in intergenerational solidarity
6. Emergent major challenges; and
7. The future.

By addressing these issues, we hope to contribute some ideas that should maximise existing opportunities for the promotion of intergenerational relationship as well as identifying the implications of this discussion for policy adaptation and research.

The evolution of intergenerational solidarity in Sub-Saharan Africa

Intergenerational solidarity in traditional communities in Sub-Saharan Africa is very close to the basic features of reminiscence, social cohesion and integration of different generations and cultures identified by Mercken (2003; 81-94) in the Netherlands. In the case of traditional African communities, the reminiscence activities were often built into moonlight stories, drama, sketches, dances and music. But much of these patterns have been slightly altered as communities become more “Westernized”.

The alteration of intergenerational relationships over historical space and location had compelled us to propose what we termed African contextual definition (Oduaran, 2003: 3 and Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004; 171-185) to include:

- Involvement of all generations, irrespective of age, gender, race, location and socio-economic status;
- Uniting effectively in the process of generating, promoting, and utilizing ideas, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in an interactive way; and
- Applying the outcomes of such unification and interactions to the improvement of self and the community.

Following upon that proposed definition, we had argued that intergenerational relationships in Sub-Saharan Africa are largely and primarily informal and both clearly and squarely located in cultural reproduction (Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004;174). In putting forward that argument, we relied on the idea of cultural reproduction as was originally espoused and developed by the French sociologist and cultural theorist, Pierre Bourdieu (Jenks, 1993; 1-3). For it was Pierre Bourdieu who originally used the concept of cultural reproduction to describe the manifest quality of daily life experiences when applied to a broad spectrum of interpretations. When that happens, it is possible for one to articulate the dynamic process that gives meaning to the utter contingency, on the one hand, of the stasis and determinacy of social structures and, on the other hand, the innovation and agency inherent in the practice of social action (Jenks, 1993:1 and Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004; 174). It was social action that frequently guaranteed

intergenerational relationships in Sub-Saharan Africa prior to its coming in contact with foreign influences.

Although it would have been good scholarship to explore the earliest historical evolution of intergenerational relationships in Sub-Saharan Africa, the dearth of relevant written records would not allow us to do so. The construction of the evolution of intergenerational relationships after Sub-Saharan Africa came in contact with foreign cultures is still limited by the fact that historical data on the subject has not been explored in strict scholarship and the literature is therefore almost non-existent. Moreover, an attempt to trace the evolution and development of intergenerational relationships in the sub-continent could be further limited by its diverse nature, owing largely to our numerous cultures and the consequences of the partition of our people along the lines of earlier European imperialism. The diversity of our sub-continent is also so intricate that one cannot possibly isolate for discussion, the myriads of “good” cases indicating intergenerational relationships in few places and on the basis of this, generalize for the entire Sub-continent. Even at that, we had argued (Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004; 175) that even in the light of the apparent discontinuities one might observe in African cultures, it is possible to identify among our peoples common grounds and commonalities that are vital for our discourse. For example, there are discontinuities that arise from different colonial heritages and from differing geographical effects, socio-economic and political systems as well as upheavals in the modern states in Sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, common grounds and commonalities arise from the fact that African peoples speaking the same languages and sharing in the same culture quite often have the same ancestors. This is in spite of the fact that the peoples may be in different countries. For example, the Yorubas are found in both the Republics of Benin and Nigeria and some of them are found in Brazil and the Caribbean just as the Setswana speaking peoples are found in both the Republics of Botswana and South Africa. These peoples living in different countries openly cherish their love, unity and common heritage. What this means is that we can generalize with some degree of correctness about their practices of intergenerational relationships.

So then, we can identify among traditional African communities the constitution of cohorts of generations along the lines of those who are physically alive, those who are departed but whose souls and spirits are very much alive and those who are yet to be born. The cohorts of those who are physically alive are generally arranged according to age grade groupings. However, at a macro level; and, for the purpose of this discussion, they are grouped into the cohorts of the young, the adults and the elderly.

In pre-colonial times, the young are loved, cared for and nurtured in our culture. Very early in their lives, the young are introduced to African value systems and the general belief in industry. That was the whole idea behind the development of the apprenticeship system under whose operation the young were prepared for vocational, professional and even spiritual development. Whilst the young get tutored in this way, the middle generation (that is, their parents) took on the responsibility of emphasizing the values behind arrangements that fostered intricate links between the young and elderly generations. The understanding and support of the middle generation was coveted at all times. For any form of mistrust and disagreement between the middle and elderly generation was deemed as capable of jeopardizing the relationship between the grandchildren and their grandparents. That in itself drives home the message that the middle generation is of no less importance in the entire plans and operation of intergenerational solidarity.

For as long as the strong traditional roots of intergenerational relationships lasted, the elderly played a dominant role. We had pointed out that the elderly were respected for one major reason that they were presumably nearer to the ancestors, and this was specially so in the context where ancestral worship was strongly upheld in our culture prior to the advent of other cultures (Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004; 177). The elderly were largely upheld in most of our communities as the custodians of wisdom and the anchor of the spiritual and judicial systems and as the main people who guided and handed down to future generations, African traditional and cultural philosophies. Such cultural philosophies are known as “*Ubuntu*” among the Zulus in South Africa (Hoffman, 2003; 173-174) and “*ekwogbe*” among the Isoko and Urhobo people in the Delta State of

Nigeria (Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004; 177). In both cases, human solidarity was socially and culturally constructed to embrace compassion, co-operation, communalism, respect and dignity in social relationships and practices.

In pre-colonial times, intergenerational relationships were built around the focal point of cultivating and nurturing kinship relationships that would in turn provide the needed strong base for the social equilibrium of the community. The arrangements were such that intergenerational relationship featured very clearly unwritten charters of actions and activities for the different social groupings in many African communities (Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004; 178).

Intergenerational relationships in pre-colonial times relied extensively on the use of moonlight stories, ancestral worship, art forms (Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004; 178) and then proverbs for greater impact (Oduaran and Oduaran, 2006; 215 – 229, and Kaplan, 2002; 39-40). The general outcomes of the systems and practices of intergenerational relationship then were respect, love, good behavior, cooperation, understanding and industry, amongst others.

That was what happened before the colonial system was imposed on the sub-continent by the West. Under the colonial system, Western institutions and ideas were imposed on the colonized Africans, perhaps, with greater fervor after the 1884/85 Berlin conference. With the coming of the colonial system, African traditional ideas and values were slowly and eventually reduced in their intensities and in many instances thrown overboard.

With the coming of the colonial system, individualism grew and our grandchildren were tactically separated from their grandparents under the unproven pretence that the grandparents would “spoil” the grandchildren by “pampering” them excessively.

In no time, the colonial system introduced welfare systems and systems of intergenerational relationships, especially in the British ruled colonies. One major consequence was that we began to have remand houses, foster homes and old people’s

homes largely in the urban areas. Then, the elderly were separated from their grandchildren.

With the coming of political independence beginning from the late 1950s and more in the 1960s, African political leaders who were “schooled” in Western values took the center stage and held on to the colonial institutions, systems and values they “inherited”. Fortunately, the profound influence of external factors remained dominant in the urban areas. The rural communities continued to hold on to the traditional intergenerational practices.

Then came increasing modernity and people began to drift away from the rich African traditions of intergenerational relationships. By one sheer coincidence, the modern systems in many African countries could not sustain the Western institutions and systems. As one could observe, especially in Nigeria, the national budget began to feature huge cuts in social welfare allocations and with time, modern social welfare institutions “inherited” from the colonial systems began to become less visible and patronized. Today, a tour of the Edo and Delta States of Nigeria would reveal that the Western welfare institutions are almost non-existent. Today, most children would prefer to support their aged parents in their homes. The question that then arises from this development is whether Sub-Saharan African countries can still safely return to the introduction of formal structures for intergenerational solidarity. I doubt very much, but we must have in place, systems that should be clearly infused into the traditional patterns that are respected by our people. If this infusion is carefully planned and introduced, Sub-Saharan African governments can tactfully offer whatever social, economic and political support that would promote solid intergenerational solidarity amongst our people.

Current Patterns and Trends

Modernism and globalization have collectively altered the traditional patterns and trends in intergenerational relationships, especially in the modern urban areas. The rural areas have continued to sustain the traditional roots but not so much the urban areas.

In the urban areas, one could find some increasing involvement of the governments in directly supporting orphanages in the wake of the devastating effect of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. In Botswana, for example, the SOS village in Tlokweng has taken on very effectively responsibility for supporting and caring for children orphaned largely by HIV and AIDS and those children who were abandoned at birth by their young “mothers”. But this is not to say that the traditional support systems have diminished in importance in terms of supporting those orphans. One would add that whenever welfare institutions supporting orphans exist, the dimension of intergenerational influence is largely lacking. For the paid workers managing the orphanages may not and mostly do not have any kinship ties with the children being cared for.

What is true of public supported orphanages could be true of the private initiatives. For the modern intergenerational approach to care-giving and receiving is not profound in many Sub-Saharan African countries. As in public support institutions, the privately supported ones do not recognize how much usefulness or value the gradual introduction of the intergenerational relationships could add to their programs. The review of relevant literature does reveal the low level of recognition and practice of the idea of intergenerational relationships in the West. So then, it might be inappropriate to castigate the managers of the orphanages.

Yet the increasing consequence of what Mphande (2004; 148) calls disruptive socioeconomic and political changes in the capitalist world together with its attendant renewed interest it has generated in the notion of “family” seem to suggest for us the need to revisit African social networks that had given many of our people reasons for living. The point being made here is that Africans cannot afford to allow the age of materialism together with its consequence of a disconnect between parents and children to make less

valuable the links that had prevailed between the young and the elderly. As a matter of fact, we do not have any choice now in these days of the ravaging effects of HIV/AIDS.

The HIV and AIDS pandemic as well as the ravaging effects civil strifes have had on Sub-Saharan Africa manifest in the emergence of some initiatives and strategies that have not been studied with a view to determining the efficacy of whatever intergenerational relationships components and objectives they possibly could have generated. What we do know is that we now have an interesting variant of care-giving and receiving in which the eldest child in an orphaned family provides the scarce economic and social support systems that are badly needed. Lydia Nyesigomwe (2006:55-63) has reported clearly about this trend in Uganda. We can also point out in Botswana instances in which orphaned children living with their grandparents make inputs to the welfare of the family. But, here again, research is either lacking or very thin in terms of illuminating the effectiveness or otherwise of these new initiatives and strategies. What is most plausible for us to do at this point in time is to briefly explore whatever policy contexts that presently exist in the Sub-continent and then we can proceed to comment briefly on the policy contexts.

Policy contexts

Baroness Sally Greengross (2003) once predicted that:

Across the globe, by 2050, one in every five people will be aged over 60 with a life expectancy of 76 years. There will be as many older people as children under age 14 and, in many countries, older people will outnumber the young.

This age shift will be particularly dramatized in developing countries, where over 70% of older people now live and where there are often no systems of social security and immense shortages of affordable or available health care.

What Greengross (2003) had anticipated for 2050 is indeed already developing much faster than expected in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many factors account for this manifestation but we can easily identify the incidence of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. More than anything else, the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa has affected

significantly the changing demography and brought into the fore, more than ever before, the copious failure and inabilities of many Sub-Saharan African governments to articulate clear social policies that feature intergenerational solidarity and programming for most of the countries.

In many Sub-Saharan African countries, the HIV and AIDS pandemic is almost wiping out the middle generation (Oduaran, 2006:41-51). This in itself means that grandparents quite often would have to fill in the yawning gap left by the “largely disappearing” middle generation. When the elderly generation reverts to playing the role of parenting and even medical, economic and social care for their dying children on the one part and the teeming population of orphans on the Sub-continent on the other, it should dawn on everyone that age-segregated policies, programs and services would be far too obsolete and unrealistic in our avid determination to deal with our new challenges. Much more than that, it should dawn on us that whatever scattered fixated generational policies, programs and research we had relied upon for these many years would no longer meet our needs and mitigate our challenges.

The reality of our situation has revealed that we can no longer afford to have in Sub-Saharan Africa over-generalized social policies that tend to create serious and deep divisions among our young, middle and older generations anymore. It is no more any novelty to say that the HIV and AIDS pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities that our older and younger generations have been contending with over the years.

One reality Sub-Saharan African political leaders cannot run away from is that our hitherto traditional strong links and solidarity that had existed amongst people but which had been weakened by urbanization and modernism must be crying out for rediscovery; cultivation and development. Once our leaders become committed to that vision, it might be much easier to expect that they would initiate in their different nations and contexts intergenerational solidarity social policies that are informed largely by African traditions that are rooted in:

1. Interdependence rather than independence.
2. Strong beliefs in respect for and trust in our elder lies.
3. Sustained and shared love among grandparents, grandchildren and the middle generation.
4. Community generation and sharing of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and interests.
5. Multidisciplinary approach to building relationships among the young, middle-age and older generations.
6. Multisectoral reflections of economic, social, cultural and spiritual needs of all generations.
7. Concerns for and coalition building among special needs or disabilities groups and the young, middle- age and elderly generations.

But we must add that not all Western values and structures will work in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Western Values and Structures that may not Work in Sub-Saharan Africa

1. The Western intergenerational value of a notion of a day-care center exclusively for elderly people (Greengross, 2003; 12) may not work in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is so because in many African communities, it is the responsibility of children and grandchildren to house and care for elderly parents.
2. The idea of an institutional framework like Help Age International working exclusively for the benefit of older people in developing countries may not be too popular in many communities as our cultures recommend and expect older people and younger people to work hand in hand and together share ideas, aspirations, challenges, concerns and celebrate successes in all endeavors.

So then, what we must identify in our own contexts are what we might regard as best practices from our point of view.

Best practices in intergenerational solidarity or relationships

Although the most significant achievements in intergenerational relationships were recorded most in informal institutions as already pointed out, formal institutions are beginning to emerge that tend to respond to the realities of modern living. As a sub-continent, the “best practices” as they are known in the West are very few indeed, and research is actually needed to identify more of them in Sub-Saharan Africa. Even at that, we can identify in Uganda a viable non-governmental program known as Action for Children and led by Lydia Nyesigomwe (2006: 55-63). Action for Children (hereinafter, AFC) was founded in 1998. The AFC was originally founded “to rescue children from immediate danger and to advocate for their rights (Nyesigomwe, 2006:56). Somewhere along the line, the program began to provide psychosocial support, skills training and education, health services and nutrition to orphaned children in Uganda. And as HIV and AIDS began to ravage Uganda, AFC came up with a special three-year project known as Grand Parents Support (hereinafter, GAS) project following the needs assessment survey it had carried out in 1993. This pilot project is funded largely by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation (BULF). Nyesigomwe (2006:58) has reported that the project was designed to strengthen the capacity of grandparents in providing care to orphans and vulnerable children under the age of 8. The project is thus aimed at improve the overall welfare of families taking care of children orphaned by HIV and AIDS. The core of the strategy outlined in GAS is family preservation and empowerment. The AFC project may be laying emphasis on the economic empowerment of grandparents caring for their orphans. But at the same time, it is possible that there are social interactions and exchanges between these frail looking grandparents who are saddled with a task they had “dumped” several years ago could be intricate. We need research to explore this and other kinds of projects that are scattered all over sub-Saharan Africa with a view to understanding how they effectively empower grandparents and their grandchildren.

Again, Phillip Cook and William White (2006:65-77) have reported a similar best practice in South Africa. That project is called the Circles of Care that aims at implementing research strategies by building on the inherent resilience or coping capacity of children, their elders, families and communities. In doing so, the Circles of Care

project relies extensively on the strength of traditional African cultural values, beliefs and practices in its strategies aimed at reversing the negative impacts of HIV and AIDS. The two sample cases of best practices reported so far in the available literature indicate that Africa is left behind in modifying what was already in existence in our cultures in the dogged attempt to deal with present challenges. All that is needed at this stage is extensive research to identify more success stories and examine how they can be adopted for use in the sub-continent paying much attention to our varying contexts. The strategy being proposed here must take into consideration some of the major challenges facing us in the sub-continent.

Emergent major challenges

We hardly need any soothsayer to tell us what our major challenges are in terms of developing intergenerational relationships. These challenges have been well articulated elsewhere (Oduaran, 2003; Oduaran and Oduaran, 2004 and Oduaran, 2006). However, we may for reasons of emphasis draw attention to the issue of a near lack of clear policies that adequately cover public provision of social services and resource allocation, social protection schemes and well implemented poverty reduction schemes with intergenerational relationships focus for most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Then we might add to these those inherent in HIV and AIDS, unemployment, poverty, political instabilities, civil wars, refugee crisis, illiteracy, near economic stagnation among a host of other challenges that have actually “dwarfed” the improved use of intergenerational strategies in bringing about social stability in Sub-Saharan Africa. We hardly need to lay on the ground once again any elaborate plans to mitigate these challenges as these might have been too well indicated in the literature on macro and micro social and economic development plans and programs for our peoples.

The Future

Despair is out of the question as far as dealing with our challenges are concerned. If we must do better in building solid foundations for the take off of credible intergenerational

programs and policies for Sub-Saharan Africa, there must be dire need for extensive research on the subject in all the language blocs in Sub-Saharan Africa. Such extensive research and needs assessment surveys that may lead to introduction of experimental projects across the continent must necessarily be followed by an African conference that brings together experts on the subject so that we can effectively identify, discuss and document dimensions of intergenerational relationships among our peoples. This way, we can generate quality data base that would be needed for charting the way forward. How well and quick we can do so should depend largely on the readiness and commitment of our political leaders who are also saddled with the burdens of civil wars, refugee crisis, HIV and AIDS, illiteracy, draughts and sometimes over flooding among a myriad of other challenges. Our hope rest in the African adage that says “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

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