

## **Intergenerational Project in Sao Tome and Principe. Observations on culture as a vehicle for the development of the elderly.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses an international development cooperation project that works for the integration of elders in exclusion or at risk of exclusion with a cultural approach—including traditional languages—in the small village of Santo Amaro, in São Tomé and Príncipe, a small multi-isle developing country in central Africa. With an approximate surface of 1001 km<sup>2</sup> and 215000 inhabitants, one third of the population of this country is living below the poverty line and more than two thirds is poor.

This project is the result of a collaboration between the local group of Boy Scouts and the Spanish NGO Cooperación Bierzo Sur and involves children and elders with the aim of creating bridges of socialization and cultural transmission, to break down prejudices and to encourage the participation of the elderly in the cultural life of their community through a series of shared recreational activities during the school summer holidays.

Since 2022, the Intergenerational Project begins is analyzed to study the effects of implementing an eminently cultural development project including a traditional language, Forro Creole. Different workshops were organized around traditional songs and dances, traditional recipes and other traditional topics, such as Forro Creole. This language is at risk, no longer transmitted from parents to children, and excluded from the education system. It is nevertheless, the mother tongue of a large part of the elders of the community, and an unquestionable cultural vehicle plus an intrinsic part of the culture of the place. Through theater, translation and dubbing workshops, the youngest are initiated to this language while encouraging the participation of the elderly and the transmission of their knowledge, in a similar way to the music and dance workshops, which count with the advice of the elders. These activities stimulate socialization between young people and the elderly, integrate the latter into community leisure activities and place them in a prestigious role, since they are the ones who have the greatest knowledge of the activities being carried out. Likewise, by observing their interaction with other members of the community throughout the activities, possible situations of exclusion or prejudice can be foreseen, which makes it easier to take appropriate measures, as well as to monitor the physical, mental and emotional state of those elderly who live alone and are, therefore, more vulnerable.

In general, a positive impact is detected on all participants. The youngest have a kinder perception of the elders and their language despite the previous reluctance of some of them to undertake the activities with them, and they feel satisfied and are willing to repeat the experience. As for the elderly participants, they also have a positive perception of the activities and are particularly satisfied with the fact that their mother

tongue is included and transmitted.

## **Introduction**

Sao Tome and Principe is a developing country situated in the Gulf of Guinea; in fact, it ranks 135th out of 189 countries on UNICEF's human development list (2021). It has approximately 969 km<sup>2</sup> and 225,000 inhabitants (The World Bank, 2023), among whom numerous vulnerable groups can be identified, for example, the elderly (Fernandes de Almeida, 2022; Guedes, 2018). Many elderly people in São Tomé and Príncipe suffer social exclusion for poverty-related reasons, intolerance, and, in some cases, accusations of witchcraft. This entails the marginalization of the elderly and sometimes involves harassment, verbal abuse, and mistreatment (Fernandes de Almeida, 2022; Guedes, 2018; Neves, 2009; Valverde, 2000). The Spanish NGO Cooperación Bierzo Sur has been addressing this issue in the community of Santo Amaro with its Intergenerational Project since 2015, an international cooperation for sustainable development project in this small town, in close collaboration with the local Boy Scouts group. Between the two parties, summer vacation camps are organized for children and elderly people in exclusion or at risk of exclusion in which a series of cultural activities are held —these are intended to vary each year and range from a cooking workshop, to a storytelling workshop, traditional dances, medicinal herbs, etc.—. Their aim is to encourage the participation of all age groups, promote cultural transmission, establish intergenerational social links to fight against stereotypes, and stimulate the integration of the elderly in the cultural life of their community (Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2015a). In 2022, Forro Creole begins to be considered as part of this project as well, as it is the language of the majority of elders in Santo Amaro and an undeniable part of the culture of this community (Montroy, 2023). The activities organized with this new item were a translation and dubbing workshop and a theater workshop, in which both children and elders participated.

The creation of this project is based on studies that relate culture —including languages— and sustainable development. To date, it cannot be said that culture has been one of the main factors taken into account in sustainable development projects (Martinell, 2017) and the benefits offered by the inclusion of culture and cultural diversity in such projects have been ignored for a long time. Among these benefits, we should mention the stimulation of knowledge and understanding between people; the contribution of different understandings of the world; it allows the deepening of fundamental rights from the point of view of participation in cultural life and the defense of individual and collective cultural rights; it has a direct impact on social and economic development and on people's social opportunities and on education, employment and the use of leisure time, etc. (Martinell, 2010). The advantages of culture in this context are not only limited to the above considerations; it also influences people's health since health is not defined by biological aspects alone but also by psychological and social factors (Gimeno, 2023).

We must not forget that language is also part of culture and, at the same time, the vehicle for its expression and transmission. Culture influences language as much as language conditions the way we see the world (Gómez Pellón, 2010). UNESCO shares this point of view and has made it clear through various initiatives for decades (UNESCO, 2002; UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO, 2006; UNESCO, 2023). But beyond UNESCO, numerous researchers have also studied linguistic revitalization processes and their relationship with the development and well-being of speech communities (Ascencio, 2009; Ferguson, 2006; Gómez-Restrepo et al., 2016; Heinrich, 2021; Hinton et al., 2018; Hornberger, 2005; LaPier, 2018; Olko et al., 2021; Whalen et al., 2016). It is therefore consistent to think about including the linguistic aspect in international cooperation projects for sustainable development (Uranga, 2013). Thus, the cultural dimension, with everything that is encompassed by the word "culture", should be incorporated transversally in development projects (Alonso et al., 2004), since besides inducing development itself and social cohesion, it has a relevant role in diversity, the integration of minority communities, gender equality processes, and the issue of marginalized urban and rural collectives (Sen, 1998).

The suitability of the Intergenerational Project can thus be understood since it seeks to stimulate knowledge of different generations and understanding between them, share their different ways of perceiving the world, encourage the participation of the elderly in the cultural life of Santo Amaro, aspires to improve the health of the elderly as it is understood by Gimeno (2023), protects the cultural diversity of the community, the integration of the elderly as a marginalized minority, and aims to create greater social cohesion. The recent inclusion of Forro is also relevant since elders are the largest speakers of this creole and also one of the most marginalized groups in the community. If we add the loss of traditional knowledge that is directly related to the decline in the use of the language, it is quite clear that relating these aspects makes sense for the Intergenerational Project, since it is an eminently cultural project, specifically designed by and for the well-being of the elderly, their integration into the community, and the protection and transmission of different aspects of the local culture.

## **Methodology**

Foremost, it must be clarified that in this project it is imperative that the technological, material, and methodological resources are the minimum possible; human resources are the pillar for the continuity of these activities in an independent manner by the Boy Scouts without external dependence, and it is from this premise that all the activities are designed (Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2015a). Having clarified this point, this project is usually developed in two paths: the health and the cultural, both with an eye on the social situation of the elderly. Thus, a group of volunteers from the health sector carry out a descriptive, quantitative, and qualitative census of the elderly in the community, which allows their situation in the community to be monitored and followed up, as well as informing the authorities of the country about the situation in this area year after year.

The elderly evaluated are in the first instance selected by the Boy Scouts because they consider who is excluded or at risk of exclusion in Santo Amaro, and the evaluation follows a biological, psychological, social and functional approach. Given the difficulty of adapting the social and psychological scales commonly used in geriatrics to the reality of the country, the Virginia Henderson's 14 components (Gonzalo, 2023) are used as a basis. To complete the mental and functional assessment, the Spanish Red Cross disability scales (González-Rodríguez et al., 2017) were chosen since they are easily adaptable and simple for the person in charge of the evaluation. For the social study, a simple questionnaire was designed and adapted to the reality of the country, consisting of a total of 14 items that collect socio-demographic, economic, and basic needs data. The condition of the house in which the elders live, access to water, and quality of relations with relatives and neighbors are also analyzed (Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2015b).

Another group of volunteers, who may come from the areas of teaching, social work, humanities, etc., together with the Boy Scouts, leads intergenerational cultural workshops with the children. These activities are specifically designed to achieve the NGO objective; all the people involved in the project must understand it; the role of the intermediate generation —Boy Scouts in this case— is recognized as facilitator of the program; it must have continuity over time; it pursues a positive impact for the participating generations; and participants can improve their quality of life and the quality of life of other people in their environment (Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2015a).

The activities that are normally organized provide the benefit of stimulating abilities such as memory, reminiscence, and concentration, mobility, psychomotor coordination, and concentration and include: cooking workshops with traditional local recipes; traditional dance and music workshops; storytelling workshops; theater workshops in mother tongues; and Forro Creole dubbing workshops. In addition, there are interactive games for adults and children where they work on body movement and memory and training on how to care for the elderly addressed to the whole community (Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2015a) and visits to the elderly in the afternoons, where Boy Scouts take small groups of children to the homes of the elderly in the community to tell them stories and tell them about their jobs while the children correspond by asking them questions and singing songs (Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2018).

## **Results**

In these eight years of the project —with a pause of two due to the COVID-19 pandemic— certain results have been obtained that contribute to the optimization of the project year after year and that offer an updated vision of the situation of the Santo Amaro community, both in terms of the elderly and in terms of the involvement and commitment of the younger generations and the appreciation of local culture. (Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2015b).

In general, the volunteers observe that the elderly usually live alone in their homes, and, although many of them have a good relationship with relatives living nearby who help

them when they need it, there is also a percentage —smaller, but no less important— who do not have family nearby or do not have a good relationship with them, so they depend on the charity of neighbors. This second group is the one that suffers the most from loneliness, they are in worse socio-health conditions and are at greater risk of exclusion and rejection, thus being the most vulnerable (Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2018). In fact, the president of the NGO reports that every year prejudices are recorded by some children and young people about elderly women—mostly— living alone, and they are labeled as sorceresses (Álvarez Vilas, personal communication, 2023). Although these prejudices are not widespread, the NGO continues to consider them alarming because they point to the need to continue working on preventing rejection and mistreatment of the elderly, as well as on the need of more information and social awareness about the different stages of aging and the effects of loneliness and mental illness on the elderly.

In this regard, there are also some changes in the perception of a few children with respect to previous prejudices (Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2018; Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2023) which, although they may be anecdotal, are viewed with optimism by the NGO. One of these cases involves a girl who did not want to visit an elderly woman because she believed her to be a sorceress. The other one was a girl who did not want to carry out any activities with elderly people. In both cases, the girls finally undertook the activity, and a more positive perception of the elderly was detected in them.

This project also gets the elderly involved in the cultural life of the community, albeit in these intergenerational groups. It takes them out of their usual environment and broadens their social relationships, as well as giving them a relevant role in the activities, which stimulates their self-esteem. Many of the elderly who, for physical reasons, are unable to move, are visited by children in their homes, so they also benefit from this special role given to them by the Project and from the interactions with the children and young Boy Scouts.

In the healthcare field, this project has highlighted the urgency of addressing disability and mental illness in Sao Tome and Principe, areas that are totally neglected by both the authorities and other entities involved in development and which are often also linked to the elderly. It should also be said that the censuses carried out each year with the updated health status of the elderly in Santo Amaro is provided to the corresponding health authorities so that they are aware of the situation in this particular area of the country and so that they can exercise their corresponding responsibilities towards society, in whose execution or not, the NGO says it has the duty to remain on the sidelines (Álvarez Vilas, personal communication, 2023). Loneliness in the elderly and relationships with the neighborhood have a vital relevance to their state of health, since the situation of those who have someone to take care of them is very different from that of those who are completely alone. Leaving these appreciations aside, without ever forgetting their importance, numerous pathologies derived from malnutrition are detected in elders without being diagnosed (hypertension, diabetes, etc.) and therefore have no follow-up or treatment. Those few who do have a prescribed treatment take it very irregularly, depending on their economic possibilities and on whether or not the medicine

in question is available in the country, with all the consequences that this erratic consumption has on the health of the elderly, who, in any case, the NGO insists are not followed up in any way.

Finally, we would like to highlight the involvement of the families of many of the participating children, especially the mothers, who support the project by attending the training sessions and meetings, cooking, and facilitating the activities.

### **Concluding remarks**

The Intergenerational Project is proving to be a good sustainable development project in terms of its affordable cost and its simplicity, which does not create dependence on the NGO, although it is not yet in a fully autonomous stage. It is attractive to people of all ages in the community and is a way of working for cultural development and against prejudice towards the elderly in a playful and friendly way while, above all, respecting the participants' timing. Moreover, the fact that it is repeated year after year makes it possible to evaluate how the attitudes and beliefs of the new generations are progressing and to monitor the physical, emotional, mental, and social states of the elderly participants.

Effective project evaluation methods must be created, nevertheless, not only for the more narrowly focused field of physical health, which does have a current report, but also with regard to the psychological and social well-being of the elderly as well as cultural activities. This will enable more accurate measurement of the activities that participants find most helpful and engaging.

The elderly are quite enthusiastic about activities involving Creole languages, and this form of activity, in turn, fits in wonderfully with nearly any other local cultural feature to be worked on (songs, stories, plays, proverbs, etc.), according to the volunteers' notes (Cooperación Bierzo Sur, 2023). At the same time, it highlights the elders' wisdom and gives them a particularly important position because they are the ones who speak the language and can teach younger generations.

It is essential that the project remains dynamic. Most of the activities carried out each year should be different from those of the previous year, or at least present relevant novelties so that they are attractive to the children, who always expect innovations.

It was revealed that the Boy Scouts cannot yet activate the workshops on their own, which is one of the project's goals, after the two-year pandemic of 2020. In order to provide the Boy Scouts the confidence to carry out the project more autonomously and effectively, it is essential to give them proper and current training. This is a major tenet of the Intergenerational Project's long-term success.

Although this project still has some limits, it is a promising initiative that should be investigated and improved in order to demand the outcomes of its implementation in the community over the long run for the equality and dignity of the elderly and the survival of the local culture.

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