Using culture to change behavior
A small-grants program catalyzes local action

Culture has a vital influence on health, shaping definitions of illness and determining how health-related decisions are made. PATH, through the Culture and Health Program for Africa (CHAPS), encourages communities to reflect on cultural practices that affect health both positively and negatively. Through research and dialogue, communities are given the opportunity to evaluate cultural practices. Since 2000, CHAPS, with funding from the Ford Foundation, has awarded grants to 58 projects in Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt and South Africa to increase community involvement in the pursuit of better health.

Local decision-making
PATH staff work with committees made up of community members and representatives from local organizations to administer the project, drawing on their knowledge of local culture and connections with communities. These committees in collaboration with PATH, select projects that are community driven, engage culture to promote health, and are respectful of cultural complexity. Priority is given to projects that promote individual and collective rights and the well-being of the community and the environment; enhance the status of the community; encourage equitable gender relationships; and offer useful lessons to other communities.

In most cases, CHAPS has supported ideas and changes that were already in motion—helping accelerate the momentum of positive cultural evolution. Grant amounts range from $6,000 to $26,000, and support usually lasts for one year. Almost 70 percent of grants have been awarded to individuals and organizations in rural areas, where traditional values are most deeply rooted and health challenges are greatest. CHAPS supports individuals and organizations that would not usually receive international health funding. Highly creative projects like the examples below use traditional cultural values to solve difficult health issues and critically reflect on practices that are barriers to good health.

Preserving traditional foods (Egypt)
A CHAPS grant for the Bedouin community in the South Sinai region of Egypt revived a traditional food preservation technique. Drying is the oldest food preservation method in Egypt – fruits, vegetables, meat, and medicinal plants can all be dried. Compared to other preservation methods, drying is easy and requires much less storage space. Dried fruits and vegetables are an excellent source of energy and contain large amounts of vitamins, minerals, and fiber.

Mahmoud Mansour, the CHAPS grant recipient, promoted drying foods in South Sinai to halt the disappearance of this traditional practice. In the past, harvested food was dried every summer to preserve it for the winter season when food was scarce. As supermarkets began to stock processed food, drying became less popular.

Drying foods provides an inexpensive and healthy alternative to the processed foods in the supermarkets. He used the grant to construct a green house where he could dry food for himself and others. Mansour has constructed two additional green houses with his own funds.

Mansour has been able to revive traditional food preservation techniques and in doing so, has contributed to food security among the Bedouin. In addition to drying food himself, he has taught community members how to dry and store foods, ensuring project sustainability.

Reviving intergenerational dialogue (Kenya)
The Luo community has some of the highest HIV infection rates in Kenya, reaching above 20 percent in some areas. In the past, Luo girls in puberty learned about sexuality from their grandmothers and boys of the same age learned from their grandfathers’. In recent years this tradition has faded and elders and young people have become increasingly disconnected. The traditional communication channels have broken down resulting in little or no communication between the older and younger generations. In response to this, CHAPS funded a program called Mama na Dada in Bondo district, which brought young and older people together for discussions about HIV and AIDS, adolescence, and relationships.

PATH improves the health of people around the world by advancing technologies, strengthening systems, and encouraging healthy behaviors.

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Prior to Mama na Dada, young people did not know who to talk with about their questions and problems. Mama na Dada revived and reinvented the tradition of intergenerational dialogue. Unlike in the past when boys and girls were taught separately by their grandparents and also kept the information they learned separate from each other, in Mama na Dada boys and girls are brought together with elders. Now young people and older people, and boys and girls can talk about issues openly and honestly. In addition to hosting the sessions with elders and youth, Mama na Dada built a center in the village where they have a variety of programs to empower girls.

**Improving health through community dialogue (Nigeria)**

In Nigeria, the Human Empowerment and Development Project used a CHAPS grant to engage communities in critical discussion about the practice of nkukut, a cultural practice that places untrained religious workers in charge of maternal health care. Among the Annang, an ethnic group in southeast Nigeria, it is common for women to give birth in religious centers, rather than hospitals—the community believes that not to do so will bring poor health to the child. Workers at these centers are not required to undergo training and are often distrustful of modern medicine. Adherence to nkukut has led to poor health outcomes for mothers and children.

The project encourages dialogue about nkukut, hoping to reduce reliance on the practice. Project participants share information with community members through communication materials such as documentaries, posters, flyers, and pamphlets. Workshops and meetings encourage individuals to discuss their experiences and consider nkukut’s impact on the community. Project staff also designed a training curriculum to provide workers at nkukut centers with the skills needed for safer delivery and postpartum care; 55 workers were trained as traditional birth attendants.

**Revising the role of traditional healers (South Africa)**

The Organization for African Herbalists, in Free State province, received a CHAPS grant to support education and training activities for traditional healers. The organization, which is managed and operated by traditional healers, used the funding to train traditional healers in HIV and AIDS, STI’s, and TB; create an effective referral system between traditional healers and the Health department; and strengthen linkages between the two.

The organization facilitated a number of training workshops which explored the role of traditional healing in HIV and AIDS treatment and support. After each training workshop, the trained traditional healers trained other traditional healers in their communities, shared information with traditional healing training programs, and held regular meetings to discuss information on treatment issues.

As a result of the CHAPS grant, traditional healers are working together and there is an effective referral system in place. Their clients are referred to hospitals and clinics for voluntary counseling and testing and TB diagnosis and treatment. Traditional healers are now taking part in home based care programs by providing treatment and support, and are involved in DOTS support programs. Trained traditional healers are now equipped with knowledge and skills to provide professional care to their clients and have become distribution points for condoms and information about HIV and AIDS in their communities.

In addition, traditional healers are now willing to collaborate with government structures to increase knowledge and share strategies for combating HIV and AIDS. There is increased willingness from the healers to work together as a united force and no longer see themselves as rivals.

**Understanding the relationship between health and culture**

CHAPS demonstrates that social change can occur at a local level through simple, small-scale interventions. It provides community members the opportunity to see that their efforts can have a positive impact on the lives of others.

In all four countries, CHAPS is reaching its goal of increasing awareness and dialogue about cultural practices that affect health and engaging communities in developing strategies and participating in related activities. CHAPS projects serve as catalysts within their communities, helping others begin to recognize and discuss the ways in which specific cultural practices affect their health behaviors as well as their mental and physical well-being.

**Stimulating public awareness and dialogue**

One of the CHAPS’ goals is to increase public awareness of the importance of culture in health. Many grantees undertake advocacy activities to engage community leaders and policymakers. CHAPS grantees also find creative ways to share experiences through the media to influence policy and decision-makers; many projects have been featured on radio and television in Nigeria, Kenya, and Egypt.

*Haba na Haba*, a video that documents four CHAPS projects in Kenya, has been a powerful advocacy piece, sparking dialogue and reflection. The film has been used to raise public awareness of the relationship between culture and health, not just in Africa but worldwide.