



They don't have careers to build, they don't have elections to fight but they have the experience, the knowledge and the necessary networks and influence to make a change.

This was the main idea behind the Elders, an independent group of eminent global leaders, brought together by Nelson Mandela, who in the past few years have offered their collective influence and experience to support peace building, help address major causes of human suffering and promote the shared interests of humanity.

The membership of the Elders is certainly exclusive and more about quality than quantity. The Elders are only 12 but six of them have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and so has the only former member.

Nelson Mandela announced the formation of the Elders in July 2007, on the occasion of his 89th birthday, at a ceremony in Johannesburg. During the ceremony, he described the mission of the group:

"The Elders can speak freely and boldly, working both publicly and behind the scenes. They will reach out to those who most need their help. They will support courage where there is fear, foster agreement where there is conflict and inspire hope where there is despair."

Child brides

"When Nelson Mandela brought The Elders together in 2007, he challenged us to reach out to those who most need our help, to give a voice to the voiceless," explains Elder Graça Machel, former first lady of Mozambique and Mr. Mandela's wife.

In this spirit, the Elders brought together in July in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, courageous women and men working tirelessly to create alternatives for girls to avoid early marriage by organising discussion and debate within their communities. In the Amhara region of northern Ethiopia the most common age of marriage for girls is 12.

“Millions of girls who are forced into early marriage are among the most silent, invisible members of our society, says Graça Machel. “They are barely treated as citizens, with no space to speak on their own behalf; they have no choice about school or marriage, no choice about if or when they want children.”

Original idea: Branson and Gabriel

The story of the Elders started in a conversation between the entrepreneur Richard Branson and the musician Peter Gabriel. The idea they discussed was a simple one: How could a small, dedicated group of independent elders help to resolve global problems and ease human suffering?

For inspiration, they looked to traditional societies, where elders often help to share wisdom and resolve disputes within communities. They took their idea to Nelson Mandela, who agreed to support it. With the help of Graça Machel and Desmond Tutu, Mandela set about bringing the Elders together.

Nelson Mandela has now retired from public life and he is now an Honorary Elder along with the Burmese Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Four other former Nobel laureates Kofi Annan , Martti Ahtisaari, Jimmy Carter, and Desmond Tutu participate in the Elders activities and in addition former Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus is a former member.

With Graça Machel, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Mary Robinson, Lakhtar Brahimi and Ela Bhatt as the remaining Elders, it is certainly an exclusive club.

How do they work?

Among the recent activities of the Elders

- **Côte d'Ivoire:** In May 2011, following months of post-election violence, Kofi Annan, Mary Robinson and Desmond Tutu travelled to Côte d'Ivoire to encourage a process of national reconciliation and healing.
- **Cyprus:** The Elders visited Cyprus to launch a new documentary about the search for the thousands of missing persons killed during inter-communal violence and conflict in the 1960s and 1970s. The film follows four local teenagers – two Greek Cypriots and two Turkish Cypriots – who join Archbishop Tutu, Jimmy Carter and Lakhdar Brahimi to learn more about the island's painful past.
- **Middle East:** The Elders made their second visit to the Middle East in October 2010. They aim to promote "a just and secure peace for all" that embraces human rights principles under international law, and guarantees the right to live in equality, dignity and security to all Palestinians and Israelis.
- **Equality for Women & Girls:** The Elders call for an end to the use of religious and traditional practices to justify and entrench discrimination against women and girls.
- **Sudan and South Sudan:** The Elders are supporting efforts to build the conditions for long-lasting peace, good governance and development.
- **Zimbabwe:** The Elders are actively engaged in supporting initiatives to address the humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe and efforts to build a stable, prosperous and secure future for its people.
- **Burma/Myanmar:** The Elders support efforts to achieve a peaceful transition to democracy in Burma/Myanmar and the release of all political prisoners.

- **Eliminating Nuclear Weapons:** The Elders strongly support current efforts to reduce and eventually eliminate all nuclear weapons worldwide. There are currently more than 20,000 nuclear weapons in the world that have the capacity to destroy life on Earth several times over.
- **Every Human Has Rights:** The Elders-inspired Every Human Has Rights campaign reintroduced the Universal Declaration to millions of people around the world and united them in upholding the values that bind our human family.