



# VALUES DELIBERATION & COLLECTIVE ACTION

Community Empowerment  
in Rural Senegal

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Beniamino Cislighi,  
Diane Gillespie, and Gerry Mackie



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palgrave  
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-319-33755-5      ISBN 978-3-319-33756-2 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-33756-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016948400

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature  
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG Switzerland

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the Wallace Global Fund; UNICEF Child Protection; Lowell and April Blankfort of San Diego for support; and to the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University; the Center on Global Justice at the University of California, San Diego; the University of California, San Diego Academic Senate; and the University of Washington, Bothell. We especially thank Francesca Moneti of UNICEF for advancing this project in multiple ways, from inception to completion. We thank Tostan, its director Molly Melching, the anonymous participants and Tostan facilitators in the three Senegalese villages we studied; project interviewers Cheikh Moussa Kane and Korka Sow; and transcriber and translator Hassana Diallo. Michael Gillespie helped us intellectually and socially. Authors are listed in alphabetical order. They contributed equally to the work.

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
	<i>Methodology</i>	7
	<i>Pilot Study</i>	9
	<i>Setting of Study</i>	10
	<i>Respondents</i>	10
	<i>Entry into the Field</i>	11
	<i>Data Sources</i>	12
	<i>Sources of Bias</i>	14
	<i>Mitigating Bias</i>	16
	<i>Field Irregularities and Their Effects on Data Collection</i>	19
	<i>Coding of Data</i>	19
	<i>Citation Format</i>	23
	<i>Sensitizing Concepts</i>	24
	<i>Schema Theory of Cultural Meanings</i>	25
	<i>The Capacity to Aspire</i>	29
	<i>Social Norms and Their Change</i>	31
<b>2</b>	<b>Community Values and Aspirations as the CEP Arrives</b>	<b>41</b>
	<i>Beyond the Individual</i>	41
	<i>Family and Community</i>	41
	<i>Commonly Shared Personal Values</i>	42
	<i>Being Lost and Finding the Right Path</i>	42
	<i>Honesty and Forgiveness</i>	43
	<i>Working Hard</i>	44

	<i>Helping Each Other</i>	44
	<i>Being Men and Women</i>	45
	<i>Caring for Children</i>	47
	<i>Commonly Shared Aspirations</i>	48
	<i>Education</i>	48
	<i>Better Future</i>	49
	<i>Health</i>	50
	<i>Working Together</i>	51
	<i>Being in Public</i>	52
<b>3</b>	<b>Tostan's Instructional Strategies</b>	<b>53</b>
	<i>The Local Context</i>	53
	<i>Experiential Learning</i>	55
	<i>Active Learning Through Discussion</i>	56
	<i>Interactive Instruction Strategies</i>	58
<b>4</b>	<b>Learning and Values Deliberations During the Democracy and Human Rights Sessions (DHRS), 2010</b>	<b>63</b>
	<i>Public Deliberation</i>	64
	<i>Organized Diffusion</i>	67
	<i>Better Future</i>	68
	<i>Self-Understanding</i>	70
	<i>Working Together</i>	73
	<i>Why Work Together?</i>	75
	<i>Justice and Rights</i>	77
	<i>Equality</i>	80
	<i>Peace</i>	84
	<i>Changing Understandings</i>	86
	<i>Education</i>	86
	<i>Health</i>	87
	<i>Being Women and Men</i>	92
	<i>Caring for Children</i>	97
	<i>Ending Bad Habits, Starting Good Habits</i>	98
<b>5</b>	<b>One-and-a-Half Years After the Democracy and Human Rights Sessions, 2011</b>	<b>103</b>
	<i>Ending Bad Habits, Starting Good Habits</i>	104
	<i>Tostan Instructional Strategies in 2011</i>	106

<i>Public Deliberation</i>	108
<i>Organized Diffusion</i>	110
<i>Better Future</i>	112
<i>Self-Understanding</i>	113
<i>Working Together</i>	116
<i>Justice and Rights</i>	120
<i>Changing Practices</i>	123
<i>Education</i>	123
<i>Health</i>	127
<i>Being Women and Men</i>	129
<i>Caring for Children</i>	134
<b>6 Long-Term Program Results</b>	137
<b>7 Analysis: How Values Deliberations Lead to Community Empowerment</b>	143
<i>Another Sensitizing Concept</i>	143
<i>The Basic Social Process</i>	146
<i>Self-Sustaining Status Quo</i>	148
<i>Variations Appear</i>	152
<i>Community Enabling Conditions</i>	154
<i>Program Enabling Conditions</i>	156
<i>Program Pedagogy</i>	160
<i>Unsettling Experiences</i>	166
<i>Changing Self-Understandings</i>	169
<i>Sustained Deliberations of Schemas Among Participants</i>	172
<i>Resettling of Schemas Motivates Taking Change from</i>	
<i>Class to Community</i>	175
<i>Participants' Resettled Schemas Unsettle and</i>	
<i>Resettle the Community's Schemas</i>	179
<i>Seeing Is Believing</i>	181
<i>Individual, Collective, and Community</i>	
<i>Empowerment</i>	183
<b>8 Conclusion</b>	187
<i>A Selection of Findings</i>	187
<i>Limitations of the Study</i>	189
<i>Future Research</i>	191



<b>Appendices</b>	193
<i>Appendix 1. 2010 Individual Interviews</i>	193
<i>Appendix 2. 2011 Individual Interviews</i>	195
<i>Appendix 3. 2011 Focus Group</i>	196
<i>Focus Group Protocol</i>	197
 <b>References</b>	 199
 <b>Index</b>	 205

## LIST OF FIGURE

Fig. 7.1 The basic social process

147

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1	Tostan sessions studied	13
Table 1.2	Actually videotaped sessions	19
Table 1.3	Coded categories and their changes through three periods	22
Table A.1	Questions asked at each interview	194

## Introduction

- “The best kind of help to others, whenever possible, is indirect, and consists in such modifications of the conditions of life, of the general level of subsistence, as enables them independently to help themselves.” John Dewey and James Tufts (quoted in Ellerman 2006, p. 1).
- “Learning about [human rights] has helped us a lot because we are now able to do so much more than we were able to do before. We can go to school, we can go to meetings, and there is much more unity amongst the community.” Participant in a focus group near the end of the Tostan Community Empowerment Program (11: W, C, FG).

How do we advance child protection and human development in the world? The scope of challenges and responses is vast. One approach is to help people to help themselves. Ellerman (2006) defines and defends the idea of indirect, capacity-enhancing, autonomy-respecting help. Such help does not treat humans as objects who must be directed to outcomes imposed by an external power, but works indirectly by enabling human actors to pursue their well-considered aims. By autonomy he means the moral concept of respecting the freedoms of individuals and communities. He recommends three *do's* to aspiring helpers.

- Do start from where the doers are
- Do see the world through the doers' eyes
- Do respect the autonomy of the doers

In an autonomy-respecting program, the motivation to change comes from within, from the evolving values and aspirations of the people themselves, and not from coercion, material rewards and punishments, or manipulatively one-sided information. There is a range of contexts, perhaps wider than now acknowledged, where internally motivated change is more effective and sustainable than external prods.

An indirect program is not values-neutral. For one thing, the program itself values both helping others and enhancing human capacities. There are differences in values between human groups, but many people believe that groups have enough in common that most of them would be enlightened by conversations with one another (Appiah 2010). One ongoing conversation is international human rights discourse, a provisional summary of human values and aspirations that guides the programs of United Nations' agencies. International human rights discourse has been appropriated and adapted, in further conversations, by local groups across the world, for example, to help overcome discrimination and violence against women (Merry 2009).

The NGO Tostan, headquartered in Senegal, conducts an indirect Community Empowerment Program (CEP) in African communities. The Tostan CEP is primarily a nonformal human rights-based education program that encourages its participating communities to envision their future and engage in values deliberations, especially the understanding and realization of human rights. The CEP aims to develop the capacities of individuals and communities so that they can on their own reflect, think critically, plan, and alter or retain inherited practices. Program outcomes are much remarked upon, among them widespread abandonment of harmful practices and realizations of children's rights, but how the program develops the capacities that lead to these results has not been formally studied. The goal of our research is to better understand the ways in which its values deliberations contribute to the enhancement or adoption of beneficial individual and social practices.

Because the likely mechanisms of change are values deliberations which enhance individual and collective agency and because there is little published knowledge about the living content of such processes, we determined that the best use of our opportunities and resources was a qualitative

case study. We used the “grounded theory” method, which relies primarily on the reports of participants: what do they say about their course experiences, how do they think and feel about the changes that they make, what matters to them? From the reports of participants sparingly supplemented by middle-range theory, basic social processes are identified and traced in the case under study.

The importance of values deliberation for sustainable abandonment of harmful social practices was recognized in a comparative study of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) abandonment programs in five countries commissioned by UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre (Mackie 2009; UNICEF 2010). The comparative study identified common factors that distinguish more effective from less effective programs. The two most important factors were organized coordination of abandonment within communities of reciprocal expectation, as predicted by social norms theory (Mackie 1996, 2000); and values-based education that triggered reevaluation of old and new alternatives in the communities.

The idea of coordination on abandonment of harmful social norms and on group adoption of beneficial new ones has gained some visibility in development policy analysis (UNICEF 2007; Donors Working Group 2008). The community values deliberations essential to such change, what they are and how and why they work, are rarely reported, so far as we know not in as much detail as we provide here, and those processes of change are largely untheorized. Community human rights education programs aimed at beneficial revision of social norms are found in a variety of development settings and are claimed to yield powerful results (Indian middle schools, Bajaj 2011; women’s rights in Turkey, Ilkkaracan and Amado 2005; FGM/C abandonment and other capacity enhancements in Senegal by Tostan, Diop *et al.* 2008; Gillespie and Melching 2010; Mackie 2009; HIV/AIDS destigmatization in multiple countries through the Community Capacity Enhancement—Community Conversation [CCE-CC] program of the United Nations Development Program, Gueye *et al.* 2005; CCE-CC widened to multiple harmful practices, see for example the Ethiopian NGO KMG [[kmgselfhelp.com](http://kmgselfhelp.com)] or among a group of the Maasai, USAID 2012).

Systematic case studies, as well as comparative and controlled studies of such programs and their contents and results, would be a worthy line of research. Any journey begins with a first step, however, and our first step is the study of Tostan’s nonformal education program in Senegal. Tostan’s results are well-known and are attested by independent

evaluations; its program is already the subject of academic reporting and analysis; some of its curricular materials were available to us in English; it is open to researchers; and study sites in Senegal were comparatively accessible.

Tostan's participatory, nonformal, human rights education program, the Community Empowerment Program (CEP), is delivered in a given community for 30 months over a 36-month period. It is nonformal in that its curriculum is structured, but the classes are offered outside the formal education system in remote African communities. Most of the adults and adolescents who attend the classes have never attended public or state-sponsored schools. The CEP is taught in local languages within local cultural contexts (Easton and Monkman 2009; Gillespie and Melching 2010). The curriculum is organized into modules, and the modules in turn contain a number of sessions. The first module is called *Kobi*, a Mandinka word meaning "to prepare the field for planting." The content of the two-hour long *Kobi* sessions is shared orally since most participants beginning the program cannot read or write. Two classes of 30–40 participants each—one for adults and one for adolescents—meet three times a week for about a year. In *Kobi I* sessions participants discuss their visions for the future, the importance of participation, living in the community and the world, democracy, and human rights. The remainder of *Kobi I* is about problem-solving. *Kobi II* covers hygiene and health. The second module is called the *Aawde*, a Fulbe word meaning "to plant the seed." Devoted to economic empowerment, this phase is composed of basic literacy and mathematics lessons, and small-project management training.

In addition to the nonformal education classes, Tostan also provides training for a Community Management Committee (CMC), which forms when Tostan begins its classes in the given community. The CMC helps organize community projects that originate from the class; seventeen members are elected, some of whom are from the class. Readers should know that our study did not examine the crucial knowledge-to-action content taught in the last half of *Kobi I*, in *Kobi II*, and in *Aawde*, or material on the formation and operation of the CMCs; these elements are almost certainly essential to the CEP's results.

Participants are informed of the learning objectives of the CEP (*Kobi I* manual, Session 1, April 2009): "By the end of the program, you will:

- Have confidence in yourself and be able to express your ideas in public;
- Understand and be able to apply the fundamental elements of democracy in your family, in organizations, within the community, and on a regional and national level;
- Know your human rights and responsibilities and be able to apply them in everyday life;
- Understand and be able to apply a process for solving problems and conflicts;
- Know the importance of hygiene and health and how to improve your own personal hygiene and health, as well as that of your family and community;
- Have acquired good organizational skills for self-management;
- Be able to read, write, and do basic math operations;
- Write and receive SMS messages on your mobile phone;
- Have skills needed to initiate and manage community projects;
- Be able to sustain decisions and activities initiated during the program.”

The nucleus of Tostan’s approach to values education is the first half of *Kobi I*, the first 31 sessions of its 30-month curriculum. Our research centers on eight of these sessions in the adult classes, sessions especially devoted to discussion of local values, democracy, and human rights and responsibilities. We call them the Democracy and Human Rights Sessions (DHRS) in this document. We studied the eight sessions so that we could investigate, in depth, the meanings that participants attached to their educational experiences and how their experiences with an indirect approach to development evolved over time. We sought to discover the basic social processes that led them to take beneficial new actions on behalf of themselves and their communities. We were also able to interview participants 18 months after the DHRS, which allowed us to examine individual and community changes near the end of the CEP.

The CEP has been revised over decades of practice, community participation, and theoretical reflection. For example, the program changed from an emphasis on women’s and children’s rights to the rights of all humans (Gillespie and Melching 2010). The Interagency Gender Working Group (Greene and Levack 2010) observes a trend in this direction, conceptualizing



it as “gender synchronization,” working with men and women, boys and girls, on “a cooperative model for improving reproductive health and transforming gender relations” (see also Chant and Gutmann 2002). Another major change over time was that the human rights approach necessitated development of new educational forums to meet the needs of its participants—community management committees and empowered community networks—designed to help communities coordinate and carry out widespread social reforms in and between villages, during the program and beyond. The establishment of child protection committees to monitor the well-being of children (e.g., to monitor FGM/C, domestic violence, child abuse) was another notable revision.

We conducted interviews in 2010 and had them transcribed and translated in order to investigate participants’ understandings of what they were experiencing and learning as they moved through the sessions. What, for example, would they report as memorable, surprising, and important for their learning? How did they speak about their individual and social practices during the various human rights sessions? What gender differences, if any, surfaced in their accounts? How did men perceive women’s participation in the classes and women men’s? A year-and-a-half later (2011) we conducted one more set of post-session interviews and added one round of focus groups to understand how participants reflected on their experiences over time. Our approach needed to be sensitive to the lay discourse of participants, as we wanted to build our account from the layers of meanings in their descriptions. We sought to describe their thinking and feeling and any changes in their thinking and feeling in order to understand the basic social processes of changes they were making in their communities. We wanted to understand how they brought about such changes. We did not seek to summarize whole-population attitudes about Tostan’s program or any of its content.

In addition to working from their reports of what mattered to them in the classes they were attending, we arranged observation of participants in actual class sessions so that we could examine the content of what was said during the class and any changes in the nature and types of interactions over time. Also we needed to have a context for their post-session descriptions of their experiences. For this purpose we videotaped classes and had them transcribed and translated so that we could examine patterns of speaking, interruption, agreement, and disagreement. We were also interested in gender; for example, did women speak as frequently as men; did they initiate interaction with men? Was there gender segrega-

tion (e.g., seating during class) and, if so, did it change? How did women speak at the beginning and at the end in terms of tone of voice and length of contributions? Finally, we scrutinized session and interview records for instances of values deliberations and how they framed participant's understandings of their practices before and during the program, their expression of intentions for the future, and realized changes in their community that they reported to us.

## METHODOLOGY

In Tostan's nonformal education program, *Kobi* lasts about three months and includes sessions on human rights and democracy. The purpose of the research was to understand the experiences of participants during these sessions and how individuals and communities changed over time. From respondents' descriptions of their experiences, we aimed to create a theoretical model of how value-based education contributed to their understandings of the social changes they were making in their communities, including any shifts in social norms. We explored how they identified values they were learning in class, and how they linked them to their personal and social practices and their understandings of themselves and others. We examined, especially, how they connected their understanding of values to their motivation to learn new practices and undertake action to bring about positive social change. Our interest in the process of change and the meanings participants assigned to their experiences led us to choose a qualitative research method—grounded theory.

A well-established tradition in qualitative research, grounded theory allows researchers to collect and analyze descriptive data systematically, construct a model of the conceptual structure of processes from the data, and generate mid-level theories from those structures. Henwood and Pidgeon (2003) said that grounded theory studies “focu[s] on problems and issues that have to do with people's substantive activities, interactions, sense-making, and locatedness within particular settings” (pp. 133–4). Grounded theory allowed us to find patterns in the meanings respondents assigned to their classroom experiences and to identify connections they made between what they were learning to actions they intended to undertake or were taking to enhance the well-being of their communities.

Because the field research needed to be coordinated with the onset of Tostan's 30-month education program, we chose communities in rural areas near Kaolack in the southern part of Senegal, where the program was

initiated in March 2010. The research involved collecting two data sets: one was collected during March–July 2010 and a second during December of 2011. The 2010 data included videotapes of eight Democracy and Human Rights Sessions (*DHRS*) from the *Kobi I* and their transcripts and 230 interview transcriptions with male and female participants soon after each session ended. We provided program-specific training to videographers and interviewers. They were native Senegalese speakers of Pulaar, the language in which the program was offered. The 2011 data included 30 interview transcripts from male and female respondents in the same communities after a session near the end of the program and five focus group transcriptions. The videotapes of the classrooms allowed us to see what Tostan participants and respondents in our research said and did during the classes. The interviews conducted after the videotaped class allowed participants to describe what they had learned, how they understood class dynamics, and what they would do with what they had learned. In the 2011-videotaped focus groups, respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences in the Tostan program, especially with human rights. They allowed us to test the dependability and accuracy of the coding categories that emerged from the main set.

Prior to data collection activities, we secured approval from our respective Institutional Review Boards (IRBs): Cislighi was approved by the Leeds IRB, Gillespie by the University of Washington IRB, Mackie by the UC San Diego IRB.

In collecting the *DHRS* data, videographers taped each two-hour class and after the class five men and five women class members were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. In collecting the 2011 data, the same interviewers returned to the same three villages and interviewed five male and five female class participants after a session near the end of the *Aawde*, the second and last part of the Tostan Community Empowerment Program, at about Session 96 of the Aawde. They repeated the same semi-structured interviews used during *DHRS*. The interviewers also conducted focus groups. In two villages, the interviewers conducted gender-segregated focus groups and in the third, a gender-integrated one. (The protocol for the focus group is in Appendix 3.)

The research procedures were set up to ensure the trustworthiness of the data.

Prior to data collection, we took the following steps: (1) secured and studied the English version of Tostan's facilitators' manual so that we had an understanding of the curricular sequence being used by the facilita-

tors for each session; (2) reviewed the baseline data Tostan collected on the communities in our study; conducted a pilot study before undertaking data collection; (3) secured Pulaar-speaking interviewers and cameramen; and (4) tested interview protocols. After collecting and analyzing the 2010 data, we examined the trustworthiness of our initial coding categories by having the same interviewers conduct 2011 interviews and focus groups in the same communities toward the end of the program. Finally, we interviewed the interviewers about their experiences and observations after collection of the 2011 data. These various sources of data allowed us to cross-check or triangulate our data to ensure dependability in our categories and their interrelationships.

### *Pilot Study*

In Fall 2009, the research team conducted a six-week pilot study to better understand the logistics that would be needed to carry out the larger research project and to test out the research design. Specifically, the team (1) developed a cooperative relationship with Tostan's Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Department in its international office in Dakar, Senegal, so that relevant personnel in Tostan would be informed and willing to help the team gain access to the communities and the facilitators of the classes in those communities; (2) consulted with Tostan's country coordinator for Senegal and regional supervisors about the project and discussed curricular and pedagogical issues with experienced facilitators; (3) conducted interviews with participants who had already participated in the Tostan program in order to refine the team's interview questions; and (4) determined that the project could be carried out in a way that would respect the rights of those participating in the study and thus meet ethical standards. The findings of the 2009 pilot study assured the research team that the chosen methods would allow for timely collection of relevant data. The program was to be inaugurated in 200 villages in January, but funding difficulties delayed the start date until late March 2010. The team met in March in Senegal in 2010 to further refine logistics, including training of Fulbe interviewers and videographers and hiring of translators. We wrote and tested the interview protocol. To inform facilitators and to seek volunteers for the study, the team attended the facilitator training session in Kaolack in March. We subsequently secured permission from three facilitators (who volunteered to participate in the research) to have their classes videotaped.

### *Setting of Study*

Senegal, a country located in West Africa, is composed of 14 regions divided into 34 departments; departments are subdivided into arrondissements, and arrondissements into either communes or rural communes. The research was carried out in the Kaffrine region. Originally a department within the region of Kaolack, Kaffrine became an administratively independent region in September 2008. As a consequence, a new administrative internal structure was created (previous arrondissements became departments, previous rural communes became arrondissements, and new rural communes were created). The new administrative configuration not only reorganized the internal bureaucratic hierarchy, but also is slowly enhancing the political importance of the villages in the area, since their votes came to count more in electing the members of the rural council of the community—the first grassroots structure of democratic power. New political incentives increase government accountability to more vulnerable groups, and those groups in turn are motivated to improve their understandings of democracy and human rights. Thus, the Tostan training in democracy and human rights may come at a propitious time for the communities.

The three Fulbe villages that we studied were located far from paved roads and were connected to the bigger center of Birkilane only through a long, sandy road. The villages differ from one another in size and infrastructure. They were also located in an area where there are many villages of the Wolof ethnic group. Village B, for instance, was an important center for storing peanuts. According to Tostan's 2010 baseline data about the region, the population of these villages varied between 200 and 500 people. At the time of the research, none of the villages had electricity, running water, latrines, a hospital, a bank, or a school. Three weekly markets in the area attracted mostly male members of the local communities who attended, bought and sold merchandise, and enhanced their social networks. Battery-powered radio was the main connection to the rest of the world.

### *Respondents*

Research respondents were members of three Tostan classes in the Fulbe communities near Kaolack. Although Tostan was implementing its