Enabling Social Change:
How value deliberations led to individual and collective empowerment in rural Senegal

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[The program] brought unity because in the past people would say a woman should not argue with a man, but [it] has rid us of that. It used to be that men and women would not be in the same place and children weren’t allowed to go to meetings, but that has changed. Now, in meetings you will see men, women, and young men and women... get together to have meetings, argue, talk and make decisions together.

— A participant in the Tostan Community Empowerment Program

Young girls were held out of school and were told they had no reason for going... Now we know that it is just as important for a woman to get an education as it is for a man... When it comes to our health, a pregnant woman would go through the whole nine months without going to the doctor for a checkup, but now women make sure they go to the doctor regularly when they are pregnant. Now, parents in the village make sure when a baby is born they get their shots and... get birth certificates... There are changes happening all over the village.

— A participant in the Tostan Community Empowerment Program
The Study

This is a study of how a program of values deliberations – sustained group reflections on local values, aspirations, beliefs and experiences, blending with discussions of how to understand and to realize human rights – led to individual and collective empowerment in communities in rural Senegal.

The four years of field research and theoretical analyses are fully reported in an 80,000-word manuscript planned for publication as a book. This document is an advance summary of that larger work.

The study explains what happens during the deliberations and shows how they bring about a larger process that results in improved capabilities in areas such as education, health, child protection, and gender equality. It shows how participants, particularly women, enhance their agency, including their individual and collective capacities to play public roles and kindle community action. It thus provides important insights on how values deliberations help to revise adverse gender norms.

Understanding social norms, how to change harmful ones or promote beneficial ones, is a growing area of research important to child protection and human development. An influential model proposed that effective adoption of beneficial new norms begins with a core group, which engages in values deliberations and diffuses them to the remainder of the community until enough people are ready to change, culminating in coordinated adoption of the new norms. Further research found that effective programs for the abandonment of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) shared two central features: coordinated abandonment and values deliberations. However, the way values deliberations work to empower the community was not well understood, which motivated this investigation.

Focus of study

Tostan, a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Senegal, began to offer a program of informal education to rural communities in the 1980s and 1990s. Around 1995, the NGO added a new module on democracy and human rights, which had dramatic effects on social mobilization and community action. The first community that used this module was also the first – in 1997 – to decide, on its own, to organize collective abandonment of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).

Tostan’s Community Empowerment Program (CEP) motivates discussion and action on democracy and human rights, problem solving, health, hygiene, literacy, numeracy, and project management and organization. The first three months of the course are thought to be most important by Tostan staff and consist of 24 sessions. Introductory sessions expand aspirations

for the self and the community and begin to build agency and voice. Next there are five sessions on democracy, followed by 14 sessions on local values and human rights.

The CEP is introduced into one out of about five villages in an area. In that village there are two classes of about 25 to 30 people each, one for adults and one for adolescents. Participants attend nearly 90 two-hour classes over 30 months. A trained outside facilitator follows a set curriculum; the facilitator lives with the community, which is expected to house and feed him or her. The course is taught in the participants’ language, and both curriculum and pedagogy draw on their cultural background, their daily experiences, and their existing abilities and competencies.

Each participant is expected to attend the course and then repeat each session to an outside ‘adopted learner’ and to discuss class content with family and friends. As the program unfolds, the class brings many changes to the remainder of the village and to neighboring villages.7

Study methods

We studied eight of the early sessions in each of three similar communities in rural Senegal. We videotaped, transcribed and translated those sessions, and participants were asked a standard set of open-ended interview questions after each of them. We later visited each community for one post-session interview and a focus group discussion on program experience. We observed the content of, and change in, participants’ responses over the first three months of the CEP, and at one point 18 months into the program.

Because so little was known about the change process, we applied a “grounded theory” approach. The method strives to let the doers speak and to induce a theory of the basic social process from their reports, supplemented by social theories most appropriate to the data. In addition to the theory of social norms and their change8, three other theoretical concepts were applied:

- **Cultural models.** Values, aspirations, beliefs and practices can be connected together in webs (the schema theory of cultural meanings).9 It’s hard to break one strand of the web because the rest holds it in place.

- **Capacity to aspire.** People may live in such unvarying circumstances that there is little knowledge of alternative goals, let alone how to reach them.10 When people expand the capacity to aspire, they revise their cultural models of the future.

- **Self-efficacy.** The belief of an individual or a group about their ability to attain goals.11 When people increase their self-efficacy, they revise their cultural models of the self.

The data we gathered and the methods we used generated a thorough and organized description of what participants said during the classes; reactions from themselves and from family, friends and community to the cumulative elements of the program; individual and community values and aspirations and how those

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7 Additional detail on the CEP design may be accessed here: [http://www.tostan.org/community-empowerment-program](http://www.tostan.org/community-empowerment-program)


changed over time; and how self-conceptions, understanding, and practices changed over time. From the data we were also able to infer the causal processes that led from values deliberations to community empowerment.

How individuals and communities became empowered

These are the basic psychological and social processes inferred from what the respondents said:

Presence of a self-sustaining status quo. The status quo of the community, beneficial in many ways and harmful in others, was strongly sustained by equilibrium forces. These included: lack of meaningful variation in beliefs and practices; rejection of information inconsistent with shared beliefs; social approval of established practices and disapproval of deviation; inherited beliefs and practices operating mostly at the automatic rather than conscious level; established social norms that both stabilized expectations and served other useful purposes; restricted capacities to aspire; and a narrow public sphere confined to male elders.

Enabling conditions of change. Several characteristics of the community and of the program enabled change. Friends, family and the community supported participants’ adherence to the program. They already esteemed and desired education. They aspired to working together and wanted better lives for themselves and their communities.

To engage with harmful features of the self-sustaining status quo, the program had to be strongly credible. In this case, the NGO had a good reputation in the area; it was invited in by the communities, collaborated with local authorities, used facilitators who came from the same language background, and its program was multi-purpose. In addition, the pedagogy and curriculum included welcoming facilitators; culturally compatible content; learning to deliberate together in class; modeling, rehearsal, and role enactments; and structured knowledge-to-action components.
Unsettling experiences perturb the status quo. From the beginning, the class organized to clean the village on a weekly basis. This improved their capacity for collective action, modeled it in public, and produced benefits that were highly visible to the whole community.

The agreed-upon rules inside the class was equal voice for all. According to our respondents, that was not the norm outside the class, particularly where women were concerned.

In an important early session, participants imagined a better future for the community, beginning to imagine alternative actions and ways of being in the world – to expand their capacity to aspire. In the next session, they imagined playing multiple roles as individuals and within the community, beginning to expand their capacity to aspire to alternative understanding of one’s potential. Local values and aspirations were elicited and reflected upon. New knowledge and skills were learned.

Changes in the understanding of self. Changing the way one understands oneself was also an unsettling experience for participants. They arrived with a few familiar and fixed gender and family roles and learned, through imagination and rehearsals, to expand old roles and acquire new ones. They saw themselves as capable of doing new things as well as doing old things in new ways. These changes expanded the capacity to aspire, widened the map of available roles and increased the capacity to assume them. Participants saw one another acting in new ways in the class, and commonly believed that their personal and collective abilities were increasing.

In sustained deliberations inherited outlooks blend with new perspectives. In the sessions on democracy and human rights, participants undertook sustained deliberation on local values and aspirations. This concluded in an agreement that a better future for the community required the participation of all. A striking feature of the subsequent human rights sessions was how each human right started as a meaningless abstraction and was filled in with concrete local experiences and responses, thereby becoming a meaningful and actionable
concept. This prompted reconsideration of past experiences, from unproblematic to problematic, from given to socially malleable. Finally, the human rights sessions culminated in a lofty but articulated aspiration for the realization of human rights of all.

Values, beliefs, and practices are harmonized. As cultural models resettled among class members, they worked with each other to harmonize conflicting values, beliefs and practices. In the process, the class changed shared beliefs about the physical world and adopted new social norms. Participants understood that realizing human rights for all required that the process of change continue beyond the class and throughout the community.

New public roles are enacted and the public sphere expands. Class participants enacted in the community the public roles they had learned, and modeled those roles for others. They changed the norm that women of all ages and young men should be silent in public and actively expanded the public sphere beyond male elders to all sectors of the community.

Seeing is believing. People learned, applied, and obtained publicly visible benefits again and again; direct observation of benefits built the credibility of the process and its participants. “Seeing is believing” also increased the personal self-efficacy of participants, who understood themselves in new ways as others remarked on how they had changed. It also increased the collective self-efficacy of the village, as outsiders noticed the accumulation of beneficial changes and said they wanted to bring them about in their own villages.

Outcomes

On multiple items over the course of our observations, respondents progressed through stages of changed awareness, attitude, intention, and finally to action. Increased capacities, including increased personal and collective self-efficacy, were apparent in reports by the middle of the sessions on democracy and human rights and were quite strong in reports gathered a year and a half later.

Personal skills. In final interviews, respondents said that they knew how to read, write, do arithmetic, and use a calculator. They said they knew how to count money in the marketplace, use a telephone, make soap, and prioritize work and complete it in a timely manner.

Household changes. They spoke of cleaning the home daily, washing dishes, using improved cook stoves, bathing regularly, building and using latrines, sweeping standing water from around the house, using mosquito bed nets, and going to the clinic for illness instead of relying on folk medicine. Support by family and friends for participants to attend class increased over time.

Child protection. Respondents said they obtained prenatal care, vaccination, birth certificates, and clean clothes and shoes for their children. They said that more children were enrolled in and attending school and that parents provided them with school supplies and stayed in touch with teacher and school.

Human rights for all. Respondents could recite a variety of human rights and give reasons in support of them. They could detail the content of rights and their practical applications. People agreed that human rights increase individual and collective capacities. Equality and freedom from discrimination, they said, are among the most important human
rights and imply equal voice for women and younger men. They also imply equal education for girls; school enrollments for girls had increased, according to respondents. They also said that equal education implies an end to forced or child marriage. (A number of respondents claimed that such marriages had ended, but field researchers said it is more accurate to say they had declined.)

**Roles expand.** They said they were aware of an increased capacity to learn and an increased capacity to get things done. These increased capacities allowed them to fulfill or aspire to a variety of expanded roles. Among those roles were learner, teacher, and, quite importantly, beneficent community organizer. CEP education allowed some participants to take up traditional economic roles new to them. People also aspired for themselves and their children to assume roles in the modern economy.

**Gender roles relax.** Some respondents said the CEP broke the barrier between men and women, enabling women to pursue any role, not just traditional ones. Many said that the quality of relationships between women and men, both in the village and in households, improved. Women talked about the importance of the right to work outside the household. Although gendered division of labor remained, men helped in new ways with the family and the community. Gender role references became what people chose to do rather than what they are socially obliged to do.

**Women and Young Men Enter the Public Sphere.** Women were newly able to present themselves in public, and more men were able to do so. The public sphere thus expanded beyond elder males: women and younger men were invited to public meetings and had the right to participate. Women participants in CEP took on new leadership roles in the village, with responsibilities for youth, education, unity, or health, for example.

**Better ability to deliberate, decide and plan actions together.** They said they were better able to work together to bring about valuable changes for the community. Stated motives for working together shifted from traditional virtues of honesty and forgiveness to newly emphasized values of unity and caring. The respondents said they knew how to deliberate with one another, make decisions in groups, and carry them out. They organized and held more meetings on aspects of community development, and in one community they decided to fine those who came late to or missed a meeting.

**More effective collective action.** Communities formed credit groups that profited their members. In two villages a result of the CEP was that the community successfully worked to obtain a school from the government. The most conspicuous community change was public cleaning of the public space. Over time, cleanings were more regularly scheduled and attended. In one village, initially only women worked on public cleaning but eventually it became the obligation of all and those who missed a scheduled cleaning were required to pay a fine.

**Outcomes spread to nearby villages.** Respondents said they took new knowledge to nearby villages, and that the people there were very interested in learning more. They also said they had established active new relationships with people in nearby villages, who came to visit CEP villages and to take back home what they had learned.
Conclusions

1) **Human rights become a motivating force when they are explored, understood, and applied through participants’ own values, experiences and aspirations.** Once empty abstractions, they become filled with personally and culturally meaningful content. Participants become equipped with the knowledge, skills, motivations and possible action plans needed to explain to others in the community what realization of human rights means in the local context. The move from meaningless to meaningful and actionable concepts plays a key role in engaging participants in a revision of social understandings and practices.

2) **The right to be free of all forms of discrimination, that is, equality, is the human right most important to the participants and most central to change.** For example, together with the right to education, it implies the equal education of girls; equal education and equal health imply delayed age of marriage for girls; and these inferences are supported by equal voice for all in the community.

3) **Social norms are constructed from one’s expectations about a rule that other members of a group follow and approve of following.** Adopting a beneficial new social norm requires changing those expectations among the greater part of the community. For people to discuss and decide on those changes requires a public sphere open to all, which in turn requires enhanced agency and voice among previously excluded members of the group.

4) **Many harmful social beliefs and practices are deeply entrenched and hard to change with quick and fragmentary methods.** An individual’s mental model of an area of life is made up of many elements that support one another. Such a model is shared across members of a group, which further supports it. Social norms are also interdependent among members of a group, and must be changed or adopted by most members of the group. A program should therefore work through many elements of the shared mental models, and work with all sectors of the group.

5) **The process of empowerment involves more than just changes in beliefs and practices.** Changes in individuals’ and communities’ conceptions of themselves are crucial as well. In a traditional setting, people inhabit few roles and know little about new ones. Rehearsing and enacting new roles such as learner, teacher, organizer of collective action, public speaker, and new economic roles make traditional roles less automatic and natural. People learn to think and act in new ways, see themselves doing so, and most importantly are seen by others to do so. The joint awareness of change boosts personal and collective self-efficacy.

6) As a result of the foregoing, **men and women become more relaxed about gender norms, and relations between them improve as a result of the process.** In addition, members of the group connect traditional gender norms to values of peace and security. The gender norms thus serve to stabilize expectations in the community, reduce conflict and protect the peace. Participants learned how to create new ways of advancing the values of peace and security. They aspired, and worked, to realize all of the human rights for all in the community, including the right to peace and security. Knowing better how to act peacefully together and to resolve
conflict with others, especially in marriage and family relationships, also diminishes the unease and threat of variations in roles.

7) **The cultural model of child development changes when individual and community aspirations for a better future, and paths to the realization of those aspirations, are expanded.** To be consistent with the new vision, the developmental potential of children requires more active protection of their human rights generally, and specifically of the rights to education – including equal education for girls – health, and their future as citizens through birth registration, among others.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The study generated a rich set of observations and traced a detailed causal process of change in the case observed. Nevertheless, the findings are limited by being based on self-report in a single case – the Tostan CEP. They can be tested further in the Tostan case and beyond with multiple methods of research. Resource and opportunity constraints limited this research to qualitative study of the participants in the adult class.

Other components of the program could also be studied, including how the deliberations of the participants in the class diffused through the community, and how individuals in the remainder of the community responded. Adding quantitative survey research and behavioral measures over time would allow for much more complete and confident assessment of whether, why, and how people change. Case, comparative, and controlled studies of a variety of similar values-deliberations programs are needed for a more general understanding of how they work to bring about change.