

Tostan
Dignity for All



Breakthrough Generation Initiative Final Evaluation Overview of the Findings from the Qualitative Data Analysis

December 2021

INTRODUCTION

Tostan's 2016-2022 Strategic Engagement Plan (SEP) sets out a clear vision to bring human rights-based education and community-based approaches to new levels of depth, quality and scale for positive social change and increased well-being among rural resource-poor populations in West Africa. The Breakthrough Generation (BG) Initiative was a central part of this effort. Through the BG, Tostan implemented its flagship Community Empowerment Program (CEP) in 148 villages in four West African countries: 30 in Gambia, 40 in Guinea, 38 in Guinea-Bissau, and 40 in Mali from October 2017 to September 2020.

Tostan undertook the evaluation of the BG using mixed methods. It sampled 20% of the villages in each country and undertook baseline and endline studies using standardized questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. The quantitative data informed a set of indicators on governance, education, health, the environment, and economic empowerment, with specific attention to changes in social norms relating to harmful practices, including female genital cutting (FGC) and child marriage. Analysis to date of the quantitative data examined the results especially among class participants and among adopted learners with whom class participants share their classroom experiences as part of the CEP strategy of “organized diffusion”.

The analysis of qualitative data was critical for triangulating and interpreting the quantitative data. It was also essential for gaining additional understanding into how the well-being results were reached by the communities as a result of the program. Importantly, it also provides more systematic evidence than was previously available indicating that the communities of all four program countries follow the same pathway to

reach the results of improved well-being. This is of critical importance for sharing the model with other organizations and development actors interested in adopting essential elements of the Tostan model to strengthen their capacity to promote community well-being.

A team of external experts, working in collaboration with Tostan's Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Research staff,¹ analyzed the qualitative data (110 focus group and/or interview transcripts). A primary objective of the analysis was to assess the effectiveness of the Community Management Committees (CMCs)². These are elected and trained bodies of 17 representatives from the communities, of which at least nine are women, that are established at the onset of the Tostan Program. The CMCs consult regularly with participants in the Tostan classes and frequently, some members overlap. Given Tostan's community-led approach and its participatory methodology, the CMC is a lynchpin for leading, nurturing and supporting the activities and changes that the class members set in motion during their participation in the class. It is also the structure that is left in place when the program ends. It ensures the continuation and sustainability of well-being initiatives undertaken or planned.

The analysis provided evidence well beyond the role and effectiveness of the CMCs. In exploring the validity of the claims CMC members made regarding the well-being results they helped to generate, major evidence emerged regarding the perceptions and opinions of community members as well as leaders and officials regarding what well-being results were reached and – importantly – regarding the ways in which they were reached.

The team prepared a separate report for each of the four countries. Each country report details the themes that emerged from CMC and Tostan class participant descriptions of their activities during the three-year implementation of the CEP and from individuals not directly involved with the classes or the CMC, including local leaders, public officials and service providers.³ The reports also confirm the findings of surveys that collected quantitative data in these same communities at the end of the CEP.⁴

¹ Diane Gillespie, PhD, Tostan volunteer, assisted by Kyla Korvne and Tilly Ruback conducted the analysis, and they co-authored the country reports. Disclosure: Diane Gillespie is a sibling of Molly Melching, Creative Director, Tostan; she received no monetary compensation for this project.

² A description of Community Management Committees can be found in each of the reports and at Tostan.org.

³ Country reports are available upon request.

⁴ The summary results can be found here <https://tostan.org/resources/evaluations-research/>

MAJOR FINDINGS

Although conditions in Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, and Mali differed significantly, the descriptions in the interviews and focus groups and the themes that emerged from an analysis of those descriptions provided enough evidence to support the claim that, without exception, each CMC became a vibrant and robust force in creating and promoting well-being at the end of Tostan's Community Empowerment Program. Remarkably, across countries there were no criticisms of the CMCs and their work—either from members themselves, class participants, or from leaders/officials and community members who were not in the class or on the CMC. Data fell into a set of clusters or themes leading to findings as follows:

1. Community Engagement - CMC participants actively engaged with their communities and with their adopted neighboring communities as agents and facilitators of positive change for improved well-being. They described their approaches as inclusive.
2. Partnership with Local Leaders and Public Officials - All CMCs reported informing and/or working closely with and consulting local leaders, such as the mayor or village chief, about their plans and requested professionals, such as health workers and teachers, to take part.
3. Newfound and Strengthened Community Solidarity - CMCs and participants stated that their communities were more cohesive and peaceful as a result of the Tostan program and there was decreased violence within households. All non-participating focus group members and interviewees linked the activities carried out by the CMC and class participants to strengthened collaboration among community members.
4. Women's Empowerment (Increased Voice and Agency) - Female CMC members said that they had a voice not just in the family but also in more public venues, such as community meetings. They discussed conducting awareness raising activities and working visibly as leaders to advance well-being in the community.
5. Significantly Improved Health and Hygiene - Respondents in all focus groups demonstrated their ability to take new actions based on accurate knowledge about health and hygiene. The improved health effects were visible and valued by all. CMC members and non-participants alike gave examples and made the connection between cleanliness and health.
6. Decreased Cases of Violence and Intent to Abandon Harmful Practices - All CMCs claimed violence had decreased and that FGC, child marriage and corporal punishment had been abandoned. Most stated that there had been some or a great deal of resistance to the abandonment of these practices. There was, however, significant evidence in individual interviews and non-participant focus groups in one of the countries that FGC had not been fully abandoned and resistance remained in several communities. The CMCs' claims were more universally supported for the other two practices.

7. Strategies to Overcome Resistance to Change - All CMCs reported some resistance to change at the beginning of the program and said they used dialogue to persuade and convince (but not coerce) community members who resisted. To encourage non-participating community members to engage in the class content, CMC members frequently reported on processes of sensitization and awareness raising such as reaching out to people, talking to them, and explaining an issue until it was understood. CMC members also served as examples for other community members.

These findings point to the importance of changes in the way community members interacted, in more peaceful and respectful ways. They also suggest that these relational changes - including those in gender relations - are also at the heart of the process that led to other improvements in well-being related to health, hygiene, economic empowerment and abandonment of harmful practices. These findings are fully consistent with feedback communicated regularly by facilitators and supervisors, as well as with the findings of the study finalized by IDinsight in 2020, which found that communities referred to social changes as among the most important changes related to their well-being⁵.

A COMMON PATHWAY TO IMPROVEMENTS IN INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Across communities and countries, a common pathway emerged of how the CEP reached the improvements in well-being and on the role of the CMCs in the process. The rest of this overview outlines the major components in the sequence. It should be noted however that although the components follow a sequential logic, one component does not cease to exist when the next begins. In addition, the pathway consists of observable behaviors and publicly visible consequences of those behaviors which function within a holistic system. One component cannot be extracted from the system without affecting the effectiveness of the CMCs at the conclusion of the CEP and the results of the program.

Early Actions throughout Whole Community Visibly Improved Health and Well-Being

“People saw us cleaning the roads, the health post and the mosque and holding meetings.” –Guinea Bissau

“We work for the social progress of the community.” –Guinea Bissau

Early in the program’s presence, the CMCs, in partnership with participants in the Tostan classes, assessed their physical environment and organized cleaning activities throughout their communities. This activity was part of the realization of their vision to

⁵ The IDinsight study, *The Current State of Tostan’s Community Empowerment Program (CEP) and Diffusion Communities* found that “Social dynamics are characterized by discussion and broad participation and by an increase in respect or harmony—between men and women and in general” see <https://tostan.org/resources/evaluations-research/> for additional information.

create a healthier community. Their highly visible actions (e.g., sweeping, garbage disposal) demonstrated to fellow community members that program participants cared about the well-being of the entire community and were widely praised. Several focus group participants across the countries described some initial resistance to the Tostan program in their community, but all said that the resistance was overcome, in part, by seeing class participants and the CMC members as they worked to make the surroundings (e.g., roads, houses, mosques) cleaner and more sanitary.

Communication Practices Enhanced Relationships and Social Cohesion

“No matter how healthy you are, if you are not cooperating with your neighbor, your health will be lacking.” –Gambia

As class participants and CMC members were visibly taking public actions in the communities, they were also improving their skills on how to communicate in such a way as to increase understanding within and between families and with neighbors. Throughout their descriptions about how they interacted with others, the word *respect* occurred frequently and in the context of recalibrating existing relationships. Although specific accounts about what was actually said in exchanges were not detailed, the reported effects of the new communication skills were: it deepened relationships between husbands and wives, and among extended family members, and neighbors (“feelings of brotherhood,” “neighborliness,” “community solidarity”). Relationships were frequently described with the word *peaceful*. The new relational harmony created cohesion which was also discernible because many reported a decrease in fighting (observed yelling and hitting) that characterized daily interactions before the program was implemented. In contrast, husbands and wives, families and neighbors now calmly discussed issues at home and during public meetings. Neighbors greeted each other in the morning; and, at the end of the day, they sat outside, talking peacefully with each other. New communication skills also helped participants to more effectively organize activities for improving community well-being, since they were carried out in ways that privileged peaceful interactions and reduced conflicts.

Inclusive, Transparent, Democratic Practices Increased Participation

“Nothing can be done without consultation; consultation is one of the keys to our activities and it is together that everything is decided.” –Mali

Class participants, CMC members and non-participants stated that their meetings and events were open to everyone in the community. Indeed, CMCs frequently had a designated person who went door to door to inform citizens of their meetings, inviting everyone to come—young, old, men and women. The inclusivity served to increase the visibility of changes being proposed or made during and after the meetings. All could witness men and women members of the CMCs leading the meetings together. Many non-participant focus group members and leaders/officials could describe the CMCs’ processes because the steps they took were made public.

Increased Agency and Voice of Women Transformed Women’s Lives

“Women are involved in community decision-making. As proof, we participate today in this meeting with men.” –Guinea

The increased visibility of women, both in the classes and on the CMC, their public actions (e.g., cleaning, attending meetings, speaking at meetings) and their new communication skills shifted how others saw them and how they saw themselves. Women described their ability to speak in public as surprising to themselves and empowering. (“I know how to speak in an assembly without being afraid.”) The violence against them lessened or disappeared as they won the respect of the men in the village. Their influence in decisions taken in the home increased. Their participation in and management of the community bank was admired by all; several men spoke about the transformative role women’s economic contributions had in improving conditions in the community.

Continued Public Actions Increased Community Pride and Furthered Trust

“Because of the help we gave to the health center, many people started to trust us and became more involved.”—Mali

The visible, positive changes in the community created pride, trust, and a sense of joyfulness in the class participants, the CMC members, and even in those who were not directly involved in the program. As projects were undertaken, they paved the way for even more observable actions as class members learned more during their classes and shared it with others: women walked to pre-and postnatal care visits; people used latrines and handwashing stations; women brought their children for vaccination administration; parents monitored children’s school attendance; and everyone knew about micro-credit practices. As class members and the CMC carried out these observable projects effectively, they gained confidence in their abilities and courage to take on more difficult dialogues and projects.

Engaging Leaders and Officials in Community Initiatives Heightened Community Awareness of Activities and Participation

“For us, the government employees, even the teachers, are involved in our activities; doctors, councilors, the imams and the village chief are all involved.”—Gambia

All CMCs reported engaging local leaders in their activities, and non-participating community members witnessed the leaders’ support of the CMC projects. Their presence contributed to heightening the visibility of the CMCs activities and increased the trustworthiness of those directly participating in the program. As non-participants saw the positive outcomes and came to recognize why they were important to authorities that they trusted, they increasingly supported the actions of the CMCs.

Accumulated Community Trust and Solidarity Led to Openness to Abandoning Harmful Practices

“The change that has been made in our community is that female circumcision and early marriage have been abandoned; corporal punishment has also been abandoned.” –Mali

By the time the entrenched practices of corporal punishment, FGC and early child marriage arose in the curriculum, program participants trusted the information about the harm of those practices; and, after learning about their harm they can cause, made unwavering commitments to work to abandon them—all participants and CMC members expressed such commitment. Because CMCs and class members knew that the community had witnessed and praised their activism in creating positive change, including their peaceful means of communication, they were more willing to risk being persistent, even courageous, in the face of sometimes strong resistance as they advocated for the abandonment of these practices in public and private fora. The more that non-participating members of the program had been informed (“sensitized”), had been included in dialogues, and had a chance to witness and understand community improvements, the more likely they were to join the CMCs’ efforts to encourage abandonment of harmful practices.

Sharing Accurate Knowledge about Harmful Practices Helped Abandonment Activities

“A child should not be corrected by a brutal method, but by reminder; otherwise his mind may be disturbed and destabilized.” –Guinea Bissau

“Moreover, we point out the dramatic consequences to which the girl is exposed if she is given in early marriage. We try to convince the parents that the girl's body is not yet fit for motherhood.” –Guinea Bissau

“It was common to see a girl who had just been cut, but who suffered a lot of bleeding and ended up dying. These are daily problems that often result from excision.” –Guinea Bissau

Noteworthy in the participants’ and non-participants’ descriptions of their experiences with Tostan classes was the accuracy of their reasoning about the changes that they had made or were making in their communities; that is, they were able to correctly explain the information learned in Tostan classes and its application in practice. This included reasoning about initiatives related to the importance of sanitation (e.g., handwashing, latrines), school attendance (e.g., keeping girls in school), and gender equality (e.g., woman leading initiatives, speaking publicly, taking out and paying back loans, voting for the candidates of their choice). There were instances of some misinformation in non-participant focus groups about the harmful practices of corporal punishment, child marriage, and FGC (e.g., that FGC is “a religious obligation”). In all but one of them, however, someone shared accurate information that balanced, if not corrected, the misinformed comments (e.g., that “FGC is not a religious obligation”). Knowledge acquired from the classes had diffused out into the community, and diffused outward among non-participants.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the evidence from all the transcripts supports the effectiveness of the CMCs across communities and countries. Of course, some were more active than others; some took up major projects (e.g., building a health center); many did a variety of activities (e.g., vaccine promotion, school cleanings, latrine and stove construction); some spent more time repairing frayed relationships that existed in the community at the start of the program. The data did not allow us to assess the CMCs' work in neighboring or adopted communities, but CMC members and class participants described conducting such activities when distance and resources permitted.

Several interviewers asked interview and focus group participants what they wanted to work on next, at the end of Tostan's program. Many wished that Tostan would bring more education. Others described projects that needed government support and coordination. These reports support the claim that the CMCs are highly functional and poised to take on such challenges: they are democratic, well organized, and able to take actions to end harmful practices and promote ones that create opportunities for a brighter future, especially for girls and women. At the end of their three-year educational experience, they are able to create partnerships with the government and other nonprofit organizations to support existing and new efforts on behalf of the well-being of their own communities and those with which they are affiliated. With their education, they have helped to transform their communities. As a CMC member from Guinea Bissau said, "The teachings received from Tostan forge the individual conscience into a human and responsible conscience."