

The Effects of Tostan's Community Empowerment Program: 2021 Evaluability Assessment

Tostan
Dignity for All

OVERVIEW

In 2021, Tostan conducted an Evaluability Assessment (EA) of its Community Empowerment Program (CEP) with the organization IDinsight. The EA served to test the feasibility and desirability of conducting an impact evaluation (IE) of the program using an experimental or quasi-experimental design. The EA advanced Tostan's learning goals, and concluded this type of design would require changes to the program that would alter the program in ways that would distort its very nature and would limit its capacity to reach the results observed to date.

The Community Empowerment Program—a holistic program with many interlinked outcomes

Tostan's¹ flagship program, the three-year CEP, has been recognized by communities, governments, and national and international development partners for its success in enabling communities to improve their well-being through a non-formal educational experience anchored in principles of human rights.

Tostan implements the CEP in clusters of communities and also organizes capacity-building activities for decentralized government officials so as to generate a district-wide or a department-wide movement for improved well-being. Facilitators live in the villages and organize classes—one for adults and one for youth—that meet three times per week. Community Management Committees (CMC) consisting of 17 members (of which at least nine are women) are selected by communities and provide leadership in defining and implementing the community's vision of well-being in areas that are important in everyday life.

The CEP uses “organized diffusion” to spread the learnings and reflections beyond the classes. Class participants “adopt” learners within their same community and CMCs organize social mobilization activities including theater and events within their community and in neighboring communities and wider social networks. In addition, through the component that Tostan refers to as Strengthening Democracy and Citizen Engagement (SDCE), the CEP includes training and other activities to increase the capacity of elected officials to fulfill their mandate vis-à-vis the communities in their jurisdiction, while simultaneously enabling partner communities to advocate and collaborate more effectively with them and with social services such as health and education. Together with organized diffusion by communities, SDCE activities are key for scaling well-being results to entire districts and departments, serving to improve the community well-being of Tostan partner communities and, albeit less markedly, also of other communities in the administrative zone.

¹ Tostan is a U.S. nonprofit organization headquartered in Dakar, Senegal and currently operating in five West African countries. Its mission is to empower communities to develop and achieve their vision for the future and inspire large-scale movements leading to dignity for all. Since 1991, thousands of communities in West and East Africa have participated in Tostan's program. Since 2015, Tostan shares the fundamental principles of its model through its residential training programs at the Tostan Training Center in Thiès, Senegal. More than 750 practitioners and leaders from 49 countries have participated to date.

Consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the principle of “leaving no one behind,” the pursuit of improved well-being encompasses key relational as well as sectoral aspects and generates a large spectrum of interlinked and interdependent results. In the relational sphere, well-being outcomes include the quality of interactions and relations between individuals, in households, and as a community. In this realm, expected outcomes include: greater peace and harmony—with corresponding decreases in violence; greater inclusion—with increased voice, influence, and leadership of women and youth in the households and in the community; and improved governance—with greater capacity of communities to organize and undertake collective activities. These are interlinked with sectoral well-being results relating to improved health and hygiene, education, the environment within households and in the community, abandonment of harmful practices such as female genital cutting (FGC) and child marriage, and increases in economic activities. Sustainability of outcomes is generated thanks to the increased ability of communities to lead their development and to bring about changes in social norms.²

Tostan’s commitment to continuous learning and programmatic improvement

Continuous learning and programmatic improvement are at the heart of the way Tostan operates. The internal monitoring and evaluation of multiple CEP rounds and many internal and external research studies have generated important learning and consistent evidence on the effectiveness of the CEP in enabling communities to improve their well-being, including through strengthening or establishing positive social norms. They also generated understanding of the process through which the CEP leads to improved community well-being and social norms change—the “how” of the CEP—especially in priority areas, including harmful practices and violence against women and girls.

Tostan and its partners consider the existing evidence regarding the results of the CEP to be convincing. The data indicate major changes in well-being in both the relational and sectoral realms and include often dramatic shifts in women’s empowerment and in harmful practices such as FGC and child marriage. They also provide evidence that communities have established new social norms. Nonetheless, there are areas that Tostan considers important for further continuous learning and improvement. Tostan’s primary learning goals currently include:

1. Estimate the impact of the CEP at the community (village) level on core well-being outcomes that span both the relational and sectoral realms so as to be able to make more definitive causal claims regarding the results of the CEP, doing so in a robust way with an external evaluation expert to minimize desirability bias.
2. Gain a deeper understanding of how the CEP affects relations in the community, especially gender relations, as a result of the human rights-based approach of respect and dignity for all, and how, in turn, these changed relations contribute to systemic change and increase community capacity to achieve “sectoral” outcomes.
3. Gain additional insights on the process through which CEP learnings diffuse within and between communities.
4. Explore why Tostan is effective at developing village “preparedness” through the CEP, including generating greater capacity to advocate with decentralized government and service providers.
5. Produce a public good on evaluating holistic, community-led development programs for other development partners working in this field.

² The latest major evaluation was on the Breakthrough Generation Initiative which entailed CEP implementation in 148 communities across four West African countries between 2017 and 2020. (see more on initial findings [here](#)).

THE EVALUABILITY ASSESSMENT

Why Assess the Evaluability of the CEP?

There is no question Tostan would generate important new learnings by conducting a rigorous impact evaluation (IE). The question, given the nature of the CEP, is whether using a standard experimental (randomized control trial [RCT]) or a similar quasi-experimental design would be feasible and desirable. These methods are considered the gold standard in applied science, and have been used also in other fields yielding, for example, huge benefits in the medical field. However, as outlined also by the 2021 Nobel Prize winners in Economic Sciences, in some cases controlled randomized experiments may not be possible or appropriate in the social sciences.³

To address this question, Tostan selected IDinsight and conducted an Evaluability Assessment (EA) between March and July 2021 with the guidance of an Advisory Group of external experts, and with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). As a secondary objective, the EA sought to contribute to the understanding of the measurement and evaluation challenges faced by development actors with goals and operational modalities that, like the CEP, are holistic and community-led.



Young woman shares about human rights at an Intervillage Meeting in Sabu Sireh, The Gambia.

³ The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, *Scientific Background on the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2021 – Answering Causal Questions Using Observational Data*, The Committee for the Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, 2021

Structure and Methodology

The EA was divided into two main parts:

Phase 1: Definition of three key outcomes and of an impact evaluation (IE)-adapted Theory of Change

Given the holistic nature of the CEP and the impossibility of measuring all of its many well-being results, the first step was to select no more than three core well-being outcomes considered vital to determining the success of the CEP which included both sectoral and relational dimensions. These served as the basis for the elaboration of a complex IE-adapted theory of change consisting of a causal map that highlighted causal pathways, interlinkages, and feedback loops. The selected outcomes were:

1. reinforced women's capabilities,
2. collective capacity (community better able to engage in/with and sustain development efforts),
3. improved health and hygiene (selected from the five categories used in the CEP results framework ⁴)

For each of these, between three and seven sub-components were identified that served to more specifically capture the nature of the changes that would be expected to take place as a result of the CEP.

Phase 2: Feasibility and desirability of impact evaluation (IE)

The EA examined the experimental randomized control trial (RCT) option and the quasi-experimental matching design option. It also considered other options but dismissed them either because they would not offer reliable causal estimates or because they would not sufficiently meet the IE objectives.

To determine feasibility, the EA estimated the sample size needed to detect the outcomes caused by the CEP at the level of the village.⁵ To do this it defined the needed set of parameters, including level of significance, units per cluster, power, and the desirable minimum detectable effect size. The EA also identified and analyzed the elements of spillover⁶ that are posed by the very nature of the CEP—especially by the organized diffusion strategy and by the SDCE activities—and discussed ways in which the CEP could be modified to limit their effects. This was necessary since both the experimental and quasi-experimental designs require that villages selected as counterfactuals not be touched by the CEP—that there be no spillover. In addition, the EA looked at timeline considerations, noting some of the effects of the CEP could reach their expected level sometime after the end of the three years of the CEP classes, once the new dynamics set in motion by the program have time to develop.



Intervillage Meeting. Paoskoto, Senegal

⁴ The Tostan results framework includes outcomes in Governance, Education, Health, Economic empowerment, and Environment.

⁵ The village is deemed to be the appropriate level of measurement given within-community activities and spillovers built into the CEP and its focus on community capacity.

⁶ Spillover occurs when the control (or untouched) group is also affected in some way by the program, specifically in a way that causes the control group to experience some of the same outcomes as the treatment (CEP).

Assessment Findings

Feasibility of experimental and quasi-experimental designs

The EA found that an experimental design with an RCT is technically feasible, but only if the impact evaluation is conducted with a set of specific conditions, some of which would entail important variations from the normal operation of the CEP. The first pertains to sample size, with the options outlined in Table 1 below. Of the four options the most plausible would be Option C, which would require that 538 villages be screened, with 269 constituting the CEP villages and the other 269 constituting the control villages.

Table 1 Sample size calculations using relevant parameters

	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
Type of change captured	+ or – difference in outcomes	+ or – difference in outcomes	+ difference in outcomes	+ difference in outcomes
# of villages to screen	938	738	538	556
# of villages in which CEP is rolled out	469	369	269	278
Level of Significance	5%	10%	10%	10%
Power	80%	80%	80%	80%
Minimum Detectable Effect (MDE)	0.1 standard deviations	0.1 standard deviations	0.1 standard deviations	5 percentage points
Take-up rate of CEP communities	100%	100%	100%	100%

The second condition is that treatment and control communities selected for the IE must be appropriately distanced from each other, with a geographic and network “buffer” around each one in order to limit spillover. This means introducing changes in the CEP with respect to how communities are selected. Moreover, the mapping of the distribution of CEP communities in Senegal between 2010 and 2020 with a 10 km buffer around each one suggested it might be impossible to identify a sufficiently large number of communities that are free of influences from previous or current iterations of the CEP.

The third condition, also to limit spillover, is a limitation on organized diffusion activities. Social mobilization activities would need to exclude control villages and their buffer areas, thereby constraining the capacity of the CMCs to spread knowledge and learning through priority social networks, and radio broadcasts could not cover topics related to the core outcomes identified for the IE (see above). A fourth condition, also to limit spillover, would be training of district and department officials be conducted in ways that do not affect the core outcomes in the villages that do not receive the CEP. Alternatively, treatment villages would need to be selected from different districts, which would likely pose different challenges related to identifying appropriate counterfactuals.

The EA noted that a quasi-experimental matching design rather than an RCT would have similar conditions but would make it possible to select treatment villages that are closer to one another. However, finding appropriate counterfactuals would require collecting baseline data from a pool of potential control villages that is two to 2.5 times higher (738-922 villages for Option C in Table 1 above) and presents a major constraint.

Desirability

Desirability was discussed by Tostan in the context of its learning goals, summarized above. Key areas of concern relate to the way the IE would need to be carried out to meet the technical requirements of the experimental or quasi-experimental design. These were partially touched upon in the discussion of feasibility and include:

Changes to the CEP: Do modifications to the CEP needed to ensure the rigor necessary for the IE to make causality claims distort the standard operations of the CEP in ways that would jeopardize its integrity or its expected outcomes?

Tostan considers the restrictions needed to limit spillover effects would distort the principles of inclusion, threaten the spirit of true partnership with communities, and significantly limit the CEP's ability to enable communities to drive changes at scale in social norms—including adverse gender norms and those which uphold harmful practices such as FGC, child marriage, and the use of corporal punishment on children. For Tostan, reinforcing the capacity of communities to enact new collective choices and reach the necessary scale to abandon harmful practices requires sufficiently permeating and connecting communities that are part of social networks. Therefore, when selecting communities, Tostan needs to be able to choose those strategically positioned in their network so that these can influence additional communities in their proximity and fuel a district-wide and eventually department-wide movement. Moreover, during CEP implementation, the choice of which communities to engage in social mobilization activities is made by Committee Management Committees. Constraining their selection would run counter to the principle of community-led development and limit the CMCs' ability to organize social mobilization activities in line with their internal knowledge of interconnections among the communities.

Furthermore, the limitation with respect to SDCE activities would prevent Tostan from covering fundamental topics related to well-being in the training sessions and unduly restrict participatory dynamics that Tostan considers to be of fundamental importance to fuel district and department-wide sustainable improvements in well-being.

Ethics: Would the requirements of the IE conflict with fundamental ethical principles of the CEP?

For Tostan, the isolation of a very large number of communities from the benefits of the CEP poses an ethical issue. In areas of concentration, or in the expansion of these, Tostan is known and welcomed, based on its reputation and on the spread of information regarding the positive results of the program. In fact, many communities request to be selected, sometimes beyond Tostan's capacity to meet the demand, and their request constitutes a prerequisite for their selection. Collecting data from a large number of communities to identify counterfactuals while denying many of them the possibility to benefit from any of the elements of the program for up to six years would run deeply contrary to Tostan's principles of respect, inclusion, and partnership with communities. Tostan also suspects it would likely generate discontent and erode the high level of trust that currently exists between Tostan and communities.



Ga Nhala community shares their vision, Guinea Bissau

FURTHER RESEARCH AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

In line with its learning agenda, Tostan will proceed in exploring other methodologies that show promise in enabling it to generate stronger causal statements regarding the CEP. One such method is process tracing, which uses qualitative data. It aims to showcase evidence of the extent to which an intervention's key targeted outcomes have materialized and to investigate the causal mechanisms responsible for the outcomes. Irrespective of the methodology it will ultimately use, Tostan is committed to undertaking a rigorous external evaluation of the CEP. Although it may not answer all questions regarding causality, an external evaluation would be expected to significantly decrease desirability bias that may be present in existing internal evaluations, which are conducted by individuals identified with Tostan and where the respondents potentially answer questions in a way they believe would be expected or desired by Tostan.

Tostan also welcomes the five areas of possible additional research recommended by the EA which are: 1) process evaluations of the SDCE component and of the entire CEP; 2) testing and implementing new metrics; 3) an in-depth documentation of Tostan's village selection process; 4) a study of the process of change, including relational change, diffusion, and communal shift within CEP villages; and 5) an external village-wide longitudinal or within-case study. Tostan is planning a process evaluation of SDCE in the first half of 2022, after the election of new Council Members in Senegal. We are aware that such an evaluation also poses challenges since the SDCE is interwoven into the CEP implementation and is not a stand-alone component.

CONCLUSION

The systematic process of analysis undertaken by the EA brought out the strengths and weaknesses of using an experimental or quasi-experimental design for evaluating the impact of the CEP. While it served to basically eliminate these as viable options, the EA was of great value. Tostan benefited from the wealth of knowledge and experience in the realm of impact evaluations by IDinsight and by the members of the Advisory Group. Tostan is grateful for the encouragement, support, and technical partnership provided by the BMGF throughout the EA.

Through the exercise, Tostan more clearly distilled what it considers to be the primary results of the CEP and set out a more complete representation of the myriad factors and processes that interplay to generate them. It also sharpened the appreciation that the CEP is based on spillovers and strengthening a movement for well-being that includes the establishment of new social norms requires that communities have leadership in how and with whom the spillover is done since they know the dynamics of their social networks. The EA highlighted the importance of using an evaluation methodology that leaves the necessary space for the dialogue with communities and takes account of their leadership, needs, and advice. Thanks to the EA, Tostan deeply re-examined its programming principles and reaffirmed the fundamental role of inclusion and partnership with communities—principles at the very heart of the CEP and central to community-led development.

Many development partners who share Tostan's vision and principles of supporting community-led development that generates well-being and greater gender equity do not have the means to conduct such an in-depth EA of their programs. Tostan is therefore eager to share the results of this EA with them and the broader development and evaluation communities so the findings can contribute to the study of the most appropriate ways to evaluate holistic community-led development programs.

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