

Tostan

Community-Led Development





Tostan's mission is to empower African communities to bring about sustainable development and positive social transformation based on respect for human rights.



What is Tostan?

Tostan is a US 501(c)(3) nongovernmental organization dedicated to community-led development in Africa. Working primarily in remote regions, we provide participatory human rights education to adults and adolescents who have not had access to formal schools. For over two decades, Tostan has demonstrated that providing such an education transforms learners and their communities, leading to meaningful and sustainable social change. Our predominantly African staff includes dozens of field coordinators, supervisors and organizational administrators and hundreds of trained community facilitators. Our 30-month education program, known as the *Community Empowerment Program* (CEP), includes community-led outreach strategies that engage program participants in their own and neighboring villages. As a result, Tostan has transformed the lives of millions of Africans.

In Wolof, the most widely spoken language in Senegal, *Tostan* means “breakthrough,” as well as “spreading and sharing.” This word was suggested to Molly Melching, Tostan’s founder and executive director, by renowned African scholar Cheikh Anta Diop. He believed that to foster democracy, development must be *educational for all involved*, always rooted in and growing out of existing cultural practices and local knowledge. Influenced by his philosophy, Tostan honors the local context of our participants. Our classes are offered in African languages, and we hire and train culturally competent and knowledgeable local staff. Classes are taught in a participatory manner and include dialogue and consensus building, highly valued skills in African societies. Learners create

songs, dances, plays and poetry inspired from traditional culture to reinforce new knowledge.

Tostan believes that when participants start with what they already know, they can expand and “break through” to new understandings and practices and easily share with others what they have learned.

Our organization offers a collective, interactive, community-led approach to development, one in which community members themselves create pathways out of the dire poverty that so adversely affects their health and well-being. The following overview explains what Tostan does, how we work, how we are funded and why our approach has been successful.

Women, men, girls and boys participate in Tostan classes in rural villages in many African countries. Theater, poetry and other elements of African culture contribute to engaging communities in discussions and activities leading to positive change.



What is Tostan's community-led approach to development?

Tostan uncovers local knowledge, values and beliefs and uses a *holistic* educational approach that encourages program participants to reflect on their own experiences across a wide range of subjects. Working from what they already know and what they hope for their future, they can better define and solve community problems. In Tostan classes, villagers design, undertake, evaluate and sustain new actions that they believe will help them reach personal and community goals.

In addition to the nonformal education classes, Tostan establishes a Community Management Committee (CMC) and provides training for this committee throughout the program. The role of the CMC is

to ensure coordination, management and sustainability for all development activities.

Tostan is careful to include those who already hold influence and power in the community and those who have traditionally been marginalized. In this way, women and men, adolescents and adults, religious and traditional leaders, people of different social and economic backgrounds and locally elected officials come together to find solutions that benefit everyone.

The following six characteristics of our approach to development have been critical to our successes.

Beginning with Villagers' Visions of the Future

Tostan's first sessions engage participants in discussions about their visions for the future of their communities. They typically express their hopes and dreams for well-being, peace and prosperity. These shared visions serve as a reference for the rest of the educational program; goals identified are reviewed, discussed, debated, revised and put into practice throughout the 30-month program.

Providing a Relevant Curriculum

Tostan works outside state-sponsored educational systems, often with adolescents and adults who have never been to primary or secondary schools, thus our approach is referred to as *nonformal* education. The 30-month program in African languages involves regular class sessions structured with sequenced information that is presented in modules devoted to different themes.

There is no literacy taught during the first year of the Community Empowerment Program. Instead Tostan meets people where they are by promoting dialogue and open conversation; classes are conducted in African languages using communication methods that are both familiar and engaging.

Throughout the sessions, we emphasize developing critical thinking and research skills, particularly those that help participants investigate issues in their own communities. Over the years we have learned from our participants and responded to their requests for further knowledge. Because of this feedback, we can teach standardized information at critical junctures in the curriculum when participants express interest. For example, we provide data on maternal and infant mortality rates for analysis and use illustrations that teach the steps involved in preventing dehydration from diarrhea. In areas where there is deforestation, we teach how to construct fuel-efficient stoves and promote solar cookers.

Tostan's approach is participant-centered, not issue-driven. However, critical issues do arise out of our interaction with learners when they begin to research problems in their communities. We then follow their lead. For example, we have supported participants as they have built schools, wells and health centers and as they have organized inter-village meetings and public declarations to abandon harmful practices, such as female genital cutting (FGC) and child/forced marriage. We also help communities establish their own public health initiatives, such as campaigns to prevent malaria, increase vaccination rates and promote family planning.



Teaching Democracy and Human Rights

From years of experience, Tostan realized that participants could not apply their new skills and knowledge unless they knew and understood their human rights; for example, the human right to speak and be heard in public forums. Participants were also interested in democratic practices, both in their own cultural traditions and in their national government. Working with African language specialists, Tostan approached human rights and democracy through the concepts already present in villagers' daily language and ordinary experience. The introduction of these new themes energized learners who began identifying human rights-affirming practices they wished to reinforce and harmful practices they wished to abandon. As a result, in 2000, Tostan placed interactive sessions on democracy, human rights, problem solving, hygiene and health at the beginning of the curriculum.

In Guinea, 198 villages have participated in the Tostan CEP since 2002. "Although we were neighbors, we never really sat together before and discussed these important issues," noted one participant.

The CMC of Alabaday, Somaliland, has organized many activities to improve health, the environment and education in their village. Girls, boys, women and men work together to coordinate and manage all projects and events.





Adolescent girls share information on human rights and responsibilities at an intervillage meeting. For most girls it is the first time they have spoken out in public.

Facilitating Outreach and Knowledge Sharing

Since 2000, Tostan's community-led development approach has become even more effective through the addition of strategies that encourage outreach activities. Class participants and Community Management Committee members tap into existing social connections to create ever-widening networks for social action and resource sharing. We call this process of reaching out to others to disseminate information *organized diffusion*. In this model, participants "adopt" learning partners and share program topics with friends and family members and with the community at large. The community itself then "adopts" surrounding communities and family members in the diaspora. This diffusion of knowledge and action has brought about regional, national and even international consensus among interconnected social networks about the need to respect human rights. It has led to collective celebrations of positive practices and abandonment of harmful ones.

Involving Multiple Stakeholders

In helping communities solve problems that they themselves identify, Tostan works closely with key stakeholders including traditional and religious leaders, government officials, other nonprofits, international organizations, UN agencies, donors, outside evaluators and scholars. These collaborators have provided essential resources, support and information as Tostan has evolved over the years.

Program and Organizational Learning

Tostan's structure, program and approach have greatly evolved over time based on feedback from participants, insights from program evaluations, staff discussion of program experience and consultation with advisors. This has allowed the program to continue its trajectory of "learning" – the process of finding a closer "fit" among villager needs, the social-cultural context, program design elements and staff actions. This adaptive learning approach is now a normal practice for Tostan. It allows us to remain coherent and consistent over time while still adapting materials, curriculum, methods and components of the program. This is why Tostan is confident that it can spread its model to new countries and cultural contexts given the dynamic, context-sensitive and learner-centered nature of the program.

What is Tostan's educational philosophy?

Rooted in theories of democratic education, such as those of John Dewey and Paulo Freire, Tostan values what participants already know and bring to the learning experience. Our curriculum is designed so that new information is

introduced through a process of shared inquiry. Such inquiry starts in the very first session when participants are asked to express their future hopes for their community. These discussions reveal possibilities and lead to the discovery of shared goals. Cultural anthropologist Arjunu Appadurai calls this ability to see the present in terms of a desired future "navigational capacity," one that involves continuous reexamination of the present situation for possibilities that were formerly seen as unavailable or closed off. As class members describe a future for their community that includes peace, health, economic growth, security, education, work, solidarity and lack of discrimination, they begin to look at what they have already been doing that will help them succeed; they also discover practices that are blocking progress toward their goals. Our educational modules provide participants with new information and problem-solving strategies that enable them to author their own futures in terms

of these goals. The human rights context insures participation from all sectors of the class and a safe environment for exploration of previously taboo issues, such as the harmful practices of FGC and child/forced marriage.

How have theories of social norms and social conventions influenced Tostan's educational practices?

Since 1998, several theories about social change have guided our educational work. Our participants have long-standing practices, some they have identified as positive and some as harmful. The work of philosopher Cristina Bicchieri has helped us think about social norms that underlie these practices. Social norms are clusters of expected behaviors that bind people



Public declarations allow members of an extended family to come together and announce their decision to abandon harmful traditional practices and promote human rights for all members of their community in a peaceful, positive way. Women and girls play an important role in the abandonment process.

together culturally. They are systemic, perpetuated by multiple actors within a system and acted out without critical thought as to their origin or function. Our educational approach encourages dialogue and deliberation about the assumptions and beliefs that hold social norms in place within communities. Such public deliberation has led to a shift in social norms and group expectations: thousands of communities have organized to abandon harmful practices such as FGC.

Political scientist Gerry Mackie has argued, in a similar vein, that several harmful practices, such as FGC, constitute self-enforcing social conventions. As such they are not a matter of one individual's choice and preference. A girl's reputation and future would be adversely affected if her family did not conform to the convention. Mackie's theoretical work, along with the experiences of villagers, informed Tostan's community-wide approach as villagers themselves helped Tostan see

that they could not individually abandon FGC. In Senegal, as in much of Africa, a "community" can often extend well beyond the borders of any village, region or even nation. Decisions about important matters are made within a large and complex network of inter-related neighborhoods and villages, connected through marriage and family ties, trade, local resources and a host of other influences. In order to redefine social norms, these networks must be included in the educational process—otherwise, any one individual or group within that network will be unlikely to adopt a new behavior on their own, as others will be unaware of, surprised by, and often offended by the change if not first consulted. Tostan thus recognized early in its educational work that individuals and their social networks need to coordinate to solve their problems.

What are the components of Tostan's educational program?

Villages learn about Tostan's program in a variety of ways, most often by word of mouth. When a village has requested Tostan's Community Empowerment Program and funding is available, the community is informed about what Tostan provides and what it must contribute. Villagers understand that they will receive a systematic curriculum for the classes, a chance to interact and discuss what they are learning and a trained facilitator whose stipend is paid by Tostan. The villagers must provide a meeting place for the classes and feed and house the facilitator, who lives in the community and teaches two classes of 25 to 30 participants three



Poetry and dance help participants in Djibouti understand new information.

times a week. Each village has a class for adolescents and one for adults, so a minimum of 50 to 60 villagers participate.

Once a village agrees and classes begin, the facilitator helps establish the village's Community Management Committee (CMC). Composed of 17 members, these committees are a mechanism for community action and institutionalizing democratic community leadership. The training curriculum for the CMCs provides the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to identify, prioritize and address human rights violations, using the same participatory and reflective methods that are modeled throughout our program. CMCs propose and manage development projects identified during class sessions and CMC meetings. They also organize social mobilization activities and spur meaningful action in areas including health care, the environment and child protection, among others. CMCs provide sustainability for the Tostan program as responsibility for development is placed in the hands of the community itself.



The educational program has two phases, and each phase contains modules, units of sequenced information organized around a theme. The first phase is called the *Kobi*, a Mandinka word meaning "to prepare the field for planting." The information contained in over 100, two-hour long Kobi sessions is shared orally since most participants beginning the program cannot read or write. The Kobi sessions take place over a one-year period, with facilitators drawing on oral traditions to spark debate and dialogue on issues related to the community's well-being.

Before introducing reproductive health themes during the CEP sessions, community facilitators and supervisors hold meetings, like this one in Guinea, to engage and gain the full support of local religious and traditional leaders.

Tostan participants use whatever means they have available to study, learn and grow, like these women studying by flashlight. Tostan is using an innovative solar project to address participant and community needs for electricity.





The Coordinator and treasurer of a CMC in Senegal explain monthly income and expenses for the millet machine project in the community. At least 80% of the CMC coordinators are women.

The Kobi module begins with sessions on democracy, human rights and problem solving. Participants actively discuss and debate their views about the future of their village. They then use their shared vision as the basis for exploring the implications and meanings of human rights, such as the human right to be free from all forms of discrimination. These early dialogues set the context for the sessions that follow. For example, participants are empowered to take action when they learn about health and hygiene. They learn about germs and how to stop their transmission. The class weighs the benefits of prevention over the costs of treatment. Many lessons are devoted to understanding the role of vaccinations in preventing disease. Participants learn about their own mental and physical

development, including systems of the body, the reproductive process and proper birth spacing, as well as information on HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections and the dangers of practices such as FGC and child/forced marriage. The module also promotes positive, health-enhancing local traditions, such as breastfeeding and infant massage.

During the hygiene and health sessions, participants use knowledge gained from the sessions on democracy, human rights and problem solving to organize, speak out and take action based on information learned. CMCs support this process by developing, monitoring and sustaining health activities in partnership with local health officials.

The second phase of the educational program is called the *Aawde*, a Fulani word meaning “to plant the seed.” Devoted to economic empowerment, this phase is composed of literacy lessons and small-project management training. In the *Aawde*, participants learn to read and write in their own language and study basic math skills. They write letters and compose simple project proposals, reports, autobiographies, stories, poems and songs. They also learn to read and write SMS text messages on mobile phones to practice their literacy skills. Participants study management skills and learn how to assess the feasibility of income-generating projects and then select, implement and manage good projects. Interactive workbooks help them review the initial modules of the Kobi and practice their reading and writing skills.

What is organized diffusion?

Tostan has drawn its educational practices from the social context of villagers’ daily lives, tapping into what animates them as learners. Villagers are skilled at creating and maintaining multifaceted social networks within and among communities, networks that are familial, religious, economic and educational. Sometimes invisible to outsiders, these historically rich social connections are intergenerational, created through making shared decisions and responding to challenges.

As Tostan’s education program has evolved, it has increasingly responded to and reinforced these social practices, making it possible for villagers to spread their new knowledge to others. We call this process

of community-led educational outreach “organized diffusion”. In our program, participants “adopt” a learner within their community, and most spontaneously teach other neighbors and relatives in their own and other villages. They not only reinforce existing social relationships, but they also take on new roles, such as teacher and/or community leader, building competence and confidence as they try out new skills or take different approaches to problems.

Communities also “adopt” other villages to share information and plan social mobilization activities and awareness-raising campaigns. They organize intervillage meetings to discuss important issues and achieve consensus on decisions affecting their extended family and social network.

Our radio programs provide another means to disseminate information. They bring education to the airwaves once a week in regions where Tostan implements its program. Broadcast in local languages, radio shows include discussions on

During an intervillage meeting in the Matam region in northern Senegal, women applaud news of successful campaigns for school enrollment and vaccination in their communities.



topics such as human rights, health and democracy. They also provide community members with a forum for sharing positive experiences accomplished by participants and CMCs. These radio broadcasts generate further discussion and support local social mobilization initiatives across the country.

Participants are highly motivated to apply their new literacy skills as they write text messages. Adolescent girls are always ready to help other learners.

Linking villages to insure broad dissemination of information through organized diffusion has become a core strategy within Tostan's model because it fosters conditions for collective and coordinated social transformation.



What is Tostan's latest strategy to sustain literacy and increase organized diffusion?

Tostan has found that one main barrier to making literacy a "norm" in rural communities is a lack of opportunities for individuals to use their literacy skills in ways that are relevant to their daily lives. We believe that SMS text messaging can remove this barrier by giving individuals the possibility to practice and reinforce their skills in reading, writing and math on a daily basis. The cellular telephone is already one of the most frequently used modes of communication in the rural areas in which we work. However, an informal Tostan survey in educational centers revealed that very few participants with cellular phones currently use SMS to communicate, despite the fact that it is much less expensive than making a phone call.

We have launched an new project to review and teach literacy through SMS text messaging in rural villages that have already received the Tostan program. We have used their feedback to create exciting new exercises for our literacy sessions. We are working with UNICEF and information technology programmers to develop equipment that will make it easier to teach literacy through messaging. This project not only allows learners to review their new literacy skills and apply them, but it also enables participants to communicate with people in their extended family networks as they organize to bring about positive social transformation.

What are some results of the Tostan approach to community-led development?

Tostan's internal monitoring and evaluation team continually seeks participant and staff feedback and uses that feedback to improve the program. We have evidence to suggest that, among other outcomes, many Tostan villages have a reduction in infant and maternal mortality; an increase in vaccination rates, birth spacing, and pre- and post-natal consultations; and a decreased incidence of domestic violence.

The following results are clearly visible:

- *As of 2009, collective public abandonment of FGC and child/forced marriage in over 4,000 communities in Senegal, Burkina Faso, The Gambia and Guinea*
- *New forms and lines of communication between men and women, youth and adults, husbands and wives, parents and children and different socio-economic groups*
- *Increased mediation and conflict resolution*
- *Regular community clean-ups*
- *Active Community Management Committees, a majority of which are headed by women and are officially registered as Community Based Organizations*
- *Increased involvement of women in civic activities*



• *Establishment of small community-operated health centers*

• *Community-managed microcredit operations benefiting clients with limited access to credit*

• *Increased birth registrations, marriage certificates, national identity cards and school registrations*

The public, collective declarations to abandon FGC are the most visible outcome of the Tostan program. Since the first public declaration in 1997 in Senegal, almost three-fourths of the estimated 5,000 communities that practice FGC have abandoned it. As we expand our program to other African countries, the movement to end FGC is spreading. Hundreds of villages in Guinea, for example, have publicly declared abandonment of FGC and child/forced marriage and declarations have started in The Gambia.

Women sell vegetables harvested from their collective garden started during the Tostan CEP.

What do external evaluations tell us about Tostan's work?

Tostan has been evaluated extensively by several external agencies, including Frontiers in Reproductive Health (with the Population Council) (2003 and 2004); UNICEF (in a commissioned 2008 study); and the Ministry of the Family, National Solidarity and Women's Enterprise and Micro-credit of the Government of Senegal (2008). We briefly summarize some main conclusions here.

In 2003 the Population Council reported on a collaborative project between Tostan and Mwangaza Action in Burkina Faso designed to replicate a previous, shorter version of the Tostan program. The project was successful, as made clear in the project evaluation:

In Burkina Faso, the community-based education [Tostan] programme involved 23 villages. ... During the implementation of the Tostan programme ... many positive changes occurred in the participating villages. The communities now promote reproductive health and human rights and hold regular clean-up activities for improving public hygiene. Also, these villages are now standing up against violence toward women. The utilization of health services, antenatal care, family planning and child health have significantly increased.... At the end of the programme, the 23 communities made a public declaration for abandonment of the practice of FGC in front of 5,000 villagers, religious, traditional and political leaders, the media and programme managers from government, NGOs, and international organizations.

In 2004, the Frontiers in Reproductive Health project of the Population Council, published a controlled study conducted from 2000-2003 to evaluate the success of Tostan's nonformal education program in 20 villages in which it had been implemented. The researchers found that, in terms of knowledge, attitudes, and behavior regarding reproductive health, human rights and FGC, Tostan's program results were noteworthy. The study states:

The impact of the Tostan program on women's and men's well-being has been substantial. The program has been able to bring about a social change within the community and to mobilize the villagers for better environmental hygiene, respect for human rights, and improvement of health. Extending the Tostan program to other areas of Senegal and to other

African countries could make a difference in the well-being of women and of the community as a whole.

Based on the above and other studies, in 2005, the Innocenti Research Centre of UNICEF published a Digest on FGC concluding that Tostan "has achieved remarkable results" (p. 24). In *Health Bulletin: A Publication of the Population Reference Bureau*, Gryboski et al. (2006) compared five community-based programs deemed effective for improving health care. Tostan, one of the five programs, was given the highest overall rating for community participation in recognition of efforts to work on health goals identified by the community.

In 2007, UNICEF sponsored an in-depth study of communities where the Tostan program had been implemented between 1996 and 2000. Researchers found, on average, a 77% abandonment rate of FGC in Tostan-trained communities that had publicly declared their abandonment of the practice. It is important to note that this study investigated communities that participated in the older version of the Tostan educational program (before democracy and human rights modules were fully integrated into the curriculum). Tostan's staff believes that its current integration of democracy and human rights and its improved training program for CMCs have accelerated learning, addressed issues of sustainability and led to even more rapid abandonment of FGC and child/forced marriage.

As a result, in part, of the research studies on Tostan, two international groups have endorsed strategies developed by Tostan: the Donors' Working Group on



Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting and ten United Nation agencies. Both argue for three essential components for FGC abandonment to occur: a human rights-based education program, a process of organized diffusion and a public declaration of abandonment by members of the social network.

In 2008, during a study conducted by the Ministry of the Family, National Solidarity and Women's Enterprise and Micro-credit of the Government of Senegal,

(Pages 16-17 images)
Tostan mainly works in communities located many hours from urban centers and paved roads. Ninety-five percent of Tostan participants are Muslim. Traditional and religious leaders have been actively involved in creating Tostan sessions.



Tostan CMCs have created special commissions for protecting children in the community. These commissions help to plan, implement and monitor decisions made by the community in the areas of health, education and social norms.



researchers found that “the only activities that had been totally accomplished and with an unprecedented rate of success within the framework of the Government National Action Plan of 2000–2005 were those implemented by the NGO Tostan in terms of nonformal education and social mobilization activities.” The government and their partners decided to adopt Tostan’s human rights-based model as the centerpiece of their National Action Plan to end FGC 2009–2015.

How do we monitor our program, assess our practices and respond to external evaluations?

Our success lies not only in our participatory philosophy and strategies, but also in the way we continuously assess our own practices and respond to recommendations from external evaluations so that we enhance participant learning and staff performance. For example, an evaluation by UNICEF of a shortened version of the Tostan program revealed that the majority of participants were frustrated at receiving only the Kobi modules without the literacy and management training portions of the CEP. Tostan then made a firm commitment to implement the full three-year version of the CEP in every community.

Other external evaluations, such as the 2004 Population Council evaluation, showed the need to introduce literacy workbooks to help participants remember themes learned in the Kobi. These workbooks were developed soon after the evaluation and have greatly contributed to participants’ literacy skills and reinforcement of previously acquired knowledge. Evaluations also showed the need to strengthen skills of the Community Management Committees for the sustainability of all activities. Current CMC training modules ensure that projects and activities begun during the program continue into the future.

Inside our organization, we have built in assessment of our work from the ground up. In 2006, donors provided funds to reinforce Tostan’s evaluation practices; we have strengthened our data collection

tools, expanded our data management systems and broadened our methodology and data analysis strategies. As the program has expanded, Tostan has identified specific indicators, measured during the implementation of our three-year program, so that we can standardize data collection and the analysis process. In 2007, Tostan formalized the Department of Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) to coordinate measurement and evaluation throughout projects now operating in eight countries.

What happens after communities finish the three-year CEP?

Tostan relies on CMCs to sustain development activities during and after the Community Empowerment Program. To date, Tostan has trained over 1,500 Community Management Committees, many of which have become officially registered Community Based Organizations. In 2006, we created the Empowered Communities Network (ECN) to help CMCs address needs in their communities by facilitating partnerships between them and trusted NGOs, service providers, donors and decentralized government services. ECN projects are related to the environment (solar electrification, waste management, solar cookers); health (family planning services, construction of community health centers, further training for health agents); and economic empowerment (micro-finance, small businesses, agricultural projects).



Tostan’s interactive literacy workbooks on democracy, human rights, problem-solving, hygiene and health not only build literacy skills but also reinforce themes discussed in class and allow review and sharing of information with friends and relatives.

Through a special partnership with the Barefoot College in India, Tostan graduates travel there to learn to become solar engineers. These grandmothers will be fully equipped to bring solar energy to their communities and become role models for the entire community.



What other activities does Tostan carry out?

Tostan implements the CEP in prisons in Senegal. The Early Release Prison Project provides human rights and skills training to facilitate prisoners' reintegration into society, allowing them to return to their communities with new perspectives for social and economic success. Tostan also conducts mediation sessions to improve communication between prisoners and their families.

We have taken up one "issue-based" project—child begging—which arose out of our concerns for the health and human rights of Senegalese children. Tostan is currently providing specialized training on child protection for its CMCs, especially in rural areas where parents send their children to Koranic schools, known as *daaras*, located in larger cities. Because families cannot pay for this schooling, some Koranic teachers support themselves by forcing their students to beg in the streets.

This has become a dangerous form of child exploitation, which was outlawed in Senegal in 2005 but has visibly persisted. A new component of the CMC training program empowers communities to take responsibility for the protection of all children in their community and find solutions to this and other issues related to the violation of children's rights.

How is Tostan funded?

Tostan's success is the result of contributions by hundreds of donors, including foundations, agencies and individuals. UNICEF has been a very important long-time collaborator, supporting us as we refined our educational program and organizational structure. The following donors have also greatly contributed to our ability to reach new communities and design innovative strategies: American Jewish World Service, Annenberg Foundation, Anonymous Donors, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Comunidad de Madrid, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Forum Syd, Gail and Tom Kaneb Family

Foundation, Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation, James R. Greenbaum Jr. Family Foundation, JustWorld International, Los Angeles Trusteeship, Nike Foundation, Radio Sweden Foundation, Rapidan Foundation, Sigrid Rausing Trust, Spanish International Cooperation Agency, Swedish International Development Agency, UNFPA, UN Foundation, USAID, Valvisions Foundation, Wallace Global Fund and Wallace Research Foundation. Individual donations, whether large or small, continue to support and inspire our work.

Two nonprofit organizations now support Tostan's work: Tostan France in Paris and Tostan Sweden in Stockholm. These organizations disseminate information about Tostan through updating the media about Tostan's accomplishments, speaking in schools and other educational forums, fundraising within the European community and working with the diaspora. They have also interacted with government agencies and officials as they develop policies for international aid.

In addition, we have a vibrant volunteer program with over 40 volunteers contributing annually to our mission. Volunteers come from all over the world and enhance our ability to take a much needed interdisciplinary and global approach to issues in our work.

What are some critical moments in Tostan's history?

Founded in 1991, the origins of Tostan date back to 1974, when founder Molly Melching moved from the United States to Dakar to complete graduate work at

the University of Dakar in African Studies. After her program ended, she decided to remain in Senegal. Through her work both in Dakar and in rural villages, Molly began to notice that a lack of basic education in national languages was impeding development in many communities. Villagers were intelligent and motivated but lacked important information and skills needed for making improvements in their communities.

These observations spurred the development of an initial nonformal education program. For three years, Molly and a team of Senegalese cultural specialists worked with villagers in the rural community of Saam Njaay to develop educational materials based on African traditions and learning styles, which focus on dialogue and active participation. This early program became a forum for women to discuss their own needs and hopes and encouraged them to take a more active role in community development.

Tostan donors helped to construct an international training center in Thiès, Senegal. Since 2006, Tostan has received thousands of trainees from the development community in Senegal and across the African continent.





(Top image) Grandchildren of the first participants of the Tostan program in Saam Njaay now go to school every day.

(Bottom image) Molly Melching studied with Cheikh Anta Diop from 1975-1986. Tostan's work is grounded in the philosophy of Diop's work on the cultural unity of Africa.

Discussions with villagers about the problems in their communities allowed Molly and her team to further refine the program. In 1987, they designed a six-module basic education program based on the feedback that they had received in Saam Njaay. Their program differed both in methodology and content from existing literacy programs which relied mostly on rote learning and memorization rather than active discussion and participation.

Starting in 1988, Molly collaborated with UNICEF Senegal to train local facilitators to implement the program in rural villages in

the regions of Thiès and Kolda. On February 7, 1991, Tostan was officially incorporated as a US 501(c)(3) nongovernmental organization. With support from UNICEF, Tostan subsequently expanded to over 55 communities. This initial implementation was presented as a "path to discovery," in which villagers typically played an active role in improving the program. Since this original implementation, we have continued to revise our program based on participant feedback.

In 1995, Tostan conducted a one-year participatory research effort with thousands of former participants to assess new educational themes of interest. Women overwhelmingly stated their desire to learn about their own bodies. The survey showed high interest in learning about systems of the body, puberty, the reproductive cycle, menopause, sexuality and best practices for good health. The Tostan pedagogical team realized that it was critical to introduce human rights education before these sessions, as it became evident that knowledge of health issues alone would not be useful without an understanding of human rights.

Following this assessment, Tostan introduced democracy and human rights modules into the education program and a peaceful grassroots revolution began. Democracy and human rights learning became the foundation for other subject matters. Women participants became more proactive in their communities. They were empowered to speak out for the first time and make important decisions about their own and their children's health. In addition, men gradually became more involved in the Tostan program. The Tostan team realized that by focusing solely on

women and children, they were excluding key members of society who could play a decisive role in community improvement. Thus, modules that had initially discussed "women's rights" or "children's rights" were rewritten in 2000 as "human rights," and men were invited to attend classes and participate more actively in the development process.

One outcome of our participatory educational approach has been community-led movements to improve community health. The story of how villagers decided to abandon FGC and child/forced marriage illustrates how Tostan's staff both supports and learns from its program participants. In 1997, Tostan participants in the village of Malicounda Bambara applied what they

had learned in the Tostan program and declared an end to harmful practices in their communities. In a village where one hundred percent of the women had previously undergone FGC, participants decided to discontinue this practice in order to protect the human rights and health of their daughters. On July 31st, 1997, 30 women announced their decision to abandon FGC in front of 20 national and international journalists. However, they did not receive a supportive response from neighboring villages.

A local religious leader and class participant named Demba Diawara came to Tostan to explain that such ambitious social change could never be achieved by one village alone. Where FGC is

A participant in the Gambia learns how to discuss the different stages of pregnancy with her family.



(Left image) Imam and Village Chief Demba Diawara is a major leader of the movement to abandon FGC in West Africa.

(Center image) The public declaration in Senthio Maleme brought together relatives from over one hundred villages in Senegal and Guinea.

(Bottom image) African women love their daughters and want them to succeed. That is why they practiced FGC and why they are now abandoning.



practiced as a tradition, it is required for a girl to marry into another family, frequently in another village. Thus, ending the practice requires consensus among the intra-marrying group. Diawara therefore decided to walk from village to village to raise awareness about FGC in his interconnected communities. On February 14, 1998, 12 villages declared their decision to join the Malicounda Bambara pledge.

American scholar Gerry Mackie reinforced Diawara's insights. In 1996, Mackie had published an article comparing the practice of FGC to the tradition of foot binding in China, which was rapidly and universally abandoned in the early part of the 20th century. Because both practices were linked to marriageability, he suggested that FGC could be ended in Africa in a manner similar to the way foot binding had been abandoned in China: through a locally based process of empowering education, dissemination of information by the people themselves, collective deliberation and public declaration. Collaboration with Professor Mackie allowed Tostan to add theory to practice, and Mackie's version of "Social Convention Theory" has since served as a model for Tostan activities.

In 2000, after unprecedented success with democracy and human rights modules in hundreds of villages, we revised our curriculum, placing these modules at the beginning, as the foundation for the entire program.

Tostan is currently implementing the CEP in Djibouti, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Somalia and The



Gambia. The program has been requested by many in other African countries.

Meanwhile, the movement for the abandonment of FGC and child/forced marriage is accelerating, with more than three fourths of previously practicing communities in Senegal declaring an end to these harmful practices. The Government of Senegal officially adopted the Tostan model for its National Action Plan for the Abandonment of Female Genital Cutting 2009-2015. Through this concerted effort, many feel it is now

possible to totally end Female Genital Cutting in Senegal by 2015.

Tostan's holistic, nonformal educational program has created dynamic spaces for democracy, human rights, life-long learning and development to flourish. By encouraging dialogue about the democratic processes and human rights already embedded in villagers' local contexts, Tostan helps participants link their understandings to larger global efforts to expand and promote democracy and human rights for all Africans.

The women of Malicounda Bambara celebrated the 10th anniversary of their decision to abandon FGC in 1997. Delegates from all regions of Senegal and other African countries renewed their determination to improve health and human rights throughout Africa.

Families now have a common vision for the future: a vision based on respect for human rights and responsibilities.



Why has Tostan's community-led development been both successful and sustainable?

Tostan has worked at the grassroots level with thousands of village communities in many African countries, learning from participants about their priorities, values, and hopes for the future. Such deep knowledge of local conditions has resulted in innovative strategies that are context-sensitive and responsive to villagers' lives and experiences. Because Tostan's pedagogical methods encourage lively participation and reflection, the organization receives constant participant feedback and adapts quickly to changing circumstances. Tostan's staff and volunteers work with and alongside

participants, never against them or as experts from the outside. The partnership between our staff and our participating communities is mutually empowering, each responsive to and learning from the other.

Tostan ensures sustainability by building leadership capabilities through its training of members of each village CMC. When participants have completed the educational program, most CMCs remain active and engaged in community development efforts. Tostan also fosters sustainability through its Empowered Communities Network (ECN). This project facilitates partnerships between the most dynamic CMCs that have completed the program and African and international NGOs, government projects, donors and other service providers.

What have others said about Tostan?

"We have participated in the Tostan program and have learned about our human rights to health, hygiene, education, information and above all the right to be protected against all forms of violence. This is why we are engaged in abandoning all practices harmful to our health. Today we are even more in harmony with our traditions and culture. We are more Bambara than ever. The program allowed us to become more conscious of our traditions because it gave us the opportunity to reinforce our positive traditions and to weed out those that were harmful to our well-being. We have changed because we are now more responsible and united, proud of what binds us together."

—Mayamouna Traoré,
President of the Women's Group of
Malicounda Bambara.

"Tostan's approach succeeds because of its deep respect for the people it serves. The Tostan nonformal education program is comprehensive, leading to the development of the whole individual and the community, both socially and economically. What most impressed me when I met the women in this program is the confidence they demonstrate while discussing the profound changes they have made in their communities, based on their application of human rights and responsibilities. The Tostan experience has renewed my faith in education as the key to achieving positive social transformation and poverty reduction around the world."

—Then-Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton



Tostan's work is award winning: In 2007, Tostan won the Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize for "extraordinary contributions toward alleviating human suffering" and the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize for advancing health through literacy. In the same year, Molly Melching and the women of Senegal were named People of the Year by OneWorld voters across the planet. In 2005, Sweden's Anna Lindh Award was given to Tostan for its innovative human rights work.



Ban Ki Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations and Steven M. Hilton, President and CEO of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation presented the Hilton Prize to Tostan representatives Molly Melching, Oureye Sall, and Malick Diagne on September 12, 2007.



Tostan has shown that community initiated, owned and managed activities lead to positive and sustainable development.

“ Human rights can be protected. Child marriage can be prevented. Forced marriage and excision can be stopped. Before we learned about human rights, men hit their wives, but after this education from Tostan, these beatings are now stopping, in our homes, in our society. Through this Tostan education, we have now really begun to understand that these things must stop. We now stand together, chatting, doing things together. We all come together like brothers and sisters. This is why I really appreciate this and am happy and hope that tomorrow will bring more of this education! ”

–Sannebou Keita, Tostan Class Participant in The Gambia

“ Humanitarian intervention demands not only hard work but also originality of vision. It would be hard to match Tostan... in the quality of innovative thinking it has brought to its dedicated work, against seemingly impossible odds. There are many great things about Tostan and its leadership but the most important is (its) freshness of approach and ability to think differently. ”

–Amartya Sen,
Nobel Laureate in Economics

“ All the time, after class, we talk about Tostan. On our way to fetch water, or with the children, we talk about what we learn and the importance of this education. It helps us. It improves our minds. We now know our human rights and we always talk about them. We talk about how to improve our family and our work. ”

–Nansa Daramneh, Village Midwife and class participant

“ Tostan has mobilized over 4000 communities to declare the abandonment of Female Genital Cutting, a dangerous and potentially life-threatening procedure that causes unspeakable pain and suffering to girls and women who are subjected to it. Last year, I visited a Tostan community in Senegal. Several women gave very personal statements on the positive change that had been a direct result of Tostan. Participatory education programs improved the skills and knowledge of women and girls, empowering them to become self-confident and able to impact social transformation and economic development in their communities. ”

–Ann M. Veneman,
Executive Director, UNICEF, NY

“ When the history of African development is written, it will be clear that a turning point involved the empowerment of women. Tostan has demonstrated that empowerment is contagious, accomplished person by person and spreading village by village. They are writing a story of inspiration, hard work, grass roots participation, tangible results, and a much brighter future. ”

–William H. Foege, M.D., M.P.H. - Senior Advisor, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

“ What I like about Tostan in the Gambia is the improvement we are making in the lives of very poor people. What people are learning from Tostan classes they are able to immediately practice, particularly for better health, human rights, and democracy. In villages where Tostan is working, you can really see a difference. People are doing their own development which they can sustain on their own, without depending on the government, NGOs, or other outside help. ”

–Edrissa Keita - Women's Bureau - Tostan Government Partner in the Gambia

“ Perhaps the most successful effort to end (female genital) cutting is that of Tostan, a West African group that takes a very respectful approach and places FGC within a larger framework of community development. Rather than lecturing the women, the programs's representatives encourage villagers to discuss the human rights and health issues related to cutting and then make their own choices. The program's soft sell has worked far better than the hard sell. ”

–Nicolas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn,
Half the Sky, page 224.



Further information

Please see our website at www.tostan.org

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