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Author(s): Peter Easton, Karen Monkman, Rebecca Miles

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Social policy from the bottom up: abandoning FGC in sub-Saharan Africa

Peter Easton, Karen Monkman, and Rebecca Miles

The authors analyse the experience of Tostan, a Senegalese NGO, with the abandonment of female genital cutting (FGC) in Senegal, the Sudan, and Mali. Tostan uses non-formal, participatory methodologies to support village-based social change, especially in the areas of human rights and women's health. Following Tostan's educational programme, some communities have declared a moratorium on the practice of FGC and have mobilised their families and villages to discontinue its use. This article describes the process used, considers issues that have arisen as the concept is marketed and disseminated beyond Senegal, and reviews implications for grassroots policy initiatives.

Introduction

Female genital cutting (FGC) or female genital mutilation (FGM)—less precisely termed 'female circumcision'—is a centuries-old cultural practice in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and in a few contiguous areas of the Muslim world, such as Egypt and Yemen. Inaccurately identified with Islam, FGC is not sanctioned by the Koran. It has also spread in recent years via migration to the Far East, Europe, and North America. It is estimated that over 130 million women and girls worldwide have undergone the procedure, and two million more are subjected to it each year (Population Reference Bureau 2001).

FGC involves partial or total removal of the female external genitalia and is usually performed on pre-pubescent girls aged four to twelve as part of their rites of passage. In Senegal and Mali it is sometimes performed on baby girls as young as one month old. FGC is practised for a variety of social and cultural reasons:

The ritual cutting is often an integral part of ceremonies . . . in which girls are feted and showered with presents and their families are honored. . . . The ritual serves as an act of socialization into cultural values and an important connection to family, community, and earlier generations. At the heart of all this is rendering a woman marriageable, which is important in societies where women get their support from male family members, especially husbands. . . . The practice [of FGC] is perceived as an act of love for daughters. . . . Because of strong adherence to these traditions, many women who say they disapprove of FGC still submit themselves and their daughters to the practice. (Population Reference Bureau 2001:6)

The social function of FGC rests, in some traditional societies, on a long-standing concern to control the perceived threat of overt female sexuality to the web of inter-familial affiliations that marriage cements; however, the practice can have a number of severe health consequences on the women who undergo it. Short-term repercussions may include:

. . . severe pain, shock, haemorrhage, urine retention, ulceration of the genital region and injury to adjacent tissue. . . . Long-term consequences include cysts and abscesses, keloid scar formation, damage to the urethra resulting in urinary incontinence, dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse) and sexual dysfunction and difficulties with childbirth.
(WHO 2000)

These effects can significantly compromise a girl's lifetime health outlook, although the severity of consequences depends on the procedure used.

The issue was adopted as a major health concern by WHO in 1982 and recognised as a human rights issue in the 1990s. Strategies for promoting the abandonment of the practice include legislation, medicalisation (training health professionals to perform the procedure under sanitary conditions), religious condemnation, information, 'just-say-no' campaigns, educational efforts, and attempts to institute alternative rituals. According to Mackie (2000), few have had widespread or locally sustained effects because in many cases such strategies have failed to recognise the need for locally generated initiatives to reform such social conventions.

Among the few successful strategies has been an approach developed by Tostan, a rural village empowerment programme that originated in Senegal. The Tostan programme did not at first explicitly focus on FGC, but it embraced it when a number of local women participants decided that combating the practice was their biggest concern and organised to promote its abandonment. Tostan's approach has since been replicated with modifications in Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, and Sudan. The story of its development and dissemination—presented and analysed below—provides insight into linkages between non-formal education and social change from the bottom up.

The Tostan experience¹

Tostan's original mission did not include combating FGC (Easton 1998, 2000; Easton and Monkman 2001; UNICEF 1999, 2002). In Senegal, FGC is practised among about 50 per cent of the population. Only a very small proportion of the country's dominant ethnic group, the Wolof, observes the custom; but the practice is widespread among some of the other main groups in the country—including the Pulaar, the Bambara, and the Mandinka, while it has also been adopted by fragments of the Serer and Diola peoples.

The Tostan initiative got underway in the late 1980s as an attempt to devise non-formal education and literacy programming for rural Senegalese women grounded in their own perception of problems and based on their own learning styles. The word *tostan* itself is Wolof for 'breakthrough' or 'coming out of the egg'. The programme has been continuously supported by UNICEF, and at times it has enjoyed the tolerance and the active endorsement of the government of Senegal. After a trial period in the Kaolack region, the programme was officially launched in Wolof-speaking villages surrounding Thiès in the central agricultural basin of Senegal and in Pulaar-speaking communities in the region of Kolda, south of the Gambia. It was aimed primarily at women but was also open to men, who accounted for about one fifth of registrants.

A participatory orientation

A curriculum for the programme was devised in a highly participatory and iterative manner. Designers held a series of workshops with rural women to identify their felt needs, to develop and test curricula that reflected their concerns and used language and cultural forms familiar to the participants, and to anchor the approach in a Senegalese version of 'women's ways of knowing' (Belenky et al. 1986). Tostan staff were concerned to break with the then-traditional approaches to literacy programmes, where women struggled over exercises that had little practical application in their lives. The Tostan model that emerged used a problem-solving approach based on the women's perception and prioritisation of their own needs.

Six modules, requiring 18 months' study in all, constituted the initial Tostan curriculum. The programme started with an introductory session on problem solving and continued with modules on hygiene, oral rehydration, immunisation, leadership skills, feasibility studies for local projects, and project management techniques. Literacy lessons in the language of the participants were interwoven throughout. The objective was to enable women to come to grips with their most pressing problems and to acquire the skills to design and manage their own projects as means of addressing those needs. Participants were also encouraged to 'adopt' non-participating adults and—collectively—a non-participating community.

Tostan provided learning materials, training for local facilitators, the bulk of their salaries, and outside monitoring services. The village was responsible for recruiting participants, building and furnishing a learning centre, housing and feeding the facilitator, contributing to the facilitator's salary, and establishing a management committee to supervise these activities. Villages typically organised one or two classes with a maximum of 35 adults each. Facilitators originally came from the community itself, but, with the increasing diversity of curricula, Tostan staff and participants decided to bring in people with greater knowledge and teaching experience. These were generally 'graduates' of other Tostan programmes in the area or literate young people with the requisite interest and skill. Facilitators were paid about US\$25 a month for each class they taught, of which about US\$5–10 was provided by the village. The willingness of villages to accept these obligations is testimony to the importance they gave 'second-chance' and problem-solving education for women in a rural environment strongly affected by male out-migration, but also witnesses the attraction of programming that might attract new resources for local development, as Tostan in fact later did.

Follow-up provisions

The village improvement projects and income-generating activities that typically followed the education modules were a significant part of the attraction and momentum of the programme. With the aid of a variety of donors, Tostan tried whenever possible to make available small amounts of seed capital and microcredit for communities and groups that took the initiative to organise and propose projects. Initiatives typically included well-baby clinics, improvements to local water supply, small livestock projects, consumer cooperatives, collective farming efforts, and crafts marketing. The follow-up activities added to the successful aura of the programme and helped increase demand for it. They also created another incentive for men, who were often involved in (but seldom controlled) the management of the resulting initiatives.

As the Tostan programme gained in popularity, participants began requesting further training and new knowledge after completing the 18-month course. To meet the demand, Tostan set about developing a programme of 'continuing education'. The first step was once again to conduct needs assessment in each targeted region in order to ascertain what topics

should be addressed. The next step involved participatory development of the related curricula, devised by teams who worked closely with local students and teachers. Four modules of particular local interest were added at this time: human rights, women's health, early childhood development, and sustainable natural resource management. Two months were allotted to the study of each. Not all supplementary modules were implemented in all communities. Uptake depended on the level of local interest and the willingness of donors to underwrite Tostan's related costs.

The first two of these topics quickly generated a great deal of interest. Attendance at sessions on human rights and women's health—which included sessions on issues of women's sexuality that had never before been so openly discussed—broke all records, and lessons were disseminated by word of mouth around a much broader community. During the participatory research phase, Tostan staff discovered the depth of oppressive experiences from which this reaction sprang—stories of girls who had died or had their health permanently impaired by FGC, or tales of women worn out by repeated childbirth who risked death because families and medical personnel refused to allow them access to family planning. In addition, the concept of human rights and the evidence of its international endorsement seem to have struck a chord with a rural population quite aware of its disadvantage compared to urban areas and the industrial world and not far removed from a history of repression. Programme designers realised that the human rights component provided a means of addressing health issues as well and of fostering a consciousness-raising, empowering experience that allowed women to open up for the first time about topics that had traditionally been taboo and created a platform for involving both women and men in social problem solving.

'Human rights' thus became an integral part of the message, and the focus of the modules was progressively broadened to include men's health. Drawn by this approach, either by sheer curiosity about issues of such importance to women or out of interest in the broader human rights agenda, a greater number of male participants began to appear in the classes.

Confronting FGC

In these circumstances, something remarkable happened in one village outside Thiès—the community of Malicounda-Bambara. Women (and a few men) from the village had just completed the full Tostan training programme, including the 'continuing education' modules on human rights and health. When participants sat down to decide what 'problem' they most wanted to address in their post-training phase, a resounding choice was made: get the community to abandon FGC once and for all. The initiative caught Tostan staff almost totally by surprise, and it had multiple repercussions over the months that followed.

The women began by approaching local authorities and other villagers to win support for a declaration of intent to abandon the practice, and they succeeded. On 31 July 1997, the villagers of Malicounda-Bambara made a collective statement renouncing the practice in perpetuity in front of 20 invited Senegalese journalists. The declaration was broadcast on national television and through other media. There was some immediate opposition from conservative religious and political leaders to what the women of Malicounda-Bambara had done, as much in reaction to the 'shame' of talking publicly about a taboo topic as to the substance of the declaration. Despite the controversy, however, Nguerigne-Bambara, a neighbouring village of similar lineage that had also completed the Tostan training programme, decided to imitate Malicounda-Bambara's example. Significantly, the effort there was led by a woman who was herself a traditional 'cutter' and knew the potential effects of FGC only too well. A third village, Kër Simbara, began actively discussing the idea. Then a critical event occurred.

The turning point

Concerned by these events, Demba Diawara, the much-respected 66-year-old imam of Kër Simbara, came to talk with Tostan representatives and the women of Malicounda-Bambara. Diawara was disturbed by this challenge to traditional mores and asked to address the group. But the women of Malicounda-Bambara suggested that he first talk with his own female relatives about their experience and feelings, and then he could return to discuss the matter. Diawara did as he was told, and he got an earful. The elderly imam came back, persuaded that the women were right—and was ready to help. He also had some important advice to give, though.

Diawara pointed out that there were two major problems with the way in which things were being done. ‘We are part of an inter-marrying community’, he said, ‘and unless *all* the villages involved take part, you are asking parents to forfeit the chance of their daughters getting married.’ Second, he felt that there was a real problem of the choice of language and approach. These are taboo topics, Diawara insisted, and they should not be discussed lightly or inconsiderately. The people who crusaded against FGC in the past had done so in front of mixed audiences and used terms and images that shocked the villagers. They had treated the practice as a disease to be eradicated and its practitioners as social pariahs. That is no way to change a culture, or to help it change itself, the imam pointed out.

So Diawara and the women of Malicounda-Bambara outlined a careful strategy that consisted of the following:

- Go to all the villages in the inter-marrying community and start by reaffirming personal relationships.
- Do not tell the villagers what to do, but rather what Malicounda-Bambara and Nguerigne-Bambara had done, and why. Then let them tell their own stories and make their own decisions.
- Avoid using graphic terms or demonstrations for taboo activities. Refer to FGC simply as ‘the custom’, as everyone knows what is meant. (In Senegalese, Bambara ‘customs’ in the plural refer to a whole set of cultural traditions; ‘the custom’ in the singular refers to FGC alone.)
- Avoid condemning practitioners either implicitly or explicitly for practices they have been performing in good faith.

On the basis of these agreements, the imam set out on foot, accompanied by his nephew and the woman cutter from Kër Simbara, to ten other villages within the marriage community. It was a ground-shaking experience, analogous—in its own way—to the ‘speak bitterness’ campaigns of revolutionary China or the truth commissions of post-apartheid South Africa. Women opened up and told stories of daughters who had died from haemorrhage, contracted infections, or experienced long-term psychological distress from the FGC trauma. Cutters and men talked, too. No systematic inducements were offered to traditional cutters to abandon their practice and nothing was said to condemn them. The approach focused more on drying up demand than on forbidding supply.

In the end, all ten villages visited decided to join the original three in opposing FGC. Fifty representatives of the 13 communities, representing 8000 rural people, met on 14 February 1998 at Diabougou—one of the villages that had joined the grassroots coalition—and declared ‘never again’. The news multiplied the impact of Malicounda-Bambara’s initiative.

The movement next jumped to the Casamance region of Kolda—in southern Senegal below the Gambia—where a majority of the Fulani ethnic group traditionally practised FGC and Tostan programmes were already underway. A first group of 14 villages studied the health and human rights modules, listened to the news of Malicounda-Bambara, resolved to take action

in their own environment, and enlisted four additional communities within their socio-marital network to make a joint declaration in the village of Medina Cherif on 12 June 1998.

National debate and grassroots dissemination

Since the original breakthrough in Malicounda-Bambara, the movement has evolved along two paths: out front in the media and international forums, and on the ground. For once, the out-front publicity does not seem to have outstripped the local reality, and the activity has remained largely wedded to its village manifestations.

Media attention was quick in coming, both to Senegal and abroad. In October 1997, a feature article on the 'Oath of Malicounda-Bambara' came out in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. Tostan representatives have since been invited to numerous conferences, assemblies, and events to relate the story of the movement against FGC. In almost every instance, promoters have made sure that local people speak for themselves, sometimes through interpreters. The local champions of the movement—the elderly imam and the women cutters and organisers—have made presentations to the British parliament, the German Ministry of Development and Cooperation, the EU, an international women's rights conference, and various UN committees. More significantly, they have travelled to neighbouring countries—Burkina Faso and Mali—to talk with others facing similar problems.

But outside attention has had its downside. Endorsement of the Oath of Malicounda-Bambara by the Senegalese President Abdou Diouf—significant, even if he himself is from the majority Wolof (few of whom practise FGC)—led to a move in the country's Assemblée Nationale to pass a law abolishing the practice and dictating severe penalties for violators. The allies of Tostan were immediately concerned and went to Dakar to testify against the law, not, obviously, because they wanted to maintain FGC, but because they firmly believe official abolition and sanction are not the way to go. They believe laws should not be dictated from the top down but follow changes made at the local level. As the imam from Kër Simbara put it in reference to his own ethnic group, 'Try to tell Bambara people what they must do about their own customs and you have a fight on your hands.'

He was right. The law was passed despite these words of caution, and a general outcry ensued. In protest, one traditional cutter in the region of Tambacounda made a point of performing 120 'circumcisions' in the days following the enactment of the law. Perhaps the most harmful outcome was that an influential religious leader in the north of Senegal issued a statement saying that FGC is a religious practice and must continue. This greatly hampered the activities of the women in that area, as his followers did everything to prevent open discussion of the issue.

Developments on the ground unfolded quite differently. Additional villages in the Thiès and Kolda regions rallied to the cause. New grassroots movements took hold, not without strong opposition at times, in the Futa Toro and the Sine Saloum areas of Senegal, with women in the latter coastal area canoeing from island to island to spread the word. The more recent evolution of events, described in Easton and Monkman (2001) in greater detail, resulted in over 700 communities throughout the country making their own declarations by June 2001 and in growing demand from human rights and women's health advocates in neighbouring countries for help in initiating similar movements.

An indigenous strategy for policy change

Analysis of the Tostan experience and local response to it reveals a strategy with three distinct elements.

First, the approach was *collective*. It explicitly recognised that families cannot abandon a deep-rooted cultural practice if there is no collective will to change the incentive structures and at least some of the objective conditions that hold it in place. When 13 related villages endorsed the Malicounda-Bambara initiative, they, in effect, changed the marriage-market conditions in which people *could* comply.

Second, the strategy adopted was grounded in the *local context* and evoked some of the strongest values and practices of ambient culture—parental love, Koranic piety—to challenge other practices. It came across more as a movement for internal consistency and liberation than as an outside condemnation. No one talked of the ‘eradication’ of FGC, as if it were a plague to be stamped out, but rather of its conscious ‘abandonment’. The presence of an imam who could remind people that Islam never dictated such a practice was also instrumental. In addition, men’s support was critical to the development of the movement. One articulate cutter, Oureye Sall, was highly influential as well. She explained that she stopped the minute she learned of the harm she could potentially be causing, saying, ‘I was making 5000 FCFA (about US\$18) for one operation, but if a girl must pay 50,000 FCFA (about US\$180) for medical care, I did not have the right to continue’.

Third, the tactic was *empowering*—that is, while rooted in personal testimony and the transmission of new information, it left resolution and action up to the initiative of each community and its members. It cast the problem of FGC in the larger frame of women’s health and human rights—topics of importance to men too. The result was people who not only voluntarily adhered to the initiative but were also ready to spread the word.

Marketing and disseminating an innovation: the Village Empowerment Programme

As noted, the Tostan experience awakened strong interest outside Senegal as well and the organisation was increasingly solicited to disseminate its ‘FGC strategy’ and support or advise those interested in similar results elsewhere. The attention has created both opportunities and challenges. Tostan has always been dependent on outside funding. Though it costs only about US\$40 per participant per cycle to implement the programme, participating communities cannot fully cover the cost, and so the organisation tends to offer only the programmes that outside funders choose to underwrite.

Given Tostan’s apparent success, more donors were willing to offer support and those already involved were ready to up the ante, but most asked Tostan to trim down its programme and to focus on the four modules directly relevant to FGC: human rights, problem-solving skills, community hygiene, and women’s health. Literacy elements were relegated to the continuing-education phase of the programme, and emphasis was placed on immediate and highly focused change. The new strategy was called the Village Empowerment Programme (VEP).

This is the model that is currently being replicated in other African countries. Two of the worthiest early requests for assistance, in Tostan’s eyes, came from human rights and public health organisations in Mali and Sudan. The Wallace Global Fund (WGF) in Washington DC underwrote this extension because it offered an opportunity to see whether the Tostan approach could work in societies where FGC was a nearly universal practice rather than the custom of half or less of the population, as in Senegal. WGF insisted, however, that the project provide for the external evaluation of results—and we were brought in to perform that function.

The results of the evaluation are now being analysed for Mali; and data collection is at last concluding in Sudan, where diplomatic problems initially made it difficult for outside evaluators to get visas. At this point, it appears that there have been good results at both sites.

Attendance and interest have been strong. The programmes actually implemented have varied somewhat from the Tostan VEP model, both because of the need to adapt to local timing and circumstances and because of problems of implementation—but this does not seem to have seriously compromised results.

Participants in both Mali and Sudan have set up FGC committees as well as other units concerned with village hygiene and particular local projects. The women involved (and, in Mali, men as well) turn out to be enthusiastic about working with health, human rights, and FGC issues. They have encountered both resistance and support from other segments of local society, but the difference between the minority-culture status of FGC in Senegal and the overwhelming majority allegiance to the custom in Mali and Sudan does not seem, at least at this point, to have impeded the work to any significant extent.

In Mali, where classes included both men and women, some of the men involved—evidently motivated by the factors mentioned above—were very helpful in facilitating women's participation as well as in designing and implementing the projects that evolved from the training sessions. They also appear to have supported women in leadership roles, to the surprise and gratification of some of the facilitators. The groups formed in Sudan were composed exclusively of women, though half of the facilitators were men, a fact that raised little objection. Both projects had discussed whether or not to restrict enrolment to women, with the usual pros and cons having to do with the dangers of either silencing women or marginalising the effort.

Neither in Mali nor in Sudan has there yet been a public written declaration of FGC abandonment, though the matter is still under discussion. The idea of the public declaration is to reach a much larger audience and eventually to provoke a large-scale convention. It remains to be seen whether that is the only way participants can achieve the abandonment of the practice in their communities, and whether they will adopt the same formula of alliance among contiguous villages developed in Senegal. Nevertheless, in at least three of the villages in Mali there is strong evidence that no cutting has been performed on girls since the topic was debated in the programme in July 2000.

It is not clear to what extent continued activity around FGC depends on the momentum created and sustained by other projects. Both in Mali and in Sudan there is some confusion about just what form follow-up will take outside collective FGC initiatives per se. That dimension of the Tostan approach, which acquired increasing importance in the original programme with the encouragement of village improvement projects and women-directed income-generation activities, remains somewhat vague in the stripped-down VEP model. Participants in most areas are interested in follow-up activity, but the donors' commitment does not currently include that, and it remains to be seen whether participants can undertake such initiatives on their own.

Lessons learned, questions raised

The material presently available for drawing lessons from the Tostan programme and its replication suggests a number of working hypotheses, and it highlights a variety of tensions whose resolution has been critical to the programme's success.

Abandonment versus eradication of FGC

- Approaching FGC as a social custom that people can abandon through local mobilisation—under supportive conditions—appears to produce markedly better results than treating it as a scourge to be eliminated principally through outside stricture and legislation.

As a Sahelian proverb puts it, 'Send a child where he wants to go.' Tostan's approach stands out from approaches that frame FGC as 'bad', which implies that participants are also bad.

Cultural practices make sense in the context of their social function. FGC is practised because culturally it has come to represent marriageability of daughters as well as 'religious beliefs, initiative rites, or the hierarchy of women' (Izett and Toubia 1999). It is 'an essential element of social integration that ensures virginity before marriage and chastity afterwards' (UNICEF 1999). In some places where women are infibulated they are re-circumcised periodically, often after giving birth, in order to make sex more pleasurable for husbands (Khalifa 1994). This is a culturally defined obligation of marriage. These practices will continue unless beliefs and social expectations can be separated from cultural practices. People abandon cultural practices, from foot binding to the forced feeding of newborns every four hours, when they understand the negative consequences and find a different way to address the social function. Finding ways to ensure the marriageability of daughters and the fulfilment of marital obligations through means other than FGC is therefore critical.

Some deeper gender-related issues remain, however. The cultural belief in the need to protect women's virginity (but not men's), marriage as a (the) measure of success and validity for women, and the construction of sex as a woman's obligation in marriage (but a man's right) indicates the long road that remains to be travelled in achieving a more balanced version of women's—and human—rights. Abandoning FGC as a practice that negatively affects women's health is important, but it does not necessarily dismantle other gender-based practices that are harmful to women psychologically, economically, and/or socially.

Cultivating collective initiative

- Because FGC is a collective cultural pattern with benefits and sanctions anchored in a broad system of social behaviour, collectively initiated action tends to be more effective in achieving its abandonment than individual 'just-say-no' tactics.

The original Malicounda-Bambara initiative emerged as a result of local women's collective reflection and problem solving. The local imam and the former cutter's insistence that families could be expected to abandon the custom only if a large part of their social network did so as well was at least equally important. Parents were bound to the practice not just by cultural tradition or social convention but by the fear that their daughters would be unmarriageable if they were not cut. The decision of the 12 intermarrying communities surrounding Malicounda-Bambara to abandon FGC in effect changed the marriage market. The group did something that individuals acting alone could not have achieved.

Mackie (2000) has pointed out the striking parallel here with abandonment of foot binding in China. FGC is obviously a strong social convention linked to cultural notions of marriageability, much as foot binding was. It is dependent on a group consensus that perpetuates the links between a painful practice and deeper cultural meaning. Manufacturing a new social consensus is not an individual affair. As with other social conventions like driving on the left (or right) side of the road, it is nearly impossible and often dangerous to make change individually—and such efforts do little for the greater social good. A critical mass must agree to reform practice and must make the change in concert (Mackie 2000).

The centrality of human rights

- An environment of attention to human rights—and to women's rights and health concerns in particular—seems to constitute the most favourable setting for locally initiated abandonment of the practice.

Human rights seem to have become the governing metaphor and focal point in the Village Empowerment Programme, partly because it so nicely links individual needs with social policy, and gender equity with democratisation. Recasting women's rights as human rights places them at the centre of international attention and gives them legitimacy.

Women's rights are assumed by some to benefit only women, while human rights benefit society at large. The nexus of human rights and women's health points to FGC as a primary manifestation of the combination of these issues. It provides a clear frame for analysing the cultural dynamics of FGC (as well as related problems such as early and forced marriage). How much the curricular focus guided participating communities in this particular direction is unclear, but the potency of the linkage stands out clearly.

The empowerment theme

- Local empowerment is a corollary of human rights but poses a contradiction that has not been entirely resolved. An empowerment or problem-solving approach implies no outside imposition of targets for collective action. What if participants decide on a different priority issue?

This dilemma has been made potentially more acute by the stripped-down version of the Village Empowerment Programme. Donors are interested primarily in the FGC outcome, and support is somewhat less clearly available for other kinds of action and learning. What the Malian and Sudanese communities do in the future with respect to FGC may be instructive, in comparison to the Senegalese communities, where the programme was expanded. Initiating an expanded programme in Mali and Sudan would have provided an instructive comparative opportunity.

Donor influence in project agendas, goals, and strategies is common and is often criticised in the development literature (e.g. Crewe and Harrison 1998). Some development literature also criticises the way in which women's needs and interests have historically been marginalised in development projects (e.g. Kabeer 1994; Moser 1993). Yet growing numbers of projects, such as this one, focus directly on issues that affect women's lives. When is outside influence useful in getting important issues heard, and when does it sidetrack local concerns?

Similarly, we can examine the ways in which project staff may have steered the discourse toward FGC and away from other issues of interest to participants. Staff of the Sudanese project are also involved in initiatives for human rights education, sometimes in the same communities. This dual valence seems to have strengthened the appeal of the Sudanese programme, both among the women enrolled and within the broader community. Questions remain about how the women might have responded in the shorter and longer term without that dual emphasis.

Men's roles

- As the linkage between women's concerns and empowerment and community well-being is established, it is essential to involve men in the programme and in deliberations involving FGC.

The programmes in both Senegal and Mali seem to have become a crucible for new male roles in rural West African society. Navigating that route has been a fruitful experience and one that appears to have reinforced, not diminished, the centrality of women. However, the balance and

the structure of participation by women and men remain delicate. It is easy to fall back into patterns of inequitable gender relations and jeopardise the agenda-setting and process dynamics of a programme such as Tostan. Family relations and social relations are both worth paying attention to so that men's participation continues to provide support but does not take over or exclude women.

The Malian project worked with mixed-sex groups, but women continued to make up the majority of participants. The Sudanese groups included only women, though three of the six facilitators were men, and the effort enjoyed active support from men in the community. The involvement of community leaders (male, usually) added further legitimacy to the undertaking. The support of husbands, husbands-to-be, and other male family representatives is also important, as their preferences or criteria in choosing a bride are critical when the abandonment of cultural practices is in question. Elder women are also key actors, since they have significant control over decisions concerning their daughters and granddaughters and, sometimes, daughters-in-law as well.

Although a significant number of men participated, women remained in the numerical majority in the Malian projects, and facilitators were trained to encourage women to take the initiative. In Sudan, the male facilitators and the project director were very sensitive to the importance of giving women a voice and systematically encouraged them to speak out.

Clarifying potential follow-up: the economic connection

- The problem-solving focus that is central to the broad integrated approach works best when participants have access to seed capital for their new enterprises—whether through bank loans, microcredit, or charities—or when they have enough of their own pooled funds to meet this need, plus the juridical facilities for creating new associations and businesses.

The difficult issue here has to do with how tightly the approach is tied to external benefactors and NGO largesse. As a Hausa proverb succinctly puts it, 'It takes water in the belly to draw [more] from the well.' The rapid and largely spontaneous spread of the Village Empowerment Programme across whole regions of Senegal poses the question of follow-up. When outside assistance is available, does it enable or constrain choices? To date, the availability of credit and resources for follow-up activity seems to have been a critical element in programme success.

Implementation: perils and surprising opportunities

- Though the broad integrated approach relies on a great deal of local and women-driven initiative, programmes that have been successful to date also need the implementation guidance of an effective support organisation.

This fact poses questions for replication and extension, and highlights the importance of concomitant capacity-building opportunities for implementing organisations. There must be clarity in the agreement between Tostan and the implementing NGO about expectations, roles, processes, and payments. As mentioned above, the staff in Sudan were involved not only in FGC but in human rights education as well, but they seemed able to intertwine the two initiatives where appropriate and keep them separate at other times. Nonetheless, the staff's lack of experience with project management concerns limited their effectiveness.

In Mali, the NGO staff were also involved in a variety of endeavours, and at a certain point this dispersion of effort seemed to deny the project there the dynamism noted in the Sudanese

and Senegalese villages. Village-level support kept it going. Given the frequently precarious state of NGO finances, a broad integrated approach may mean tending to the health and capacity of the 'mother' institution as much as to the 'baby' programme, while seeking creative accommodations with its parallel commitments. A Sahelian proverb encapsulates the issue: 'Support the mother and the child will drink its milk in due time.'

Group sovereignty

- From preliminary evidence, the difference between minority and majority FGC cultures does not pose insurmountable obstacles to the replication and extension of the broad integrated approach.

While only half of Senegalese women practise FGC, 94 per cent of Malian women and 89 per cent of Sudanese women do (El-Goussy 1999:29). This implies a more pervasive social norm that may constrain the cultivation of collective initiative, as discussed above. In interviews, however, Sudanese women seemed to be aware of other practices and other options; they knew that not everyone practises FGC. And initial results from the Mali programme suggest that participants felt quite able to promote abandonment of the practice in their communities, despite the unanimity of social norms in their environment. A long-term assessment of results will be instructive, both in terms of the strategies used to address FGC (or other issues), and in terms of the ability to sustain changes or abandonment of practices.

The perils and potentials of philanthropic marketing

- International NGO largesse provides critical support for such innovative grassroots initiatives, but the layered dynamics of philanthropic marketing can create pressures that risk skewing strategies in the field and short-circuiting empowerment.

The programmes discussed seem in good measure to have circumvented these dangers by virtue of the loosely coupled nature of monitoring and supervision: in short, they did pretty much as best they could with the funds available. But availability of resources for one type of activity and lack of outside support for another inevitably creates a somewhat distorted local policy environment, only surmountable to the extent that beneficiaries can play multiple sources off against each other and/or generate some of their own local capital.

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Note

- 1 Portions of the description of Tostan programmes are taken from a paper prepared by the authors for *IK Notes*, a web and hard-copy bulletin of the Indigenous Knowledge Programme of the World Bank. See Easton and Monkman (2001). See also Tostan's website at www.tostan.org.

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The authors

Peter Easton is Associate Professor in the Graduate Program in Adult Education at Florida State University. He has worked for many years in adult and community education in Africa and in the evaluation of development programmes. Contact details: Adult Education Graduate Program, Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies, 114 STB, College of Education, Tallahassee, FL 32306–4452, USA. <Easton@coe.fsu.edu>. Karen Monkman is Assistant Professor in the International-Intercultural Development Education Program at Florida State

University. Her interests include non-formal education, gender and empowerment, and grassroots social change. Contact details: International-Intercultural Development Education, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 114 STB, College of Education, Tallahassee, FL 32306-4452, USA. <Monkman@coe.fsu.edu>. Rebecca Miles is Associate Professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning and the Center for the Study of Population at Florida State University. Her interests include the socio-economic determinants of health, gender and development, and planning for developing areas. Contact details: Department of Urban and Regional Planning, and Center for the Study of Population, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2280, USA. <rmiles@garnet.acns.fsu.edu>.