# Development, Aspirations and Frustrations

## Exploring social change in rural Gambia

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# PREFACE

If we take a moment to consider what aspirations mean to each one of us, and what aspirations we might have as individuals, no doubt a plethora of thoughts, feelings, images, wants, preferences or desires would come to mind, in one way or another all oriented in the future, relating to a 'time to come'. If we think a little harder, we might consider what influences and choices have shaped these aspirations, how they have changed over time and perhaps even what we might have to do in order to attain any one, or all, of them.

These are some of the questions that will be explored in this paper. They will be explored in the context of development and in relation to one program implemented in the community of Kissi Kissi in rural Gambia. Appadurai argues that it is in *aspirations* that ideas about the future are held, and that by bringing the future back in to considerations of development, we are better positioned to understand how individuals navigate their social spaces (2004). By employing an ethnographic approach, this study will examine the relevance of aspirations to post-modern understandings of development and social change, and conversely will consider other factors affecting the attainment of such aspirations, empirically building on primary research conducted in The Gambia.

This study is the product of many months of brainstorming, planning and discussing. In many ways it has been a test of endurance and perseverance, as preparing and setting in motion the fieldwork took longer than expected. Thankfully everything fell into place at the last minute and I embarked on this new experience – I had never conducted primary research before, nor had I been to Africa. Needless to say I have learnt a whole lot through the practical processes of researching, organising and conducting fieldwork, but this project has also reiterated to me the value of reaching out to people and communicating in a positive and productive manner, and of working steadfast towards something you aspire to do, even when the path is foggy at times.

I would like to extend my warm and grateful thanks to all those who contributed in this project to fruition. First and foremost to those who made the fieldwork for this study possible – the Tostan staff and volunteers who facilitated my research, and the members of Kissi Kissi who participated in the study – all of whom welcomed us so openly in The Gambia and made our time there rich.

## ABSTRACT

Whilst the desire to aspire may be a ubiquitous characteristic of human beings, not all of us have the capacity to realise this in the same way.  The notion of aspirations is necessarily multifarious and multidimensional since the 'capacity to aspire' is not evenly distributed across cultures and societies. In addition, aspirations are malleable and constructed in the thick of social life.

This study examines the connection between development and aspirations in the rural community if Kissi Kissi, Eastern Gambia. An anthropological inquiry into these concepts revealed that, whilst community members expressed desired aspirations, these were limited by a host of *frustrations.*

## ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| **CEP** | Community Empowerment Program |
| **CMC** | Community Management Committee |
| **D** | Dalasi (Gambian Currency) |
| **HDI** | Human Development Index |
| **GRA** | Gambia Revenue Agency |
| **NGO** | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| **OED** | Oxford English Dictionary |
| **UNDP** | United Nations Development Programme |
| **UNFPA** | United Nations Population Fund |
| **UNICEF** | United Nations Children's Fund |
| **URR** | Upper River Region |

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

*'The capacity to aspire is one important thing about culture and (cultures), and it has been paid too little attention so far. Since the work of development and poverty reduction has everything to do with future, it is self-evident that a deeper capacity to aspire can only strengthen the poor as partners in the battle against poverty' (Appadurai 2004:82).*

Until recently, the concept of *aspirations* has remained largely absent from anthropology and the social sciences more broadly. The association between aspirations and individual wants and desires has tended to locate it firmly within the realm of economics (Appadurai 2004: Green 2013). However, over the past few years, the idea of aspirations has gathered increasing interest from within the social sciences - notably from development[1] - for its particular relevance to understandings of poverty and wellbeing (e.g. Appadurai 2004; Camfield et al. 2012; Copestake and Camfield 2010; Ibrahim 2011; Narayan et al. 2009). This paper considers the interconnection between development, aspirations and *frustrations*. It explores these themes in relation to one community in rural Gambia that has participated in a Community Empowerment Program (CEP) implemented by the NGO Tostan. It looks at how this program has affected members personally, their aspirations and their future hopes. It also considers other factors affecting the attainment of these aspirations. Here I will build on the emerging discourse relating to aspirations to argue that aspirations are profoundly important to the way that people engage their own futures and development (Green 2013), and that anthropology is well-placed to explore this concept further at the micro-level.

Empirically, this study is based on 11 interviews conducted in the rural community of Kissi Kissi, Eastern Gambia, over a two-week fieldwork period. A range of secondary sources such as website resources and articles, as well as conversations with Tostan staff have provided the contextual background. Conceptually, this study engages with anthropological debates surrounding development and empowerment, as well as a growing body of literature examining aspirations. Combining all of these ideas, this study consists of three main areas of analysis. In the first instance, the paper will consider how participation within the CEP has affected the lived-realities of community members of Kissi Kissi, and what changes have been significant for them. Secondly, it will explore what this program has meant for people's aspirations and how they see the future as a result of participation, and larger ideas about the 'good life'. Lastly, the paper

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[1] A smaller body of literature has also emerged from within anthropology (e.g. Appadurai 2004; Karlstrom 2004) and the education sector (e.g. Gutman and Ackerman 2008).

will explore in more depth a theme that noticeably emerged from the fieldwork - that is an overarching sense of what I will call '*frustrated aspirations',* associated with a reliance on outside sources and external structures, in order to achieve certain goals and aspirations.

By exploring the idea of aspirations within the community of Kissi Kissi, looking at how individuals have engaged their own development, this study will respond to a call from within anthropology, appealing for a move towards a more anthropologically informed understanding of how recipients experience development, and a more productive rapport between the two fields (e.g. Gardner and Lewis 1996; Lewis and Mosse 2006; Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012).

After briefly outlining the socioeconomic context of The Gambia here, Chapter two introduces the conceptual background of the paper. It lays out in more detail on going debates surrounding anthropological engagement with development, evolving understandings of empowerment, and current discussions relating to aspirations. Chapter three locates the field site of Kissi Kissi and delineates Tostan's program. Chapter four details the research methodology of this study and brings to light some critical reflections. Chapter five comprises an in-depth analysis of the research findings, divided into the three sections detailed above. Finally, chapter six presents the conclusions of this study, and presents the case for a more nuanced, anthropologically-oriented understanding of development.

### *1.1 The Gambian Setting*

In order to better understand the specific experience of inhabitants of Kissi Kissi, it is important to delineate the wider socioeconomic context of The Gambia.

Located in West Africa, The Gambia, is one of the smallest countries in Africa. It is a predominantly Muslim country and ethnically diverse – of seven different ethnic groups, Mandinka is the most common (40%). It is also one of the least developed countries in the world – its HDI value for 2012 was 0.439 ranking it 165 out of 187 countries (UNDP Report 2013 – with more than 60% of the population living in poverty (UNFPA Report 2011). Life expectancy at birth, in years, is 58 and the total adult literacy rate is 50% (UNICEF Report 2003).

The Gambia was a British colony until 1965 when it gained independence. Since then it has largely enjoyed political stability, but social and economic problems have persisted. Postcolonial Gambia has experienced a weakening national economy, with rapid urbanisation and deteriorating living conditions affecting both urban and rural

areas (Bellagamba 2008:239). The country has been described as 'an agrarian neo-mercantilist state in crisis' (Kea 2007:6). Historically, agriculture has been the main source of income for The Gambia, with groundnut production providing the main source of state revenue up until the late 1960s when, due to harsh drought conditions, a re-export trade developed as an alternative mode of accumulation (*ibid.*). Due to the country's low levels of industrialisation, the tourism sector has emerged as the next largest source of income in the country, attracting largely 'Western' tourists to the country's coastline, and providing a main source of foreign exchange to the area[2]. Much of the academic literature on The Gambia has explored issues associated with agriculture, tourism or medical research[3] in the country (e.g. Gaibazzi 2012; Kea 2007, 2013; Nyanzi et al. 2005; Sharpley 2009; Fairhead et al. 2006; Kelly 2012). However, social issues in The Gambia, especially those relating to gender inequalities, have also been a source of considerable discussion. The country's social system has been referred to as 'patriarchal and gerontochratic' (Touray 2006 in Chant and Touray 2012). In 2012, a UNDP report ranked The Gambia 128 out of 148 countries in terms of gender inequality. Gender inequality is particularly marked in terms of adult literacy rates – only 36% of Gambian women are literate compared with 58% men, and women's enrolment in higher education is only 23% that of the male rate (Chant and Touray 2012).

The Gambia's socioeconomic situation has attracted much attention and 'investment' from the development sector, particularly in regard to agriculture and land-based issues. Aside from a small number of studies looking at agriculture-related programs in The Gambia, few ethnographic studies have been conducted investigating wider community-development programs in the country. This study will help to fill that gap.

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[2] Tourism in The Gambia has also been problematic for the country and questioned for its wider socio-economic impact (cf. Sharpley 2009).
[3] The Medical Research Council has a significant presence in The Gambia.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT

In order to explore the interplay between development, aspirations and frustrations in the community of Kissi Kissi, it is important to elucidate some of the discourses and concepts that provide the foundation of this study. This section will outline anthropological debates surrounding development and empowerment, and delineate the current discussions relating to aspirations that will inform this study.

### 2.1 Moving Beyond Critique

Historical debates surrounding the relationship between anthropology and development have informed present-day dialogues between these two disciplines. It is therefore useful to begin by briefly tracing this trajectory.

Since the mid-1980s and 1990s, the connection between anthropology and development has been very problematic. Despite their close association during the colonial era when anthropology was considered the handmaiden of the imperial project (Asad 1973), the advent of post-modernism brought about a shift in the epistemological orientation of anthropology, causing a breakdown in this previously close relationship and giving rise to the post-development critique. Led by scholars such as Wolfgang Sachs, Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson, this critique centred on a deconstruction of the dominant development discourses. They revealed 'development' to be a reflection of Western-Northern hegemonic superiority, driven by neoliberal ideologies, that ultimately perpetuated inequalities between the 'North' and 'South' (Sachs 1992; Escobar 1995; Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012)[4].

These critiques of the development project have been fundamental in bringing to light the mechanisms by which the industrialized 'West' has continued to exercise control over processes of global change in a postcolonial world. They have opened our eyes and made us question the true nature and intentions of dominant development interventions. However, they have also undoubtedly created a degree of tension for

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[4] Although the post-development critique widely concerned the deconstruction of development, several different strands of thought emerged within this school. Numerous academics have criticised discursive constructions of 'poverty', the 'third world' and 'the poor' by development institutions, for portraying an un-differentiated image of the people and struggles that might constitute this 'third world'. Critics have argued that development activities have been justified by locating the 'solutions' to such struggles and problems in the supposedly superior forms of knowledge and 'expertise' that Western development professionals bring (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Fairhead and Leach 1997; Grillo & Stirrat 1997). Leading scholars of this critique have notably approached this deconstruction from different angles. Ferguson (1994) revealed the way that development resources have been used to bolster the position of educated elites who have exploited their privileged positions to the detriment of the 'poor' they are supposed to be helping. Escobar (1995) has seen the critique of development as a means by which to liberate anthropology from its own colonial past, arguing that by turning the critical lens onto the practices and assumptions made within both anthropology and development, anthropology could finally be unshackled from its somewhat troubled past.

anthropologists involved in the development world. Whilst it is certainly necessary to question the structures and practices driving the development project, such wholesale critiques ultimately negate the potential for positive anthropological engagement in the development sector.

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars within anthropology have questioned such outright critique of development, calling instead for a move towards a constructive anthropological engagement with development (e.g. Gardner and Lewis 1996; Olivier de Sardan 2005; Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012). Whilst post-development critiques have been insightful and valuable, Gardner and Lewis note that they have tended to foreclose consideration of how or whether it is possible to retain hope in the vision of a better or more just future, denying the possibility for anthropologists to bring insights that can positively affect the way 'development' is undertaken (1996). Instead, Gardner and Lewis emphasize the fluidity of development discourse, which is receptive to changes as new practices and knowledges are introduced, and maintain that anthropologists should work to reorient development discourse away from its earlier post-modernist positions, and towards a greater focus on the relation between poverty and inequality (*ibid.* p75).

In a similar vein, others have also stressed the value of anthropological insight in redirecting development discourse's trajectory, helping to reveal the complexities of particular development contexts and re-perceive development as a potential force for good (cf. Lewis and Mosse 2006; Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012 ). By redirecting the concrete practices through which development is enacted, and the specific social realities that ideas of development frame, they stress that anthropology could pave the way for more reflexive and nuanced understandings of development (*ibid.*).

Anthropological debates relating to development have evolved significantly over the decades, and there are valuable lessons to be learnt from the post-development school of thought. However, as these scholars argue, it is time to move these dialogues beyond a critical stance and towards an understanding of development as a mode of engagement, which seeks to comprehend, represent and work within a complex world. Anthropology is well positioned to re-build bridges and strive for a more productive and constructive relationship with development as both ideological practice and practical enterprise (Leve 2007:130). Indeed, anthropologists should be actively engaged in attempting to change the conditions which produce poverty, inequality and oppression (Gardner and Lewis 1996:158).

This paper takes inspiration from this burgeoning body of work within anthropology, and aims to contribute to discussions concerning a better engagement of anthropology

in development. By taking an anthropological approach to explorations of aspirations in the community of Kissi Kissi, it seeks to present a more nuanced understanding of how individuals experience social change, and ultimately what this means for lived realities, their futures and their aspirations.

### 2.2 Development through Empowerment

Key to this study of 'development' in the community of Kissi Kissi, is an understanding of 'empowerment'. Since the mid-1990s, the term 'empowerment' has become a buzzword within mainstream development discourse, and even considered a trope of the development 'industry' (Trundle 2012 in Yarrow and Verkatesan 2012). Whilst numerous actors, including NGOs, governments and powerful international institutions have promoted empowerment-based development projects, not everyone defines or measures empowerment in the same way.

The concept has evolved over the years to comprise many different meanings and uses. It emerged alongside the 'bottom-up' approach to development which was widely perceived as an alternative to modernisation (Singh and Titi 1995 in James 1995:18).  In the 1970s, 'empowerment' in relation to 'the third world' was understood as 'the development of economic activities under the control of the weakest… so that they had their own resources for development' (Wright 1994 in Cheater 1999:6). Through the 1980s and 1990s, empowerment came to be associated with certain groups of people or specific areas of impact e.g. gender, health, education, women, children, girls, with a focus on being vocal and having a right to 'voice' (Cheater 1999:4). Broadly speaking, the notion of empowerment  goes beyond ideas of democracy, human rights and participation, rather it focuses attention on enabling people to understand the reality of their environment in terms of social, political, economic, ecological and cultural factors, with particular attention to principles of 'inclusiveness', 'transparency' and 'accountability'(Singh and Titi 1995 in James 1999:19). Singh and Titi argue that it gives people a true capacity to cope with the changing environment as societies and communities enter the transition towards sustainable development (*ibid.*).

Paulo Friere has been widely recognised[5] for pioneering present day understandings of empowerment. He stresses the need to stimulate and support people's abilities to understand, question and resist the structural reasons for their situation and circumstances, arguing that education should be the practice of freedom (1970). He

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[5] See Gardner and Lewis 1996 and Leve 2007.

advocates a process of '*conscientization[6]*' consisting of learning, organisation and action, through which learners come to recognise their own value and knowledge (Leve 2007:136). By becoming aware of their reality, by reflecting on it and by criticising it, individuals are better placed to opt for changes relevant to themselves and in accordance with humanistic principles (La Belle 1984:85). Friere argues that through processes of empowerment, individuals, communities and nations obtain collective responsibility for their own future and are able to work towards a desired level of well-being (1970). Appadurai stresses that empowerment must take some cultural form in order for it to have resonance with the people involved. Empowerment comes from culturally-rooted processes which mobilize adherents and capture the public space of debate (Appadurai 2004:67).

Whilst it may seem that in theory strategies of 'empowerment' do have the potential to promote community participation and indeed some form of economic, political, social or cultural transformation (Craig and Mayo 1995:1), that is not to say that we should not treat the term – and concept – with caution. Wendy James urges researchers to take very great care in 'handling the […] jargon of the 'development industry'' (1999:13).

Indeed, some dominant, more neoliberal, models of empowerment have been criticised for shifting the focus of empowerment from that of subaltern groups to an instrumental empowerment *for* capitalist citizenship (cf. Leve 2007:141). Leve attributes this slippage in the empowerment ideology to five factors, three of which are particularly relevant to this discussion. Firstly, development is generally perceived as a unilinear progression towards a predefined goal of self-conscious agents[7]. Second, empowerment is conceived of as a subjective transformation that will ultimately lead to concrete forms of action that reflect an analysis of objective reality. Third, the development subject tends to be imagined as 'incomplete' and lacking either access to credit or self-knowledge and historical agency (2007:141).

Empowerment programs have also been criticised for, like the wider development project, facilitating neoliberal goals of small and good government, by allowing Third World developmentalist states to downsize by farming out their welfare responsibilities to other entities and by capacitating individuals and communities to be responsible for their own development (Sharma 2006:64).

Due to the multifarious ways in which empowerment has been conceptualised within development, and in order to obtain a clearer understanding of what this means to the recipients of development, it is necessary to explore notions of empowerment at the

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[6] Also known as 'consciousness raising'.
[7] The 'self-conscious agent' could be expressed through economic activity and disciplined participations in civil institutions, or by seeking to overturn hierarchies and remake society

individual level. For the purpose of this analysis, I will refer to 'empowerment' as a process that enables people to change their own lives (Gardner 1997).


### 2.3 Understanding Aspirations

> *"Aspirations about the good life, about health and happiness, exist in all societies"* (Appadurai 2004:67).

Defining *aspirations* is by no means a straightforward task, since it can mean many different things to many different people, in a range of different contexts. For the purpose of this study, it is important to outline what some of these meanings are, and how this concept is considered and employed in current discussions.

The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of 'aspiration' is 'the action of aspiring; steadfast desire or longing for something above one' (OED 2013). Although this definition provides a useful starting point for any exploration of aspirations, it is overly simplistic and does not take into account the dynamic nature of the concept. Aspirations are widely recognised to be multifaceted and multidimensional (Appadurai 2004; Copestake and Camfield 2010; Gutman and Ackerman 2008; Ray 2002). Academics from various disciplines have contributed to the conceptualisation of aspirations. Appadurai stresses that aspirations have something to do with wants, preferences, choices, and calculations (2004:67), and are influenced by overarching factors such as gender, health, education, class, age, race, sexuality, etc. Aspirations are closely linked with socioeconomic background, embedded in and constructed against the backdrop of cultural norms. They develop and change throughout childhood and beyond as they are shaped by, and respond to, different environments and circumstances (Gutman and Ackerman 2008:i). What's more, aspirations are not evenly distributed across society, thus varying with different social groups (Appadurai 2004:68, Gutman and Ackerman 2008). They can concern the collective or they can relate to the individual and private sphere - though it is pertinent to note here that even individual aspirations should not be considered in total isolation as these are ultimately constructed in the thick of social life (Appadurai 2004; Ray 2006). Regardless of the particular nature of aspirations in any given time, one thing is certain – aspirations are oriented in the *future* (Bernard et al. 2011) and relate to 'the good life' (Appadurai 2004:67). Whether that future is somebody's 'tomorrow' or the rest of one's lifetime, aspirations are assigned to 'a time to come'.

The abstract and dynamic nature of aspirations makes it a challenging concept to write about and examine. Nevertheless, it has recently gathered attention within the

social sciences, examining the importance to understandings of wellbeing, poverty and learning (Ray 2002; Appadurai 2004; Gutman and Ackerman 2008; Copestake and Camfield 2010; Ibrahim 2011; Camfield et al. 2012; Locke and Te Lintelo 2012; Green 2013).

### 2.3.1 DEVELOPING ASPIRATIONS

Arjun Appadurai's chapter on the 'capacity to aspire' (2004) has been significant in bringing the notion of aspirations to the fore. From an anthropological perspective, Appadurai frames his examination of aspirations within the context of *culture*, conceiving 'the capacity to aspire' as a cultural capacity.

Appadurai establishes the connection between culture and aspiration by noting that 'aspirations form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms' and that 'aspirations about the good life, about health and happiness, exist in all societies, but in every case [... these] are part of some sort of system of ideas (2004:67). What's more, he highlights that ideas about the future, as well as the past, are ultimately embedded culture. [8]

In an attempt to open up understandings of culture, Appadurai builds on Sen's 'capability approach'. According to Sen, 'capabilities' refer to a person's ability to *do* or *be* certain things they have reason to value – or put another way their way of *doing* and *being* (1997; 1999). Capabilities depend on personal characteristics, social background, economic circumstances, etc. and include states of wellbeing, as well as more complex capabilities such as agency or the ability to decide and act within externally set constraints (Sen 1997; Nathan 2005:36). A capabilities perspective explores a person's ability to live different kinds of lives and to choose to live the kind of life they value. Appadurai's notion of the 'capacity to aspire' extends Sen's work by arguing that capabilities and aspiration are closely intertwined, and in fact aspirations should be considered capabilities in themselves (2004).

Thus, we can understand aspirations to be a cultural capacity that relates to the manner in which people visualise the future and engage in forward-looking behaviour. It not only captures group-level characteristics, but also allows for the possibility of each individual to break away from these and envision their own future. In this way it proves

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[8] Key to Appadurai's analysis is his critique of historically held counter-conceptions that have perpetuated an opposition between 'culture' and 'development'. On the one hand, these have viewed *culture* as a matter of 'pastness' relating it to terms such as habit, custom, heritage, tradition. On the other has been the notion of 'development' which has been associated with the future, and ideas relating to plans, hopes, goals, targets (Appadurai 2004:60). He argues that his opposition has resulted in a lack of attention to culture within development discourses. As such, culture has been perceived as a problem to overcome or a hindrance to the forward momentum of planned economic change. Where culture is present, it has been conceived in terms of norms, beliefs, and values, which has ultimately maintained its association to a 'pastness' (*ibid.*).

a useful handle on the individual-group symbiosis that seems to be key to any form of transformation, be it economic or otherwise (Bernard et al. 2011).

Appadurai argues powerfully that by strengthening the capacity to aspire, as a capability […] the future-oriented logic of development could find a natural ally, and the poor could find the resources required to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty (2004:59). Appadurai's analysis provides a starting point for a micro-scale exploration of aspirations in the community of Kissi Kissi.

### 2.3.2 ASPIRATION FAILURE

Appadurai's analysis of aspirations has inspired many to examine this concept in more depth. An emerging body of work in the social sciences has taken up the concept with a greater focus on aspiration 'failure' in their studies of wellbeing and poverty(Ray 2002; Ibrahim 2010; Copestake and Camfield 2010; Bernard et al. 2011;) or 'aspirational inequalities' (Camfield et al. 2012).

From an economics perspective, Ray discusses the 'condition of poverty' in relation to a failure of aspirations (2002). He claims that poverty stifles dreams, or at least the process of attaining dreams, and thus poverty and the failure of aspirations are linked in a reciprocal, self-sustaining trap (2002:1). Ray relates to the capacity to aspire in terms of an 'aspirations window'[9]. His emphasis is on learning from similar social role models who inhabit that 'aspirations window'. In other words, an individual draws aspirations from the lives, achievements, or ideals of those who exist in that window (Ray 2002; Bernard et al. 2011).

Ibrahim(2010) looks at the relationship between poverty, aspirations and wellbeing in Egypt. She identifies two interrelated dynamics of aspirational failure: a downward spiral and an intergenerational transmission. She notes that the former happens when one aspiration failure leads to another, while the latter reflects 'the failure of many parents in poor[10] communities to fulfil the aspirations of their children, thus ending up transmitting their failed aspiration to the next generation' (2010:18).

In their study of poor rural households in Ethiopia, Bernard et al. (2011) take the idea of aspirations failure and attribute it to an expression of 'fatalism', exploring whether these 'fatalistic beliefs' have implications for people's attitudes towards, and investment in, the future, taking a broad view of 'fatalism' as aspiration failure. However, due to the

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[9] Ray also identifies the 'aspiration gap' – the difference between an individual's actual and aspired standard of living, and thirdly 'aspiration failure' according to Ray refers to an individual's response to that gap, and in particular to a lack of pro-active behaviour towards filling the aspirations gap

[10] Throughout this paper, use of phrases such as 'the poor' or 'poor people' are only utilised in reference to literature that employs them. In my own analysis I try to avoid generalizing a diverse range of people that might be placed in this category.

multidimensional nature of aspirations, this approach has been questioned, as it is in fact possible to believe that certain outcomes are predestined and take a fatalistic attitude to failure, whilst still actively pursuing other aspirations (Camfield et al. 2012).

Camfield et al. explore ideas about the subjective effects of aspiration and inequality in Thailand. They identify a co-existence between a culture of aspiration – where goals exceed resources, and a culture of poverty – where people have stopped pursuing what they cannot achieve (2012).

These studies provide a useful starting point in understanding why aspirations are not attained. However, in this paper I will argue that discussions of 'aspirations failure' that result from a deprived 'aspirations window', a 'downward spiral', 'intergenerational transmission' or 'fatalistic' beliefs fail to take into account other structural factors which may influence the attainment of aspirations. What's more, these analyses discredit individual agency and capability in achieving aspirations. For this reason, I consider the notion of *frustrated aspirations,* and will explore other, broader, social, economic and political factors which have affected the attainment of aspirations in the community of Kissi Kissi.

## 3. LOCATING THE FIELD SITE

After a long period of time spent searching for fieldwork possibilities, the opportunity finally arose to conduct fieldwork in The Gambia, through the NGO Tostan.

### 3.1 From Banjul to Kissi Kissi

Fieldwork took place over a period of seven days in the community of Kissi Kissi (meaning *research* in Mandinka), located in the Upper River Region (URR) of Eastern Gambia. The community of Kissi Kissi is located approximately 10km from the busy market town of Basse Santa Su. It is a rural community of roughly 600 inhabitants, without much infrastructure to speak of – the community does not have electricity or running water. The nearest health facilities are located in Basse and the nearest school is a few kilometres away. Like much of the URR, the primary source of income in Kissi Kissi comes from seasonal agriculture and vegetable farming.

### 3.2 A note on Tostan's CEP

It is important here to outline briefly the work that Tostan does, the approach they employ, and my rationale for choosing to conduct fieldwork through this NGO, as it bears significance to the information I gathered from participants.
In order to explore ideas surrounding aspirations, and in particular changing aspirations, I was keen to conduct research among a group of people who had experienced some form of 'empowerment' within a development program.  I wanted to explore the impact of such empowerment on individual aspirations and perceptions of the future and, in particular, get a sense of *how* aspirations had changed through that process, *if* indeed they had.

I first became aware of Tostan through volunteering with one of their partner organisations in London. I was especially interested in Tostan's approach and specifically the nature of its program[11].  The sessions cover a diverse range of topics including, democracy, human rights, problem solving, hygiene and health centre. Later

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[11] Tostan implements a three-year long, human rights based, non-formal education program known as the Community Empowerment Program (CEP) in eight countries throughout West and East Africa. This program engages participants through familiar, traditional methods of communication such as theatre, song and dialogue exchange. During the program, participants learn in their mother tongue and discuss their human rights and responsibilities, including their right to health and their right to be free from all forms of violence, as well as other current issues and topics (Disruptive Women, 2013). Importantly, the CEPs are run by facilitators who are local to the area and of the same ethnic group as the community. Tostan's areas of impact include education, health, environment, governance, economic growth and cross-cutting issues (including female genital cutting (FGC) and child/forced marriage). One of the principle areas of impact for Tostan's program has been in ending, the practice of female genital cutting (FGC) in over 6,500 communities throughout the eight countries in which they work, driven largely by a participant-led social movement (Tostan, 2013; Gillespie and Melching, 2010).

on in the program modules also cover numeracy, budgeting, project-management as well as literacy through SMS text messaging. These sessions prompt critical reflection and have empowered and emboldened learners to undertake actions that have created new social norms, thus producing a form of social transformation (Tostan 2013; Gillespie and Melching 2010:477).

As well as Tostan's holistic approach to empowerment, the program aims to reach and include the community as whole, bringing everyone into open dialogue and promoting the development of critical thinking skills, leading on to decision-making processes involving the whole community (Tostan 2013), rather than a select demographic within the community, and I was keen to find out how different members of the community perceived the process and the changes they experienced vis-à-vis aspirations. What's more the length of the Tostan's program was also significant. It runs over three consecutive years, which is considerably longer than other programs I looked at, usually lasting only a few months or comprising much more intermittent contact.

La Belle states that non-formal education[12] should include specific reference points to engage learners in the process, such as agricultural extension, community development, consciousness raising, literacy, etc. (1984:80). What's more, it should be viewed as a process that links individuals with their environment. Tostan's non-formal education program has done just this in the community of Kissi Kissi, the sessions have engaged learners through specific reference points and linked them with their environment, thus triggering a form of grass-roots social change in the community.

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[12] Non-formal education refers to out of school educational programs designed to provide specific learning experiences for specific target populations (La Belle 1984:80).

## 4. RESEARCH METHODS & REFLECTIONS

Tostan facilitated the short period of field research contributing to this study. Following my criteria[13], Tostan Gambia selected an appropriate community to approach for the purposes of this fieldwork. They selected Kissi Kissi – a Mandinka community located within daily reach of Basse Santa Su[14], which had successfully completed Tostan's Community Empowerment Program. Tostan also recommended a member of their staff – Dawda Jawala – who would be my Mandinka/English translator.

### *4.1 Gaining Access and Selecting Participants*

In several instances throughout the research period for this study, access was gained by means of a 'gatekeeper'. By gatekeeper, I refer to 'actors with control over key sources and avenues of opportunity' (Atkinson 1981 in Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:34). In the first instance, establishing fruitful communication with Tostan head office proved quite challenging as I explored different channels of communication, and I soon learnt that 'identifying the relevant gatekeeper is not always straightforward […] it is not always obvious whose permission needs to be obtained, or whose good offices it might be advisable to secure' (Wolff 2004 in Hammersly and Atkinson 1995:64). Once dialogue was established, planning and preparation materialised relatively effectively. The Tostan office in Basse then became the next gatekeeper to the community. With very little information available relating to the different communities and with time limitations, it was left in Tostan's hands to select a community that would be suitable for this study. The day after arriving in Basse, Ansou, the Regional Coordinator and Dawda took me to meet the community elder. I took gifts of Kola nuts and sweets for the children and sat patiently as Ansou introduced me and my research project. The Elder listened attentively and accepted. With the help of Dawda, I spoke with the CMC[15] Coordinator of Kissi Kissi that same day in order to arrange interviews for the next day. The CMC Coordinator became the gatekeeper in recruiting participants for the study.

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[13] My criteria were a Mandinka community that had completed Tostan's CEP within reasonable, daily travel from Bassse Santa Su. Mandinka is the most prominent ethnic group in The Gambia, so it was thought to be most appropriate.

[14] My fieldwork coincided with the month of Ramadan, so it was not possible to stay in the community itself.

[15] As part of the CEP, Community Management Committees are set up comprising 17 democratically elected members of the community. The CMC members are trained with management skills necessary to implement long term development projects (Tostan 2013b)

### 4.2 Interviewing

This research draws from 11 semi-structured interviews conducted among community members of Kissi Kissi between the ages of 16-80. I was keen to gather viewpoints from a broad, cross-section of the community, as well as a range of people with different levels of engagement in Tostan's program, in order to capture the divergent experiences and understandings of the CEP, and of course aspirations. As such I conducted interviews with: the elder (male, 80 years); 4 women between the ages of 30-50; 2 men between the ages of 30-50; 3 young women between the ages of 16-20; 1 young man of 16 years. In an ideal situation I would have liked to interview equal numbers of men and women, but most of the men were away from the compounds during the time of my morning visits to the community,

In order to gain a more thorough understanding of people's perceptions of the CEP vis-à-vis their aspirations and thoughts of the future, I chose to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews. This was the most appropriate interview technique as, given the limitations on time, I would only have one opportunity to interview each of the participants (Bernard 2006:212). In addition, I wanted to allow for a more organic dialogue or 'conversation' with each of the people I interviewed, rather than an overly formalised question and answer approach. I used an interview checklist with a series of questions to guide the interview, but I allowed the conversation to flow as freely as possible, allowing the participants to tell me as much as they wished. Thus interviews were flexible enough include additional questions in response to themes that arose during the conversations, and also to omit questions that repeated material. I also gave every participant the opportunity to add anything else they wished to say at the end of each interview.

During all of the interviews, Dawda translated simultaneously between each informant and myself. Before beginning the fieldwork Dawda and I discussed the questions that I had prepared and their suitability. We discussed the concept of aspirations and how this abstract term might be translated. Dawda told me the Mandinka phrase *'Hammeng kuwooluu'* meaning 'what we want to do', would be suitable. I iterated the importance of Dawda to *translate* the interviews as best possible, rather than elaborate or guide the participants to tell me what he thought I might want to know.

Prior to each interview, I explained the purpose of the research and how the material would be used. I gained informed consent from each of my participants and have ensured confidentiality by using pseudonyms throughout this paper. In addition, I

stressed to each informant that participation was voluntary and they should feel free to answer as they wish or stop the interview at any point.

During one interview, I sensed the participant was very shy and perhaps uncomfortable. I asked if she was ok and if she would prefer that we stopped. She said that she was enjoying the interview, but I detected that she was uneasy, perhaps because older members of the community were around at that time and she did not feel comfortable speaking in front of them. We continued the interview for a while longer, trying to encourage her and adopt a more chatty approach, but we cut it a bit short as it was clear the girl was not entirely at ease.

Interviews were carried out outside the Elder's compound – a location selected by the CMC Coordinator as a sign of respect for the Elder. All interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and then later transcribed by myself.

### 4.3 Interpretive Complexities and Reflexivity

Throughout this study, I have been conscious of the ways in which the products of research are affected by the people and processes involved, thus I have aimed to practice reflexivity along the way (Davies 2008:4). I am aware that the individual stories I collected are socially embedded and a product of a particular time and space. I have paid close attention to the ways I have interpreted and represented the stories told by my research participants, and understand that this material remains an outcome of dialogical encounters, which have been filtered through my own socio-cultural lens (Davies 2008). What's more, I recognise Dawda's position as translator means that he was not simply a passive recipient of meaningful utterances, but rather the dialogical material also passed through his interpretation, so I consider him an active agent involved in the co-construction of these meanings (Davidson 2002:1284). This could have introduced some bias into the study and I have kept this in mind when analysing the interviews.

My position as a *Toubab* (white person) working through Tostan has caused me to reflect on my positionality in the field, and how I may have been perceived by my participants. For example, I believe that many community members thought I might be associated with a development body or organisation that could provide some sort of help to the community. At the start of each interview I made sure to stress the purpose of the research as part of my studies and communicate my limited role, but still I got the sense from my participants that as an outsider and a *toubab*, I might be able to help them in some way.

# 5. DEVELOPMENT, ASPIRATIONS & FRUSTRATIONS IN KISSI KISSI

Discussion with my participants brought to light some interesting dynamics relating to the interplay between development, aspirations and frustrations in the community. This section of the paper will analyse these in more depth in order to get achieve a nuanced understanding of how people visualise their futures.

## 5.1 Development through Empowerment in Kissi Kissi

In order to explore the relevance of aspirations to the developments in Kissi Kissi, it is necessary to look more closely at the nature of social change that has taken place in the community, and specifically what Tostan's CEP has meant to community members, their subjective realities and their day-to-day lives, and the extent to which people have been able to change their own lives.

   Narratives collected during field work indicated that Tostan's CEP had catalysed individuals, and to an extent the wider community,  to effect changes in their sociocultural practices. Overall, my participants testified to a profound sense of individual and collective transformation. Many participants talked about improved knowledge, open dialogue and a change in their actions and activities, which had helped them to transform their capabilities and their ways of *being* and *doing*.

   As my participants commented on the changes that had impacted them personally, several prominent themes began to emerge.  These recurring topics reflected a range of interrelated practical, behavioural and ideological transformations.

   Participants expressed an increased and improved level of communication between men and women, and across generations. An ideological shift resulting from a greater understanding of democracy and human rights translated into behavioural and practical changes, as 'young ones'[16] of the community were invited and encouraged to participate in discussions and decisions that would previously have only concerned  the elders[17]. Several respondents also stated that young ones were encouraged to discuss issues affecting them and express their views even in the presence of the elders which 'they could not have done yesterday' (cf. Amadou and Yaya interviews Kissi Kissi 2013).

  A greater understanding of human rights and children's rights in the community, had resulted in a greater awareness of the value of education, which meant that child enrolment in school had increased in the community. In addition the community had

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[16] 'Young ones' was the term used by participants during interviews to refer to the younger generations.
[17] For example, participants told me how the young ones were not involved in discussion concerning marriage, and girls were no longer betrothed to men that they did not like.

abandoned harmful traditional practices such as FGC and child marriage, after understanding the rights of the child.

Several of my participants spoke about a more equal division of labour between men and women in terms of farm work, house work and child care, that had resulted from the recognition for shared responsibilities and duties. As a result of this ideological shift, men would help women with farm work, 'labour work'[18] and cooking, which were previously assigned as women's duties only (Buba, interview July 2013). In fact, two of the men I interviewed spoke about helping their wives with the cooking, and enjoying it, either by 'pound[ing] some things for them at the kitchen' or 'sometimes cooking *Pah* for my son when he is hungry [...] yesterday I didn't know that, I thought it was only women's work, but I know I can do it, it is my responsibility too' (Buba and Malik interviews Kissi Kissi 2013).

A number of my participants mentioned that general health in the community had improved.  Again, this was due to a combination of ideological, behavioural and practical shifts. A better understanding of the spread of illnesses and disease[19] had led community members to employ good hygiene practices, improve their diet and ensure a cleaner environment. They also organised collective 'clean-ups' of the all the compounds every month, which involved all members of the community. A greater appreciation of the need to keep communal areas clean meant that more people worked together for the good of the community, rather than simply taking care of their own house and their own problems. This reflects an overarching shift that many of my participants identified. Several participants told me that 'their minds were open' or that 'their mind-set had changed'. One member of the community expressed this shift in consciousness as follows;

> '*the way I used to think, I used to think inwards before Tostan came, but now that Tostan came I think outwards. That means I think of myself and others and how to collectively move ahead. Then I used to think alone and things stop with myself, but now I think with people and discuss with people and plan together with people*' (Amadou, interview Kissi Kissi 2013).

Other changes highlighted by participants included; an increase of investment in small business to supplement income received from farming; an understanding of how

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[18] 'Labour work' included sweeping, fetching firewood, laundering, cooking, vegetable gardening, watering, etc., which was previously considered women's work (Buba, interview July 2013).
[19] Several participants told me that there was a greater awareness about the spread of Malaria and where mosquitoes would breed. As a result they used their nets mosquito nets – even at night when they were chatting outside – to protect themselves and the children. They would also clean the compounds and throw the rubbish far away so that mosquitoes would not breed there. As a result, they told me there were fewer incidences of Malaria in the community (cf. Mariama interview Kissi Kissi 2013).

to lobby for support from local government; and also crucially, numeracy skills. Isatou's story revealed the importance of acquiring numeracy skills to her own reality;

> *'Then I used to save at the bank, but I never think of whether there can be fraud, or the banks can cheat, I never had that concept. But as soon as I got educated [through Tostan's program] I can recognise numbers and other things. I needed to withdraw from an account [but I was sent to collect a certificate from the Gambia Revenue Authority (GRA) there they asked] to pay 200 Dalasi. As soon as I paid the 200D they drew me a receipt of 50D. When I looked at the receipt and saw 50 written, I said "you people are saying to me I should pay 200D and I'm seeing on the paper that you gave me 50D". [It's because of Tostan that brought my thinking capacity, improved my thinking, my knowledge] I told them "you have done what you did, you have written what you have written. I gave and you gave me a receipt of 50D. I cannot force you to take my money from you, but I can go somewhere else where you will be called upon and then the truth will prevail". As soon as I told them that, they looked at each other and they decided to give me back the 150D' (Isatou interview Kissi Kissi 2013).*

Isatou's ability to discern numbers had significantly impacted her day-to-day reality. This new capability had given her the agency with which to challenge these exploitative social structures, giving her the consciousness and confidence with which to navigate her social landscape on a more equal footing.

When I asked my participants to tell me what had prompted these different changes in the community, the vast majority of participants indicated they were a result of the knowledge they had learnt through Tostan's program. In a handful of instances, participants also referred to outside influences such as family members living away or abroad, or in some cases other NGOs working in the area, and that had also influenced them somehow.

Whilst I recognise the various limitations[20] of this short study, the information gathered during interviews certainly attested to a process of empowerment which had enabled people to effect changes in their lives. When asked if the changes had been welcome, a few participants indicated that certain changes had been harder for some[21], but once the knowledge and understanding had diffused around the community, the participants wholly recognised that their situation had changed for the better.

Although certain theories of empowerment have tended to conceive of empowerment processes as bridging over dualisms such as unconsciousness and consciousness, alienation and agency, 'subalternity' and 'subjectivity', or cultural constraint and

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[20] Due to certain constraints I was not able to carry out participation observation in the community, which would have served to either affirm or question the information gathered during interviews. In addition the sample size was relatively small so I cannot generalise for the whole community.

[21] Participants told me that certain changes – particularly relating to traditional practices (e.g. FGC and child and/or forced marriage) -  had been harder to accept for those members who had not directly participated in Tostan's program.

personal choice (cf. Leve 2007:151), on closer examination of these processes in Kissi Kissi, it would seem that these distinctions are not so clear-cut. The practical, behavioural and ideological changes that occurred in Kissi Kissi were all closely intertwined, and one could not occur without the others. Through discussions with my participants it became apparent that Tostan's program had indeed catalysed change in the community, but these changes did not consist of overcoming dualisms. Rather, by developing their capabilities and expanding their knowledge, community members were able to alter their way of *being* and *doing* in their day-to-day lives, which has changed the way they perceive the future and consequently impacted on their aspirations.

### 5.2 Aspirations and the 'Capacity to Aspire'

We have already identified aspirations to be culturally determined and dynamic, and formed in the 'thick' of social life, which encompasses personal beliefs, societal expectations and structural opportunities and constraints. Aspirations and the *capacity to* aspire are important to development processes as they provide an ethical horizon within which more concrete capabilities can be given meaning, substance and sustainability (Appadurai 2004:82). What's more, by exercising these capabilities people are able to move away from 'wishful thinking' to 'thoughtful wishing' (*ibid.*).

In the previous section, I described how Tostan's program has catalysed a form of social change in the community of Kissi Kissi. By developing their *capabilities* people have altered their ways of *being* and *doing*. Appadurai (2004) considers aspirations a capability in themselves. Therefore, if capabilities have changed, it would be reasonable to consider that aspirations might also have shifted.

When talking to my participants about their aspirations, the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the concept certainly came to light. Anyidoho et al. highlight two ways to conceptualise aspirations. The first relates to aspirations embodying some component of reality – that is what people *expect* to achieve. The second considers aspirations as 'hopes and dreams' which are not necessarily rooted in reality (2012:20). For the most part, my participants spoke of aspirations in terms of the first conceptualisation and what they realistically expected to achieve. But even within this particular framework, the multidimensional nature of aspirations was apparent. In fact three prominent dynamics emerged, which I have categorised as *universal* aspirations, *intergenerational* aspirations, and *tangible* aspirations.

In discussions about aspirations, participants did not express overly grand aspirations or 'idiosyncratic demands' (to borrow the term from Green (2013:90)), such as owning a car or living in a big house. None of the men or women expressed a desire to live as 'new [wo]men' in an altogether 'new society', or to be completely autonomous agents (Leve 2007:151).

Rather, the aspirations that my participants talked about were in many ways *universal*, relating in one way or another to their cultural construction of 'the good life'. When asked about their aspirations, participants talked about aspiring for a 'good' or 'positive future'. When probed as to what this might mean, common responses included peace and security, a good condition of health and access to health care, a good standard of housing, living and living condition, good education (especially for the young ones), or peace and harmony within the community. When asked what 'a good standard of living' would be, participants reiterated wanting good education for their children so they could have a better future, having good health, and enhancing their farming livelihoods (Malik and Mariama interviews Kissi Kissi 2013).

Another dimension that emerged through discussions of aspirations was a *generational* dynamic. All of the adult[22] men and women I spoke with expressed aspirations for their children and the young ones of the community generally. In fact, many of them articulated more specific aspirations for the young ones than they did for themselves. For the most part, they expressed a desire for their children to get a good education and develop skills that would improve their future. Many of the adults mentioned that they had not been fortunate to go to school, through Tostan's program they had come to recognise the right of children to receive a formal education and the value of this as a pathway to a wider range of futures that they could lay claim to (Green 2013:195). One mother told me;

> 'We[23] were not fortunate to go to school […] so that is what we want for the future of our children. We are taking them to school, when they learn they will graduate. They also get their own positions that the present generation are not [fortunate] to get because our parents did not take us to school. So we want our children to be in those positions – even president, ministers, teachers – so that they can have a brighter future' (Mariama interview Kissi Kissi 2013).

As discussed in section two, aspirations are determined in part by socioeconomic factors, and this includes social class structures, which are transmitted

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[22] Here I refer to the men and women I interviewed between the ages of 30-80 who were all married with children.
[23] Mariama refers to other women of her generation

intergenerational. The above example given by Mariama demonstrates how that cultural capital is able to change from one generation to the next. In developing their capabilities, and their aspirations for their children, the older generation was transferring new ideas to the younger ones about the value of education, along with the message that it would help to improve their futures. In addition, mothers who had developed skills also wanted to pass these onto their children, so that they could improve their futures. Here, Kady's story is particularly pertinent. Over the years, Kady had been fortunate enough to learn many different 'life skills'[24] which she wanted to pass on to her daughter;

> *'Whatever I am doing, I used to train my children [...] I have one daughter at home, she is 14 years old, she is an expert in this now – she can make pepper soup and tomato jam, pumpkin jam, mango jam, cashew jam, she can make all these jams'.*
> *'What would you like your daughter to do with these skills?'*
> *'It's a very good business, sustainable business. The jams don't spoil quickly [...] So I am planning that my daughter will keep those skills and then take great care of it and take it as a skill for her future so that she can use it as an income generating activity for herself and her family'.* (Kady interview Kissi Kissi 2013)

After speaking to several younger members of the community, I got the sense that these positive aspirations had trickled down the generations. One young woman told me that even though she had not been able to go to school, she wanted to learn more life skills as she saw this as a way to earn more money and improve her future. She also appreciated the importance of education and would ensure that her children attend school (Yahar interview Kissi Kissi 2013). Another boy, Yankuba, had very high ambitions to go to university and become a bank manager and move to the capital Banjul. He told me that with that position he would help his family and also ensure his children got a good education (Yaya interview Kissi Kissi 2013).

In addition to the universal wants and cross-generational aspirations described above, several participants spoke about more tangible objectives that would improve the living standard in one way or another, and even free their time. These tangible objectives included improved infrastructure, a new health facility, a primary school nearby, electricity, better farm equipment and machinery, and even an internet connection. Many of the women mentioned that better farm equipment, such as tractors, would reduce their labour work on the farm so that they could have more leisure time.

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[24] By 'life skills' participants referred to income generating activities such as carpentry skills, weaving, bag-making out of recycled materials, jam-making and the like. These skills were seen as providing additional income to supplement agricultural income. One girl mentioned that another partner had brought a carpentry program to the community but it had not lasted long, and the equipment was only a loan so not many people had benefitted from the project (Yahar interview Kissi Kissi 2013).

With this free time they would be able to focus on developing their other skills in order to generate additional income, as Kady told me;

> *'I want [my daughter] also to get good knowledge, good education. Getting Western education is not suffice. You may have your occupation or may be in a position, but if you have skills also you can use these skills and help your family from other sources, you know because one job cannot keep people nowadays. For me these have helped me because I am not doing a lot of labour work now, I am using most of my skills work and getting income out of it. So I am putting it in the mind of my daughter so that she will know that she will not depend only on labour work, that she can depend on these labour-saving works' (Kady interview Kissi Kissi 2013)*

The narratives recounted by Mariama and Kady examples oppose Ibrahim's discussion about the intergenerational transmission of failed aspirations. Whilst the parents I spoke with in Kissi Kissi had not received an education, or achieved those aspirations – indeed some of them had regrets that they had been taken out of school early – these aspirations or 'failed aspirations' were not being transmitted to the younger generation, rather a more positive message was being conveyed across generations.

It would be wrong to attribute all of these aspirations to Tostan's program alone as, despite Kissi Kissi's remoteness, many of my participants had connections with the world outside their own, usually from community members who had been fortunate enough to travel, or other relatives who had moved 'West'[25]. It is important to recognise the influence that these outside sources would have on community members, however, from the conversations I had with participants, I certainly got the sense that an overarching change had occurred in the community, a shift in consciousness and a change in habitus[26] (Bourdieu 1980), which had influenced people's wants and *aspirations* for the future.

Whilst the aspirations were certainly there, and changes had occurred in the community, I understood from the conversations I had with participants that other factors were affecting their ability or capacity to fulfil their aspirations. I sensed that their aspirations were *frustrated*.

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[25] In this instance, 'West' refers to Gambia's coastline in the West and also the West in terms of Western Europe and North America.

[26] Habitus is defined as a concept of structures, beliefs, attitudes and actions internalised by members of the same class (Bourdieu 1980).

### 5.3 Failed or 'Frustrated' Aspirations?

During the interviews I conducted in Kissi Kissi, a theme emerged that I had not initially anticipated. This related particularly to the *tangible objectives* I have identified in the previous section. Repeatedly, participants expressed a need for assistance from external sources such as partners or donors to help them further develop their community. They required support to improve infrastructure, build a health facility and secondary school in the area, or to provide tools, equipment and machinery[27], etc. When I asked if the community were doing anything themselves to achieve these objectives, different participants affirmed that they were working towards that. They told me they were saving collectively to buy some of the things they needed, Buba told me 'we are doing our effort but we have limitations' (interview Kissi Kissi 2013). Indeed, following Hannah Green's experience, many of my participants had high expectations of what they could achieve and also a belief in their ability to do so. Rather, what stopped them achieving their aspirations and objectives was not a lack of capacity at the human level, but instead a series of external structural constraints (2013:14). They were reliant on outside support in order to 'put into practice their knowledge', as Malik told me;

> *'Let Tostan find partners to help us sustain what we have, the knowledge we have learnt, for us to [put in to practice] the knowledge we need some equipment and materials and other support'* (Malik interview Kissi Kissi 2013).

From many of the interviews I conducted it became apparent that my participants wanted to use the knowledge and skills they had acquired to improve their economic situation. However, they were constrained by a lack of capital, resources and opportunities (Green 2013:196). Kady's story particularly stood out in this regard. She described how, over the years, she had acquired and developed numerous life skills. She had become very good at making different sized wallets from recycled bags and old cassette tape, and she was also skilled in food processing. Indeed she offered to show me all the certificates she had acquired as proof of her training. Kady was recognised in the community[28] and the wider region for her range of skills and also her aptitude for training other people[29]. In fact she told me how she was 'taking her expertises and exporting it to Senegal', and other communities in the region, to train other women in the skills that she had. When we talked about her aspirations, she spoke a lot about her skills and her plans to improve her knowledge, add more skills and 'get something out of

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[27] Participants expressed needs for a tractor, fertiliser, pesticides, farm machinery, and tools that would help them make use of their life skills.

[28] Several of the other women I spoke with recognised that Kady had many skills.

[29] Kady told me how Tostan's program had helped her to become a better manager and trainer, as she recognised the importance of communication and human rights.

that' through business and reinvestment. However, during our conversation I got the overarching impression that Kady was frustrated at an inability to move forward, despite her highly skilled position. She told me;

> *'The skills is here, but to apply it is the problem because there is no tools […] the materials are not with me. You cannot teach people without the materials […]. If we have all those equipments here, we can even teach and reduce our labour work. We will not concentrate on labour work anymore, more on these skills and it is very economically viable. At least when you get the knowledge you need to have resources to at least multiply your knowledge' (Kady interview Kissi Kissi 2013).*

Kady raised this point a number of times, also commenting that other NGOs in the region were using her knowledge, taking her to train other people, but she wasn't being compensated for her service, her time and her knowledge, only her travel costs were covered. She felt that if at least she had the necessary tools and equipment, then people could travel to her to learn those skills, which ultimately would be better for her. This frustration was indicative of a general feeling I detected among my participants, particularly from the adult men and women. They had developed an awareness of their situation, their environment and their realities, as well as an understanding of how to effect positive changes in their community – one could say they had experienced a process of empowerment. However, this greater awareness had triggered a set of new aspirations, objectives and needs which might not have developed in the same way were it not for participation in Tostan's program. Building on Green's experience again, I found that the lack of capacity for my participants to realise their aspirations came not from a psychological capacity i.e. an ideology of 'low' or 'failed' aspirations, but rather as a lack of opportunity to pursue them (2013:14), and for this reason I would argue their aspirations were *frustrated.* That is to say, despite their poverty, my participants did not have 'low' or 'failed' aspirations, nor was their 'aspirations window closed', as detailed above. Rather, a set of structural constraints were hindering the attainment of their aspirations. For example, some of my participants expressed an understanding of how to appeal to local agencies for say clean water, or improved infrastructure, but they also recognised that this was a slow and uncertain process that would take a long time. One participant told me;

> *'Although we can go and appeal for assistance, […] it is left with the people themselves […] to help us at any time the want to. […] It is gradual, everything is gradual, it is not overnight'* (Kady interview Kissi Kissi 2013).

Several of my participants also mentioned contact with other NGOs working in the area, aside from Tostan, that had 'taken [members of Kissi Kissi] for training', or were working to construct schools, and improve infrastructure, etc. in the area.

Given the lack of state presence in the area, the people I spoke with in Kissi Kissi revealed an awareness whereby appealing to development partners, NGOs and donors for sponsorship, grants or general assistance, was in fact a surer channel that would help them get to where they wanted to. Some participants commented;

> *'if at all we can get assistance from donors and partners on the side of infrastructural development, like a health facility nearby [...], it will help us' (Buba interview Kissi Kissi 2013).*

> *'if we have support from donors to help us, who can support on that [agricultural assistance], who can have somebody who can connect us with those people and support us – that will improve our living condition more than today' (Isatou interview Kissi Kissi 2013).*

Revealingly, in these appeals, none of my participants mentioned requiring support from local authorities or the state. This requires an examination of the wider social, economic and political structures in the Gambia, and the extent to which the state is 'visible' enough to lay claims to. Foucault's idea of 'governmentality' provides a useful tool for analysis here (1991). This concept refers to all processes by which the conduct of a population is governed[30], and in particular it concerns the welfare, care and security of a population within a territory (Sharma 2006:83 no.7). The advent of the neoliberal era has witnessed the emergence of new institutional bodies that take on modes of governmentality that were formerly assigned to the state (*ibid.* 61). In Kissi Kissi, and the wider URR, it would seem that NGOs and development agencies are perceived as the 'go-to' bodies for those requiring support and assistance. Indeed, altogether, my participants had quite a repertoire of external agencies that they had come into contact with and sought support from, rather than appealing to state bureaucracies. It seemed that collectively, these non-state agencies were both assuming the responsibility for, and simultaneously relied upon to provide the support that the state was incapable of delivering or disinclined to provide. This raises questions for further exploration concerning the role, ability, or even retreat of the postcolonial state from its governmental responsibilities of enhancing welfare for its national population, and instead allowing for a range of non-state actors to assume some, or all, of these obligations (Sharma 2006:65). In addition, this raises questions about the emergence of

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[30] This includes institutions and agencies, including the state; by discourse, norms, and identities; and by self-regulation, technique for the disciplining and care of the self, as well as the mechanisms of government that are found within state institutions and outside them (Gupta and Ferguson 2002: 989).

a potential 'culture of development' whereby recipients and beneficiaries become reliant on these external sources to bridge the gap between their own capabilities and their (frustrated) aspirations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored the way that ideas relating to development, aspirations and frustrations interplay in the community of Kissi Kissi in rural Gambia. By examining the impact of Tostan's CEP on my participants' day-to-day realities and thoughts about the future, I got a sense of what this program meant to individual community members, and the interconnectivity of these themes.

My participants discussed a range of practical, behavioural and ideological changes that the community had effected. These too were closely intertwined as, without an ideological change, behavioural and practical transformations would not have come about, and vice-versa. Certainly, from the conversations I had with members of Kissi Kissi, it became apparent that Tostan's program has served as a catalyst for development in the community. Through knowledge, learning and discursive practices, members of Kissi Kissi have been exposed to new ideas, they have been able to analyse their reality and conceptualise a vision of what is possible. In this sense, they have developed their capabilities allowing them to effect changes in their ways of *being* and *doing.*

Discussions with participants relating to their aspirations highlighted the dynamic and multidimensional nature of the concept, and revealed what I have termed *frustrations.* Though further study is required to expose and examine these constraints in more depth, the frustrations in Kissi Kissi were linked to structural constraints relating to capital and access to resources, which were hindering the attainment of aspirations. Contrary to the body of literature which has associated poverty with 'failed aspirations' or 'low aspirations', I have argued that my participants in Kissi Kissi expressed realistic aspirations and had faith in their own capabilities to achieve them. They were not restricted by a psychological or ideological capacity to aspire, rather by a set of external constraints, which resulted in a sense of frustration.

By focusing on individual lived realities and experiences; by giving a voice to people in their own local context (Fetterman 2010); and by engaging an anthropocentric analysis of aspirations vis-à-vis development in the community of Kissi Kissi, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how people engage their own development. In doing so, it responds to a call from within anthropology for a more constructive rapport with development. By examining the multifarious nature of aspirations and 'bringing the future back in' to understandings of the future (Appadurai 2004), this paper makes an important contribution to a burgeoning body of work exploring *aspirations* in more depth.

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**APPENDIX 1:** *Information Sheet*

## University of Sussex

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

*How does Tostan's community empowerment program (CEP) affect individual's wishes and aspirations for the future?*

Hello,

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

I am doing my MA dissertation in Anthropology of Development and Social Transformation at the University of Sussex, UK about the effects of a community empowerment program on personal aspirations and wishes for future.
The purpose of the study is to understand how participants of the CEP experience the program, how views and daily activities have changed since the program began, and how individuals see their future as a result of the program.

My aim is to gather interviews from approximately 10 community members where the CEP has taken place. Interviews will take about one hour and we can stop at any time. I am conducting the study with the help of Tostan, however I am not a staff member of Tostan. I am doing his research as a student of the University of Sussex, School of Global Studies. This research has been approved by the School of Global Studies ethical review process and will be completed in September 2013.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. Participating is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without prejudice or negative consequences. Non-participation will not affect your rights or access to services.

Your help and participation in this study would be very important in order to further understanding of the topic. The information collected will be kept strictly confidential and your privacy and anonymity will be ensured. The information will be kept in my custody only and used exclusively for my MA dissertation as described above. After this, it will be destroyed.

If you need any more information, please feel free to contact me on either of these email addresses ████████████████████████████████ Alternatively you may contact my supervisor ████████████████
If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, you may contact ████████████████████████████
████████████████████████████

Thank you!          Date:

**APPENDIX 2:** *Consent Form*

# US
## University of Sussex

**CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS**

| | |
|---|---|
| **PROJECT TITLE**: | *Development, Aspirations and Frustrations: Experiences of* |
| | *Social Change in rural Gambia* |
| **Project Approval Reference**: | |

I agree to take part in the above University of Sussex research project. I have had the project explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:
- Be interviewed by the researcher
- Allow the interview to be photographed / audio taped

I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that I disclose will lead to the identification of any individual in the reports on the project, either by the researcher or by any other party.

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

| | |
|---|---|
| Name: | |
| Signature | |
| Date: | |