

## OVERVIEW

Over the last three decades, Tostan has been internationally recognized as a leader among development practitioners due to its success in engaging communities through its Community Empowerment Program (CEP), a three-year, human-rights based, holistic and culturally-relevant educational experience that empowers people to improve their well-being.

As a learning organization, Tostan is committed to deepening the understanding of how the CEP contributes to the sustainable well-being of partner communities. Building upon the existing vast body of internal and external evaluations and research studies, in 2019-20 the organization made an important strategic investment in this area by commissioning an external evaluation partner, IDinsight, to carry out a Descriptive Study of the CEP. The study, carried out in five countries, researched community realities three to five years after completing the program. It focused on the sustainability of program results and—in particular—of the social dynamics and community organization mechanisms set in motion or accelerated by the CEP. The study was also important for informing the design of a future rigorous impact evaluation. This memo summarizes what Tostan sees as key takeaways from the study and future applications.

## THE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

In early 2019 Tostan selected IDinsight through a competitive search process to conduct a “descriptive study” that sought to capture the state of communities after the end of the CEP through research across five countries (Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal). Trained interviewers, totally independent from Tostan, collected data in 50 communities, including through observation, 416 in-depth interviews, and 108 focus groups. IDinsight’s report, *The Current State of Tostan’s Community Empowerment Program and Diffusion Communities*, details the process followed, the methodologies used, and the findings. This memo is designed to be read in conjunction with the main findings and research recommendations presented in the executive summary of the report.



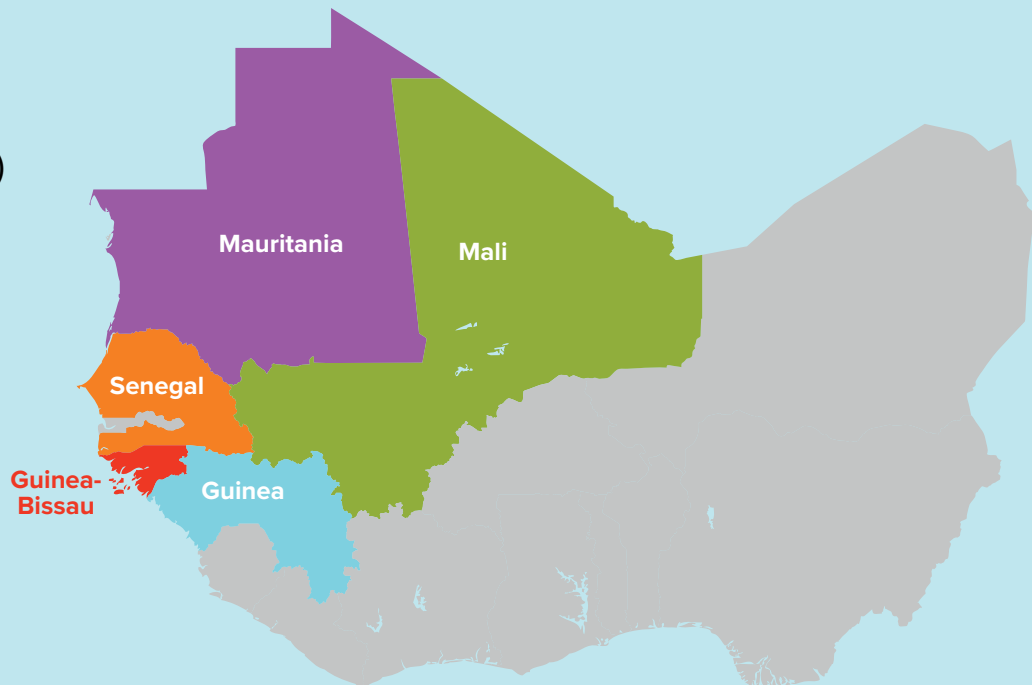
## Study by the Numbers

50 villages (10 per country)

416 in-depth interviews

108 focus groups

50 village observations



## STUDY FINDINGS: Tostan's Key Takeaways

Tostan is encouraged by the main findings of the study, which in general tended to confirm Tostan's expectations about realities in communities after the completion of the CEP. In particular, the study was valuable for Tostan to increase its understanding of the importance and sustainability of positive social dynamics that influence individual and collective well-being. Tostan also gained a useful overview of how a measurement strategy for these elements can be developed. Tostan will apply the learning from this study as part of its current revision of the CEP and also in view of the rigorous external impact evaluation of the program planned to begin in 2021.

### Social Dynamics and Community Well-Being

The report notes that *"Across the study, we found communities referring to social changes as among the most important changes related to their well-being. Social dynamics are characterized by discussion and broad participation and by an increase in respect or harmony—between men and women and in general,"* and that *"Many study respondents highlight this harmony as one of the most important social changes they have experienced."* For Tostan, this and related findings reinforce **the importance of placing attention on the interpersonal, relational aspects of well-being.**

Relational well-being is valuable unto itself, as manifested by the finding, *"Residents of CEP villages perceive that violence towards women has decreased."* In addition, relational well-being appears to be a foundation for significant, sustainable progress in the pursuit and attainment of other aspects of well-being, like health and education. The evidence reconfirms Tostan's understanding that the needs and rights of all are more fully considered in community discussions and actions as a result of the new social dynamics, with reaffirmed respect for all and greater participation of women and youth. The findings are consistent with feedback Tostan receives regularly from community members and facilitators who report that as a result of the program, women take part in decisions and, thanks to the higher degree of respectful consultation, there is less conflict and decisions taken are beneficial for the whole community.

## Emergence of Women and Youth

The report specifically notes, *“Evidence indicates the participation of women in discussion and in reaching decisions. Husbands discuss decisions with their wives and village leaders discuss projects and aspirations with community members. This suggests agreement, by men and women alike, that everyone can and should participate in both household and community affairs. This also suggests an underlying capacity for women to form opinions and share them.”*



Tostan sees in this a clear indication of social change, reflecting the empowerment of women who previously were not consulted on many family and community decisions.

Study findings such as, *“Evidence also suggests that the positive value of respect, which is very strong in West African communities, extends to women and youth who also feature in discussions,”* confirm extensive existing evidence gathered by Tostan that addressing gender implicitly in a respectful manner generates significant, sustainable change in the situation of women. For Tostan, the findings suggest the CEP inspires communities to fundamentally reframe the positive value of respect and thereby creates the social conditions for the empowerment of women and youth. Rather than addressing gender inequality explicitly by pointing to and passing judgement on the situation of women which can cause backlash, Tostan addresses gender inequality implicitly, mainly through its human rights sessions. The CEP also does this by establishing a democratically selected Community Management Committee made up of more than 50% women members, and by emphasizing the principles of inclusion and non-discrimination.

The traditional authority of men and older community members is not usurped, while respect extends to women and youth in unprecedented ways as they now participate in and influence decisions. Change is peaceful and recognized as beneficial for all. Women take up and hold leadership positions in the communities, and they feature in discussions not only with husbands and other men in their household but also in village meetings. All the while, men and village and traditional leaders are recognized as ultimate decision-makers, as is mandated in Chapter 4, verse 34 of the Qur’an. It is therefore not surprising, in the rural West African Muslim contexts where Tostan operates, that *“Respect for traditional authority of men and older community members remains, with husbands in the home, and village leaders in public seen as final decision makers who consult others before exercising this authority.”* It is important to view this finding through a West African lens, where women in the village setting would not normally be allowed to discuss and weigh in on decisions with her husband or to speak in public. Therefore, Tostan’s interpretes the findings as major empowerment of women has taken place — an empowerment that is often invisible to commonly used measures that relate women’s empowerment to taking decisions independent of their husbands.



## Abandonment of Female Genital Cutting (FGC)

Tostan is encouraged by the finding, “Across all five study countries we find evidence of social norms against FGC in most CEP villages.” Tostan was not surprised by the finding that FGC was the subject of discussion, both by residents and by advocates or organizations conducting awareness-raising and that Tostan was frequently credited with these awareness-raising efforts.

Tostan is also not surprised these patterns were much weaker in diffusion villages and that “Despite the overall trend, there are some CEP villages in which larger proportions of people reported that they are in favor of FGC.” Given the time it takes for the process of abandonment to take hold, especially in areas of high prevalence,

the continued presence of support for the practice is expected. Finding that support for FGC was not found in most communities where Tostan conducted the CEP classes, but rather in diffusion communities is also not surprising for Tostan. The findings highlight the importance of measuring social expectations regarding FGC, both at individual and community level, at baseline and following the completion of the program, to determine whether a change in the social norm may be under way even though some support for the practice endures.

*“FGC was practiced here before, now it is prohibited and we have also received lessons on the consequences of this practice so the [mother] will not think of doing it.”*

— Man, Sintcham-Dicori village (CEP), Guinea-Bissau

## RECOMMENDED FURTHER RESEARCH

The research experience and the Descriptive Study findings are also useful for informing the design of future research. Tostan agrees with IDinsight’s recommendations related to further research and evaluations and is currently organizing an evaluability assessment of the CEP, planned to be complete by summer 2021. It will be an important step for the design of a rigorous impact evaluation. Undertaken by an external partner, the study will examine and refine the theory of change at the heart of Tostan’s CEP and explore possibilities of conducting an experimental or quasi-experimental study to determine the impacts of the CEP in Senegal.

## FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Findings from this study for the most part aligned with Tostan’s expectations about the state of communities years after Tostan completed the implementation of the CEP. Combined with previous research and evaluations, this study reinforces Tostan’s commitment to the fundamental principles reflected in the content and approach of the CEP: **dignity, respect, and human rights for everyone, with attention to those who least enjoy them, including women and youth.** The overall process surrounding this study was highly instructive and important for future research of all kinds. Tostan thanks all those who contributed to the various phases of this study. Special thanks to IDinsight for their expertise and collaboration throughout. To read the research report, visit the evaluation and research section of Tostan’s website (tostan.org).

January 2021