The Transformative Power of Democracy and Human Rights in Nonformal Education: The Case of Tostan

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Abstract
This case study analyzes the introduction of democracy and human rights into the educational program of Tostan, a nongovernmental organization working in Africa. The authors show how Tostan's original educational approach created a meaningful context for integrating democracy and human rights into its curriculum, a process that took place from 1995 to 2003. The integration produced unexpected results: a participant-led social movement to end harmful practices such as female genital cutting and child and/or forced marriage. After describing the phases of curricular revision in the case, the authors draw out themes to show how the phases interacted to produce social transformation. A visioning exercise at the beginning of the program created a discursive context for the introduction of democracy and human rights, the democracy and human rights sessions created critical reflection about past practices, and awareness of an international human rights framework emboldened participants to undertake actions that created new social norms.

Keywords
human rights, nonformal education, Africa, social transformation

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This case study describes how a human rights curricular innovation in a nonformal adult education program in Sub-Saharan Africa empowered learners and positively transformed their communities. The program was developed and implemented by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Tostan, located in Senegal, West Africa. Since 1991, Tostan has worked primarily in Senegal, but in the past 5 years it has expanded to other African countries, currently Djibouti, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, and Somalia. As of May 2009, Tostan reported 825 centers in the above African countries; its educational program reached 54,740 direct participants (27,163 women, 6,901 men, 12,053 girls, and 8,683 boys); centers in Mali opened in 2010 (www.tostan.org). Amid calls for the revitalization of nonformal education in Africa (Minnis, 2006), Tostan offers a unique opportunity to study the potential of nonformal education within a democracy and human rights framework.

Between the late 1980s and mid-1990s, Tostan developed and implemented a literacy-based curriculum, one that did not include democracy and human rights. This original curriculum resulted from the work of a cross-cultural team that interacted with adult learners in rural Senegalese communities. The team integrated interactive facilitation practices into its pedagogy and drew from the experiences of learners to create a curriculum, offered in local languages, that included problem solving, health, literacy, and management (Fredo, 1995). Between 1991, when Tostan was founded as an NGO, and 1995, the team refined this problem- and literacy-based nonformal educational program in more than 50 rural Senegalese communities.

Tostan's original approach to literacy in the indigenous languages of its learners distinguished itself from formal schooling; at the time, French was the only (and preferred) language in state-sponsored schools (Welch, 1995, p. 268). In its early years, Tostan co-created its curriculum with rural women who had even less access to schooling than men. Tostan's use of the term nonformal for its original program is not surprising, given the widespread use of that term at the time (Fordham, 1993; Rogers, 2004). It continues to use the term today because it focuses on learners' educational needs with a curriculum that they help to create, a central characteristic of nonformal education (Fordham, 1993; cf., Rogers, 2004, for a history and contemporary criticisms of this term, including those who claim it is now confusing and outdated).

The curricular transformation began in 1995, when Tostan's educational team, working with participants, discovered the significance of democracy and human rights for learning, particularly about women's health. In this context, democracy and human rights emerged from praxis, as "generative themes" as the organization and its community participants interacted. For Freire (2002), a generative theme is one that opens for examination what has previously been thought to be "given" or fixed in a situation, and these givens frequently involve status differentials. As participants raised questions about democracy, human rights, and health care, Tostan became co-investigators with them as they researched problematic situations in their communities. Participants then responded to that information and those responses led the organization to create new learning materials and opportunities. For instance, as we show later, learning about the human right to voice one's opinions in public discussions opened the possibility for
women to articulate their health concerns in village meetings and to the press. Tostan developed new interactive learning modules on democracy, human rights, and women's health in the same interactive way it had its original curriculum.

Participants responded to these new modules in an unexpected way: they linked their new knowledge to community organization and social action. In the rural community of Malicounda Bambara, for example, participants researched the health conditions of their community and found that certain practices were harmful. As a result, they reached out to others in their community and in 1997 collectively abandoned the centuries-old practice of female genital cutting (FGC). Other classes organized peaceful marches against violence against women and child and/or forced marriage. Participants started reaching out to their intramarrying network as they realized that they could not abandon certain harmful health practices, such as FGC, without intercommunity consensus (Mackie, 2000). Because of participant and community interest, engagement, and social action, in 2000, Tostan's team revised its original curriculum: it placed the new interactive modules on democracy and human rights first in its curricular sequence. Today, Tostan describes its new educational approach as a holistic, human rights-based program of nonformal education.

The above chronology paints in broad strokes a picture of the curricular reform. The fuller story is far more complex. The purpose of this case study is to explore how democracy and human rights were integrated into the original program and how the new curriculum intensified participant learning and led to unprecedented social mobilization. Our focus is on Tostan's nonformal educational practices, both curricular and pedagogical.

Tostan's original curriculum has been described as learner centered and culturally based (Easton, 1998; Fredo, 1995; Welch, 1995, pp. 266-273). For example, Welch (1995) found that Tostan effectively integrated traditional West African proverbs, songs, stories, plays, and dances into its pedagogical approach. Learner involvement and integration of cultural practices have been recognized as important background for understanding Tostan's turn to democracy and human rights (e.g., Easton, Monkman, & Miles, 2009; Easton, Monkman, & Miles, 2003; Mackie, 2000; Melching, 1999, 2002). The activities of Tostan and its communities' responses to the new human rights curriculum, especially public abandonments of FGC and child and/or forced marriage, have been reported widely in the media (e.g., Gillespie, 2007a, 2007b; Kristof & WuDunn, 2009; Reaves, 2007).

In addition to descriptive research and media accounts of Tostan's nonformal education program, experimental studies have documented the effects of Tostan's program in communities in which it has been implemented. In their study for the Population Council, Diop et al. (2004) evaluated the outcomes of Tostan's nonformal education program in 20 villages in which it had been implemented compared to 20 control villages where the program had not been implemented. The researchers concluded that "the impact of the Tostan program on women's and men's well-being has been substantial" (p. ii). Using this study, Gryboski, Yinger, Dios, Worley, and Fikree (2006) compared five community-based programs deemed effective for improving
health care. Of the programs, Tostan ranked highest for community participation in establishing health goals.

Based on the Diop et al. (2004) study and another Population Council study (Diop, Badge, Ouoba, & Melching, 2003), a study by the Innocenti Research Center (2005) on ending FGC concluded that Tostan had “achieved remarkable results” (p. 24). In a long-term evaluation, Yoder, writing for UNICEF (2008), concluded, “Tostan’s intervention was globally beneficial to all populations in the zones where the NGO was active” (p. 90).

Some of the above evaluations also documented challenges and problems, primarily with aspects of program implementation. For example, Yoder, writing for UNICEF (2008), pointed to the importance—from the start—of infrastructure that is necessary for communities to sustain projects after program completion. As a result, Tostan is even more careful in assessing potential communities for its program. Diop et al. (2004) found that some of the village participants who attended only part of the program (the first year) forgot what they had learned over the next year. As a result, Tostan discontinued partial implementations and revised the workbooks used in the second part of the program to reinforce early learning. Diop et al. (2003) and UNICEF (2008) found attrition sometimes problematic; participants who had more pressing duties that affected survival of their families missed or stopped attending classes. The above two studies were carried out while the new curriculum was in transition. Since 2003 Tostan has worked with participating communities to strengthen their organizational infrastructure during program implementation. For example, in addition to offering classes, it establishes and trains Community Management Committees (CMCs) to help carry out projects designed in Tostan classes, a change that we discuss below.

Theoretical Considerations

Although we do not have space here to develop the issues, we recognize that Tostan’s work is relevant to several important debates. As an international NGO, Tostan faces the challenges identified in recent discussions in the field of development (e.g., Bebbington, Hickey, & Mitlin, 2008; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hickey & Mohan, 2004), especially given its use of participatory methods with socially and economically marginalized populations. In identifying social networks as a source of transformation, Tostan provides an example of how an NGO might expand the site of learning and action from the individual in the classroom to larger public spaces where participants engage democratically in decisions they deem important to their lives. Yet Tostan must deal with complex interactions as it relates to state and local governments and donors, interactions which might constrain social action given broader systems of political and social power relations.

Tostan adapted its original nonformal program “to the specific needs and learning preferences of rural Senegalese women” (Melching, 1999, p. 17). The team empowered program participants to voice their understandings of their situations and designed a pedagogical approach “based on intimacy, narrative, nurturing, interdependence,
and contextual thought" (p. 18), characteristics of feminist pedagogy at the time (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). The women-centered pedagogy actively engaged women in determining the future of their own education and that of their community (Kandiyoti, 1998/2000; Mohanty, 1991). But the case also reveals how a women-centered approach became problematic from within the new democracy and human rights framework. Tostan decided to include men as participants in its program, a move toward gender integration and inclusiveness that Chant and Gutmann (2002, p. 271) found “rare” in the development world.

Although Tostan did not set out to end FGC, from August 1997 to December 2009, its educational program has resulted in numerous collective declarations of abandonments (4,121 communities in Senegal, 364 in Guinea, 48 in The Gambia, 34 in Somalia, 23 in Burkina Faso) (www.Tostan.org). Tostan’s educational approach is implicated in the controversies surrounding the nature and harmfulness of FGC (e.g., see Boyle, 2005, for a summary of the social complexities surrounding FGC; Shweder, 2000, for an argument for the cultural integrity of its practice). In her analysis of the FGC debates, Shell-Duncan (2008) pointed to Tostan’s human rights educational approach as an alternative to more legalistic and/or exclusively health-based Western approaches that have frequently lacked understanding of communally based cultures. Odinkalu (2000) argued that, for many Africans, human rights language has become specialized and thus inaccessible. Merry (2006) showed how NGOs that have become relatively successful on the ground have “translated” human rights into local terms even as these NGOs “give local groups voice in global settings” (p. 104).

Attempts to embed democracy and human rights in nonformal educational programs are controversial because of the criticisms of human rights declarations and conventions (Baxi, 1997). Human rights as a set of abstract principles can seem to stand apart from ordinary experience, and progressive educators who want to honor the sociocultural context of an educational setting can face challenges in teaching them. Paulo Freire (2002) and John Dewey (1944), for example, emphasized the need to begin educational efforts with “the concrete, existential, present situation of real people” (Freire, 2002, p. 93) and their thinking about “developing situations” already familiar and meaningful to them (Dewey, 1944, p. 126).

In an analysis of the potential of human rights education, Talbott (2005) described two pitfalls: (a) When human rights documents are perceived as a Western phenomenon imposed upon communities from the outside, their use is experienced as an act of moral imperialism and paternalism; (b) yet if one embraces moral relativism, then any shared traditional practices within a culture become educationally worthy, and educators have no grounds on which to participate with the community in fostering social change. Talbott argued that Tostan has avoided these two pitfalls by “provid[ing] a model for bottom-up social change based on human rights” (p. 10).

If Tostan has avoided pitfalls, it is because its educational approach is learner-centered, nonprescriptive, and rooted in local cultural practices. In the eight African countries where Tostan works, the National Coordinators and their administrative staff, supervisors, and facilitators are all African (www.Tostan.org). Diouf, Sheckley,
and Kehrghan (2000) underscored the value to adult Senegalese learners of instruction that built upon their everyday experiences and engaged them in meaningful dialogue, reflection, and participatory research. An-Na’im (2002) argued that religion is a key factor in successful development efforts in Africa; as we will show, Tostan has worked respectfully with participants’ religious beliefs and closely with religious leaders, especially as it introduced human rights into its curriculum. From its start, then, Tostan has involved learners in how and what they learn; nonetheless, the new sessions on democracy and human rights intensified deliberation and dialogue in the classes, dialogue that led to praxis—“reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (Freire, 2002, p. 126).

This case explores how the new curriculum created critical capacity both in participants and in Tostan as each responded to the other. What practices in the original curriculum engaged Tostan’s adult learners and led them to embrace the sessions on democracy and human rights? How did this curricular material emerge, and how did the team integrate it into the original curriculum? What new pedagogical practices did Tostan develop for the new sessions? A case study allowed us to explore complex relationships between participant engagement and Tostan’s educational responses and to discover key practices that led to enhanced learning and community-led social action.

Method

Our aim in this case study is to deepen understanding of Tostan’s praxis during the period of curricular reform. What distinguishes a case is its “boundedness and activity patterns” (Stake, 2008, p. 121). We bound our study by focusing on the introduction of the new sessions, the accompanying pedagogical practices, and the shift in the nature of participant engagement from 1992 to 2003. The data collected for the case included research studies (cited above); internal Tostan documents, such as annual reports and press releases and video documentaries (www.tostan.org); Tostan: Breakthrough in Senegal (Melching, 1999); media accounts (e.g., Kasdon, 2005; Reaves, 2007); a historical document about the origins of Tostan (Harrell-Bond, 1981); and in-depth interviews with Melching, who was on the cultural team that developed Tostan’s original literacy program and was directly involved with the curricular transformation. (Other key members of this original team left the organization long ago or have died.) The interviews with Melching, founder and Executive Director of Tostan, involved first establishing a chronology of events and related practices based on her direct observations in the field. Open-ended questions encouraged reflectiveness about the meanings of actions and events, especially for future actions undertaken by Tostan and its participants during the implementation of the new curriculum.

All interviews with Melching were transcribed and coded; internal documents, descriptive and empirical studies, and media accounts were also coded. The coding allowed us to organize the data by identifying critical phases of the curricular change. The documents described above allowed us to triangulate the data, which provided, for example, a check on Melching’s interview accounts of the curricular
transformation. By using data from multiple sources and perspectives, we could "clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 2008, p. 133). For example, Reaves’s (2007) and UNICEF’s (2008) accounts of the 1997 Malicounda Bambara’s first abandonment of FGC involved interviews with participants and were compared to Melching’s accounts. Any discrepancies between Melching’s interview accounts and accounts in the above archival documents were clarified in further interviews. We decided to co-create the case together rather than use extensive quotations from Melching. After creating the case, we identified educational practices as themes that were critical to enhanced participant learning and community-led social action.

We are not only collaborators on this research project but also siblings, a relationship that affected our study. The potential disadvantage of this relationship is the loss of a critical outsider’s perspective; the advantage is a rich research context, as we have spent years discussing and writing informally to each other about Tostan’s interactive approaches. Our aims here are descriptive and theoretically interrogative.

The Case

The case begins with a brief review of Tostan’s original nonformal education program, particularly the practices central to the curricular reform. We then describe the following phases of curricular change: (a) the introduction of a visioning exercise that coincided with (b) the introduction of women’s and children’s rights and women’s health, (c) the inclusion of sessions on democracy, (d) the transition from women’s and children’s rights to people’s rights, (e) the recognition of the importance of activating social networks for sustaining learning and social change, and (f) the implementation of the new curricular sequencing. In the last section of the case, we briefly describe the actual content of and some pedagogical exercises in the transformed curriculum.

The Context for the Curriculum Transformation

The origin of Tostan’s educational approach can be traced to 1976, when Melching established Démb Ak Tey (Yesterday and Today), a children’s center in a low-income area of Dakar, Senegal (Harrell-Bond, 1981). With Senegalese cultural specialists, Melching published educational materials in Wolof, the lingua franca of Senegal, testing them out with hundreds of street children who flocked to the center. To expand their audience, the team produced the first radio program for Senegalese children; they used traditional songs, stories, and proverbs that they collected and recorded as they traveled throughout Senegal. As the popularity of these radio programs grew, the team collected more cultural materials and integrated information about hygiene, health, and the environment into familiar songs and stories.

To develop more culturally relevant learning materials, Melching and the team moved to Saam Njaay, a rural village located 2 hours north of Dakar, where no one had attended public schools. Living there for 3 years (1982 to 1985), Melching realized
that any educational activities had to take into account the extraordinary challenges the community faced—for example, a lack of access to resources, services, and information about health care. Because conditions were so dire, team members decided to embed basic information about hygiene and health into the literacy modules that they started developing at the request of community members. They refined a pedagogical approach in dialogue with participants and experimented with integrating African cultural practices, such as singing, storytelling, and performing, and pedagogical strategies, such as consensus building and mediation, with information on health care, as they had done for the radio programs. The team’s culturally based approach earned the trust of El Hadji Moustapha Ndiaye, village chief and religious leader, who became Melching’s close consultant and supporter as the team worked on this grassroots nonformal initiative.

From her work in Saam Njaay, Melching developed a six-module basic education program that was tested with other NGOs in the region of Kaolack; the program included problem-solving skills, hygiene, health, literacy, mathematics, and management skills. Rural village women especially responded to the classes and soon began taking a more active role in their communities (Melching, 1999). In 1988, the team partnered with UNICEF to expand the program into other regions and other national languages.

In 1991, Melching established Tostan as an NGO. In Wolof, tostagan means “breakthrough” as in the hatching of an egg; it connotes “spreading” and “sharing.” While Melching attended the University of Dakar from 1974 through 1975, she met renowned African scholar Cheik Anta Diop, who mentored her until his death in 1986. He talked with her about the educational significance of the word tostagan for describing the sharing and spreading of knowledge by people themselves in their own language and using their own cultural traditions.

From the beginning, Tostan’s educational practices have diametrically opposed more authoritarian pedagogy prevalent in the French-model school system in Senegal. Teachers are called facilitators and students participants. Almost always of the same ethnic group as the participants, facilitators live in villages and teach in the language of the participants. Facilitators themselves have frequently been participants. Tostan’s long-term facilitator training focuses on helping facilitators unlearn stereotypes of the teacher as authority and the student as passive recipient. For example, their training involves reflective exercises that encourage them to look at learning in terms of everyday life situations and to identify structural power relationships that might adversely affect full participation and equal interactions between learners.

Facilitators are supported by supervisors, most of whom have been facilitators. Supervisors collaborate with facilitators and community-elected leaders to reinforce learning and collective action in 7 to 10 villages; the supervisors communicate with regional coordinators who report to the staff in an office in Thiès, a large city 60 miles from Dakar. Communication flows back and forth among Tostan facilitators and staff. The network structure assures that new strategies are shared widely and that problems are addressed by a number of experienced people.
The Five Phases of Tostan's Curricular Reform

Tostan's curriculum has grown inductively and organically out of interactions with participants. Still, in its evolution over time, key events and responses stood out in the data. Our retrospective analysis revealed five phases. Here, we portray those events and their interrelationship.

The introduction of visioning. In 1992, before the introduction of democracy and human rights sessions, Tostan’s facilitators, supervisors, and even an outside evaluator reported that Tostan participants were having some difficulty understanding the content of the problem-solving module, which introduced them to a typical problem-solving process (e.g., identifying and analyzing the problem, choosing appropriate solutions, planning and implementing the solution, and evaluating to see if the problem has been solved effectively). Class participants were not always able to explain why they were using the process. Working collaboratively, the Tostan pedagogical team began investigating the sources of the difficulties and found that the problem-solving module produced a list that lacked an integrating framework.

The pedagogical team determined that the curriculum should include a phase when participants could share what they envisioned for their own and the community’s future. The team added introductory sessions in which facilitators asked participants, “What do you want your village to look like in 5 years? Where do you want to be?” In the new sessions, facilitators continued to use traditional African methods, such as sitting in a circle, allowing each person to express his or her ideas, and coming to consensus using negotiation and mediation (Melching, 2002). When class members described their aspirations for the future, the facilitator then asked, “How can we achieve our goals as a community? What do we need to know about our community? What problems must we solve in order to achieve our vision?” The sessions on visioning turned out to be highly relevant to the introduction of democracy and human rights.

The introduction of women's and children's rights. In 1995, a women’s research team, formed by Tostan, conducted focus groups for over a year to design the module on early childhood development. The team asked open-ended questions of thousands of former Tostan female participants about early childhood development. Over and over, the team heard women state that they wanted to understand their own bodies first and then learn about child development. During this time, one of the team member’s friends had a fourth child, and the doctors told her that if she carried any more children, she could face dire health consequences. She asked them to tie her tubes after the birth, but when she woke up from her Cesarean section, the doctors told her they had not done the procedure because her husband would not authorize it.

Startled and angered by the doctors’ decision, the team investigated its legal basis. Working with a local human rights lawyer and using international instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which had been ratified by the Senegalese government, the team decided to investigate the hospital’s decision. With human rights instruments in hand, the team discussed the decision with the director
of the hospital, who, to the team’s surprise, apologized and promised in the future that they would not require the husband’s consent. From this interaction, the team realized that human rights could be a powerful tool for supporting women and defending their rights to health and survival.

After discussing the findings from the interviews, the team honored the women’s requests and created a module with sessions on women’s health first, followed by one on early childhood development. Given team members’ experiences with human rights, they also decided to introduce sessions on human rights before those on women’s health. The team had discovered that without knowledge of one’s human rights, such as the right to express one’s views, women could not effectively advocate for their own and their children’s health care. If women participants just received information on health, they would not be able to take action. Tostan also introduced sessions on children’s rights before the sessions on early childhood development.

The inclusion of sessions on democracy. Tostan added visioning and women’s health and early childhood development sessions to the six original modules and then intensified its work on new curricular sessions on democracy. Participants in many Senegalese villages had been asking facilitators for more educational sessions after completing the sixth module. Many communities explicitly requested information about democracy. At the time, public talk about democracy saturated radio and television, often in contrast to information about brutal dictatorships (see Welch, 1995, for general background on Senegal and its experiences with democracy). Now getting requests from communities in Guinea for the program, Tostan learned that they too were interested in democracy. Communities wanted to know what democracy meant in terms of everyday life practices; they knew that dictatorships had led to suffering but were not sure what was involved in the practice of democracy.

Following its participatory approach, Tostan conducted research to uncover traditional practices that embodied democratic processes. In many communities, for example, the village chief listened to everyone’s ideas. It is important to note that frequently men’s ideas were shared in the circle under the tree in public meetings; women were consulted privately, in what was described as pillow participation. Researchers learned that the meetings—private and public—frequently involved building consensus among those with different points of view. The inclusion of good leadership and decision-making practices became integral to the new visioning sessions. Knowledge of democracy helped participants articulate their goal of a community in which all members could participate publicly in decision making. The sessions linked valued local practices with new information on issues such as equality, voting, government duties, and citizen rights and responsibilities. Tostan tested the new democracy sessions in different regions. In the beginning, the men were particularly interested in these sessions; women continued to respond enthusiastically to the women’s health sessions, which emphasized women’s rights.

The transition from women’s and children’s rights to people’s rights. When Tostan implemented the women’s health module, facilitators reported to their coordinators and supervisors that the men were worried about what the women were learning about
their rights in these classes. In contrast to the women, who were excited about their classes, the men appeared demoralized in private and defensive in public settings where sensitive issues, such as family planning, were considered. Thinking the program would lead to problems in the community, some men decided to close down Tostan classes. When learning about children's rights, some parents also became defensive, asking about their rights as parents. Such reaction to focusing specifically on women's and children's rights challenged the pedagogical team to reexamine its strategies. In a seminar in 2000 devoted to analyzing the resistance to the women's and children's rights classes, the team had a breakthrough: Tostan had to conceive of its educational mission as advancing people's rights. Because Tostan had a vision of human dignity for all, it needed to focus its educational program on human rights for all, including men, women, and children.

The recognition of the importance of activating social networks. In 1996, before the breakthrough described above, the team was testing the new women's rights and health curriculum in 30 communities that had expressed interest in this extension of the program. In 1997, in the village of Malicounda Bambara, studying the new curriculum led to a dramatic decision: 35 mothers decided to end the practice of FGC (see Gillespie, 2007b; Reaves, 2007, for accounts of the Tenth Year Celebration of this event). Their decision sent a shock wave through neighboring villages, many of whom expressed outrage that the women would go against tradition.

Local Islamic religious leader Demba Diawara, from the neighboring village of Kër Simbara, began consulting with Tostan and the women of Malicounda Bambara. He pointed out that one village alone cannot end FGC. For the practice to stop, the intramarrying group (sometimes spread out geographically) must be included and abandon together; otherwise, a girl will be rejected and ridiculed and remain unmarried. As a result of Imam Diawara's advocacy in his extended family, in 1998 his village and its 12 intramarrying villages pledged publicly their abandonment of FGC. Political scientist Gerry Mackie (1996, 2000), who was writing on FGC, contacted Tostan and explained the parallels between what Tostan was learning from Diawara and the process that ended foot binding in China.

With the growing awareness of the importance of public declarations by the intramarrying group, Tostan's staff further developed its interactive pedagogical strategies to extend beyond the class and the community. For example, they encouraged each participant not only to "adopt a learner" within the community but also to go to other communities to share new knowledge with relatives and friends.

The implementation of the new curricular sequencing. In preparation to extend its program to Guinea, Tostan conducted baseline research that revealed significant levels of interest in both human rights and democracy. The team decided to revamp the entire educational curriculum, rewriting all the women's and children's rights sections so that they were part of an inclusive treatment of people's rights. In this process, Tostan worked with African linguists to refine a human rights vocabulary that captured the local and ordinary language practices of participants, a practice used during translation for each new ethnic group.
Because Tostan’s work in Guinea was part of a governmental effort to activate citizen participation, the team decided that the democracy sessions should be combined with the new human rights sessions and that both would be preceded by the visioning sessions. Tostan’s revision of its curriculum for its extension to Guinea, then, was a culmination of all the lessons learned in Senegal and other countries.

The Curricular Content and Pedagogy of the Transformed Curriculum

The democracy and human rights sessions are part of what is called “The Kobi.” In Mandinka, kobi means “to prepare the field for cultivation.” Two classes of 25 to 30 participants—one for adults and one for adolescents—meet three times a week for 2 hours over a 10-month period. Tostan pays the modest stipend of the facilitator, and the village furnishes his or her housing and food and provides adequate classroom space. Tostan moved the literacy sessions to the second year of the program to ensure full participation in the conversations about democracy and human rights. In so doing, Tostan recognized the power of oral tradition in African society. Literacy and numeracy skills are introduced in the second year of the program and reinforce what has been learned in The Kobi. Our purpose in this section is to describe, briefly, the content of the Kobi modules and then give examples of how they are taught using culturally based practices and interactive exercises.

The Kobi begins with three general sessions: one on participants’ hopes and expectations for their learning in the program, the next on the importance of participation, and the third on participants’ goals for the future of their community. To illustrate the participatory nature of the class, we take an example of a popular exercise used in the second session on participation. The facilitator takes a ball and tosses it to someone in the class, who then throws it back to the facilitator, who repeats this action several times. The facilitator then invites the class to imagine the ball tossing as a discussion, asking them to describe the kind of interaction that they have just witnessed. After identifying the discussion as a one-way conversation between the facilitator and a class member, the facilitator invites the class to represent (with the ball) what a true dialogue among the class would look like. Members throw the ball to each other and finally back to the facilitator. As a metaphorical, conceptual activity, participants explore the process of discussion and the role of the facilitator without prescriptions or pressure. In future discussions, when the conversation becomes one-way, participants call out, “Don’t forget to toss everyone the ball.” Exercises such as this—which challenge authoritarian scripts about education as a room full of individuals who must compete and whose actions primarily have outcomes on an individual rather than collective level—are well known to practitioners of nonformal education (Freire, 2002). Occurring early in the curriculum, the ball exercise allows the class to envision itself as a community of learners and helps them to bond as such.

In the third session, participants describe their aspirations for the future of their community. During this discussion, they frequently describe the values captured in more formal expressions of human rights that they will discuss in upcoming sessions.
Participants are invited to draw what their village would look like; each one comes and adds something to the total vision. They draw, for example, health huts, schools, people working, roads, poles with electrical wires, and trees. They explain that their village has peace and security and everyone is treated with dignity. In short, they have described key features of a human rights community. Their drawing is posted in the classroom and the facilitator frequently refers back to their vision throughout the 30-month program.

The next 10 sessions in the Kobi are devoted to understanding the place of the individual in the world and the importance of organizing in a democratic society. Information about democratic governance at the state and local level is interlaced with information about democratic processes at the micro-level in the classroom. The democracy sessions are then followed by 21 sessions devoted to human rights, drawn from different human rights instruments. Facilitators use poster-sized drawings that depict an important human right and encourage class members to discuss what is represented in the picture. As those participating in the course learn about the existence of human rights, they connect what they are learning to their original discussions about their aspirations. They frequently find parallels between their original descriptions of their future and the human rights they are learning. And they discover that human rights are recognized universally.

As they practice democratic decision making in the class, make connections between their original aspirations and human rights, and discover the legitimacy of human rights in their country and the world, participants become more enthusiastic and animated. They recognize that they are not isolated; they are part of a larger conversation taking place in other communities in their region, their country, and the world. And the conversations bring class members together. As a participant stated in Unkovic’s (2007) documentary of a Tostan community in The Gambia:

With this Tostan education, we have now really begun to understand that [human rights abuses] must stop. For example, I saw someone who beat his wife. . . . Since we started this education, he has . . . completely changed. He no longer beats his wife. We now stand together, chatting, doing things together. We all now come together like brothers and sisters.

As part of learning about human rights, the class composes poems and songs, weaving new ideas about human rights into traditional customs. For example, a facilitator recorded one woman’s poem:

My spirit flew high above the earth
With eyes sad and full of tears
Seeing the misery of imprisoned human rights.
Angry, revolted, my spirit will cry no more.
Speaking out, she emerges from the shadows to awaken
She travels the world to gather people
It is I, Human Rights, who speaks.

................................................

You the people of Tostan,
I thank you.
Because of you, everyone is aware of me.
I have chosen you and you have taken me throughout the country.
You have made me famous.

In addition to poetic expressions about the value of human rights, participants have also taken social action. In Dialakoto, a village in southeastern Senegal, class participants responded to a case of domestic violence within their community by organizing a march against violence. During the peaceful march across the village, they sang songs that they had composed in their class; they called in the local media to make it known publicly that domestic violence would no longer be accepted. Such spirited responses to the lessons follow from dialogic exchanges about issues that they have never discussed before publicly. Participants learn new forms of discourse in their class discussions, moving between their traditional discourse practices and the more universal language of human rights.

For example, during the session on the human right to be protected against all forms of discrimination, participants are asked if they have ever been discriminated against and if they have discriminated against others. In their exchanges, they describe their personal feelings of frustration when they have experienced discrimination. As they imagine the experiences of those they have discriminated against, they place themselves in others’ shoes and realize that everyone has a right to human dignity and equality. The discussions reveal the complexities of discrimination as a participant might be both a discriminator (e.g., a man) and someone who is discriminated against (e.g., a man from a minority ethnic group).

In the next sessions of the Kobi, the class reexamines and reinforces what has been discovered about democratic practices at the individual, family, and community levels and how those practices relate to and reinforce the implementation of human rights into community practices. Facilitators present culturally relevant vignettes and cases that engage participants in applying what they have learned. For example, one of the exercises asks them to create a village charter that specifies rules and regulations democratically agreed upon. These projects serve as context for the problem-solving sessions.

The problem-solving sessions, still part of the Kobi, begin with what participants already do in their ordinary lives. For example, in the session on the importance of planning solutions to problems, they reflect on and analyze the steps they already use in daily life, such as making and “drinking” tea (a ritual throughout West Africa) or planning a baptism. They discover that they are highly skilled in carrying out such projects. By detecting their own inherent skills, they can more easily transfer them to personal and community problem solving.

In the last part of the Kobi, participants learn about and discuss information on hygiene and health (developed in response to women’s requests for more information
about their own biological development). The sessions cover information about menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause, and FGC, but they also cover information about disease, including diarrhea, malaria, HIV, and AIDS. Participants work with the information on hygiene and health in these sessions by applying the problem-solving steps to what they identify as their own community health problems. During the sessions, they constantly refer back to what they learned about human rights and democracy, so they are eager to investigate issues relating to health and human rights, such as vaccination and child marriage. It is from this nexus of human rights education, participatory research, and information about health and hygiene that the social mobilization movements to end FGC and child and/or forced marriage emerged.

The second phase of the Tostan program, called the Aawde, a Fulani word meaning "to plant the seed," lasts 18 months. Although a detailed account of its content is beyond the scope of this article, it is devoted to economic empowerment through literacy, numeracy, and management training. Participants learn to read in their own national language and do written math. As participants' interests and capabilities increase, they review the initial modules of the Kobi through studying interactive workbooks provided by Tostan that allow them to practice the new skills they are learning.

Emergent Themes

The new curriculum grew out of Tostan's original educational practices (Easton, 1998; Easton et al., 2003)—use of experiential, interactive pedagogy and integration of sociocultural context into the learning process. The familiarity continued to provide participants a safe space for dialogic inquiry, critical reflection, and action about human rights, democracy, and women's health. But the effects of the new sessions were not just additive; they were transformational. We explore the transformation through identifying interconnected practices: visioning, reframing human rights in local discursive practices in a problem-based context, and creating critical capacity and consciousness through connecting participants to a larger discourse on human rights.

Awakening "The Capacity to Aspire"

Engaging participants in imagining and discussing their future aspirations at the beginning of the program allowed village community members to express their own understandings of their "indigenous conceptions" of human rights (Donnelly, 2003; Merry, 2006) and discover connections to more general formulations of human rights. Tostan's staff identified and acknowledged participants' visions of social justice and used their language practices to create the new sessions. As Merry noted, such visions might be missed by someone unfamiliar with local cultural and social norms, especially since most participants' visions were not founded on Western notions of rights but "on ideas such as sharing, reconciliation, or mutual responsibility" (p. 133).

Putting the interactive visioning exercises at the beginning of the 30-month program engaged Tostan's adolescent and adult classes in awakening what sociocultural
anthropologist Appadurai (2004) called "the capacity to aspire." Such a capacity, he argued, involves a complex set of cultural skills associated with "voice"—"the capacity to debate, contest, inquire, and participate critically" (p. 70). What at first can appear to be "just bundles of individual and idiosyncratic wants, are inevitably tied up with more general norms, presumptions, and axioms about the good life, and life more generally" (p. 68). Opening up the space between "what is" and "what could be" involved participants in a process of inquiry that moved from the concrete ("our children are dying of malaria before our eyes") to the intermediary level ("we need a health hut and mosquito nets") to the abstract moral domain ("everyone has a right to health care"). Exercising this complex set of skills engages what Appadurai terms "a navigational capacity" (p. 69), the ability to look ahead and see possibilities and potentials.

Once the capacity to aspire was awakened, others, such as those defined in Nussbaum’s (2001) capability approach, became engaged. Interactive pedagogy collectively strengthened participants’ senses, imagination, thinking, playfulness, emotion, practical reasoning, and affiliations—all capabilities in Nussbaum’s normative social framework. And these capabilities led to deeper discussions concerning bodily health and integrity and control over one’s environment, the other capabilities in Nussbaum’s framework. The imaginative, playful, and sensual aspects of learning (writing poetry, singing, dancing, and role playing) helped participants recognize and demonstrate what was of value in their cultural repertoire and freed them to examine the problematic. The movement to abandon harmful practices—from a class to a village to a multivillage public declaration—illustrates Nussbaum’s claim that “people who once learn and experience these capabilities [bodily health and integrity] do not want to go back” (p. 85).

Dialogue About Generative Themes

The discussions about aspirations in Tostan classes were dialogic and critical (Freire, 2002), originating within the context of participants’ own discursive practices. The discussions not only engaged capacities, they also encouraged participants to analyze their former reality and “come to have a new perception of that reality” (p. 114). As former Senegalese cutter Oureye Sall told Reaves (2007):

> I was married at eight and had my first child at 15. . . . It was only when I went to the Tostan classes, and we began studying human rights and health and hygiene, that I began to think more about cutting, and about the things that had always bothered me instinctively, but that I could never quite articulate. (p. 16)

The discussions revealed gaps in knowledge, or generative themes. For Freire (2002), generative themes “exist in people in their relations with the world,” and investigating these themes “deepen[s] their critical awareness of reality” (p. 106) and what is possible. Collectively identifying the gap between what is and what could be motivated participants to act, and everyone contributed to the solution, equalizing participation.
To achieve the goals and conduct their investigations, participants were eager to learn more about democratic processes, especially as they made decisions that affected the entire community and their intermarrying communities. With participants, Tostan created new community groups and public spaces where decisions could be discussed and debated by multiple stakeholders. Interestingly, the original Tostan education program did not result in the creation of these larger community organizations; they arose out of the classes that studied democracy and human rights.

Connecting Participants to Global Movements and Related Discursive Practices

When participants in Tostan classes learned of a universal rights movement, they found themselves connected to a larger set of discourse practices about human rights. As a dimension of discursive practice, then, human rights served not as a set of disembodied abstractions imposed from without but as ideas and practices that were connected to thinking about local circumstances. The availability of a larger discourse community, however, emboldened community members to share their new understandings with friends, family members, and neighbors. Learning about human rights and democratic processes reinforced the importance of a cohesive community, an underlying African value, and helped participants recognize that they have the right to engage meaningfully in private and public dialogues as they make decisions about their future. When the women of Malicounda Bambara, for example, declared their intention to abandon FGC to journalists, they explicitly stated that they had a right to voice their opinions (Reaves, 2007). And as participants discovered that they were connected to a larger human rights movement, both within their own country and across national borders, they felt less isolated, expanded their problem-solving abilities, and reached out to educate others and find out how they were solving problems. As participant Tunko Jawla stated in Unkovic’s (2007) video documentary:

> All the time, after class, we talk about [our] Tostan [education]. On our way going to fetch water, or with the children . . . [a]nywhere you find us, you will hear us talking about the importance of this education. . . . We now know our rights and we always talk about them.

Tostan could facilitate organized diffusion—helping communities spread democracy and human rights—though starting with ordinary discursive practices.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we explored how Tostan came to integrate modules on democracy and human rights into its original nonformal education program. The problems Tostan faced are instructive for theory, as the organization worked through them on the ground. From its inception, the organization put dialogue at the heart of its curricular
approach. But the modules on democracy and human rights led to a more vigorous praxis: to reflection and action that has created large-scale social transformation. Freire (2002) argued that “cultural action of a liberating character” is only possible when generative themes are meaningful to the people (p. 107). As “co-investigators” with its participants, Tostan transformed its practices as Tostan-trained communities transformed theirs. Such responsiveness, over time, suggests that understanding and privileging cultural context is necessary, but perhaps not sufficient, as cultural practices can so easily become reified, trapping both participants and the organization in a fixed view of reality. This is especially true if nonprofit organizations select out certain features in the cultural context to meet project design needs or funding priorities (Bebbington et al., 2008).

Tostan’s introduction of visioning created space for imaginative explorations of possibilities for their communities. These discussions drew on cultural context but expanded and enriched it. The result of the visioning also revealed existing power relations in the community, especially ones that would need to change if everyone had human rights and could participate meaningfully in the public life of the community.

Tostan’s experiences suggest that democracy and human rights can emerge from the bottom-up (Talbott, 2005). As Merry (2006) concluded, “[human rights ideas] need to be framed in images, symbols, narratives, and religious or secular language that resonate with the local community” (p. 220; and see Odinkalu, 2000, for the pressing need to link human rights language to Africans’ aspirations). As Tostan participants used human rights to interpret their situations, they were led to new actions, and those new actions were then interpreted in light of their newly created human rights discourse. When communities learned about international human rights groups and their work, they saw them as resources (and inspiration) for their own struggles, even as their successes are, in turn, providing resources (and inspiration) for other communities, nationally and internationally.

Tostan also did not confine learning to the traditional classroom. As the classroom became an active site for promoting democracy and human rights in interactions among different social groups, dialogue spilled out into the community. Tostan responded and created new spaces (the CMC, adopt-a-learner, and intervillage meetings) so that participants could practice in ever-expanding public venues what was learned and practiced in the classroom. Had Tostan curtailed the learning space and kept it confined to the classroom, learners might not have pursued social action (see Minnis, 2006, for the need to expand what can count as a learning setting in nonformal education).

The same responsiveness and flexibility that allowed Tostan to think of learning spaces more broadly also allowed it to move from an emphasis on women’s rights to people’s rights. A commitment to only one category of oppression might have trapped the organization in the binary approach to gender relations warned against by Mohanty (1991). And the involvement of men expedited the movements to abandon harmful practices. Without the support of religious leaders, husbands, fathers, and brothers, efforts on the part of women and girls would have been
limited. And Tostan learned that men and boys needed a place to talk about their shifting roles given the new relationships created through their investigations of democracy and human rights. Tostan “created both a space and a need for men to be brought more squarely into the frame of gender and development work” (Chant & Gutmann, 2002, p. 271).

Further research would deepen understanding of Tostan’s approach through a more detailed analysis of its curricular materials on democracy and human rights. Also crucial will be efforts to determine what kinds of learning occur in the public spaces that its curriculum produces—the community empowerment committee meetings, facilitator training meetings, Tostan staff meetings, and the public abandonment ceremonies. In particular, how are the public declarations themselves educative? How will gender inclusiveness affect the actual status of women in Tostan-trained communities over time? In the meantime, Tostan’s holistic human rights–based program of nonformal education continues to transform learners and their communities. As Gambia participant Sanneba Keita put it, “[I] hope that tomorrow will come bringing more of this education” (Unkovic, 2007).

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