



# Social Norms Change at Scale: Insights from Tostan

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## The Approach

Tostan, which means “breakthrough” in the Wolof language, is an international nonprofit organization founded in 1991 and headquartered in Dakar, Senegal. Tostan is currently offering its 30-month program in five West African countries. We are dedicated to empowering African communities to bring about sustainable development and positive social transformation based on respect for human rights.

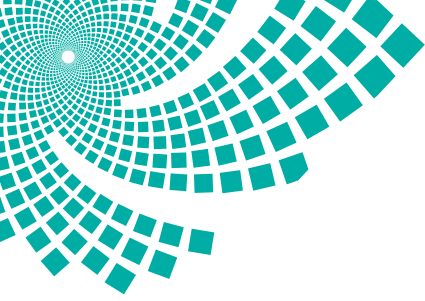
At [Tostan](#), we believe that development is most effective and sustainable when brought about by communities themselves. In this community-led approach to social change, we see our role as a facilitator—to share resources, skills, and knowledge that will empower communities to set their own goals and create change on their own terms. Through a holistic, human rights-based education program, the Community Empowerment Program, we ignite community dialogue on a wide range of topics through modules focused on democracy, human rights, hygiene and health, and problem-solving. We then reinforce these topics while providing training in literacy, numeracy, and project-management skills.

We currently deliver the Community Empowerment Program in five West African countries: Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal, and The Gambia. (It has also been implemented in Mauritania, Somalia, and Djibouti). Participants represent the community at large, including women and men, elders and youth, from various ethnic groups and social strata. Most have never received formal schooling or dropped out at an early age. Sessions last for two hours, three times a week. Participating communities must house and feed the facilitator and create the classroom space. Tostan pays for the facilitator’s stipend and for facilitator training and educational materials. During the second phase of the 30-month program, Tostan also provides a US\$800 community development grant.

Community engagement begins when Tostan staff present an overview of the 30-month curriculum to community leaders and potential participants during program preparation. Tostan implements only when invited by communities. Each class member agrees to “adopt a learner” to share what they learn in each session with someone outside the class. The curriculum has been modified over the years based on participant feedback.

At the same time Tostan sets up its classes, it trains a Community Management Committee comprised of 17 members (nine of whom must be women) selected by and representative of the community. The committee helps carry out actions decided by the class and community (for example, vaccination and birth registration campaigns), including discussions with the community on what is learned in the class. The committee is left in place after the education program ends, and most become registered community-based organizations. Some have independently received funding, and many have federated to carry out multi-community projects.

Throughout this process, Tostan uses a robust system for monitoring and evaluating its programs and their effect on communities.



## Where and How it is Being Used

To date, Tostan staff members have carried out implementation in “all-new” communities—that is, they have trained the facilitators and Community Management Committees, taught the classes, and monitored and evaluated the program, all while adapting the program to local circumstances.

In one case in 1998 (featured below as a “challenging story”), another organization was trained on the first phase of the Community Empowerment Program (called the Kobi), but carried it out in a way that did not correspond with the basic principles of Tostan’s standard implementation process.

In addition to offering the Community Empowerment Program, Tostan provides a 10-day training for local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious leaders, and other interested stakeholders. The training includes a general orientation to Tostan’s holistic human-rights based approach, including an overview of its curricular content, participatory methodology, “organized diffusion” strategy, and guiding theories. It does not provide the entire set of curricular materials that would allow a trainee to replicate the 30-month program.




## Understanding Scale

Historically, Tostan has typically looked at scale by direct implementation (i.e., scaling done by Tostan itself) in three main ways: first, scaling up to reach new communities in different regions of the same country with the core model; second, scaling up in new countries; and third, scaling deep—expanding the curriculum through two one-year-program modules (on peace and security and on reinforcement of parental practices) implemented in over 800 communities.

Tostan has also looked at indirect scale—scale by training others—in several ways. First, Tostan was asked to start a “training of trainers” initiative but had early formative experiences of training other organizations to replicate the Kobi phase that did not achieve the same results (see the “challenging story” below). Second, the organization has trained others on the entire program by co-implementation, which was programmatically somewhat successful although the organizations were not able to implement without Tostan afterwards (this took place in eight West and East African countries). Third, since 2015, Tostan has trained over 400 NGO leaders from 45 countries who implement different, non-Tostan models. They participate in the 10-day intensive training noted above. The organization is now exploring ways to ensure fidelity by providing guides and materials to those wishing to follow Tostan’s model, with plans to eventually supplement those guides with technical advisory services.

Tostan is currently undertaking an externally facilitated process to more clearly articulate how it defines scale. First, it bears mentioning that Tostan’s model organically scales during implementation through the process of organized diffusion: class members pick an adopted learner to immediately share what they have learned; the class and Community Management Committee hold community meetings to spread key information from the classes; class and community members visit neighboring communities to hold sessions with them on what has been learned; and highly motivated participants and influential leaders from different communities form social mobilization teams visiting hundreds of communities, even across



borders. These activities, however, tend to focus on specific issues (as shown below in the successful scaling case); community activists do not replicate the 30-month program.

In terms of scaling the model itself: Tostan has been requested to scale both directly and indirectly. Direct-scale requests may be attributed to the fact that Tostan implements directly as a main operating model, stemming from a wish to maintain Tostan's demonstrated quality and its ability to work on issues other groups have been less willing to address. Tostan has also been repeatedly asked to scale indirectly via training or sharing. There are constant requests to "share the model" with others; however, most are not aware of the complexity and length of the model, of its time-intensive and holistic nature, of its rigor and dedication to local cultural understanding, or of the organizational capacities that underpin Tostan's ability to resource, implement, and learn from large-scale implementation. Most NGOs also have their own mission priorities and it is difficult for them to find funding for and manage a 30-month education program in different national languages along with their many other activities.



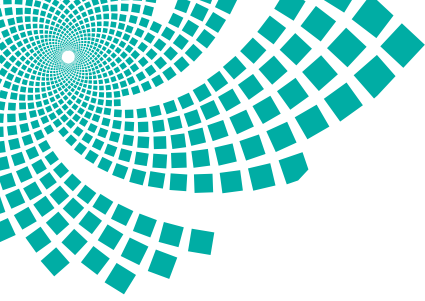
## Going to Scale: A Success Story

Tostan learned how to effectively scale single-issue social norms change through an experience in 1997 in Malicounda Bambara, a village in western Senegal. Key elements of success included:

- **Local leaders taking the lead:** After female participants studied human rights and women's health in their Tostan class, including the adverse health consequences of female genital cutting (FGC), they decided to end the practice with support from their husbands and the local imam; however, when the women bravely held a press conference to make their announcement public, they were quickly denounced by their relatives in other villages, who called them traitors to their ethnic group. Demba Diawara, a religious leader from an FGC-practicing community, came to Tostan to explain that in Africa, a social norm such as FGC could not be ended through a public announcement from one community alone; it was a traditional practice shared by members of intra-marrying social networks and carried harsh sanctions for non-compliance. After consulting with other respected religious leaders, doctors, and women in his village, Demba told Tostan that he had decided to travel to his own intra-marrying communities and organize open discussions with his relatives, eventually helping them realize they could give up the practice as a united family.
- **Face-to face dialogue and deliberation:** Demba's outreach resulted in the 1998 Diabougou Declaration, for which 13 villages joined to publicly declare they were going to end the practice. The Diabougou Declaration was discussed in other Tostan classes, and soon, the community of Medina Cherif in Southern Senegal reached out to its own intra-marrying relatives in 17 neighboring communities. After much deliberation, they collectively declared they would end the practice as well. A 2008 external evaluation found these efforts led to significant declines in the practice of FGC.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. (2008). *Long-term evaluation of the Tostan Programme in Senegal: Kolda, Thies and Fatik Regions*. New York, NY: United Nations Children's Fund Section of Statistics and Monitoring, Division of Policy and Practice. Retrieved from [https://www.unicef.org/protection/fgmc\\_tostan\\_eng.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/protection/fgmc_tostan_eng.pdf)



- **Social mobilization agents reaching out to thousands more:** Inspired by Demba’s strategy of “organized diffusion” and the two public declarations, other Tostan participants formed groups of five or six women and men to reach out to the members of their own social networks. In the eight countries where Tostan has been active over the past 20 years, over 8,500 communities have decided to come together to abandon FGC through public declarations thanks to class participants and the tireless efforts of hundreds of these grassroots social mobilization agents.

In considering this case of scaling, it is important to note that Tostan offers a holistic program not focused only on FGC. The interest in FGC came from within the class itself, much to the surprise of the Tostan programming team. Class participants wanted to know more about the practice because they were also learning about aspects of physical well-being such as menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause. Class members had previously engaged neighboring communities in a broad range of discussions around health and well-being—for example, how to treat diarrhea and how to construct local cookstoves—but FGC was more sensitive and took longer. In many communities, it was taboo to discuss because it was falsely associated with an Islamic obligation and its health effects (such as tetanus) sometimes occurred later after the cutting operation. Social mobilization agents said they most often had to visit the same communities many times before the people decided to abandon FGC. In this case, the imam was a critical spokesperson due to his status as a respected and influential religious leader who could explain that FGC is not a recommendation of Islam.

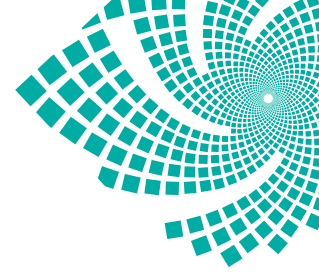
Three critical lessons on what has made this case of scaling a success include that: 1) Tostan engaged closely with community leaders who recognized the importance of a holistic, community-wide approach and the structured scaffolding model (e.g., adopt-a-learner); 2) Tostan and communities allowed for adequate time and resources for organized diffusion, providing the funding needed for travel to communities, and the time needed for deliberation; and 3) Tostan provided accurate information, in non-judgmental terms, in local languages that could be comprehended by learners.

## Going to Scale: A Challenging Story

A nonprofit was selected to implement Tostan’s program in 1998 as part of a pilot project in which the relevance and effects of Tostan’s model would be tested in another West African country. The programming resulted in:

- **Greatly abridged programming training.** The first year of the curriculum is called the Kobi (with sessions on visioning, human rights, democracy, problem-solving, and hygiene and health). Each session is critical, as all build on previous sessions over a one-year period, interacting synergistically, leading into the second part of the curriculum. The non-profit chose not to offer the entire Kobi curriculum and greatly shortened or modified the sessions.
- **Selective use and concentration of the curriculum.** Only some exercises were used and other, critical ones were excluded, and thus important background information was omitted. For example, the module on hygiene and health (the second part of the Kobi) was crammed into a 12-hour-a-day, three-day workshop instead of being facilitated over a period of five months.
- **Greatly reduced use of the participatory methodology and participant outreach through the adopt-a-learner and community sharing strategies.**





## The Takeaway: What Made It Ineffective?

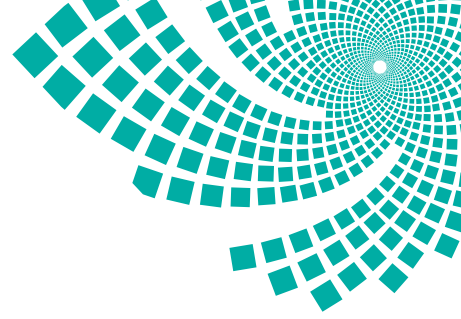
New learners did not have time to assimilate information and skills because the schedule was too condensed and their participation reduced. In Tostan's standard two-hour sessions (involving activities and discussion), learners have the following day off to think about what was learned and to share the class information with an adopted learner. The condensation violated core principles: namely, that participants learn at their own pace, become a facilitator by sharing with others, gain confidence and new respect by being viewed as a "teacher," share interesting (often life-changing) information, and work in close collaboration with the facilitator (who lives in the community and supports participants outside of the classroom).

Tostan decided not to share its curriculum publicly because of the results of this and other scaling experiences. It became clear that the curriculum guides alone would not be sufficient to ensure fidelity to the core principles needed for successful replication. What drives the program's success is as much the use of locally adapted African cultural elements and interactive pedagogy as it is content. As founder Molly Melching says, "Of course, we have content in our model, but I see our program more as a framework into which communities themselves add their own content, participatory methodology, and outreach strategies. But this takes lots of time, practice, and interpersonal work and facilitation."

## Reflections

Tostan very much concurs with CUSP members' descriptions of the tensions and programming realities encountered when trying to scale social norms work. On a broader level, we note that while Tostan and CUSP members work on a range of critical social norms that exist in the cultures and contexts in which we operate, what Tostan is trying to do by scaling up a three-year, multi-sectoral model—in local languages, in a manner that is culturally respectful and norms-informed—is to offer an alternative to the common practices and social norms present in international development—a landscape in which efforts to help others are so often problematized, "project-ized," short-term, siloed, lightly participatory, and top-down. As we seek to support communities to reformulate and act on creating new norms in the field, we must also look at the norms guiding our own actions and apply these lessons to the communities of which we are a part.

As noted above, Tostan's programming does not focus on any one issue. As such, the organization has had a range of experiences in discovering and finding ways to scale through the Community Empowerment Program, helping create a wide variety of local efforts to create change. These efforts continue. At the time of writing, Tostan is reviewing the most recent external study (not yet formally published) entitled *Preventing Intimate Partner Violence: An Evaluation of Tostan's Community Empowerment Program in Senegal*. The evaluators stated that at the end of the Community Empowerment Program, "There was a declining trend in all forms of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). In particular, the decline in physical IPV was statistically significant." Increased couple communication and improved attitudes toward gender norms were also statistically significant.



## For Reference: Tostan’s Current Community Empowerment Program Scale-Up Framework

| HOW<br>Tostan can be scaled   | WHO<br>should be involved  | WHAT<br>needs to happen  | WHEN<br>should it happen   |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>Understand and create the administrative structure needed to implement the Community Empowerment Program and Community Management Committee trainings, including hiring and training administrative personnel, supervisors, and facilitators.</p> <p>Undergo at least three months of participatory training to be able to facilitate the curriculum and set up the Community Management Committee.</p> <p>Understand the program’s holistic approach, which includes multiple outcomes and has a curriculum requiring community and learner participation for the entire 30 months.</p> <p>Communicate regularly with Tostan (or Tostan provides a consultant for new countries).</p> <p>Consider local priorities and realities and adapt accordingly.</p> <p>Pilot the adaptation before scale-up, and follow the interactive participatory learning process and implementation schedule.</p> | <p>Countries, NGOs, and communities that understand and choose to participate in Tostan’s program.</p> <p>Male and female facilitators trained to engage participants in Tostan’s holistic curriculum and who agree to live in the communities during facilitation. (Facilitators have at least a sixth-grade education or local language literacy and vary in age).</p> <p>Community members who attend Tostan classes for adults and youth over a three-year period and who volunteer to serve on the Community Management Committee.</p> <p>Trainers of facilitators who know the curriculum well and apply the participatory learning process.</p> <p>All members of the community (e.g., youth, adults, elders, and religious leaders).</p> | <p>Communities agree to participate, elect/select members to participate in classes and the Community Management Committee.</p> <p>Facilitators engage participants in classes, and the overall structure and sequencing are explicitly followed.</p> <p>Participants “adopt a learner” and engage with others in their community, sharing what is being learned.</p> <p>Participants reach out to neighboring communities and their social networks to share learning and turn it into action.</p> <p>Well-trained facilitators speak and teach in the predominant local language of the community.</p> | <p>Over a 30-month period, plus preparation activities with community (varies given awareness of Tostan).</p> <p>Religious and traditional leaders receive special training before the Community Empowerment Program begins to ensure their support and engagement.</p> <p>Begin consultations with Tostan and conduct training before implementation. Also ensure monitoring and evaluation system is in place.</p> |

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