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Expanding the Aspirational Map: Interactive Learning and Human Rights in Tostan's Community Empowerment Program

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Introduction

In 2010, a new cycle of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Tostan's three-year Community Empowerment Program (CEP), a human rights-based education program, was beginning in rural Senegal. The CEP had been linked with various community results—for example, better health practices, higher participation of women in public decision making, and effective lobbying of local government (Gillespie and Melching 2010; Diop, Moreau, and Benga 2008; CRDH 2010; Kuenzi 2005). The Tostan staff knew from experience that the human rights education classes in the first six months of the program were critical for communities to achieve those results in a sustainable fashion. However, nobody had really studied the ways in which those classes helped participants, most of whom had never been to public schools, to act for community well-being and the promotion of human rights. Knowing how Tostan's human rights curriculum contributed to these results seemed important both practically and theoretically.

An evidence-based corpus of theory and praxis in nonformal transformative HRE would be beneficial for development practitioners working to empower resource-poor rural communities. The HRE literature does not

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offer many practical models of effective instructional strategies for the nonformal setting. Yet such models have long been called for and bear promising results. Merry (2006), for instance, has argued that we need examples of “community-based” human rights interventions grounded in the belief that “local arrangements can promote human rights and social justice” (104). Examining local conditions as they interface with human rights would be part of an educational approach that values interactive pedagogy, one that would awaken participants’ potential for envisioning more just community practices as they arise out of what is already culturally given.

In contrast to the lack of nonformal models, practical models for integrating HRE into formal education are abundant. As Bajaj (2011) observed, many of the models that have emerged in the last two decades have addressed the integration of human rights within school curricula, as advocated by international organizations working in cooperation with national governments (see, for instance, Starkey 1991a, 1991b; Ray 1994; Spring 2000; Osler and Starkey 1996, 2010; Best 2002; McQuoid-Mason, O’Brien, and Green 1991; Hornberg 2002; Suárez, Ramirez, and Koo 2009). However, the fact that these models are designed to work with people who have access to schooling might limit their efficacy at scale. Cardenas (2005) criticized HRE programs that are inaccessible to vulnerable and marginalized peoples because those programs could unwittingly reinforce existing patterns of abuse and subjugation, as they would benefit only existing social and economic elites. HRE should empower communities as a whole, its main challenge being “to change the expectations of those who hold power (current and future generations) so that HRE does more than simply widen the gap between human rights demands and state practice” (375).

In the last few years, the number of practical guides for implementing HRE activities in the nonformal setting has increased (see, for instance, Amnesty International 2011; Elbers et al. 2008; Brander et al. 2012). These guides are helpful as they provide practitioners with a set of activities that they can use in the field, but most lack an evidence-based understanding, grounded in participants’ experiences, of what empowers them to advance human rights locally. To our knowledge, none of them have focused on how expanding aspirations through nonformal interactive HRE methods can empower people in rural African communities for human rights protection and promotion.

This chapter was drawn from a larger research study (Cislighi, Gillespie, and Mackie 2016), which explored how participants described their experiences

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with the pedagogy and curriculum during the first module of the CEP. That module includes, among other content, sessions on visioning and human rights and responsibilities. We found that participants in the rural communities came to advance human rights in their larger communities and beyond; they did so in a way that aligned local practices with specific human rights in efforts to actualize their vision of community well-being. Our purpose in this chapter is to look more closely at the relationship between Tostan’s visioning and human rights sessions, the type of pedagogy used to teach them, and their effects on participants’ realization of their aspirations.

In the next section we present the work of the NGO Tostan, its CEP, and its approach to HRE, including its sessions on visioning and human rights. We also explain the methods used in the larger study and explain the concept of “the capacity to aspire.” In the second section, we discuss the themes that emerged from participants’ descriptions of their learning during the visioning and human rights sessions. Finally, we discuss how the interactive strategies throughout these sessions prepared many of the program participants to imagine and create, individually and collectively, more just relationships and social conditions.

Study Background

Tostan and the CEP

Since the 1990s, Tostan has worked in remote rural villages in West Africa, primarily Senegal, providing its nonformal education program to those who request it. In an earlier study, Gillespie and Melching (2010) described the ways in which, over time, the curriculum changed and how the sessions on human rights came to be included in what originally was solely a literacy-focused curriculum. This new curriculum proved transformative for participants and their communities. A full description of Tostan’s thirty-month CEP and its different components can be found in Cislighi et al. (2016). The first module, the focus of our study, lasting about twelve months, is called *Kobi* (a Mandinka word meaning “to prepare the field for planting”); it includes sessions on democracy, human rights, problem solving, and health and hygiene. Two classes of twenty to fifty participants—one for adults and one for adolescents—participate in the sessions. These sessions are two hours long, usually meet three times a week, and are taught by a trained facilitator

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who lives in the village for the duration of the program. The classes are taught in the participants' first language (as much as possible when dealing with multiethnic groups of participants), and both curriculum and pedagogy draw on participants' cultural background, their daily experiences, and their existing knowledge and abilities. To increase the reach of the program, facilitators require each participant to share the new knowledge acquired in class with one "adopted learner," a nonparticipating member of their family or group of friends. Tostan also equips participants with skills they can use to organize awareness-raising activities in their village and in surrounding villages. The NGO calls this knowledge-sharing strategy "organized diffusion."

The first twenty-four sessions of the CEP include, among others, sessions on visioning (session 3) and human rights (sessions 10–24). The eight sessions we selected and studied among the first twenty-four were: (1) the first introductory session, (2) the visioning exercise, (3) the human right to life, (4) the human right to be protected against all forms of discrimination, (5) the human right to peace and security, (6) a review of all human rights learned up to that point, (7) the human right to health, and (8) the right to vote and be elected. From the larger study, we look here at how the interactive pedagogy used throughout the CEP and the visioning session set the stage for teaching human rights interactively in the adult classes.

Individual and Collective Aspirations

In session 3, on visioning, the facilitator puts a poster in the middle of the class and invites each participant to draw his or her vision for the future of the community ten years from that moment. Participants typically draw such features as health huts, better roads, and peaceful interactions among community members. As the sessions unfold and participants learn about human rights, they revisit and revise that vision. This exercise helps participants share the hopes they hold for the future, both individually and collectively, and discuss ways to achieve them—to bring that positive future into being.

Cultural anthropologist Appadurai (2004) called the capacity to visualize a future that is different from the present and the actions required to navigate toward that future the "capacity to aspire." This capacity is usually more highly developed among the most privileged—those who are exposed

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to a variety of possibilities that open up their imagination and who possess the resources to explore the steps required to achieve their aspirations. The most disadvantaged lack opportunities to discover alternatives to their present conditions and the ways to attain them. Appadurai, as well as the scholars who furthered his work, believed that the capacity to aspire is critical for human development, as it is a fundamental capacity to direct human energy and resources toward positive change (Ray 2006; Genicot and Ray 2015; Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani 2015; Ibrahim 2011).

Appadurai (2004) has further argued that aspirations are as much collective as individual. To advance their common good, social groups need to develop “a culture of aspirations by collectively envisioning their future, and their capacity to share this future, through influencing other groups, the government, and other factors in their physical and social environment” (25). Given the importance of increasing the capacity to aspire for community development, we studied the human rights curriculum in the Tostan classes, investigating to what extent and through what dynamics it could help participants develop individual and collective aspirations for their future.

The literature on aspirations also alerted us to the potential spillover effects of participants’ expanded aspirational capacity to nonparticipating members of the community. Macours and Vakis (2009) argued that spillover can indeed happen. They showed how a cash transfer program in Nicaragua increased the aspirations not only of participating women but also of those in their social networks. Capacity spillover seemed to be a concrete possibility in the CEP, particularly because of its organized diffusion strategy. Tostan participants are encouraged in many ways to share what they learn in the classes. As we reexamined our data from the larger study looking at aspirations and human rights, we wanted to reflect further on how Tostan’s instructional strategies contributed to possible spillovers, if at all.

Study Methods

Participants in the larger study (Cislaghi et al. 2016) were men and women who attended the Tostan classes in three different resource-poor communities in central Senegal. It is important to note that most were illiterate and had little if any formal schooling. The data, collected over a period of twenty-six months, included video recordings of Tostan’s classes, focus groups, and

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individual interviews. We selected and trained six local interviewers to conduct focus groups and individual interviews, and two local cameramen. All research assistants spoke the same language as the research participants. Living in Senegal during most of the fieldwork, researcher Cislighi supervised the data collection.

We videotaped, transcribed, and translated eight of Tostan's human rights sessions in three villages, for a total of twenty-four tapes. After each of these sessions, we conducted ten semistructured interviews with class participants (five men and five women in each village after each class); in total, 240 individual interviews were translated and transcribed by local transcribers. After eighteen months, at the end of the second phase of the program, we revisited the same villages and conducted two focus groups and ten individual interviews in each of the three villages. The data included a total of six focus groups and 270 individual interviews.

To analyze the data we used grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006; Henwood and Pidgeon 2003). With the aid of the interviewers, we immersed ourselves in the data and independently coded the transcriptions by breaking the text into segments made up of words, phrases, and sentences (a process referred to as open coding). As patterns in the data emerged across videotapes, focus groups, and interviews, we revised our codes by comparing and contrasting the codes from the individual work of each of us. Through axial coding, we arranged the data into major categories and subcategories. Eventually, data saturation was reached when no new categories emerged.

For this chapter, we thought more specifically about the interrelationships between the visioning session, the eight human rights sessions, and Tostan's interactive pedagogy as described by the participants. Appadurai makes the case that aspirations need to be tied to meaningful, manageable tasks if they are to be realized. How did culturally relevant interactive instructional strategies and human rights curricular materials enable that? And how did they expand people's aspirations in ways that help them work together to improve their social situation?

Participant Descriptions of Their Learning Experiences

Participants were very keen to talk about their class experiences. For instance, they reported that they found them engaging and enjoyable. One

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man, for instance, spontaneously said, “I was surprised at how everyone in class was sharing laughs, talking and exchanging thoughts, and having fun learning” (10: M, A, 22).¹ They also described what instructional strategies stood out to them as having motivated them to come to class and participate in the discussions. Five themes emerged from participants’ responses: (1) the use of culturally meaningful curricular materials, (2) experiential learning, (3) democratic dialogue and deliberation, (4) the skits, and (5) a welcoming facilitator.

Use of Culturally Congruent Strategies and Content

As reported by Easton, Monkman, and Miles (2009), the hallmark of Tostan’s nonformal education program is its respect for and use of participants’ cultural experiences. We also found that culturally congruent strategies and content also mattered to participants. Facilitators were from the same language group and wore the same traditional clothes as participants, a visible sign of common identity. Participants noted repeatedly the importance of the use of their own language in the Tostan classes. One woman, for instance, said, she considered it important to study in Fula “because it is [a language] sacred to humans” (10: W, A, 3). To encourage discussion and interpretation, facilitators used drawings depicting West African people in situations similar to those experienced by participants in their daily lives.

In class, Tostan facilitators made reference to existing proverbs and local cultural events. Participants mentioned, specifically, their surprise at the way the facilitator used the local proverb, “If ten people dig and ten others fill in, there’s lots of dust but no hole.” Not only were they surprised by its use, they explained how the proverb opened up a discussion around the local values of working together and how they could improve their collaboration to achieve their vision. One man said, “I will tell family and friends about how important it is to work as a team instead of as individuals” (10: M, C, 1); and another man from another village said, “[At home we need to talk about how we] work together. . . . If everyone gets together and works then we can get so much more done” (10: M, A, 1).

All these elements made the classes familiar and inviting. One man said, “Everything I learned today was memorable. I learned about my culture and how things worked” (10: M, C, 1). The language, the local proverbs, and

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the depiction of West African people in familiar situations helped participants understand human rights from their set of cultural understandings and meanings and in a language that was immediately accessible to all of them.

Experiential Learning

Not only did facilitators use elements from participants' cultural background; they also deliberately asked participants to contribute with their own life experiences as members of the community. Participants frequently mentioned this aspect and recalled other people's experiences. For instance, one man, after session 11 on nondiscrimination, said, "I learned about discrimination and how it is done all over the world. For example, Amadou went to a village and only slept in the homes of people with the last name Diallo" (10: M, C, 13). The videos show that the facilitators actively encouraged participants to reflect upon their local reality and to contribute to the discussion with examples from it. Take, for instance, the following excerpt:

Facilitator: Does mutual aid exist among us [in this village]?

Man: There are some who take your money by force; they do not respect others.

Woman: There are people that helped me; for example, when my children were born, they helped me to get birth registration papers.

Facilitator: There are two categories: those that harm and those that help. What are some examples around here of harming or helping? (10: V, A, 12)

Participants connected the use of their own life experiences and their capacity and motivation to contribute to the discussion. They were also positively surprised by other people's contributions. One woman, for instance, said, "I did not think people would open up like this" (10: W, B, 13); one man said, "I was surprised today that we talked about health and everyone in class was sharing their thoughts and experiences. I did not think everyone would share so much about their personal lives" (10: M, B, 17).

While the culturally congruent strategies discussed above helped participants understand human rights and contextualize them in their culture, experiential learning helped them recognize the relevance of those rights in their own individual lived experiences. In class, participants contextualized human rights in meaningful examples drawn from their own lives that would help them, over time, look together critically at existing examples of human rights abuses and discuss how to remedy them.

Skits

Participants often cited performance through the use of skits as the most innovative, engaging, and amusing technique; it was possibly the most frequently mentioned instructional strategy. The participants engaged in a form of performance very similar to Boal's (1979, 1995) theater of the oppressed; the facilitators asked them to enact scenes from their daily lives (for instance, a misunderstanding between a husband and a wife, or a discussion about sending one's daughter to school or marrying her off) and invited the rest of the class to comment on what they were seeing. These skits were very memorable to participants. One man, for instance, said, "Today I was surprised to see a performance about someone marrying a young girl. The father agreed to the marriage but the mother did not. There was lots of arguing but people got together and they talked about it until they came to understanding. A skit about this was really surprising" (10: M, B, 17). Participants also repeatedly described how the skits helped them learn and talk together: "I was happy because it taught me a lot. I have never seen something like this before and it is very interesting" (10: M, A, 14), said one man. A woman remarked, "I was [at first] surprised at what the skits meant, but we sat down and talked about it and that was very interesting" (10: W, B, 14). The videos show that direct discussions among participants increased dramatically in length and intensity during the plays; interestingly, during these discussions the women, when interrupted by the men, would not stop but would speak louder and persist in making their voices heard.

The skits offered participants the opportunity to look together critically at examples of human rights violations or protections. Some of these events might have happened in their villages before, but possibly they had

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never deliberated on them collectively, deciding how to act on them. The skits helped participants talk about concrete examples of violations of human rights, and together deliberate on their possible solutions.

Democratic Dialogue and Deliberation

Participants also enjoyed having debates around local issues and remarked upon the novelty of doing so. One man said, “I was surprised to get the chance to talk to some of my neighbors and share ideas with them; I never thought we would sit in the same room and do this” (10: M, B, 1). Another man, from a different village said, “Usually at this time of day everyone is off doing their own thing, but it’s great that we are here . . . having great conversations and getting an education” (10: M, B, 3). Participants also believed that similar conversations in class were fun, great, memorable, and good.

They also remarked on the differences between conversations in the village and in class, where norms of democratic collaboration had been established. After the first session, one man said, “Here at school participation is the same, but it is different out in the village” (10: M, A, 1). The difference this man referred to, the data suggest, is mostly in gender participation. Although he observed an equitable participation (possibly because it was indeed already more equitable than in village meetings), analysis of videotapes shows that women’s participation increased over time. In community A, for instance, in the first session women spoke for 45 seconds, and men for a total of 517. By the time the course had reached session 13, all participants were speaking more, and the women were speaking longer and more frequently than the men.

Toward the end of the human rights sessions, participants all valued their conversations: “Woman: Taking part in the group is good. . . . When you speak, someone might correct you, and persuade you of the contrary view. . . . Man: It’s important to speak, because your ideas could be useful for others” (10: V, A, 22). Not only did participants believe the discussions to be important, they found them fun and helpful. Take, for instance, the woman who said, “I was surprised that everyone in class participated, especially after the skits everyone got excited and was laughing and we learned a lot” (10: W, A, 17).

Experiential learning and the skits helped participants discover individually and collectively the relevance of human rights for their own lives.

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Democratic dialogue equipped participants with the individual and collective skills they needed for all to be active parts of the conversation.

Welcoming Facilitators

Participants described Tostan's facilitators as friendly, warm, understanding, and culturally familiar. In particular, they linked their facilitators' clarity and enthusiasm. One woman said, "The facilitator is interested in us learning because that is why he is here. He wants to teach us, and every morning he asks us questions to see if we have not forgotten what we learned" (10: W, B, 11). They also appreciated the facilitators' kindness, which made them feel safe and welcomed: "The teacher helps . . . a lot, he is very polite, he will not embarrass you in class, he won't show you up, he is very patient with us and he takes time to explain things to us until we understand and he allows us to ask as many questions as we want" (11: M, B, FG). The videos show facilitators responding with encouragement to all participants at all times, even when they simply repeated what others had just said. Participants said they were motivated to participate in and return to the classes because the facilitator valued their contributions and invited them to experiment without fear of error.

These instructional strategies were important in engaging participants in the human rights curriculum in transformative ways. Culturally congruent elements presented human rights to participants as something approachable, something they could contextualize in their cultural understandings. Experiential learning and skits showed them the relevance of those rights for their individual and collective daily lives. A welcoming facilitator helped participants join in the dialogic problematization of their social context from their newly acquired human rights perspective, and in the deliberation as to solutions to the problems they identified.

Effect of the Program on Community Members' Aspirations

In the larger study (Cislaghi et al. 2016), analysis of participants' descriptions of the community before Tostan's HRE classes revealed that aspirations were limited. Participants described themselves and others as being lost, or asleep, without hope for the future. One man, describing life in his village in the first

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interview, said, “It’s like being in a closed house with no keys” (10: M, B, 1); and one woman, commenting on her life conditions, said, “Someone who doesn’t know anything can’t get anything and can’t get anything done” (10: W, B, 1). We don’t mean to represent these villages as either hopeless or excluded from the social change processes occurring in their country; rather, we see them as using HRE to become agents of change in their communities. In 2011, reflecting on the CEP, participants remarked that their communities were transforming, but that the CEP had sped up the process and put them in charge of that change (11: M, A, FG).

In this study, reexamination of the visualization session showed that it unlocked participants’ hopes and aspirations for the future. Participants began to reflect on how they could achieve change for themselves and others. After the visualization session, one woman, when asked what stood out to her from the class, answered, “What I picked up today was the question, what is life? Life is working and being able to survive and making a difference” (10: W, B, 3); a man, in answer to the same question, replied, “[I have learned that] we all make a difference” (10: M, B, 3). As the classes unfolded, participants began to report an increased capacity to learn and get things done, which, in turn, expanded their awareness of the possible roles they could take. One woman reflected on how she was now capable of actively participating in the public life of her village: “I have learned roads to go through I did not know, and now I know how to talk to others and present myself” (10: W, A, 11). In 2011, reflecting on how she and others in her community (both men and women) had changed, one woman said, “When I attended meetings in the past, I would sit in the back and never say anything but now when I go to meetings I speak. . . . Now, women like me are able to call for meetings and men will sit and listen to what the women have to say” (11: W, B, I).

In the human rights sessions, participants could link each right and responsibility to what they believed to be good for the future of their community. The small-group discussion and the skits helped participants develop the public speaking skills they needed to participate in these class debates. The visualization session (with the drawing exercise and its following revisions) expanded participants’ aspirational map; the constructive dialogue around the community’s future increased the number of possible future communities available to participants. These aspirational discussions increased as participants looked critically at their reality through the human rights curriculum: experiential learning guided participants in a critical analysis of

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their community as it was and as they would like it to be. Facilitators then presented participants with practical problems: How can we reach the ideal community we visualized? Not only were participants developing aspirations for the future, they were problematizing the present. This process responds to Appadurai's call for stretching the map of aspirations and increasing navigational capacities of even the most disadvantaged populations.

Most important, we could see how the aspirations had spillover effects. Participants explained to each other interactively in class, in light of their aspirations, why they needed to change unjust social practices, and they actually changed these practices. They and others saw the changes. This visibility created spillover. They said nonparticipating members of their communities had observed them undertake public actions, such as cleaning up the community and speaking in public. They said, too, that they had become models for those nonparticipating members, and that those examples convinced them that together they could achieve even more changes. The spillover reached neighboring communities. Participants said that visitors commented positively on visible changes they had made and asked them how they had accomplished them. Participants reported having explained to them how they had relied on human rights to establish their goals and awaken their aspirations, and that they wished to share what they had learned with their neighbors. Our participants said they shared their aspirations and information, but future research could explore how others take up these aspirations as they learn the information from participants in the *Kobi* sessions.

Conclusions

Increasing aspirations is a dangerous process, since it can lead to either frustration, in the case of unreachable aspirations, or to its opposite, a lack of drive to self-betterment, due to underwhelming aspirations. Ray (2006) argued that aspirations expand by opening a gap, or "window," between present conditions and the possible future. The size of the opening is what determines the successful expansion of the capacity to aspire: if the opening is too small, "there is no drive to self-betterment"; if it is too large, "there is the curse of frustrated aspirations" (4). The CEP encouraged participants to open their own aspirational windows and framed the opening in terms of the participants' sociocultural context, so that they could engage proactively and meaningfully with the conditions in that context.

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At the beginning of the program participants had some aspirations, but did not know how to move from their present situation to the future. They lacked the practical skills and social technologies to advance their collective well-being together. Through the CEP, participants developed individual and collective aspirations for their future, identified obstacles to those aspirations, and acquired knowledge and skills necessary to address those obstacles together. Their work in their village inspired others to join in the process of change. In this study, we found that participants' expanded aspirational capacity was critical for them to act for the promotion and protection of human rights in their communities. Further studies could enhance our understanding of how the expansion of aspirations and engaging human rights education practices and curriculum reinforce each other in ways that are transformative for participants. We hope these findings will inspire human rights educators working in similar settings to consider integrating visioning exercises in their transformative human rights education curricula.

Note

1. We adopted the following system to identify quotations: the year in which the interview was conducted, 2010 or 2011 (in this case 10): Gender of the interviewee (Man) or V for video, village (A), and number of the session after which the interview was carried out (in this case 22).

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