



Senegal: Grassroots Democracy in Action

In villages of the Wolof-speaking groundnut basin and the Fulani-speaking Fouta Toro in Senegal, “democracy” is fast becoming a household expression. The Senegalese NGO “Tostan” (a Wolof name that means “breaking out of the egg”), a rural women’s non-formal education program has been developing for over two years a brand of local training in democratic principles and behaviors. The initiative got under way on the heels of a training and empowerment program that the NGO had been promoting throughout central Senegal for the last decade. The effort was open to all, but it specifically targeted women and included lessons in problem-solving, income generation, African-language literacy and child health. In order to meet emerging felt needs, and as the program grew, new modules were developed with the beneficiaries. One of the last of these was a module on women’s health, including some sharing and discussion of a long-taboo subject - women’s sexuality - which broke all records for participation throughout those rural areas. Tostan staff discovered that one strong and unsuspected source of interest in this module was the emphasis put on human rights, particularly the rights of women and children to be free from discrimination and the threat of violence. People wanted to know more about these matters.

Democracy from the family to the state

Before developing any new modules, however, staff decided to undertake some participatory research into just what most concerned people in this realm and what they most needed to learn. The results were surprising. Respondents very much wanted to expand on the issue of human rights and to examine the conditions, even the kind of society, in which these could be more durably ensured. The term “democracy” surfaced on a number of occasions, overheard from national political discourse, but no one was too sure exactly what it meant. Staff resolved therefore to try out a training sequence that would use “democracy” as a cover term for the kind of social arrangements under which human rights could be effectively guaranteed and people of all groups and ages could play an active role in determining their own

IK Notes reports periodically on Indigenous Knowledge (IK) initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is published by the Africa Region’s Knowledge and Learning Center as part of an evolving IK partnership between the World Bank, communities, NGOs, development institutions and multilateral organizations. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the World Bank Group or its partners in this initiative. A webpage on IK is available at <http://www.worldbank.org/aftdr/ik/default.htm>

destiny. The module that resulted from these months of effort included information, discussion, role-playing and applied activities all focusing on what human rights society must protect, how individual and group values are balanced, by what means those who have been deprived of rights can assert them, how conflict is healed, and the sort of governance strategies such goals require. Organizers found it worthwhile to go back to the root meaning of “democracy” in Greek—*government by the people*—and to facilitate widespread discussion of just what this implied and how it related to the assertion of human rights and the resolution of conflict. Democracy was interpreted and discussed as an arrangement affecting family life, local associations and village organization every bit as much as it did politics at the regional or national level. The debate and exchange that these topics prompted in participating communities was extremely lively and soon reached well beyond the confines of the non-formal education course. A remarkable amount of dialogue between men and women, between young people and their elders, and even among ethnic groups ensued in most areas involved.

IK Notes

would be of interest to:

Name _____

Institution _____

Address _____

Letters, comments, and requests for publications should be addressed to:

Editor: IK Notes
 Knowledge and Learning Center
 Africa Region, World Bank
 1818 H Street, N.W., Room J5-055
 Washington, D.C. 20433
 E-mail: pmohan@worldbank.org

Keeping the faith

Organizers were careful to associate village authorities and religious leaders in the process. In fact, perhaps the greatest impetus to the effort was given by its interaction with religious values, mostly Islamic in the areas concerned. The widespread reaction among the faithful was that the rights and democratic principles in question were a better reflection of true Islamic values than much of contemporary society or customary practice.

Palpable results were soon evident on a number of fronts. Much of the momentum seems to have come from a dynamic much like Gandhian nonviolence—that is, from deliberate efforts to bring contradictions between values and behavior into the light of collective awareness. Violence against women and children in the family provides a case in point. Participants in the Tostan democracy education program were quick to denounce the practice of allowing the beating of wives and children within the family. Cases were brought out and discussed in community after community. As a male head of household in the village of Ngaparou put it, “We all knew it was not right to beat women. We just got away with it. But you have to change now, because the whole matter has gone public.” Going public—though usually in a non-aggressive way—has to all appearances been a key arm of the movement.

Children’s rights constitute another principal focus. Groups in the town of Thies who went through the study then identified the lack of birth certificates for a major proportion of children born in their community as one of the most serious abuses of human rights to be remedied. It effectively excluded these children from schooling and a series of life opportunities. Program participants went on to lobby for new procedures and to obtain certification for a large number of young people. In a number of locations across the region, the problem of early marriage without the consent of girls was posed in no uncertain terms and widely debated. The increased focus on girls’ rights added new impetus to the grassroots movement to ban female circumcision highlighted in IK Notes # 3 on the Oath of Malicounda.

Habits of accountability

The democracy debate appears also to be having major effects on practice within local associations and communities. Notions of accountability, transparency, leadership qualifications, interest representation and effective governance were much discussed in the curriculum, as were means for resolving the conflicts that increased claims on social recognition and equity inevitably produce. Staff now find former participants maintaining that there has been a major change in procedures and even in personnel within community associations as a result of the training. “We now know better what a leader should be,” they say; and there is a noticeable increase in women’s access to leadership functions. Women also speak of no longer tolerating customary situations where the leader—of either gender—makes decisions for the membership. And, in several areas, conflict resolution clinics have been established by women who finished the democracy module.

Further political ramifications cannot be excluded. Participants suggest that a much larger proportion of women is interested in voting than ever before - and few are willing to accept the frequent pattern where the male head of the household dictates how all family members shall vote. (In fact, in a number of villages it was the chief who decided how all residents would vote.) The discussion of leader qualifications has led in several places to new criteria for evaluating political candidacies, a sort of local “checklist” of desirable characteristics and an indigenous litmus test for democratic intentions. Women in the Fouta Toro region resolved to monitor more closely national legislation on women’s rights.

A growth industry

Demand for the democracy module has been increasing and prompting a sort of local campaign spirit, particularly at the intersection between this populism and the issues of women’s rights. Participants from the islands of Sine Saloum canoed this summer from community to community in order to organize women in a region-wide front against female circumcision. Over eighty villages, covering nearly the entire *arrondissement* of Dabo, have joined the movement of their own volition. And in the Toucouleur areas of the Fouta Toro, participants in the training program have organized their own “road show” to take from village to village throughout adjoining rural areas.

Results are showing up in some farther-flung areas as well. Participants from the region of Ngirin Bamba started a garden project by asking plots from the men of the village on the principle of “land to the tiller,” and then posted a sign reading “the right to land” at the gate to their vegetable and fruit cooperative.

Notions of “democracy”—adapted to local Senegalese conditions—are thus woven in and among these various assertions of human rights. The word itself has been assimilated directly into the Wolof and Fulani/Pulaar languages and crops up now in arguments, proclamations and jokes throughout the villages involved. As a women in Ker Simbara explained to training staff on a follow-up visit, “We had to change the way we ran our cooperative meetings, because it wasn’t consistent with ‘democracy!’” At a time when the fate of national representative government still hangs very much in the balance across the sub-region, a locally-grown variety seems unexpectedly to be laying some of the groundwork for future change.

This article is based on research conducted by local researchers with the support and technical supervision of Peter Easton, Associate professor, Graduate Studies in Adult Education., Florida State University, with the active collaboration of the concerned African communities. The research was carried out under the joint aegis of the Club du Sahel/OECD, the Interstate Committee for Combating Drought in the Sahel/Comité Inter-état Contre la Sécheresse (CILSS) and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa.

