

Evaluation of Tostan's Social Mobilisation Programme in Senegal

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Overview of the programme

Orchid Project is a UK charity working for an end to female genital cutting (FGC) worldwide. Since 2012, Orchid Project has partnered with Tostan, a Senegal-based NGO, established in 1991, that focuses on sustainable development and positive transformation of communities in line with the achievement of human rights. Tostan's Community Empowerment Programme (CEP) is a 3-year non-formal education programme implemented in six countries. The CEP has multiple outcomes, and one key result is the abandonment of female genital cutting (FGC) by some communities. Tostan offers the opportunity for villages who are ready to abandon FGC to publicly declare that they have abandoned the practice. To date, almost 8,000 communities have abandoned FGC across West Africa as a result of the programme.

Tostan and Orchid Project developed the Social Mobilisation Programme (SMP) to complement the CEP to accelerate the abandonment of FGC. Orchid Project supports the delivery of the SMP in four regions in Senegal, where FGC incidence is highest. These are Saint Louis, Matam, Sedhiou and Kolda. The SMP focuses on facilitating social norm change associated with FGC through completion of social mobilisation activities. These activities are social mobilisation missions, inter-village meetings, sharing workshops, inter-generational meetings, radio broadcasts and school campaigns. The activities are completed by four teams of six volunteers: five social mobilisation agents (SMAs) managed by one supervisor.

The social mobilisation missions are the key activity of the SMP, playing a vital role in accelerating the reach of understanding about FGC. The teams undertake these missions to facilitate open dialogue at village level about FGC. Each mission should include visits to six villages, with each visit lasting two days. SMAs hold an initial meeting with key village members, such as the village leader and the Imam, providing information, addressing misperceptions held by these influential people about FGC, and asking for permission to engage with the wider village population.

If access to the wider village is granted, the SMAs subsequently spend a further day in each village, in discussion within a 'whole village meeting'. This meeting is convened in a culturally-sensitive manner, accommodating societal nuances and conventions. The meeting is an opportunity for the village to openly discuss FGC as a group and understand that the topic is no longer taboo, and it is now appropriate to discuss FGC openly with one another. The fact that the SMAs are publicly supported by the village leader and Imam during the meeting means that the village residents are likely to be empowered to ask questions about their own understanding of FGC. SMAs answer questions and address misperceptions about FGC. The meeting also offers an opportunity for village residents to understand the perspectives of others from the village about the practice of FGC.

Scope of the evaluation

This evaluation adopted a fully participatory approach, incorporating qualitative methods of inquiry. The random sample comprised residents from five villages located in each of the four regions where the programme takes place. An additional eight SMAs participated in an outcomes hierarchy workshop. The coverage of activities is mostly restricted to social mobilisation missions owing to the experiences of sampled villages. The evaluation focused on extending understandings of the SMP through research into its effectiveness, reach and efficiency. Any change in social norms that may be attributed to the programme's influence were studied.

Summary of findings

The background and training of the selected SMAs is key to the success of the SMP, as is their method of approach. SMAs are volunteers, recruited from communities who have undertaken the Tostan CEP and have chosen to abandon FGC. They are educated, fluent in local languages and many are the same ethnic group as the majority of residents in their areas of operation. Each team likely comprises SMAs with a variety of skills and knowledge, e.g. on Islam, literacy and health. SMAs participate in rigorous training prior to starting their role.

The change between the taboo status of FGC to its open discussion is directly attributable to the participation of the village in a social mobilisation mission. Prior to involvement in a mission, it is likely that the village residents are not aware of the perspectives of others on FGC and may not have had the opportunity to talk openly about FGC with people outside of conventionally approved contexts, such as single gender, household or age groups.

Communication channels are opened through participation in the whole village meeting which provides a 'safe space' for convened discussion about FGC, which is likely to continue at village level after the SMAs have left the village. This continuation of dialogue was found to be a factor associated with the programme impact and likelihood of resulting abandonment of FGC by the villages involved in the SMP. The continuation of this discussion is, however, dependent on support from key people in the village.

Since 2012, SMAs have reached 48,721 people in 876 villages. In the past year alone (2015-16) they reached 240 villages through social mobilisation visits, 57 villages through sharing workshops, convened 8 inter-village meetings reaching 103 communities and 828 people, delivered 5 school campaigns and broadcast numerous radio programmes.

The key findings of this evaluation were:

- The success of the Orchid Project funded SMP: since the start of the SMP in 2012, social mobilisation activities funded by the Orchid Project have resulted in 169 villages being ready to abandon FGC.
- The effectiveness of the approach adopted by the social mobilisation teams: teams work closely with key village members, to ensure that elements of the programme are completed in line with the local context and that any socio-cultural sensitivities are addressed, resulting in high uptake of understanding about FGC and high impact.
- SMAs play a pivotal role in the successful implementation and reach of the programme: in many circumstances, villages only engage in dialogue about FGC after being visited by the SMAs. As the SMP is targeted towards villages that have not participated in the CEP, it is a clear opportunity to spread the movement to abandon FGC.
- The effectiveness of the whole village meetings in encouraging open dialogue on FGC: owing to the approach taken by SMAs, the meeting is usually highly effective at opening communication channels, resulting in eventual social norm change concerning FGC.
- Prior to a village's participation in the SMP, it is unlikely that FGC is discussed outside of conventional groups. After participation, women and girls of all ages are more likely to engage in open discussion in intergenerational, intergender groups outside of the household. Older women are influencers in decisions made about FGC and their participation can facilitate change in behaviour associated with the discussion of FGC.
- Participation in the SMP was identified as providing men with the agency required to discuss FGC and contribute to decision-making about FGC in their households.
- Both men and women identified that the new knowledge they learned from the SMAs inspired them to educate others and become advocates or activists supporting the abandonment of FGC in Senegal.

Summary of recommendations

Suggested programmatic adaptations and additions

- Timing of activities should be complementary to the commitments of village residents.
- For Tostan to offer more flexibility in the amount of time spent in villages, engaging with key village members and convening forums and group meetings. SMAs to plan to systematically revisit communities after whole village meetings, to provide support for ongoing dialogue, or make visits to individuals, households or village forums and groups.
- For Tostan to consider a less direct, and more gradual approach in regions which are known to be more conservative. The SMAs should be supported in these instances by a policy and protocol that provides advice on approach and behaviour. Such an approach could include activities such as a larger number of initial consultations with key people at village level addressing related but non-direct topics.
- SMAs should ensure that all villages that are considering abandoning their practice of FGC are given the opportunity to participate in inter-village meetings where funds allow.
- For all villages that have agreed to abandon the practice to be given the opportunity to participate in a public declaration of abandonment of FGC.
- For SMAs to involve residents of villages that have participated in the SMP in identification of villages for inclusion in future social mobilisation missions. Appropriate villages that are willing to consider changing their practice of FGC could be identified.
- Scoping understandings of religion, culture and society could be incorporated into the selection process for villages to be included, to further inform the approach taken by the SMAs, which could then be adapted to suit the cultural and religious context.
- For gender to be taken into account during initial meetings to ensure key female village residents, e.g. wives of village leaders, are reached prior to the whole village meeting.
- Formal and scheduled follow up visits could be made by SMAs to facilitate extra whole village meetings after the village's participation in the main two day SMP activities.
- A door-to-door activity associated with the relay of messages could be used to support the whole village meeting to spread understanding to those who were unable to attend.
- For SMAs to provide support in the development of village level committees to enable the continuation of dialogue about FGC after participation in the SMP.
- Radio broadcasts by Tostan as part of the SMP should be referred to and explained.

Suggestions for support for SMAs

- Additional support, e.g. psychological support sessions or debriefs, and motivational opportunities should be made available to SMAs. Opportunities for 'top up' training could also benefit SMAs, enabling them to consolidate their learning, keep the programme up to date and share experiences. Training should involve SMAs from a combination of regions, so they can share and learn from each other's experiences.

Suggestions for rollout and scaling

- Scoping activities to facilitate the understanding of community level nuances and socio-cultural context prior to the commencement of the social mobilisation activities.
- The current selection process, and training procedures associated with recruitment of SMAs should be retained as this is key to the success of the SMP.
- The key activity is the whole village meeting, taking place after interaction with leaders and Imams. Success is dependent on the culturally appropriate manner in which the interaction is managed and the meeting convened. Whilst the meeting component is replicable, each is likely to be different. If convened in a manner that conforms to socio-cultural context, expectations and nuances, it is more likely to be successful.