



## **Empowering communities to lead their own development: A pathway to sustainable change in West Africa**

*Key findings from Global Fund for Children's partners-led learning research on applying Tostan inspired community led approach in Liberia and Sierra Leone.*

## Acknowledgements

This report is a compilation of the findings from Global Fund for Children (GFC) partners-led research in Sierra Leone and Liberia. The pieces of research in the different communities where our partners operate were conducted in 2023 with the technical support of GFC, Tostan and an independent consultant based in Sierra Leone. The partners include [Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society \(WAVES\)](#), [Center for Advocacy and Sustainable Empowerment \(CASE SALONE\)](#), [Children's Forum Network \(CFN\)-Kenema](#) in Sierra Leone and [Community Healthcare Initiative \(CHI\)](#) in Liberia.

Global Fund for Children deeply appreciates the outstanding work of its partners in rural, underserved and hard to reach communities, where they are driving progress toward gender justice and empowering girls and women to enjoy their rights and realize their full potential.

This transformative community-driven changes would not have been achieved without the generous financial support from TIDES Foundation and People's Postcode Lottery. Their vital funding has been instrumental in enabling grassroots organizations to work with communities to challenge deeply rooted social norms and empower local communities to realize lasting changes.

Global Fund for Children firmly believes that collaboration is the cornerstone of sustainable development, and we are deeply grateful to Tostan for their unwavering generosity in sharing their extensive knowledge, experience and expertise. Their support has not only enhanced the capacity of our partners in effectively implement community lead approach but has also amplified the collective efforts toward tackling systemic challenges to gender justice and promoting personal and community wellbeing.

## Introduction

Since 2020, [Global Fund for Children](#) (GFC), with funding from [TIDES Foundation](#) and [People's Postcode Lottery](#), has been supporting community based organizations in Liberia and Sierra Leone to explore innovative strategies to address the root causes of violence against girls, advocate and support girls to stay in school, as part of the [Educating and Empowering Girls in West Africa](#) initiative.

One of the key innovative strategies implemented by partner organizations is empowering communities to lead their own development and build an ecosystem where all members—including children, youth, women, and men—achieve their well-being. This approach is rooted in the belief that sustainable change comes from within the community, where all the members are encouraged and equipped to reflect, identify, address, and find solutions to the issues that affect their personal and collective well-being. The approach also encourages collective action to dismantle long-standing gender stereotypes and practices and help communities reflect on traditional practices that perpetuate violence against girls and women, including child marriage and female genital cutting (FGC), which are deeply entrenched in cultural norms across parts of West Africa.

At the beginning of the partnership, our partners shared that despite their ongoing efforts to end violence against girls and promote gender justice, they observed that their work with communities was not yielding the expected outcomes. This led to a collective reflection on the need for more impactful approaches that can drive sustainable change, particularly in addressing deeply ingrained cultural practices that contribute to violence against girls.

Based on the positive feedback from alumni partners in Nigeria and Ghana who had attended the Tostan Training in 2019, it became evident that [Tostan](#) inspired Community-Led Approach (CLA) offered a promising pathway to achieving these goals. In response, GFC decided to sponsor and support a cohort of partners and community leaders from Liberia and Sierra Leone to participate in the Tostan's 10-day Introductory seminar on promoting community well-being in Senegal. The seminar aimed at equipping partners with the innovative methodologies to foster deeper, more meaningful engagement with rural communities, enabling them to better address the root causes of violence, particularly against girls.

A total of 12 individuals, representing six partner organizations, five community leaders from Liberia and Sierra Leone, and two GFC team members, attended the seminar that ran from March 22-April 1, 2021. The seminar created a space for participants to reflect on their current strategies, learn from Tostan's successful community-led initiatives, and gain insights into the importance of community ownership and empowerment, setting the stage for more sustainable and impactful interventions in their ongoing efforts to protect girls and promote gender justice.

Upon return from the seminar, GFC Africa team provided tailored mentoring support to the partners to help them share knowledge and insights from the seminar for collective reflection on how they can adapt and implement the Tostan inspired CLA. GFC also encouraged the partners to respectively select one pilot community to test the Tostan CLA model's

effectiveness in addressing the root causes of violence against girls and promote gender justice.

After 2 years of piloting the Tostan CLA model, GFC supported the partners to conduct qualitative learning research which aimed at assessing the tangible outcomes of the new, community-driven engagement strategies introduced after the seminar, documenting the shifts in community dynamics, behaviors, and attitudes, particularly regarding harmful gender based violence against girls and understanding how this approach had influenced their work in the communities.

### **Social and cultural context in which GFC partners operate**

Both Liberia and Sierra Leone are deeply influenced by patriarchal social structures in which men predominantly hold power across families, communities, and political spheres, while women's roles are largely confined to caregiving and domestic responsibilities. These entrenched gender norms, often reinforced by traditional practices and cultural beliefs, contribute to widespread gender inequality, limiting their safety and access to resources, rights, as well as their ability to make decisions about their own lives. Furthermore, social norms surrounding masculinity frequently encourage boys and men to use aggression, dominance, and control to prove their manhood. As a result, this fosters a culture where physical, emotional, and sexual violence become tools for demonstrating power, gaining respect, and fulfilling societal expectations of masculinity.

Violence against women and girls is therefore alarmingly high in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, particularly in rural areas. According to the 2019-2020 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey (LDHS), 60% of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence, and 9% have faced sexual violence. The 2019 Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey (SLDHS) indicates that 49% of women believe a husband is justified in beating his wife if she burns the food, argues with him, goes out without telling him, neglects the children, or refuses to have sex with him. This reflects how cultural beliefs foster the acceptance of violence as a tool of control. In response to the alarming rates of sexual violence, both Liberia and Sierra Leone declared rape a national emergency in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

Early marriage remains a critical issue in both countries, with severe consequences for young girls. In Liberia, 36% of girls are married before they turn 18, while in Sierra Leone, 30% of girls enter into marriage or unions before the age of 18, according to the 2019 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). These early and forced marriages often lead to high rates of teenage pregnancies. 2019 SLDHS indicates that 21% of women aged 15-19 have started childbearing (i.e., they have already had a birth or are pregnant with their first child). This situation is exacerbated by the combination of cultural practices, limited access to education, and inadequate reproductive health services.

In addition, female genital cutting is widespread in both countries. The 2019 SLDHS reports that 83% of women aged 15-49 have undergone some form of Female genital cutting (FGC), while the 2019-2020 LDHS shows that approximately 40% of women and girls in the same

age range have undergone the practice. This traditional practice is particularly widespread in rural areas and often seen as a rite of passage into womanhood, and closely associated with social and cultural identity.

Given that social and gender norms are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of many communities, particularly in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone, a community-led approach offers a powerful and sustainable path for long-term change. The approach is rooted in the belief that real transformation must come from within communities themselves, ensuring that solutions are not only culturally relevant but also widely accepted and supported.

### **Definition and principles of Tostan community-led approach model**

Tostan defines “community” as a group of people living in the same place or having characteristics (e.g., language, culture, ethnic group) in common. It is also a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common values, activities, or attitudes, interests, and goals. In this report, community refers to a group of people living in the same place and having particular characteristics.

Tostan inspired CLA centers on supporting the community to collectively identify their core values, needs, and goals, and then design and implement plans to achieve those goals. Rather than imposing external solutions, Tostan inspired CLA focuses on facilitating a process that builds on the community's existing strengths, capacities, and leadership. In order to achieve sustainable change. The approach encourages collaboration within the community and supports communities to establish strong relationships with external actors—such as government agencies, NGOs, or other development partners—while maintaining the community's autonomy and leadership in decision-making.

### **Tostan inspired CLA is founded on the principles below:**

- A. *Putting the community at the center of all actions*: Putting the community at the center of all actions ensures that development initiatives are relevant, effective, and sustainable and enhances the impact and ownership of development projects.
- B. *Involvement of everyone including children and women in decision-making processes*: Tostan inspired CLA ensures that all community members – especially those who are often marginalized, such as children, women, youth, and vulnerable groups – have a voice in decision-making processes.
- C. *Focus on community wellbeing*: Tostan inspired CLA prioritizes the holistic wellbeing of individuals and the community, rather than focusing solely on specific problems.
- D. *Education about human rights and gender justice*: Tostan inspired CLA integrates education on human rights and gender justice into community programs, emphasizing principles such as nondiscrimination, equality, and justice, to encourage the community to challenge harmful practices and adopt more equitable behaviors.

- E. Facilitation of a community visioning process: Tostan inspired CLA facilitates a visioning process where community members collectively define their aspirations and set long-term goals. The community is supported to use vision boards and other tools to help visualize their desired future and plan actionable steps to achieve it. This process gives community members the power to identify problems and develop solutions, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility.
- F. Respect for the culture: Tostan inspired CLA requires external actors to acknowledge and respect the positive practices, traditions, and existing resources within the community. The approach emphasizes that the community has all it takes to address its challenges. **External actors need to simply the necessary partners only need to guide communities in a respectful and participatory methodology to harness their potential.**
- G. Support the community to put in place an inclusive Community Management Committee (CMC): Tostan inspired CLA includes support to the community to put in place an inclusive CMC with representation of women, men, children, and youth to coordinate the implementation of the vision collectively agreed upon by the community. The CMC leads the interactions between the community members and other local organizations, government actors, and external parties to achieve the goals of the community.

## Research methodology

The partners-led research employed a qualitative approach, designed to assess the effectiveness of the Tostan inspired CLA in six (6) communities where the approach was piloted. These communities are

1. Waima community, Bo district, Sierra Leone
2. Komende community, Bo district, Sierra Leone
3. Nyengbema community, Bo district, Sierra Leone
4. Kokofele community, Bo district, Sierra Leone
5. Borbu Community, Kenema district, Sierra Leone
6. Sappiemah Community, Gbarpolu county, Liberia

The research methodology focused on gathering in-depth insights from representatives of the different members of the communities, using the two key data collection methods below:

**Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** FGDs were conducted with women, men, adolescent girls and boys, youth<sup>1</sup>, community leaders and members of the community management committees<sup>2</sup>. The FGDs was segmented by gender and age to capture the nuanced experiences of different groups and understand how the Tostan inspired CLA impacted each demographic uniquely.

### FGDs – Target groups and number in each community

#	Category	Total Participants	Male	Female
1.	Youth	8	4	4
2.	Adolescent girls	8	0	8
3.	Adolescent boys	8	8	0
4	Men	8	8	0
5	Community Leaders	8	4	4
6	Women	8	0	8
7	Community Management Committee Members	8	4	4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>28</b>

**Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** The KIIs targeted influential individuals from different demographic groups, including representatives of women, men, adolescent girls, adolescent boys, youth, community leaders, and the members of community management committee.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, “adolescents” refers to those aged 10–19 and “youth” or “young people” refers to those aged 20–25.

<sup>2</sup> Elected members of the community entrusted with the task to coordinate the implementation of their collective vision.

The KIs provided an opportunity for these leaders to share their personal experiences and insights into the changes taking place within their communities. These interviews helped to identify any discrepancies between what was shared in the FGDs and individual perspectives, providing a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of community-led development. The insights gained from these one-on-one conversations offered valuable feedback for refining the approach and ensuring that the voices of all community members, particularly those in leadership positions, were heard and incorporated into future planning.

### **Key informants per community**

#	Category	Total Participants	Male	Female
1.	Youth	2	1	1
2.	Adolescent girls	1	0	1
3.	Adolescent boys	1	1	0
4	Men	1	1	0
5	Community Leaders	2	1	1
6	Women	1	0	1
7	Community Management Committee Members	2	1	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>

A key aspect of the methodology was the community-driven selection of participants. Communities were given the autonomy to choose individuals they felt would best represent their views, ensuring that the voices heard in the FGDs and KIs were seen as authentic and legitimate.

The research process served as a capacity-building exercise for partners, enhancing their practical skills in conducting community-based research, including designing research tools, conducting interviews, facilitating discussions, and interpreting findings. This experiential learning process enabled partners to observe firsthand the transformative potential of the Tostan CLA model and how it actively shifts power dynamics from external stakeholders to the community itself. The iterative learning process also allowed partners to reflect on how to adapt and refine their community led approach based on the unique characteristics of each community.

To facilitate the learning process, GFC provided funding and engaged a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) consultant based in Sierra Leone to offer technical support to partners throughout the research process. The consultant played a critical role in helping partners navigate the complexities of data collection, analysis, and reporting. GFC also sought support from Tostan to assist partners in the design of the research questionnaires. Tostan's involvement was instrumental in ensuring that the questionnaires were developed from a community-led perspective, aligning with the core principles of Tostan inspired CLA. GFC Learning and Evaluation team also played a crucial role in refining the questionnaires and guiding the overall research process. Their involvement ensured that the data collection tools were aligned with GFC's broader learning objectives while maintaining the integrity of the community-led approach.



## Key findings from the partners-led research

The findings from the research exercise have been extracted from the perspectives of the different groups and individuals interviewed. These findings are not an exhaustive list of information captured, but rather a summary of the most significant changes and frequent findings across all communities where the Tostan inspired CLA was applied by the partners.

### ***I. Increased sense of unity among community members***

Research participants highlighted that the new approach partners used to engage the community over the past two years significantly strengthened unity among its members. Unlike past methods, which tended to involve only a select few individuals, the new strategy employed by the partners was more inclusive and involved the entire community. This shift from a limited, exclusive engagement to one that embraced all community members created a sense of collective participation. As a result, everyone felt valued and included in decision-making processes. Moreover, the use of interactive exercises, such as personal storytelling, role plays and cultural dances, played a pivotal role in strengthening the bonds among community members. These activities allowed individuals to reconnect with their cultural heritage and traditions, fostering a deeper sense of belonging and pride. In all the six communities where the approach was applied, participants highlighted that these cultural expressions created a platform for open conversations and understanding, transcending age, gender, and social divisions.

For many community members, the new way partners engaged them marked a significant shift in how they related to one another. Unlike in the past, when only a select few were involved in discussions, this inclusive and participatory approach made everyone—from elders to youth—feel like active contributors to the community's development. This collective engagement fostered a spirit of unity and cooperation that had been lacking before. People began to see themselves not just as individual families but as part of a larger, interconnected community with shared goals and aspirations.

*"Children's Forum Network (CFN) has brought unity in our community"*

**~ Community chief, Borbu community, Bo district, Sierra Leone**

*"Before this time, women in the community were like slaves and were banned from entering certain places, but with the intervention of CASE SALONE, we are all the same and treated equally."*

**~ Woman from Waiima community, Bo district, Sierra Leone**

## **II. Inclusion of women and children in decision making processes**

Discussions from the FGDs and interviews with KIs revealed that, in the past, women, children, and youth were largely excluded from decision-making processes on issues affecting the communities. Traditionally, community leadership roles were predominantly held by men. Women, children and youth were not associated with community meetings. As a result, their voices were completely absent from important deliberations. Research participants noted a significant shift with the introduction of the new approach implemented by partners, which explicitly emphasized the inclusion of these previously overlooked groups. The new approach actively encouraged and facilitated the participation of women, children, and youth in decision-making processes. This inclusive strategy ensured that diverse perspectives were brought to the table, allowing these groups to contribute to discussions on matters that directly impact their lives and the well-being of the broader community.

This transformation in leadership dynamics has led to a broader cultural change within the community, breaking down long-standing barriers and challenging traditional gender and age-based hierarchies. It has also promoted gender justice and intergenerational collaboration, creating a more inclusive and representative governance structure that reflects the needs and aspirations of the entire community, not just a select few.

FGDs with the groups of adolescent girls and boys highlighted that in the past, parents and other adults in the communities assumed that they knew more about life and issues than children, and as a result, they made decisions for children without consulting or listening to them. With the discussions on children's rights, parents and other adults have realized that children have ideas and understand the issues they face, from their education to marriage, career, health, and community development. Now parents and other adults in the communities actively listen to and follow suggestions from children, especially on the issues affecting them directly.

Adolescent boys and girls also shared that they now see themselves as partners in development and are working together to build the community. Young people also highlighted that they are now leading community development initiatives, bringing their innovation and physical strength to promote unity, celebrate their culture, and address challenges within the community. For example, in the Nyengbema community in Bo, Sierra Leone, young people organized cultural gatherings such as festivals, parades, and dances that brought people together to celebrate traditional reunions. These events create unique spaces for the sharing of experiences by community members and facilitate discussions in resolving matters that affect everyone.

*"The community now works with the women. The men are no longer domineering as before. Women are consulted before vital decisions are made for the community."*

**~ Woman from Kokofele community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

*“Before now, they never allowed us (women) to sit among men to talk, but now we all sit together to discuss about the development of our community.”*

**~ Woman from Waiima community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

*“We listen to the views of our children, especially on issues affecting them. We also encourage them to be part of discussions that lead to decision-making. One parent shared that the desire of their daughter to attend a particular secondary school in Bo was given priority over theirs as parents.”*

**~ Section Chief of Nyengbema community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

### **III. Changes in the way men perceive girls and women, caregiving and domestic chores**

During the FGDs with men, they shared that the workshops on human rights, personal and community wellbeing and gender justice provided by GFC partners helped reflect on existing gender roles that create division between the two sexes. In the 6 communities, men who took part in the FGDs declared that there is a profound shift in their perceptions and attitudes toward girls and women. The workshops have helped men understand the need for both sexes to work together as a team in all aspects of life—whether within the household or in the community. In the Burbu community in Kenema District, Sierra Leone, they adopted the slogan **“side by side”** which means that men and women are now working together as a team.

Through the discussions on gender roles men have realized their responsibilities as equal partners in caregiving and household duties. They acknowledged that in the past, the division of labor within households was rigid, with women bearing the brunt of domestic work and childcare. Research participants shared that men are more actively involved in performing caregiving functions, sharing household chores, and taking on more parenting roles after the discussions on gender roles during the workshops. In addition, some men in the communities are now championing women and girls' rights. These men have become advocates for the full inclusion and participation of women in all decision-making processes within their communities. They are actively promoting gender justice, leading by example, and encouraging other men to do the same. Their advocacy has helped transform the community's attitudes toward women's roles, positioning them as key contributors to the decision-making that shapes the future of their communities. They are also supportive of women leadership.

Women have also confirmed that the interactions and relationships between men and women in the communities have greatly improved. Women reported that the men now treat them with more respect and as equals. They listen to their opinions both at home and in public gatherings; and they are more supportive in performing household chores such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning.

*“I learnt that I should care for the home and do some chores, especially when my wife is not around.”*

**~ Man from Waiima community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

*“Before now, there were certain chores the community used to say boys should not do and that they were only for girls, such as cooking and sweeping. They said those chores are not for males. But now boys cook, sweep, in short, we do a lot of work girls do too. For now, we work side by side with the girls.”*

**~ Adolescent boy from Kokofele community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

#### **IV. Increased aspiration of women and girls to occupy leadership positions**

The FGDs with women and adolescent girls revealed that the workshops on human rights and gender justice conducted by GFC partners also made them realize that they have rights and can aspire to leadership positions. The workshops enabled them to gain knowledge and confidence to assert their rights and actively participate in community leadership roles—areas that were previously dominated by men.

In both Burbu and Kokofele communities, participants reported a landmark achievement for the first time in their history, where women were elected to serve in key leadership positions. In Burbu, a woman was elected as Ward Councilor, while in Kokofele, a woman was chosen to serve as Town Chief. These elections represent a major breakthrough in challenging the traditional patriarchal structures that have long excluded women from holding positions of authority.

The election of the women in the communities has inspired more women to believe in their ability to lead and to aspire to positions of influence. It has also created a ripple effect, encouraging adolescent girls to consider leadership roles as viable options for their future, fostering a new generation of empowered young women.

*“Women feel highly respected and confident even among men. This is because of the work that CASE SALONE is doing in the community.”*

**~ Women from Waiima community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

*“The women now have confidence in contesting for leadership positions in the community; they are now advocating for leadership positions in the community. We now have a female Town Chief in this community, and this is as a result of the wellbeing training we had with IDP4T.”*

**~ Woman from Kokofele community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

*“Right now, our voices are being heard by the elders; now we have two ladies as the Quarter Chiefs. But we did not stop there, we are again advocating for the other quarters to have two more women as Quarter Chiefs.”*

**~ Woman from Sappimah community, Gbarpolu, Liberia**

## **V. Reduction in gender-based violence**

Research participants emphasized that discussions around gender justice are having a profound impact on traditional practices within their communities, particularly concerning Female Genital Cutting (FGC) and early, child, and forced marriage. The workshops and training sessions organized by GFC partners, are leading to a gradual but significant cultural shift. Men, in particular, are becoming increasingly reluctant to subject their daughters to FGC, a practice that has long been ingrained in certain communities but is now being questioned and challenged.

During the FGDs with adolescents and young people, participants reported a significant reduction in the amount of violence they had witnessed between men and women, particularly between parents. Many adolescents expressed relief that they were no longer exposed to the level of domestic violence that had been common in previous years. This marked change in their environment was seen as a major improvement in their emotional and mental well-being. Similarly, women in their FGDs highlighted a dramatic reduction in incidents of domestic violence. In some communities, participants proudly shared that there had been no reported cases of domestic violence for over a year—a profound shift from past experiences of regular conflict and abuse within homes. This positive change was directly attributed to the training workshops on well-being, human rights, and gender justice that GFC partners had conducted. These workshops equipped both men and women with practical tools to resolve conflicts peacefully, recognize and uphold gender equality, and foster healthier, more respectful relationships within their families.

These shifts in community dynamics extended beyond individual households. Discussions in the FGDs revealed a gradual but notable transformation in how communities are addressing some traditional practices that negatively affect the wellbeing and health of girls and women. One of the most prominent examples was the gradual cessation of activities related to secret societies<sup>3</sup>, including the Poro society, where boys were traditionally trained to embrace violence, and the Bondo society, where girls are subjected to FGC. In Burbu community, for instance, the residents collectively decided to eradicate the Poro society entirely. This decision followed extensive community discussions and reflections on personal and collective well-being, during which the violent and harmful nature of the society's rituals came under scrutiny. In a symbolic and decisive act, the community members dismantled the physical space where Poro rituals had been conducted and sold the land, effectively putting an end to the society's influence. The situation with the Bondo society, which is linked to FGC, has been more gradual but no less transformative. Women and girls, especially after participating in the well-being discussions, began questioning the value of the practice and its relevance to their lives and their health.

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<sup>3</sup> *A secret society is a group that has some beliefs or practices that are kept hidden from the public, and membership is often restricted in some way such as by religious affiliation, sex, or invitation only. The group's existence is not always kept secret, but some practices or beliefs are hidden from the public. Members are promised superior knowledge or status.*

In Burbu, the community acknowledged that while eradicating the Bondo society would take time, they collectively agreed to a major interim step which is no girl under the age of 18 would be sent to the bush for FGC. This agreement marks a significant step forward in protecting young girls, while respecting the ongoing process of community reflection and process to effect long term change.

In Nyengbema, community members took even bolder action, enacting a local law to ban the practice of FGC altogether. This legal measure demonstrates the community's commitment to ending harmful traditional practices and ensuring the safety and rights of women and girls. However, it is important to note that this shift is not uniform across all communities. In some areas, the practice continues, though the number of girls participating in Bondo society rituals has significantly decreased. Adolescents and young people have been particularly observant of this decline, signaling that younger generations are increasingly rejecting the practice.

Children and youth in the communities reported that they were under less pressure from their parents to enroll in Bondo and Poro secret societies. They also observed that there has been a significant reduction in cases of early marriage as well. Some adolescents reported that their parents had stopped encouraging advances from men to marry their teenage daughters and were focused instead on their education and career development.

This process of challenging long-standing cultural practices has not been without its difficulties, but the changes being witnessed are indicative of a larger cultural shift. Communities are moving away from practices that perpetuate violence and gender inequality, and there is a growing consensus around the need for more inclusive, equitable, and peaceful ways of living. The gradual eradication of the Poro and Bondo societies reflects the power of community-led approaches in promoting human rights, gender justice, and collective well-being.

*"Our parents used to encourage men to call us their wives, and they took advantage of that to sexually abuse us, but with the intervention of IDP4T through the Teen Talk and wellbeing sessions, this behavior has stopped in our community."*

**~ Adolescent from Kokofele community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

*"Child initiation into the Bondo society has now been banned, and even adults need to give their consent before initiation. This has led to a drastic reduction in the initiation process; thus the activity is gradually fading out."*

**~ Leader from Kokofele community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

*"Since 2021 till now, the community has shown less interest in initiation activities for both males and females. The bush initiation is currently outdated. As a matter of fact, the men's society has stopped functioning completely in the community."*

**~ Community Facilitator from Burbu community, Kenema, Sierra Leone**

“There is a reduction in the violence rate between my parents.”  
~ *Adolescent from Waiima community, Bo, Sierra Leone*

## **VI. Reduction in teen pregnancies**

Research participants highlighted a significant reduction in teen pregnancies in their communities, which they attributed to the introduction of Teen Talk programs by partners. During FGDs and KIs, participants shared that the Teen Talk sessions have had a profound impact on both adolescents and the wider community, empowering young people to make informed decisions about their sexual life. One of the communities reported that they have not had any cases of teenage pregnancy in over a year. This change was attributed in part to the Teen Talk program, which was highlighted multiple times across all communities.

The Teen Talk programs have created a platform for adolescents to discuss critical issues that affect them, such as sexuality, relationships, consent, and the risks associated with early pregnancies. These programs have addressed a long-standing gap in knowledge, which has been a key factor in high rates of teen pregnancy in the past. Adolescents, particularly girls, now have access to accurate information about their bodies, reproductive health, contraception, and the importance of delaying pregnancy. This knowledge has enabled them to make informed choices, reducing the likelihood of unintended pregnancies.

Furthermore, the Teen Talk programs have gone beyond just addressing sexuality education; they have also played a vital role in building the confidence and self-esteem of adolescents, particularly girls. The space provided by these programs allows young people to express their thoughts, share their experiences, and voice their concerns in a supportive and non-judgmental setting. Girls, in particular, have reported feeling more empowered to speak up and advocate for their own rights and choices. This newfound confidence is not only helping to reduce teen pregnancies but is also encouraging adolescents to pursue education and leadership roles, which further delays early pregnancies and marriages.

In addition to providing education, the Teen Talk programs have fostered a culture of open dialogue, not only among young people but also between parents and their children. For many communities, discussions about sex, marriage, and relationships were considered taboo, particularly between parents and children. However, the introduction of these programs has encouraged more open communication, breaking down barriers of discomfort and silence. Parents are increasingly recognizing the importance of discussing these topics with their children and providing guidance rather than leaving them to navigate these issues on their

own. This open dialogue has contributed to a more supportive environment, where adolescents feel comfortable seeking advice and discussing their concerns with trusted adults.

*"It has been more than a year now that the community has not experienced teenage pregnancy and domestic violence."*

**~ Man from Waiima community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

## **VII. Increased investment in children's education**

The research revealed a transformative shift in attitudes toward children's education in communities where the Tostan CLA model was applied. These communities have undergone a significant change in mindset, now recognizing the importance of education for both girls and boys. This shift represents a major departure from traditional beliefs, where education was predominantly seen as the domain of boys, and girls' education was often neglected or deemed unnecessary, especially beyond primary school.

In the Kokofele community in Bo district, Sierra Leone, after the partner took the community members through a dreaming session to identify their priorities for the next 5 years, the community took the initiative to build a junior secondary school to prevent their children from walking miles to access education putting their lives at risk. The community decided to invest its own resources, time and effort to construct their own school. After building, the community members contributed funds to pay teachers' salaries, demonstrating their commitment to the education of their children. However, they did not stop there. After taking the first steps themselves, they advocated for government assistance to sustain and further develop the school. This advocacy eventually led to government support, which is now helping to improve the school's operations.

Similarly, the Nyengbema community in Bo shared their efforts to invest in children's education by purchasing land with the intent of building a community school. This proactive approach reflects the growing understanding of the importance of accessible education for both boys and girls, which was not the case in the past. Traditionally, education was only prioritized for boys, and even then, many parents did not closely monitor their children's performance in school. Furthermore, educational aspirations rarely extended beyond primary school, as there was little value placed on higher levels of learning.

In Burbu Community, the late Town chief built a tent which he dedicated as a study space for children in the community. The community also decided to offer summer classes to their children to boost their academic performances. Community members are now more engaged in monitoring their children's academic performance and ensuring that they receive adequate support to succeed. This is a marked contrast to the past, where children's schooling, particularly for girls, was often seen as a secondary concern. The willingness of communities



to invest their resources in schools and to push for government involvement highlights the evolving prioritization of education as a cornerstone for the future.

In the five (5) communities in Sierra Leone, there has been a significant improvement in the academic performance of the children and young people, which was attributed to more interest and focus on education from the parents and the community as a whole. It was reported that children from the Burbu community are now attaining the highest grades within the overall district in national examinations like West African Examination Council (WAEC) and senior high school entrance exams.

The establishment of community schools and the active investment in girls' education signal a deep cultural change. Parents now recognize that girls, like boys, have the right to education, and they are taking concrete steps to ensure that all children in the community have equal access to learning opportunities. According to community leaders, the overall interest and prioritization of girls' education within the communities as a result of the new way partners engaged them.

*"In Borbu community, 15 adolescents took the national primary school examination (NPSE) and interestingly, a girl, by the name of Fatmata Korma, for the first time in Burbu community, came first for the entire chiefdom."*

**~ Community Facilitator from Borbu community, Kenema, Sierra Leone**

*"CASE SALONE's constant engagement with the community has influenced more parents to send their children to school, especially the girls."*

**~ Community leader, Waiima community, Bo, Sierra Leone**

### **VIII. Improved coordination for community Development**

One key aspect of the Tostan CLA model is the support to the communities to establish Community Management Committees (CMCs) to lead the implementation of the community's vision and development goals. They serve as the governing body that drives local development initiatives, ensuring that the community's priorities are addressed in an organized, sustainable, and collaborative manner. These CMCs are composed of men and women who are democratically selected by the community, ensuring that the leadership represents the interests and needs of the people they serve. The composition of the committees is purposefully designed to be inclusive, promoting gender equality and ensuring

In the past, communities were dependent on interventions from NGOs, charitable organizations, individual donations, or political figures for their development and would often receive small, one-time donations or development projects. With the implementation of the Tostan inspire CLA, the communities now understand that they possess the resources and willpower to sustainably develop their communities. In Burbu community, the CMC coordinated the maintenance and cleaning of the main road leading to the community for easy

entrance and exit. They are also working together to invest in commercial farming. In Komende community, the CMC coordinated the contribution of resources from community members to build a "Barray" (general meeting area) for the community. In Nyengbema and Kokofele communities, the CMCs led the resource mobilization for the construction of junior secondary schools. In the 6 communities, the CMCs are gradually understanding the need to federate all existing mechanisms and require Government institutions, NGOs and other partners to work directly with the federated CMC and contribute toward the community's vision board and the community's priorities for development.

*"We have unanimously agreed to be contributing money to pay our community teachers as a result of the initiative of the education committee."*

**~ Community Management Committee member from Waiima community,  
Bo, Sierra Leone**

## Success factors for the effective implementation of the community-led approach

- a) **Relationship building with the communities**: In the Community-Led Approach, relationship building with the community is not just a foundational element but the key driver of success. It facilitates trust, mutual respect, and collaboration, empowering communities to take ownership of their development and ensuring that initiatives are culturally sensitive, inclusive, and sustainable. When relationships are strong, the community's capacity to drive and sustain change is significantly enhanced, leading to meaningful, long-lasting impact.
- b) **Empowering the community to take ownership of its own development**: Another key learning from the GFC's partners' point of view is the importance of empowering communities to take ownership of their own development. Through the Tostan inspired CLAI, the partners have changed their approach of providing all resources and giving money to communities, which had created a community dependence on NGOs or external parties for their development. Now the partners prioritize empowering the communities to harness their own skills, resources, and talents to drive their own development.
- c) **Having a community facilitator in the community**: At the core of the Tostan CLA model is the presence of a community facilitator based in the community, who serves as an intermediary between the partner organization and the community and provides support to the community to achieve its development goals. The success of the support is dependent on Community Facilitator being well trained and equipped with the right knowledge, skills, competencies, and materials to effectively guide the community, understanding this principle, the partners have invested in training and empowering the Community Facilitators in all communities where they applied the Tostan CLA model. This includes understanding key topics such as comprehensive sexuality education, sexual and reproductive health, human rights, gender justice, women's rights, children's rights and facilitation skills.

*"Before attending the Tostan training, our approach was mostly organization focused. We used to go to the community to tell them "Stop beating your children," "Stop initiating children into FGM," "Let's talk about gender-based violence," etc., After the Tostan training, we were able to unpack with the community and help them define what change really means for that community. It helped us to be more sustainable in our work in addressing violence against women and girls."*

**~ Naomi Tulay Solanke, Executive Director, Community Healthcare Initiative (CHI, Liberia)**

*“Before, we would just go to the key leaders in the community whenever we wanted to organize any activities, and we start implementing. But now, with the community-led approach, every member of the community is well informed and involved in the activities.”*

**~ Elizabeth Gbanie, Project Officer, Women Against Violence and Exploitation in Society (WAVES) Bo, Sierra Leone**

*“Before this time, the communities thought that everything must be done by the government to support their children or welfare. But now they believe that they don’t have to wait for the government or for NGOs, that they have what it takes to take care of their society.”*

**~ Dennis Sheriff, former Administration Officer, Children's Forum Network, Kenema, Sierra Leone**

## Reflections on next steps in strengthening achievements and expanding the implementation of the community led approach

The next steps for advancing the Community-Led Approach (CLA) in the 6 communities focus on deepening community engagement, capacity strengthening of the community management committees, and improving systems for ongoing learning and evaluation. The learning review demonstrates that while CLA has been instrumental in creating transformative change, its success hinges on a commitment to continuous learning, improvement, and adaptation. For CLA to achieve long-term, sustainable impact, it is essential to empower communities to drive their own development, supported by flexible, multi-year, unrestricted funding. This type of funding enables the continuous, long-term adaptation required to sustain effective community-led solutions over time.

To support ongoing development, a key next step is to **strengthen the capacity of Community Management Committees (CMCs)**. These committees are vital for fostering local leadership, mobilizing resources, and ensuring continuity in community-led projects. Specific areas for capacity strengthening include resource mobilization, networking, advocacy, strategic planning, and establishing partnerships with private- and public-sector actors who can contribute to the community's development goals. Empowering CMCs will ensure that they can effectively sustain and expand upon the progress made, even beyond the period of direct support from the partner organizations.

Another priority is for partners to develop and implement **comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems**. These systems are crucial for documenting the impact of community-led initiatives, gathering insights on program effectiveness, and identifying areas for improvement. This learning review highlighted the value of documenting learnings and outcomes, reinforcing the need for robust M&E to continuously capture, share, and reflect upon the community's journey and achievements. A comprehensive M&E framework will also support data-driven decision-making, helping partners and communities to make informed adaptations as needed.

Finally, sustaining the CLA requires **investing in knowledge-sharing and collaborative learning** across communities and partner organizations. Establishing platforms for sharing best practices, discussing challenges, and brainstorming innovative approaches can create a dynamic, adaptive environment where all participants contribute to the learning process. This approach to collaborative learning builds a strong network of community-led organizations committed to mutual growth, ensuring that the CLA continues to evolve and respond to changing community needs.

In conclusion, the next steps for CLA involve providing **flexible, long-term funding for deepening and expansion**.

## **GFC's role in creating the conditions for community led change**

The outcome of this learning review underscores the essential role that Global Fund for Children plays in supporting its partners to achieve meaningful, sustainable results. GFC's contributions extend beyond conventional funding models, as it provides holistic support that enables local organizations to innovate, grow, and become resilient forces for change within their communities. Below an analysis of GFC's role in facilitating these achievements:

### ***1. Flexible and adaptive funding***

GFC's commitment to flexible funding allows partners to adapt their activities to meet immediate needs or experiment with innovative approaches tailored to their specific contexts. Unlike traditional funding with rigid requirements, GFC's flexible approach recognizes that grassroots organizations often need the freedom to address emerging issues or challenges as they arise. This adaptability has enabled partners to test, learn, and scale strategies that have proven effective, contributing to more sustainable outcomes in community-led development.

### ***2. Capacity strengthening for sustainability***

Capacity strengthening is a cornerstone of GFC's support model, equipping partners with skills, resources, and tools that enhance their organizational effectiveness. Through training sessions, workshops, and tailored guidance, GFC supports local organizations in areas such as financial management, project monitoring and evaluation, advocacy, and community engagement. These skills are crucial for the long-term success of grassroots organizations, ensuring that they can deliver impactful programs and develop strategies for growth and sustainability. By enhancing partners' operational capacity, GFC is building resilience within these organizations, enabling them to continue their work beyond GFC's direct involvement.

### ***3. Mentorship and close partnership***

The review highlights the importance of mentorship and hands-on guidance provided by GFC. Many community-based organizations benefit from close support to navigate challenges, develop strategic vision, and refine their approach to community issues. GFC's mentorship is not merely transactional; it is based on cultivating genuine partnerships and understanding the unique strengths and limitations of each organization. This close relationship builds trust and empowers organizations to confidently pursue bold initiatives, knowing they have a supportive partner who understands their journey.

### ***4. Encouraging innovation and exploration***

GFC's role includes encouraging partners to explore new and innovative methods of addressing community needs. This commitment to fostering creativity empowers organizations to develop contextually relevant solutions that are sustainable and impactful.

The learning review findings indicate that while many funders now provide direct funding to CSOs, few offer the level of flexibility and encouragement for experimentation that GFC provides. By giving partners the freedom to innovate, GFC allows them to take calculated risks, learn from both successes and setbacks, and refine approaches to achieve lasting results.

### ***5. Strengthening networks and collaboration***

GFC actively promotes collaboration among partner organizations, both locally and internationally. By fostering a networked approach, GFC enables partners to share best practices, learn from one another's experiences, and even jointly tackle challenges. This collaborative environment broadens each organization's perspective, helping them understand diverse approaches to common issues and adopt effective strategies. Through partnerships with other organizations, GFC also opens avenues for local organizations to connect with broader movements and access additional resources and support.

### ***6. Promoting sustainable, community-led change***

The review points out that while direct funding is a growing trend, sustainable results often require sustained guidance and support, which GFC provides through its community-led development approach. By investing in organizational capacity and resilience, GFC ensures that the impact of its support extends beyond the funding period. GFC's approach fosters self-reliance among partners, empowering them to lead their own development processes and create solutions that are responsive to their communities' needs. This commitment to sustainability aligns with GFC's vision of long-term transformation, where community organizations are fully equipped to sustain and expand their work independently.

## Conclusion

The partner learning review demonstrates that funders have much to gain by investing in community-led approaches. Supporting organizations through flexible funding, capacity strengthening, mentorship, and a commitment to local innovation offers funders unique insights into sustainable, ground-up solutions that are both adaptable and deeply rooted in community realities.

When funders prioritize community-led models, they empower organizations to develop context-specific responses that address complex issues more effectively. This support model fosters resilience, autonomy, and innovation, allowing local organizations to create and sustain meaningful change long after funding ends. Furthermore, community-led approaches deepen funders' understanding of the local landscape, revealing nuanced, culturally informed strategies that could guide and inspire broader philanthropic practices.

The key insight that GFC has gleaned from this report is that funders who support community-led approaches make a profound investment in lasting impact and transformational change. Flexible and responsive support that places local organizations and communities at the center of their development, strengthens communities from within, creating a foundation for enduring progress.

The report confirms that when funders trust local organizations with the autonomy and resources to lead their own growth, they contribute not only to impactful, long-term outcomes but also to the empowerment of individuals and communities to be agents of their own development. This commitment to local agency and mutual partnership ultimately enriches the philanthropic landscape, guiding funders toward practices that honor the voices and visions of those they support and foster sustainable, community-driven progress.





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