



Cislaghi, B (2016) Why do peoples values matter in international development. In: West African perspectives on humanitarian assistance. Karthala, Paris.

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# Why do people's values matter in development?<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

How can practitioners implement effective development programmes in a given setting, in ways that do not threaten local people's core cultural values and understandings? Dominant development models so far have focussed on top-down approaches that tended to override people's agency, visions and understandings of the world. In this paper, I argue that development practitioners should respond to the growing call for people-centred implementations by starting from people's values, aspirations, and understandings. I conclude by suggesting that human rights education can be a tool to implement effective and ethical people-centred development interventions, drawing on the example of the NGO Tostan.

Keywords: Indirect Development, Values Deliberation, Human Rights Education, West Africa, Tostan, Human Development.

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<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming chapter in Fouquet, T (ed.); *West African perspectives on humanitarian assistance*, Paris: Karthala. [Also in French].

## Acknowledgments

Nothing in my research would be possible without the women and men living in a few West African villages who taught much of what I know on international development. I am also grateful to colleagues Gerry Mackie and Diane Gillespie, for being an inexhaustible source of inspiration, and to my friend Michael Gillespie, who has helped more than I can possibly acknowledge. Tufts University and Tostan International provided administrative support.

## Why do poor people's values matter?

A few months ago, I visited two primary schools in rural West Africa, together with a group of UN officers. I was consulting on a programme that aimed at reducing the number of children employed in dangerous agricultural work. Not long before our arrival, an awareness raising campaign against child labour had been conducted both in those schools and in the surrounding communities. In one of the schools we visited, a few young pupils recited a moving poem they had written together. In that poem, they took a passionate stance against child labour. "Not here, not abroad, not anywhere," an alert boy proclaimed in the classroom. Everyone, including myself, clapped enthusiastically. A local UN officer was so moved that she went and kissed him on the forehead.

Later, as we were leaving the school at the end of our visit, a dozen children crossed us in the courtyard, carrying big machetes. I asked the local teacher what they were doing with such dangerous tools. "They are going to weed the school garden," he said. Impressed with his candid answer, I asked him if he found that incoherent with the stance against dangerous child labour that he and his students had so strongly taken in class. To this he smiled, embarrassed, and said, "Yes... well... it's just for today; there is a local competition for the cleanest school and we all want to win it." The positive commitments I had witnessed in class, to my great surprise, were not supported by a critical review of the practices in place in the school. Children and teachers were speaking against dangerous child labour in class, and practicing it in the school garden.

What are some of the reasons why people carry out harmful or dangerous behaviour when they have been exposed to knowledge that should empower them to act upon their understanding of the harmful nature of that behaviour? This question touches upon a very broad human problem, a full treatment of which lies beyond the scope of this paper. I will treat it only insofar as it relates to development practices. There exists a profound, frequently unspoken, *knot* in development practices: behavioural change programmes often do not work. Why is that, and how can development implementations achieve ethical and effective behavioural change?

In this paper, I offer a few reflections on a value-based approach to community development. I hope, in particular, that the content of this paper will provide practitioners with a frame of mind to guide their understanding of their work as they plan and implement it. In the following pages I explore how value-based approaches help implement ethical and effective people-centred development programmes that facilitate behavioural change. I first define what genuine people-centred development programmes look like and what it means for them to be values-based. I then use a practice illustration of an exemplary organisation (the NGO Tostan) to explicate how people-centred values-based approaches can work in practice.

### **The emerging people-centred paradigm of development**

People-centred behavioural change is a relatively new approach in development. International development efforts began in the 1950s, but only in the last decade have scholars and practitioners started to explore how those efforts can help

people change behaviour in ways that improve their own lives. Since Sen's (1999) *Development as Freedom*, consensus has grown on the need to enhance people's wellbeing, freedoms, and opportunities as means to achieve meaningful human development. Advocates of similar approaches argue for interventions that empower local communities (Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland, 2006), are people-centred (UNDP, 2013), help people at the grassroots level gain voice in the international debate (Bond, 2006), and listen to their opinions (Chambers, 1997). Recently, scholars and practitioners have explored "people-centred" approaches further, investigating the complex cognitive and social dynamics that need to be in place to facilitate change in people's behaviour. The latest human development report (World Bank, 2014), for instance, recommends development practitioners analyse "how human think (the processes of the mind) and how history and context shape thinking (the influence of society)" (p.2). In other words, consensus is growing on the need to place people at the grassroots level – and the socio-cognitive context in which they are immersed – at the centre of development interventions.

Today, there is an increasing literature in international development on the role that both our social networks (the groups of people who matter to us) and the cognitive frameworks we use to understand the world play in shaping behaviour. Yet, not much has been said on the importance of understanding the values of the people being helped to increase the effectiveness of development implementations. One of the most notable exceptions is the work by Gunning (1992), that focused in particular on integrating people's values and understandings into culturally-sensitive views of female genital surgery. As I will argue in this paper, practitioners wanting to implement ethical and effective

people-centred programmes would benefit from 1) facilitating people's co-investigation of their own individual and collective values, and 2) designing implementations that help those people improve their practices to achieve more effectively the values-based goals they have for their life and that of others. The guiding question thus becomes why ethical and effective people-centred development interventions need to explore people's values, and how that can be done.

### **People-centred, ethical, and effective**

Let me explain what I mean by *people-centred*, *ethical*, and *effective*. As the people-centred paradigm of international development emerged and gained adherents, scholars and practitioners alike began the exploration of its practical models. However, many of those models have been found only partially effective in achieving change in people's lives, mostly because they did not empower people to challenge the institutional arrangements that made them poor in the first place (Bromley, 1998, Kinyashi, 2006). Ellerman (2006), in the light of these debacles, defended the people-centred model, suggesting that many development programmes are actually wrongly labelled people-centred. These programmes fail to empower people because they are modelled on development practitioners' views of the world and are planned according to the practitioners' vision of how people should live their lives. In other words, wrongly labelled people-centred implementations lack success because they 1) impose the practitioners' vision and will on those of people at the grassroots level; and/or 2) assign all (or most) project efforts to practitioners: they underplay the importance of people's genuine participation in a project and, in doing so,

undercut their potential as agents – what Ellerman (2006) called “people’s self-help capacity”.

Genuine people-centred implementations, instead, should include the poor as active partners in all phases of the project (Kinyashi, 2006). Ellerman (2001) suggested three rules that helpful people-centred development programmes must follow. First, they must *start from where the people are*, accompanying them as they move through what they see as key stages of their development, avoiding giant leaps. Development practitioners have to open carefully what Ray (2003) has called the “window of aspirations”, so that people are motivated to work towards their next reachable – though challenging – stage of development. If one does not start from where the people are and instead challenges them with the wrong tasks at the wrong time, they might get overwhelmed by an impossible challenge or underwhelmed by an extremely easy one.

Second, development practitioners must *respect people’s autonomy*. That is, people should be empowered to own the results of their own activities, rather than being passive recipients of development assistance. To do so, development practitioners must invest in people’s potential to exercise their agency. Research shows that agency empowerment is particularly beneficial and cost-effective, because it unlocks positive dynamics that sustain and reinforce themselves over time (Cislaghi, Gillespie and Mackie, 2015). Agency is a capacity latent in all human beings, one that must be learnt, developed, and exercised. The more opportunities human beings have to exercise it, the more they will believe in their capacity to make things happen, what Bandura (1995) called *self-efficacy*. In



turn, people who believe they are capable of making things happen will act more, thus expanding their agency (Cislaghi, Gillespie and Mackie, 2015). People-centred development programmes should encourage people's agency, so that these people are full partners in the programme implementation, and then become full agents of change in their community, capable (and *confident* of being capable) of improving their wellbeing and that of others around them.

Third, development practitioners must make efforts to *see the world through the people's eyes*, that is: to understand the cultural meanings people assign to the world and that motivate their actions. I will discuss this last point further, since it's particularly relevant to the discourse on people's values.

The *values* I refer to in this paper are ideal moral end-states that people aspire to (Bardi and Goodwin, 2011). Their fulfilment can require independent or interdependent actions; i.e. actions that individuals take without necessarily caring about what others do (independent), or actions that individuals take by aligning their behaviour to that of others (interdependent). To make this clear, let me offer a couple of examples drawing from my own experience as middle age European man. These, I guess, will mainly speak to people familiar with urbanised cosmopolitan settings. One value that requires independent action is, for instance, "being physically active". To be physically active, an individual might go jogging, visit the gym, and walk to work. One value that requires interdependent action is "living together in peace". Living in peace with others requires the cooperation of the entire group. In a state of war, an individual

might behave peacefully towards others, but she needs other people's cooperation to achieve a state of peace in her community.

A group of people share behaviours and practices embodying their collective values. The natural process through which a group shapes its practices is often slow, subconscious, and adaptive, rather than conscious and deliberate (Mackie, 2015). Because of their subconscious and spontaneous origin, members of a group can be stuck in a set of social practices that are relatively harmful, following patterns that some scholars have understood through game theory (Mackie and LeJeune, 2009, Mackie, 1996, Bednar and Page, 2007). As an example (again from my own experience), think about a group of male adolescents whose value is "loyalty to the friends in the group" and understand loyalty to the group as demonstrated through "binge drinking on Saturday night". They might individually disapprove of the practice, originated unconsciously and over time, and yet comply with it because to them it's one of the most significant ways to demonstrate their mutual loyalty.

Human beings living in different cultural contexts can share values and yet embody them in very different practices. Living together in peace can require practices of arbitration, mediation, payment to the offended, self-punishment, or community punishment of the transgressors, for instance. Let me give another example. Imagine two groups of parents who live in two distant settings, who both mention "caring for our children" as one of their core values. Then, asked how they take care of their children, parents in the first group say:

1. we keep them clean;
2. we make sure they learn critical life-saving skills;

3. from time to time, we take our children to fast food restaurants.

Those in the second group say:

1. we keep them clean;
2. we make sure they learn critical life-saving skills;
3. we marry girls off when they are twelve.

The same value, in different cultural settings, gets embodied in different practices. What is visible – the practice – is of little relevance for the sustainable behavioural change. What matters is the invisible: the value that motivates people to do what they are doing. If they explore and understand parents' values, the ideal end-state they have for their children, practitioners will be in a better position to create the conditions that can help parents find new practices to embody those values.

Going back to the earlier example, group-one parents might be shocked to learn that group-two parents marry off their girls when they are twelve. Likely, they would be looking at the practice, and think about how they could prevent it from happening. As an example, taking girls away from group-two families might seem like a good option to group-one parents. In doing so, however, group-one people wouldn't be considering the deep values-based cognitive and social networks that hold that practice in place in group two. Group two parents have their own reasons, and asked to develop further, they might explain that they practise child marriage in order to keep children safe from the shame of pregnancy out of wedlock, which would condemn children (and their parents) to social isolation. Once they know that group-two parents are trying to help girls succeed in life by marrying them off at young age, outsiders will be in position to

investigate how the value “caring for our children” became embodied in the practice of child marriage. In other words, they will be capable of understanding how group-two parents’ cognitive and social networks brought about a child-protection practice that has harmful consequences for their girls’ health.

Development implementations based on external judgements that ignore a deep understanding of people’s moral reasons for behaving as they do, will backfire. Learning about the practices of the other group, parents from group one might make value judgements like: “marrying girls off when they are 12 is just wrong!”. Attacked, rather than understood, group-two parents might feel that their values are at stake, and entrench even more in their practice: “how dare these people tell us what to do, try to change the very essence of who we are?” Similar resistance has been observed in West Africa in response to programmes that tried to change harmful practices through similar judgemental approaches (Gunning, 1992, Shell-Duncan, Hernlund, Wander and Moreau, 2013, Shell-Duncan, 2008).

The values problem in development is then twofold. First of all it’s an *ethical* problem. How can outsiders’ values be a morally acceptable benchmark for insiders’ practices? Nussbaum (2000) has suggested it’s morally wrong to criticise external cultures, especially when one is not ready to look with equal criticism at one’s own. A large body of literature supports “cultural relativism”: the idea that one culture cannot judge another without being imperialistic (Goodhart, 2003, Baxi, 1998, Messer, 1993, Brown and Bjawi-Levine, 2002, Pollis and Schwab, 1979). If development practitioners cannot judge the practices of

those they want to help, can ethical behavioural change programmes be implemented at all? Note that the relativist/universal debate is probably as long as the history of human thought; I don't intend to solve it in these few pages (or possibly anywhere else). I rather intend to offer, below, a potential trajectory that practitioners can explore to implement values-based ethical behavioural change programmes.

Second, the values problem is one of *effectiveness*. How can outsiders effectively help insiders improve values-based practices, so that these improved practices are sustained over time? Some development programmes offer people external incentives to change their behaviour. Attempt to buy “best practices” – Ellerman uses the metaphors of buying love – are heritage of classic economics literature that believed in the role played by external incentives (money, benefits, social prestige) to motivate people's activities (for a critique of which see Frey, 1997, Frey, 2001). Ellerman (2006), thus, suggested that people need to develop internal motivation for behavioural change to be sustainable. Schumacher (1973) has made a very similar point when he urged the rich to propose to the poor a change that is in an organic relationship with what they are doing already. I suggest we push Schumacher's and Ellerman's view even forward: people at the grassroots level can ground within their set of values their own aspirations for change, by revising their current actions and practices. That is, from a values perspective: development practitioners can help people at the grassroots level identify new practices and behaviours that help them better fulfil their individual and shared values.

Research shows that when people reflect on the coherence between their actions and their values, they can discover convergence (our practices fully embody our values) or dissonance (our practices do not fully embody our values). A feeling of dissonance is in itself enough to influence people's behaviour so that they temporarily change it to make it coherent with their values. Bardi and Goodwin (2011) have researched how individuals' independent behaviour is influenced by similar reflections on their values. People who included "being altruistic" in a list of values and were asked by researchers to explain these values to them, tended to behave in a much more altruistic way than before the interview, albeit for a short time. Prolonged reasoning or exposure to the inconsistency would result in a more permanent behavioural change (Bardi and Goodwin, 2011, Torelli and Kaikati, 2009). One might thus be tempted to conclude that providing individuals with the necessary knowledge to judge their behaviours against their values would be enough for them to change their practices. In our example: when parents from group two learn that child marriage threatens the wellbeing of their daughters they will stop practising it. Reality is not that simple. As I said earlier, some values are embodied into coordinated, interdependent actions of the members of a group or community. It is not enough to provide them individually with new knowledge, for them to reflect on their potential values-behaviour inconsistencies; development practitioners need to find ways to help people co-investigate that inconsistency and deliberate on how they can improve their practices to make them more consistent with their values. I will discuss this further in the next section.

### **A values-based model of people-centred development**

Let's review what I said so far:

1. Some development programmes labelled as people-centred that aimed at behavioural change have been found having limited success in the past.
2. Most of these programmes have failed because they have overridden people's visions, values, and agency.
3. Investigating values is particularly important to understand what people are trying to achieve with their practices. The same value, in different contexts, can be embodied in different practices.
4. Some value-based practices can be somehow harmful to the members of the practising communities. However, development practitioners cannot judge people's practices without being culturally imperialistic: a problem of programme *ethics*.
5. In addition, external judgements on people's practices backfire; feeling that their values are at stake people might become further entrenched in their practices: a problem of programme *effectiveness*.
6. Hence, practitioners should explore insiders' understandings of a given practice, and in particular how insiders believe that practice helps them achieve ideal end-states (values) that matter to them; that is:  
development practitioners should *see the world through insiders' eyes*.
7. Then, to facilitate shared reflection that might lead to change in behaviours and practices, development practitioners should help people co-investigate the coherence or incoherence between their values and practices, by giving them the knowledge, skills, and social technologies necessary to do so.

The NGO Tostan ([www.tostan.org](http://www.tostan.org)) implements a human rights-based Community Empowerment Program (CEP) with a large values-deliberation component. External and internal evaluations have correlated the CEP with the abandonment of harmful social practices such as female genital cutting, child marriage, intimate partner violence, and child abuse (CRDH, 2010, Diop, Faye, Moreau, Cabral, Benga, Cissé, Mané, Baumgarten and Melching, 2004, Diop, Moreau and Benga, 2008). As part of Tostan's CEP, a facilitator lives for three years in each participating community. Women and men from the community participate in three nonformal education classes a week led by the facilitator. The first six months of the programme lead participants through an extensive exploration of democracy and human rights, inviting them to engage critically with those rights and helping them use their values and understandings of the world as a framework for that critical analysis. After that, the programme continues for another two and a half years with classes on health, hygiene, problem solving, literacy, and numeracy (Gillespie and Melching, 2010).

A recent qualitative study has investigate how the human rights classes of Tostan's CEP facilitate deliberation on collective values, and how values deliberation helps participants implement collective actions for community wellbeing, including the revision and abandonment of existing harmful social practices (Cislaghi, Gillespie and Mackie, 2015). The social change model that Cislaghi, Gillespie, and Mackie grounded in participants' experiences of the Tostan programme revealed many different cognitive, social, and cultural, and moral motivations for participants to act for social change. In that model, four themes are particularly relevant for the discussion on the role of values in



development. Firstly, the Tostan programme is grounded in local community values and understandings of the world. The Tostan classes are taught in the local language by a facilitator from the same cultural and language background. The classes are contextualised within the local cultural context, using elements that are familiar to the daily experience of community members: songs, dances, local proverbs, and scenarios they can relate to, to cite a few (Cislaghi, Gillespie and Mackie, 2015). Secondly, participants co-investigate their collective values by envisioning their common aspirations. Participants in the programme share their visions for their future and that of their community, and identify collective aspirations. Shared aspirations lead to the discussion around ideal end-states (values) people have for themselves and others in their communities (Cislaghi, Gillespie and Mackie, 2015). Thirdly, through the human rights framework, participants explore inconsistencies between their practices and values, and discuss ways to align those values and practices. The class facilitator (who lives in the community for the three years of the programme) presents in each session of the first months a different human right, and invites participants to reflect on whether they agree with it (that is how they contextualise that human right into their system of values, if at all), and if so, how that right is protected in their community. As they explore existing practices – and their consistency with human rights – participants acquire the knowledge they need to fully assess the effects of their behaviour for themselves and others in the community. They learn, for instance, the consequences for their health of open-air defecation, lack of perinatal consultations, child marriage, and female genital cutting, just to cite a few. The effects of certain practices (or the effects due to lack of certain practices) are connected back to the values, and motivate people to explore new

ways of embodying those values; ways that are more in alignment with their new understandings, knowledge, and aspirations (Cislaghi, Gillespie and Mackie, 2015). Lastly, value-based aspirations motivate participants for community action. As part of the programme, participants take on new tasks in the class and the community. The value-based aspirations shared in class strengthen their motivation to work for their community. That aspirational motivation, together with their increased sense of efficacy, helps them achieve major changes relatively soon into the project. The change then expands from the class to the community, in ways that are described in the research report (Cislaghi, Gillespie and Mackie, 2015). Years after the programme, a group of community members interviewed by Ibrahim and Cislaghi (forthcoming) described themselves as being active agents of social change motivated by their value-based aspirations, which speaks to the sustainability of values-based development.

### **People's values matter**

They matter for two reasons. The first is ethical: there are ways for practitioners to find legitimate ways to work without necessarily committing to moral absolutes. Human rights offer ways of examining one's own cultural practices, without functioning as moral absolutes that override people's own values.

People have desires and aspirations and have internal motivations to act as they do. Internal motivations are rooted in people's values, and visions for their future, and are shaped by people's cognitive and social network. Sometimes, the practices people adopt to achieve their goals can be harmful to themselves and others, in ways that are readily intelligible for the people who are not immersed in that particular cultural context, but meaningful, justifiable, and rich in value

from the point of view of those who instead live into that context. Development practitioners need to approach insiders in non-judgemental ways, helping them increase their knowledge and agency so that insiders themselves can revise their existing practices in ways that are sensitive to their context. Secondly, individual and shared values matter because inner motivations to act can originate from them. When people individually and collectively investigate better ways to achieve what they want to achieve, in a process that does not threaten their values but strengthens them, the behavioural change that follows is sustainable and adaptable. Values deliberation processes allow people to explore inconsistencies between their values and their practices, revealing alternative practices to embody those values, and assigning together old meanings to those new practices.

Recall the school in West Africa that gave machetes to children to clean the school garden? The teachers were proud to collaborate with their children to win the competition. Values of unity, pride, and caring for each other were probably at work in that occasion. But students and professors had not been empowered with the collective capacity to analyse their existing reality against their values, and with the shared knowledge to understand the implications of the existing practices for the fulfilment of their aspirations. We need to be closer to each others' cultural settings, abandoning the arrogance of absolutes and understanding development as a process in which everyone can teach and learn, in our effort to improve our own and others lives in our complex and fascinating world.

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