

# CHANGES IN RURAL WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

The Effects Of Funding Women's Community Organizations In Senegal



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## CONTENTS

SUMMARY

OUTCOMES

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

REVITALIZING WOMEN'S COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

CONCLUSION

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## SUMMARY

As part of its strategic grantmaking to support women and their families to overcome poverty, violence and injustice in Africa, New Field focused part of its efforts on southern Senegal as it emerged from twenty years of conflict. During 2006-2012, \$3.5 million was awarded in 90 main grants to 20 non-profit organizations that served rural women in Casamance. In turn, 6 of these organizations awarded 257 community grants totaling \$1,347,663 to 116 women's community organizations for positive change.

In order to understand the extent of the changes created by rural women and their organizations as a result of the community grants, a participatory study was carried out by World Education Senegal. Based in Casamance, it is linked to World Education International which works with local partner institutions in 50 countries to provide training and technical assistance to the educationally disadvantaged across many sectors.

The study involved 379 rural women, 35 women's organizations receiving community grants, and two evaluation consultants. Central to the process were 15 rural women whom World Education Senegal selected from the 35 women's organizations. They were trained as journalists and became proficient in conducting interviews, taking photographs and producing audio

broadcasts for local radio stations. With support from media professionals and 24 village-based women coordinators, they carried out interviews and surveys, compiled 30 reports and produced 41 radio programs. World Education Senegal then synthesized the materials by topic and held focus groups with members of the women's organizations to corroborate the findings. The evaluation showed that when women's community organizations are given grants averaging \$5000 a year for at least two years, the wellbeing and economic stability of participating rural women, and their families, significantly improve. These grants revitalized the participating organizations and improved their organizational leadership, which in turn led to increased leadership among women in the community and personal development among members.

More details on study results are available at *Fostering Peace and Vibrant Communities in the Wake of Conflict: An Integrated Approach to Grantmaking in Senegal 2004-2014*. Accompanying thematic reports include *Changes in Family Health and Education: The Effects of Funding Women's Community Organizations in Senegal* and *Changes in Asset Management: The Impact of Funding Women's Community Organizations in Senegal*.

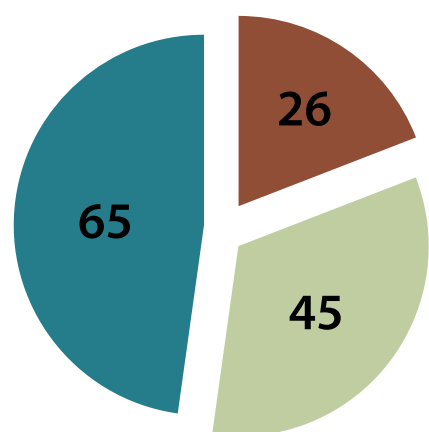
## OUTCOMES

Overall, the findings showed an improvement in rural women's leadership in 35 women's community organizations receiving community grants. This was measured by their capacity to manage their own organizations effectively; to become advisors and committee members for initiatives in their communities; and to be elected as representatives in local government. Implementation of the grant activities, supported by management and leadership training, enabled all the women's organizations to improve their effectiveness and autonomy; enhanced the reputation and authority of the executive leaders; and increased respect for members among their families and communities.

As members' financial and food security improved, and as their workload decreased, rural women took on leadership roles for the first time outside their own organizations, while gaining decision-making authority within their own households.

An important outcome was the significant increase in rural women taking on leadership roles. Chart 1 shows the number of group members who took on new roles after participating in their organization's community grant activities – 130 women out of 379 interviewed. Of these, 26 became new members of parent-teacher associations and mutual credit societies; 45 became members of committees guiding the implementation of development projects; and 65 were elected as rural district councilors.

**CHART 1:** *New roles for 130 members of 35 women's groups receiving community grants.*



- Member of PTA and mutual credit societies
- Member of project advisory committee
- Elected official of district council



Mariama Sonko is a role model for rural women leaders. Born and raised in a farming family in Casamance, Mme. Sonko is president of the women's community organization in Niaguis, where she is running for Mayor. She is a founding member and general treasurer of the Association of Young Farmers of Casamance (AJAC-Lukaal) which awarded 76 grants to 31 women's community organizations during 2006-2012. At national level, Mme. Sonko is the president of Promotion Féminine which organizes and supports rice producers in the rice market.

– Photo by Léocadie Coly.



## ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

In most cases, the rural women who were elected as leaders of the 35 women's organizations had received more schooling than their fellow members, usually to secondary level. They stated that they enjoyed the privilege of being leaders and that their responsibilities gave them hope and confidence. Their empowerment illustrated a new social mobility, since they were no longer confined exclusively to domestic duties or work in the fields. This new leadership enabled them to influence decisions beyond their family circle. Being a group leader was clearly a rewarding experience.

At least two members from each of the 35 women's community organizations received technical training in book-keeping, financial management, leadership, and governance. The great majority of these were executive members of their group. 85.7% stated they had put their training to good use and were now able to provide precise financial information to their members and non-members. In reporting on their organization's financial situation, they gave information on cash inflow, disbursements, and investments.

Executive committee members also received training on how to carry out regular meetings, hold annual elections, and provide financial reports. As a result, many stated they understood the importance of these processes and now took the lead to ensure they were carried out – even though some first-time leaders were nervous about the annual elections and the possibility they might have to step down.

Members of a women's community organization receive training on how to better manage their group. Overwhelmingly, women reported that they were putting the skills they learned in training to good use.

– Photo by Mame Cissé Diop



## COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

In addition to their organizational responsibilities, more than half of the respondents stated that they also now contributed to their community's development, whether in cash or in kind. They considered it particularly important to support local events and ceremonies. Some had organized community meeting spaces and health facilities. The Mpak women's community organization mobilized funds for the construction of a children's classroom and a mosque.

According to the village chief of Niaguis, members of women's community organizations have the reputation for carrying out their tasks honestly and fairly, and are often appointed as treasurers in community structures. "We've noticed that information generally spreads more quickly with women than with men. Women are better at mobilizing and they meet more easily. They are not as well schooled as men, but when they undertake an activity, they do so with great commitment."

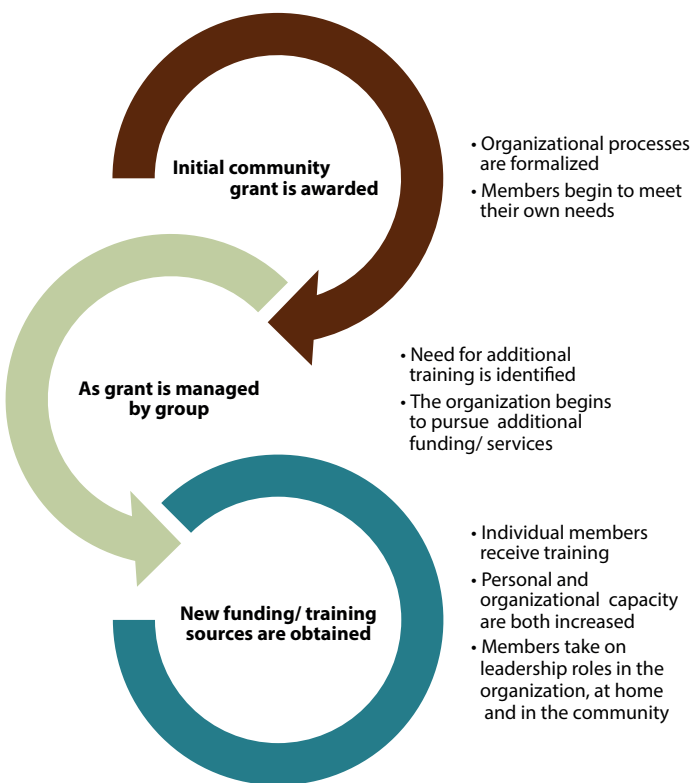
## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The income realized from community grant activities enabled respondents to contribute significantly to the well-being of their families. 63% stated that they are now recognized by their husbands and family as active, financially autonomous providers for their families. In the past, living under the control of their husbands, women were not free to use their income as they wished. To be a good wife, as defined by culture and custom, women handed over their earnings to their husbands, who spent the money as they thought fit, sometimes even to seek another wife. However, with the increase of income from community grant activities, they now managed their own income, usually in consultation with their husbands.

This greater freedom also meant it was easier to attend their group's meetings. Some even said they no longer asked permission from their husbands to attend such meetings. They were also available to participate in trainings and other activities of their organization. Chart 2



*A rural woman leader addresses attendees at a community event. All of the women interviewed reported that they were better able to express themselves publicly after receiving and managing community grants. - Photo by Penda Danso.*



**CHART 2:** *How women's community organizations capitalized on their first community grant to build personal and organizational capacity to meet their needs and increase their leadership.*

shows that 86% of respondents participated in at least one training as part of their organization's community grant activities. Of these 86%, 100% stated that they are now better able to express themselves during meetings and assemblies; their participation in group activities is regular; and they have the support of their families to do so.

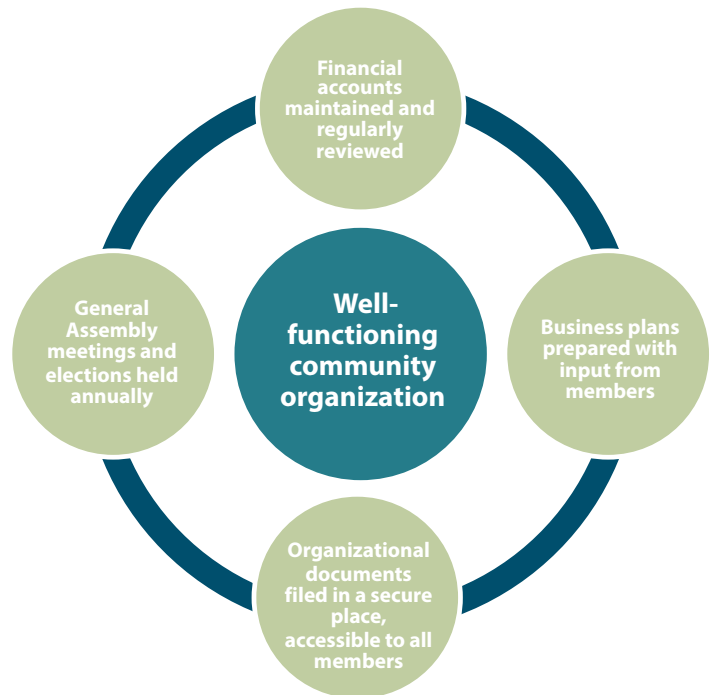
In addition, many respondents received basic literacy education in local languages and in French. Some took courses in written French so that they could better deal with administrative matters for their organization. These literacy trainings were usually funded by other financial partners in response to requests by some women's community organizations in their efforts to build their own capacity. While there is no statistical data to show how many of the 35 women's organizations reached out to and received additional funding from another source as a result of the community grants, the issue of the need for more funding and improved capacity was a regular topic of conversation with the rural women journalists and in radio broadcasts, and was highlighted as a significant issue by the rural women journalists in their reports.

Chart 2 illustrates the interconnected process by which women's community organizations were able to manage their grants, strengthen the skills of their members, and expand their organizational capacity and resources.

# REVITALIZING WOMEN'S COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

All 35 women's community organizations participating in the study strengthened their governance structures to better ensure effective oversight of the community grants. This led to greater transparency in operational procedures that in turn helped build inclusiveness and equity of members. In particular:

- Executive committees were elected to guide the group, taking into account the opinion of community authorities (such as the imam, elders, advisors, and other influential members of the community).
- Group presidents were chosen based on objective criteria such as age, levels of experience, knowledge, motivation, dedication, and credibility.
- Group leaders for specific activities were selected on the basis of objective criteria.
- Organizational bank accounts were opened with at least two members of the executive committee as signatories.
- Organizational annual plans and budgets were developed with input from members and adopted at a general assembly.



**CHART 3:** Main components of organizational effectiveness in 35 women's community organizations.

- Group members were selected for technical and skills training according to their organizational roles and capacity.

All 35 organizations ensured that financial and administrative systems were in place to manage their community grants and reported improved organizational systems.

Chart 3 shows the main processes used by rural women leaders to ensure a well-functioning organization with transparent decision-making and financial accountability.

According to those interviewed, there were no cases of embezzlement or fraud in the management of community grants. This was confirmed by the organizations that were awarding the community grants.



*A rural woman leader addresses attendees at a community event. All of the women interviewed reported that they were better able to express themselves publicly after receiving and managing community grants. - Photo by Penda Danso.*



## CONCLUSION

The participatory study clearly demonstrated the benefits of investing in rural women's community organizations, even with the many constraints and challenges that the Casamance region faces as it recovers from 20 years of conflict. The evaluation methodology, based on training rural women as journalists to conduct surveys and interviews with their peers, allowed for some unique insights into the ways in which community grants have impacted women's lives.

Rural women's responses pointed to important changes in leadership in a number of spheres as a direct result of the impetus created by community grants. Most notably, 65 rural women have been elected as district councilors.

Others are members of committees on health, finance, environmental and natural resource management, and peace building. In the region of Kolda, where women have very little representation in local governing bodies due to socio-cultural factors that limit their participation, members of women's community organizations receiving grants were appointed to committees for the management and monitoring of micro-projects, and as advisors for youth associations.

Providing resources to women's community organizations enhanced the status and capacity of its members and enabled a growing confidence in their leadership.





## RELATED PUBLICATIONS:

- Changes in Asset Management
- Changes in Family Health and Education
- Fostering Peace and Vibrant Rural Communities in the Wake of Conflict

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