



Celebrating 22 years of *Stepping Stones*

1995-2017

## Stepping Stones Stories from *the Gambia*



**MOMODOU CONTEH**

**Country:**

The Gambia

**Organisation:**

At the time described in this interview, Momodou was working with Worldview The Gambia, a local NGO in the Gambia, on the prevention of HIV and AIDS. At that time, he was coordinating the activities of five NGOs working in a Stepping Stones consortium in the Gambia. The NGOs in the consortium were Worldview The Gambia (WTG), Gambia Red Cross Society (GCRS), TARUD, Concern Universal and Medical Research Council.



**Momodou Conteh describes his work in the Gambia with Stepping Stones.**

**Interview with Alice Welbourn, February 2012** <https://vimeo.com/232321411/79afc0caa7>

(Transcript of audio begins 6.12 minutes into the film)



**How did you manage to introduce the idea of condoms to communities in the Gambia?**

This goes a long way back to the primary healthcare programme from the early 80's, which was being launched in the Gambia. Condoms were introduced by the health department into communities in rural and urban centres. Condoms were not really accepted because they were believed to be promoting promiscuity and leading young women, young girls, because the blame is always on the women, not on the men, who are also practisers of these deeds, but women are always blamed so it was seen as something that was promoting promiscuity. But with the coming of *Stepping Stones* in the Gambia we were able to look at condoms and sexual & reproductive health and issues surrounding taboos, the no-go areas when discussing sexual and reproductive health in the Gambia, we looked at these areas and had discussions with the various groups of *Stepping Stones* in the communities. This was first tested in a pilot area and then it was seen to be working very well, bringing an understating amongst community members themselves.



**So how did you develop the understanding?**

In *Stepping Stones* when we do sessions with communities we don't just come and give a lecture, it's an interactive way of discussing issues. We give communities the chance of coming up with their own way seeing things from their own point of view, and enable them to come up with solutions to these problems. Condoms were a big problem at the community level, even people who were giving the first batch of condoms in the primary health programme, they didn't work well, people didn't feel comfortable getting condoms from the village health worker or from the traditional birth attendant who were given the chance to distribute condoms. But with *Stepping Stones* everyone started to discuss sexual and reproductive health problems in the community, everyone started becoming part of looking



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at what we could do, and how we could do it without offending others. The communities themselves came up with their own versions of how to go about condom distribution through discussing these issues amongst themselves.

★ *What sexual and reproductive health issues were community members concerned about?*

In the communities there were a lot of STI's, HIV & AIDS were on the increase, it was almost everywhere in the communities. There were cases or people who had been confirmed but that's the just tip of the iceberg, this is what we know of the records, but what of the hidden records, the hidden people we don't know about? So everyone started saying, now it's time for us to discuss. Even at the national level, the media were sending messages that it's on the increase in the Gambia. Although we are not in as bad a situation as other countries, we mustn't feel complacent, that it's not going to happen to us. So we used that as a foundation of saying that before we wait for things to get out of hand, it's better to get started working on these things right away.

★ *Conteh would you like to tell us what you did with the imams?*

In the Gambia imams are very influential religious leaders in the community. Most of the time if they go against any idea that has come into the community it usually doesn't hold very well with the communities. So what we did was, from past experiences with other programs such as family planning who were promoting condoms, we were kicked out of certain communities because imams never liked the idea of them coming into those community so we said yes, it's better we get the imams on board, how do we do this? The community members themselves suggested the imams should be part of the discussions and we take it from there. For us we decided to have them on record because if you're not on record you can always deny you said it. so what we did was call the imams together, have a conference and discussions at the sessions with them and record it on video and after the recording they really talked about their opinion, which was also very good because it was not against the use of condoms, it was just being cautious of how to use condoms and who should be using them. So when we have this on video we then discuss with the imams that we would return to their communities with the video when all the community members would be able to watch. When we go to a particular community the imam will take care of these videos, they will be the leaders, they will do the opening, welcome the community members and will talk about what will be shown and after they will come up and give a brief explanation of why we should be using condoms. I remember one of the imams said 'it's better to have one sin than two sins,' If you want to have unprotected sex it means you are committing two sins, if you want to have unprotected sex you might get diseases but if you use a condom you will have sinful sex, but you won't have the additional sin for catching a disease, so he used that as an example and that was very accepted by the community because of their religious orientation particularly in our Islamic faith. This worked very well because the imams were very vocal during the meetings at night, at the end of the day when we finished we always have another session with communities before we disperse from the programme, we always open the floor for questions and answers and imams will be there as religious leaders to answer questions from the communities. This worked very well for us, it was after that we were accepted in all the communities that we worked in because we were seen as friends or partners of the religious leaders,





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whatever we were doing was not against what the religion was saying, it sort of boosted our image in the communities.

★ *That sounds like a brilliant way of doing it!*

Yes, up to now this also not only helped *Stepping Stones* in the Gambia, but also created an opportunity for other organisations working in similar areas to use religious scholars to discuss sexual and reproductive health issues, using condoms and other things that were kicked against in the past. So it's now very common in the Gambia whatever discussions we are doing we try to get religious leaders on board, discuss it, come up with a common stand and then we go to the communities.

★ *Would you like to tell us about some of the changes which participants have experienced in their communities after *Stepping Stones* workshops?*

It varies from one community to another, what we've been able to do is record the changes that are brought about in these communities. One of them is people are now very much concerned about HIV and AIDS in the Gambia. In the past people were saying that's a foreign thing, that's not part of us but now they know it's in the Gambia, the number one thing is they cannot just say 'I'll run away from it, it's part of the Gambia we have to do something about it at the community level, which is very good. Number two, is that there are some other issues that particularly in the Gambia that *Stepping Stones* helped improve on, what we call violence against women, particularly wife beating. The *Stepping Stones* sessions have promoted good understanding between husband and wife, it has created the opportunity for both husband and wife to discuss issues that affected both of them in a very understanding way. This is also very helpful for those who used to beat their wives or cause bodily harm now they have stopped doing that. Now not only them as partners but the community itself always reflects back on the session we are doing, if there is a case of wife beating or whatever, they say 'you've just been to discussions recently, have you not learned anything from the sessions, you should not engage in that behaviour'. The other thing is the use of cutting instruments in the communities, we have different types of cutting instruments, not talking about circumcisions but even the tattooing of gums, they use different types of instruments to make the gums black, one of them is using needles and they use them from one person to another without sterilising them. But now with cutting instruments on the body, now they realise it can also be another way of transferring HIV and they now use new needles. So these are some of the changes but there are so many changes taking place in the communities!

★ *What about young people, do they feel interested in *Stepping Stones* also?*

Very much, in the Gambia demand for expanding *Stepping Stones* all over the place is almost beyond our control now. What's happening is young people particularly those at age of puberty are so interested that communities where we operate, usually they have their own session at their own level, because we can't mix them with the older group but what we do is always organise them at their own group level and have *Stepping Stones* sessions with them. What we usually do is train trainers, then amongst them the trainers will continue running the sessions. Young people are very much interested because they're now going to prepare themselves for the eventualities as they grow, to avoid falling victim to certain things that they could have fallen victim to if it weren't for the *Stepping Stones* sessions. So I think it's something that's spreading across all the layers of communities.



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★ *In the Gambia you've done great things with real scale up of the programme and I think there are a lot of countries interested to hear how you've managed to achieve that scale up but how do you hold onto the quality of what is being scaled up, that's a huge challenge isn't it?*

That was a big challenge for us, but what happened in the Gambia, and what also helped is when the pilot phase of *Stepping Stones* was seen as something that can work in the Gambia and seen as something that can be helpful in educating people about sexual and reproductive health issues, it was not only confined to NGOs but the government also took it on board so in fact, with the scale-up, I participated in the national launch of *Stepping Stones* in the Gambia, which was done by the vice president of the country, to give it weight in the Gambia as an important national programme. Some of the funding also came through the government because scaling up *Stepping Stones* needs money. Some of these funds came through the National AIDS programme and also the government bi-lateral donors, but these were funds that came through the government in addition to the small bits and pieces that we were able to put together. So that is showing that *Stepping Stones* in the Gambia was recognised and accepted to be rolled out to other communities and expanded to cover more communities and then we started the roll out programme. I think we are now in the 6-7 roll out phase of *Stepping Stones* in the Gambia which is also expanding. In my organisation we've expanded to so many communities now, I'd say moving into the hundreds. We have now done good networking amongst ourselves and the organisations that are promoting and practising *Stepping Stones* in the Gambia we have a consortium of 5 NGOs at national level including state departments which are rolling out the *Stepping Stones* programme.

★ *And how do you ensure quality control of the roll out?*

We came up with the consortium of NGO's because whoever is going to practise *Stepping Stones* in the Gambia, you need to go through the consortium to make sure you're using the manual properly. We make sure at least you know how to go about *Stepping Stones* in the first place, we give you the training, all the necessary bits and pieces of *Stepping Stones* before you can do a workshop because we don't want to lose the quality of *Stepping Stones*.

**Thank you Momodou!**

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