How OSIWA and partners work toward a freer, safer, more integrated, democratic and equitable West Africa
Our Mission & Values

OSIWA is dedicated to helping create open societies in West Africa. We seek to promote inclusive democratic governance, transparent and accountable institutions and active citizenship in West Africa.

Our values define, guide, and govern our behavior within OSIWA and with our grantees and partners. These values will help us attain our mission.

OUR STORIES

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Over the past three years, dramatic social and political shifts have swept across West Africa—from peaceful presidential elections in Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal to heated conflicts in Côte d’Ivoire and Mali. These events created challenges in a region plagued by weak government, economic hardship, inadequate physical infrastructure and widespread corruption. Amidst these transformations, OSIWA maintained its focus on the Foundation’s core goals – ones which proved critical in this time of change – to promote transparent and accountable governance institutions; to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations; and to defend human rights and the rule of law.

From 2011-2013, OSIWA funded nearly 300 projects in its nine countries of focus: Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. The Foundation also worked in Mali during the 2013 Presidential elections, helping to improve citizen’s participation and more responsible media coverage of elections. Increasingly, OSIWA has also taken a more regional approach to its work by supporting West African institutions such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its Network of Electoral Commissions in West Africa (ECONEC), as well as continuing to support partnership-building across borders.

During the 2011-2013 cycle, OSIWA gave out more than US$37 million dollars with many promising outcomes. Successful projects with state institutions (in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Liberia), Human Rights Commissions (in Benin, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone) through the Network of Human Rights Institutions in West Africa (NNHRI) and Anti-Corruption Commission (in Guinea and Niger) have all allowed OSIWA to create more strategic interactions with governments and regional institutions.

Beyond working with governments, OSIWA also placed emphasis on increasing civic participation region-wide, either through civil society organizations or through direct citizen engagement. Special attention was also placed on involving the youth, women and persons living with disabilities in the issues that matter to them and finding creative means of mobilizing their efforts – whether through the arts or using new technology. It is often through citizen’s demands for transparency, inclusion and better governance that reforms can be made. And this is something OSIWA encourages and tries to help facilitate in all its work.

There have certainly been challenges over the last few years, but increasingly West Africa is moving forward—economically, socially and democratically. There continue to be ample opportunities and spaces to promote democratic values and to expand civic engagement across the region.

OSIWA’s investments in West Africa are having an effect, albeit sometimes in subtle ways that can take time to bear fruit. Entrenched issues, such as systemic corruption, gender-based violence, or even the political and economic marginalization of minority groups cannot be changed with a single act or even through a single project or sole partner. But funding a one year anti-corruption program, for example, may lead to the passage and implementation of an anti-corruption law five years down the road. This is because change—real, long-lasting and effective transformation—does not happen overnight. Rather, it is the cumulative effect of the efforts of many people, over the course of many years that produce tangible results and sustainable change.

The series you are about to read are “our stories”—the projects, actions, struggles and promises that we collaborate on with our partners on the ground.

Some partnerships are new. Some partnerships are old. But all are working towards the same goal: the vision and belief of building a freer, safer, more integrated, democratic and equitable West Africa. For today and for tomorrow.
Although Guinea is overflowing with natural resources, the gross irony is that citizens themselves are not benefitting. The reasons for this are many; they include a lack of responsibility on the government’s side, coupled with a lack of understanding on the part of many civil society and local organizations. But this can all change. Guinea’s parliament and civil society have essential, and complementary roles to play in overseeing the role of the extractive sector and safeguarding the interests of its citizens. But to do so, they must first know how.

In March 2014, the Revenue Watch Institute (RWI), in cooperation with OSIWA, provided Guinea’s parliament with briefings and backgrounders about major extractive sector issues in the country. The briefings provide information about fiscal regimes, revenue management and contract transparency. Parliamentarians were trained on practical implementation strategies using these briefings, and newly-elected parliamentarians (those with limited experience in natural resource governance) were also trained on core subjects to help them understand more about natural resource management. The briefings and workshops proved to be essential in allowing parliamentarians to, firstly, better understand the issues surrounding the management of natural resources, and secondly, play a more effective role in ensuring an equitable and transparent management of their country’s natural resources.

Following the event, members of parliament asked civil society members to investigate the impact of a mine closure on the Fria mining community after a labor dispute in April 2013 had halted operations. This inquiry may not have happened if the parliamentarians had not been able to identify or understand the issues to begin with. RWI, in cooperation with OSIWA, has prepared a guide to build the capacity of civil society organization in taking action to ensure the transparency of the extractive industries.
SENEGAL: Forum Civil
Pushing for reform in Senegal

Senegal is often considered a bastion of democracy in the sub-region—a country that has never had any constitutional breakdown, never had the army threaten to take power and has had peaceful transfers of power twice since independence in 1960. But this does not mean Senegal’s democracy is without challenges. There is still much work to do, especially in the areas of accountability and citizen engagement.

In an effort to push for more transparency and encourage Senegalese to have their voices heard, in 2013 OSIWA and the Forum Civil embarked on a project to support a citizen-led movement to demand accountability from the government. They quickly realized that one of the best ways to ensure the government meets those goals is to guarantee the country’s own laws and policies provide for accountability and transparency.

Working with parliamentarians, civil society organizations and a number of other key actors, the project prepared several draft laws, including one that requires political parties to declare their finances; another on declaration of assets for public officials; a third that provides a code of conduct and ethical guidelines for legislators; and a fourth that provides citizen access to public information. The declaration of assets and disclosure of conflict of interest bill became law in December 2013, largely as a result of the work of Forum Civil. They continue their advocacy to ensure that the other bills are enacted into law.

Other key parts of Forum Civil’s work are the Parliamentary Accountability Forums, which started in 2012, and have since taken place in over 20 departments across Senegal. These meetings provide citizens with the opportunity to engage directly with parliamentarians and discuss their challenges face-to-face. This has proven an effective way to promote active citizenship among local populations, foster accountability among parliamentarians and provide opportunities for exchange between the two groups of actors in direct and meaningful ways.

A notable example of how this process produced tangible results took place in Pout, a small community just outside Thies, Senegal’s third largest city. A contentious land rights issue erupted in 2009 when land initially purchased by the Dangote Group to open a cement factory overlapped onto more than a hundred acres belonging to a prominent Senegalese spiritual leader. This overlap meant the factory could not open, effectively taking away 4,000 possible jobs from the local population.

After several years of a stalemate, in 2013, local citizens spoke out before deputies at a Forum Civil meeting in Thies. Within a month, the National Assembly considered the case and a group of 52 members of parliament, accompanied by Forum Civil members, paid a visit to the villages and factory to hear both sides. This mediation led to a resolution to the conflict and thousands of jobs were saved.

Information exchanges between deputies on the issue of mining allows Guinean parliamentarians to ensure effective management of mining revenues and proper supervision of mining sector reforms.
CHAPTER II

MONITORING ELECTORAL & REFORM PROCESSES

GHANA: Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD)
Guarding against violence in Ghana

Compared to many other countries in the region, Ghana has a history of carrying out free, fair and peaceful elections. But that does not mean they are flawless. In fact, at the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD) they still believe there is much room for improvement. In the 2012 elections, CDD embarked on a project to promote a credible, non-violent and issue-based voting process. One of their main goals was to ensure the elections were free of violence—which is not guaranteed in the conflict-prone zones of the Northern, Upper West, Upper East and Volta regions. The CDD and the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) trained and deployed monitors based in these areas to send out field reports and analyze situations that could possibly devolve into violence. During the elections they were able to monitor almost 500 communities in this way.

During the post-election period, CDD continued to help in the observation process, especially as election results were coming in and contestation was mounting. CDD also helped in the monitoring of the Supreme Court adjudication, the management of peace activities and the facilitation of candidate visits to communities, all of which helped defuse tension and, therefore, possible violence.

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While Ghana’s Supreme Court proceedings were on-going, the CDD project team prepared a set of activities to forestall potential triggers of violence. In partnership with the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO), CDD helped design peacebuilding interventions that centered on processes of sensitization, education and awareness. These activities were deployed in 40 districts and greatly helped reduced tensions in order to ensure peaceful elections in Ghana.
REGIONAL: ECOWAS/ ECONEC
Improving the region’s electoral environment

Since the 1990s, elections in West Africa have been riddled with technical and organizational challenges plaguing almost every young democracy and every election management environment in the sub-region. As elections are integral to the proper functioning and consolidation of democracy, as well as ensuring the accountability of its governing elite, enabling quality electoral processes is crucial.

In 2008, the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS), the regional body mandated to promote economic, political, social and cultural integration in West Africa, set up an electoral monitoring network. This platform, known as The ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commission (ECONEC), was established in Guinea-Conakry and helps the 15-member states in elections management, capacity building, and evaluation missions.

In addition to being instrumental to the fulfillment of ECOWAS’ mandates, ECONEC is a major tool for sharing best practice among Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) and, as a result, for the enhancement of election management efforts in the sub-region.

OSIWA began working with ECONEC in 2012, at a time when they needed to be revamped and revitalized. The Foundation began providing institutional support because OSIWA believes in their potential to deliver. Since this time, various ECONEC workshops have been held across the region and have proven to be invaluable platforms of exchange and growth on everything from how to put an end to electoral impunity and how security can be improved during elections, to the role of EMBs outside of election periods.

In 2013, at the request of their EMB’s, ECONEC conducted exploratory and evaluation missions in both Guinea and Mali before their legislative and presidential elections. They have also, more recently, been asked to assist the electoral commissions in Cote d’Ivoire in the lead up to their 2015 presidential elections. ECONEC has further conducted staff trainings for EMBs on voter registration (in Cote d’Ivoire), election costs and ICT and elections (in Burkina Faso) and voter education (in Ghana).

Over the years, OSIWA has demonstrated its commitment to transparency and good governance in West Africa and financed the establishment of the ECOWAS Electoral Assistance Division. We are determined to further strengthen this valuable relationship with OSIWA.

The ECOWAS Commission Vice-President, H.E. Toga Gayewea McIntosh, expressed his satisfaction with the OSIWA/ECONEC partnership saying, “Over the years, OSIWA has demonstrated its commitment to transparency and good governance in West Africa and financed the establishment of the ECOWAS Electoral Assistance Division. We are determined to further strengthen this valuable relationship with OSIWA, alongside the cooperation with all other bilateral and multi-lateral partners, in the domain of democracy and good governance.”

H.E. Toga Gayewea McIntosh
ECOWAS Commission Vice-President
While elections play a critical role in the consolidation of West Africa’s young democracies, it is crucial for these elections to take place in free, fair and peaceful ways.

In recent years, OSIWA has placed large focus on elections and on developing partnerships and tools that will increase the probability of successful and non-violent elections. One such example of an instrument that has proven its effectiveness is the Election Situation Room (ESR). This innovative mechanism targets citizen and civil society organizations to monitor elections with the goal of ensuring transparency and credibility. The ESR allows civil society organizations to coordinate their real-time monitoring activities and to watch for and respond to any abuses, fraud or triggers that may result in violence. The ESR unites teams of observers who are deployed in the field at election stations, as well as policy experts who are ready to step in at any moment. The ESR may also include an online platform that collects, processes and collates any information about election irregularities.

OSIWA first implemented the ESR in Nigeria, in 2011, where it brought together civil society organizations, along with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), to oversee the elections and provide a measured response to threats of violence and accusations of fraud. It was widely considered a success and the ESR model has since been rolled out and refined through recent elections in Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Mali—each time adapted to the specific needs, capacities and challenges of the country.

In the 2012 Senegal Presidential elections, (then) running candidate Macky Sall paid a visit to the ESR, congratulating the organizers. Over a year later, in April 2013, during the Open Society Foundations’ Global Board meeting in Dakar, he again praised the ESR concept for playing a key role in ensuring free and fair elections. President Sall also welcomed the release of the film, Senegal’s Presidential Election 2012: a democracy on high alert.

“This work is very important,” said President Sall. “It is essential to preserve this historic moment as a collective memory in the evolution of our democracy. It is a useful tool to support future actions here in Africa and beyond.”

A few months later in August 2012, during a visit by (then) U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to Dakar, she lauded ESR in her speech: “We saw perhaps the most sophisticated monitoring program ever deployed in Africa or anywhere else. And in the end, we saw a peaceful transfer of power. We saw democracy reaffirmed. We saw Senegal’s traditions preserved. And we joined with the rest of the world in praise and respect for the Senegalese people.”

During Mali’s elections in 2013, government official Moussa Sinko Coulibaly said in reference to the work of the ESR: “It takes the genuine participation of everyone and citizen control to have a strengthened democracy.”

Albert Koenders, the head of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali was also impressed with the ESR, calling it “an interesting and revolutionary experience” and “a tool that should be used widely.”

In West Africa today very few elections take place without an Election Situation Room or similar model in place—even in countries where OSIWA is not directly involved. This tool has been increasingly used as a model in elections outside of West Africa as well, including in other parts of Africa and Eastern Europe. To help promote the ESR’s use even more broadly, OSIWA produced an Election Situation Room Guidebook (available in both French and English) and an informational film (in French, English and Wolof).
LIBERIA: National Youth Movement for Transparent Elections (NAYMOTE)
Bridging the gap between youth and politics

In Liberia, as in many parts of the world, engaging youth in politics can be a difficult task. This apathy can be due to several factors—disinterest, disconnect or even altogether cynicism towards politics. But in Liberia, while youth may be eager to participate, they are often too removed from the process itself.

To help address this problem, the Liberian organization National Youth Movement for Transparent Elections (NAYMOTE) created a platform to facilitate youth engagement with political leaders. Too often, political candidates only make themselves available to constituents during the campaign period, after which almost all contact ceases. NAYMOTE therefore organized a series of public town hall meetings in 17 electoral districts across two counties specifically targeting young people (aged 15-35) and their legislators to provide a direct interaction between the two groups. This is important because it makes political figures accessible to the younger population and actually demands that they hear and respond to their questions and concerns. These meetings were also beneficial for young people, because it allowed them to better understand the workings of their government (specifically the functions of legislators) and help them feel more implicated in the political process.

Successful outcomes of this project include a discussion on the national budget, which resulted in lawmakers asking for the direct budget support fund for each administrative district in each county, as opposed to a lump sum county development fund. This way citizens could assess exactly how and where their money was being used. The youth and lawmakers were able to agree that general county development funding was not spread out to all the districts, resulting in a majority of districts not benefitting and thus remaining undeveloped. The legislators are now working on a policy document that will spell out the disaggregation of county development funds into direct allocations per district; known as the Direct District Support (DDS).

Another example of positive actions taken by NAYMOTE was the youth’s rejection of the county development plan on grounds that this plan was not a true reflection of their particular needs. The youths further maintained that they had been left out of the plan’s development, even though they had been designated by the elders of these various districts to do exactly that. As a result, the youth refused to endorse any county development plan where legislators did not take their views into consideration. The process was thus halted, only to restart again at a later stage with the youth taking an active role and endorsing the plan to the point of its implementation. The youth were then able to bring back copies of the document to their various home districts, including into the hands of community elders.

In Liberia, NAYMOTE’s projects seek to implicate youth in the political process to help ensure transparent elections and an inclusive governance.
NIGERIA: BudgIT
Apps for Transparency in Nigeria

For most of his professional career, young entrepreneur Oluseun Onigbinde worked in Nigerian banks as an analyst, often handling the public sector portfolio where he had to make sense of complicated data published as immense PDFs, which were difficult to read through, let alone understand. Oluseun started wondering how he could help ordinary Nigerians do the same. What if he could decipher the intricacies of the Nigerian government’s budget by using simple infographics and visualization tools? And that’s exactly how BudgIT was born—as a way to simplify the Nigerian budget so citizens could easily access, track and monitor public expenditures.

In 2012, OSIWA started supporting BudgIT to expand the Nigerian people’s ability to retrieve this kind of information and distribute and promote the use of BudgIT’s infographics in the media. BudgIT has since created an array of comprehensive infographics that address everything from flood relief aid, ghost workers in the Nigerian government, security expenditure, fuel revenue, and of course federal and state budgets. Citizens can also request different types of data from BudgIT. The BudgIT website (www.yourbudgit.com) has received over 500,000 hits and the Occupy Nigeria movement has also used BudgIT’s tweets in its protests.

SENEGAL: MACKYMETRE
Measuring Macky

During Senegal’s 2012 presidential campaign, candidate Macky Sall issued a detailed political platform filled with ideas that, if elected, he would implement. Now, as Head of State, the Senegalese people are anxiously waiting to see if their leader actually carries through on these campaign pledges—promises that include instating five-year presidential term limits, creating 500,000 jobs over the next five years and decreasing cost of living for basic needs.

In December 2013, OSIWA began working with the website Mackymetre.com, which was created by four young Senegalese computer engineers. It was established as an online and mobile technology tool to track and measure the president’s campaign promises. It further provides a forum for citizens to debate and rate both policy issues and members of the government. Since its creation, the website has registered more than 1000 visitors daily. Today—two years after President Sall took office—only 15 of the 148 proposed pledges are complete, 33 remain in the works and 100 have yet to begin. Among those completed projects are the reform of the nationality code, which allows Senegalese mothers to pass on their citizenship to their children; the lowering of fringe benefits traditionally granted to Ministers that allow them such privileges as first-class travel and unlimited phone use; and the creation of a national body to fight fraud and corruption (created in December 2012).

Mackymetre is helping facilitate an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability within Senegal’s government sector and bringing it directly into the hands of its citizens, civil society organizations and even government officials themselves. With OSIWA’s help, the project is also ensuring the online security and credibility of data posted by running workshops that specialize in cyber-security and information collection.

The Foundation will also help broadly communicate on the Mackymetre data by releasing regular bulletins to civil society organizations, the government and the general public. The partnership between OSIWA and Mackymetre.com will continue through to the 2017 elections. It has proven to be an effective way of motivating citizens to stay interested in the actions of their government and to monitor effective delivery on key promises.
In 2006, Ghana’s government passed the Whistleblower Act. Intended to be a tool for individuals to inform authorities about corruption and other illegal practices, in practice few individuals understood how to take advantage of the protections this Act. Even the agencies in charge of monitoring corruption and implementing knew little about the protections the Act intended to provide.

To address this problem, the Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition (GACC) reached out to OSIWA to collaborate on a project that would assess how well the Whistleblower Act of 2006 was being used at the grassroots level. GACC produced publicity and educational materials, including a guide to whistleblowing in three Ghanaian languages (Twi and Ewe, and Hausa), which are widely spoken in the north. They also conducted trainings on the effects of corruption and the Whistleblower Act. These were carried out in 20 districts for 112 civil society organizations and grassroots associations, and in conjunction with over 100 traditional authorities from the Volta, Western, Northern and Greater Accra Regions.

After the trainings, several participants expressed a better understanding of the many different kinds of corruption that impact Ghanaian society.

“I understand that it is not only politicians or police officers who are corrupt, but the behaviors of some of us amount to corruption,” admitted a traditional authority at a capacity building workshop organized in the Greater Accra Region.

A traditional leader from the Western Region also noted that “while the fight against corruption is very difficult; there is the need to give the fight a human face”.

GACC also engaged with the institutions that are mandated to implement the Whistleblower Act. GACC conducted trainings and forums for key government agencies, including the Ghana Police Service, the Narcotic Control Board and the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice on the implementation of the act. And finally, over the course of this project, GACC also formed Local Anti-Corruption Networks (LANETs) to assist whistleblowers at the local level and ensure a bottom-up approach to anti-corruption initiatives.
GUINEA: National Anti-Corruption Agency (ANLC)

Tackling corruption in Guinea

Corruption is a way of life in Guinea, where bribes are often needed to grease the slow wheels of bureaucracy and the palms of officials. As a result, Guinea is consistently listed as one of the most corrupt countries in Africa.

To help combat this system-wide corruption and the general culture of impunity, Guinea’s National Anti-Corruption Agency (ANLC) started work with OSIWA in 2011 to identify areas where they could improve. They worked with the ANLC to create methodologies to assess the state of corruption in the public service (National Corruption and Governance Index); to identify ways of adopting a sustainable legal framework; and to build organisational capacity for effective conduct of operations.

The ANLC team diagnosed one major impediment to their work – the lack of an anti-corruption law. This has effectively prevented the government from articulating a clear strategy for reform. The ANLC has been pushing for the adoption of an anti-corruption law by promoting it to other officials in the government, civil society organizations and private industry. Multi-stakeholder validation workshops were organized in Conakry to introduce participants to the important aspects of the draft law and its relevance in the Guinean context.

The ANLC also conducted a nationwide study assessing how people view corruption in Guinea. This report—the first of its kind in the country—explores the perceptions, evolution, frequency and even rationale behind this all-pervasive phenomenon. It reveals, among other aspects, that the majority of Guineans are actually aware that corruption slows down development and that the areas most affected by corruption are in the public services industry—the national police, the customs department, the tax services and the land services. This 130-page study is available in French on www.osiwa.org.

After the dissemination of the report, all stakeholders agreed that it was a relevant and useful resource, because it provides data that can inform actors who are fighting corruption. Dialogues and debates were organized at every level on the basis of this report. All partners reported that the National Corruption and Governance Index is a complement to Transparency International’s own corruption index. This could partially explain why Guinea improved four places (from 157th to 154th) on the aforementioned index in 2013. Hopefully, the study will continue providing reliable information to help citizens and actors fight corruption and help Guinea continue to improve its standing on the corruption index.

While the fight against corruption is very difficult, there is the need to give the fight a human face.

Traditional Leader
Western Region, Ghana
GUINEA: Association for Rural Development and Mutual Aid in Guinea (ADREMGUI)
Mining Guinea

On paper Guinea should be one of the wealthiest countries in Africa. It is laden with massive stocks of bauxite, iron ore, gold and diamonds, and boasts abundant rivers and lush forests. Unfortunately the country epitomizes the cliché of “the natural resource curse”. A vast majority of Guineans live in devastating poverty.

To help counter this situation, the Association for Rural Development and Mutual Aid in Guinea (ADREMGUI) has been working in one of the country’s many mining regions (in the prefectures of Kindia and Télimélé) to help communities by providing the very services the government does not—effective mechanisms for local government tax collection and the management of information about mining contracts and community rights.

In 2012, OSIWA started working with ADREMGUI to help them restructure the relationship between mining companies, the government, local authorities and the local citizens to help ensure a more transparent and fair management of local resources in these mining zones. The project provided training for local officials and civil society organizations to evaluate budgets and contracts so they could better understand the tax amounts owed by mining companies to the localities.

In one community, town officials were able to go to the bauxite mining company officials and convince them to pay their overdue taxes directly to the community, instead of paying the administrative government where the money often mysteriously disappears. ADREMGUI also broadcast discussions about these issues on the radio, which has helped increase people’s awareness of the problems and reinforce their own right, as citizens, to speak out.
NIGER: The Organization for Transparency and Budgetary Analysis (ROTAB)
Making natural resources work for citizens

Niger, like Guinea, is laden with natural resource wealth—uranium, bauxite and more recently, oil. But this wealth is hardly felt by local communities; much of the population continues to live in dire poverty and without access to basic services let alone proper infrastructure. While Niger’s mining sector has been actively exploited for the last 40 years, the whereabouts of revenues generated by mining companies and collected by the government are unknown.

In 2009 OSIWA started working with The Organization for Transparency and Budgetary Analysis (ROTAB), a Nigerien civil society organization that has been one of the key driving forces behind the unprecedented and determined demand for accountability and transparency in the management of Niger’s natural resources. ROTAB has helped Niger attain EITI compliance status and continues to push the government and multinational companies to respect their mining contracts, which are often carried out behind closed doors.

ROTAB has also been a disruptive, yet highly constructive voice in Niger’s recent negotiations with the French mining giant AREVA, flagging down the blatant opacity in the process and the skewed relationship that exists between the two parties. Through protests, staunch advocacy and unwavering perseverance, ROTAB has helped raise the profile of these negotiations worldwide and allowed many Nigerians to voice their concerns.

Additionally, since the people of Niger continue to lack adequate access to health, education and other social services, ROTAB has pushed those issues to the forefront of Niger’s negotiations with AREVA. They continue to advocate for more transparency and inclusiveness in the government’s management of the resources it generates from mining.

NIGERIA: Fuelling Poverty
Documenting a crisis

Young Nigerian filmmaker Ishaya Bako was spurred into action when widespread protests broke out in his country following the government’s attempt to roll back its fuel subsidy in early 2012. Hundreds of thousands of Nigerians descended into the streets and demanded accountability from their government. The outcome was less than inspirational. “Many were disappointed, including myself, and I felt something needed to be said about this incessant disease that is corruption and its daunting repercussions on the state of the nation,” said Bako.

When OSIWA’s Nigerian Country Office Manager approached Bako with the possibility of doing a film about the fuel subsidy scam and its resulting crisis, he jumped at the opportunity. The product is a 28-minute documentary, Fuelling Poverty, which explores the history of Nigeria’s fuel subsidy, the corruption that surrounds it and the activists and ordinary Nigerians who were fighting back.

Despite being banned by the Nigerian government in 2013, the film has attracted a large audience on YouTube with more than 70,000 hits. It won best documentary at the Africa Movie Academy Awards in 2013, and was used as course material at Berlin’s Freie Universitat in a course entitled, “Representing Resistance in Africa: New Media, Civil Disobedience and the Chance for Democratic Change”.

Many of OSIWA’s other partners in Nigeria, such as Youth Initiative for Advocacy Growth and Advancement, Enough is Enough and Public and Private Development Centre have used the film as a public advocacy tool.
LIBERIA: Sustainable Development Institute (SDI)
A fight for land rights in Liberia

In 2009, the Liberian government granted a 220,000-hectare land concession to a Malaysian palm oil production company and hailed it a boon for the local economy. But there was just one problem—people were still living on that land. Sadly, the customary landholders had no documentation proving their ancestral lands actually belonged to them, so when the palm oil company came to clear the land, their homes were uprooted, farms destroyed, cemeteries and spiritual sites of worship cleared out and entire communities displaced. Similar land deals soon followed, many of them using an illegal loophole called “Private Use Permits” to convert primary forests into agricultural plantations.

In 2013, OSIWA partnered with The Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) whose aim is to create space for the participation of local communities in decision making processes relating to natural resources (such as in this particular palm oil situation).

Working with OSIWA’s support, SDI (and other local and international organizations) called on the Liberian government to respect the rights of customary land owners and to share the financial benefits of these deals with them. SDI has worked closely with government partners to ensure the passage of legislation that provides land rental fees for local communities based in concession areas. It has further used its influence to convince Liberia’s President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to declare a moratorium on Private Use Permits, which she did in 2012.

More recently, SDI has been working closely with other civil society organizations and the government to introduce a new land reform law, which if passed would recognize the customary land rights of local communities for the first time in Liberia’s history.

In Liberia, SDI lobbies for community rights, particularly in regards to land grabs for the industrial production of palm oil.
GHANA: Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach Services (OLAM)

Income-generating activities help women beat domestic violence

Although Mary (not her real name), a young Ghanaian woman, studied hard in school to become a secretary, she was never able to achieve this dream. Like so many women around the world, Mary was expected to get married and stay home. Very sadly, Mary’s husband took to beating her, and as Mary did not have a job or earn money her options for help were limited. As a result she suffered from severe physical, psychological and emotional abuse.

Many women in Ghana find themselves in similar situations to Mary. Nearly 110,000 cases of domestic violence have been recorded in Ghana’s capital city of Accra alone within the last decade. Women in these situations are often unable to free themselves from abusive situations because they are financially dependent on their husbands or their families.

When Mary first heard that she could take some computer classes at Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach Services (OLAM), she immediately enrolled. Soon after, and with more training under her belt, she developed the skills that instilled a new sense of confidence and a clearer vision for how she could feasibly change her life. Mary then found a job, which gave her financial independence and allowed her to escape from the hostile situation she was enduring at home. Mary’s story is exactly the type of success that OLAM’s project strives to achieve: reducing domestic violence and reinforcing the rights of women in the Upper East region of Ghana.

OLAM-sponsored sewing workshop. These programs seek to help women, youth and persons with disabilities develop skills for economic independence.

LIBERIA: Women Solidarity Incorporated (WOSI)

Fighting a taboo

Female genital mutilation (FGM) remains a deeply entrenched practice in 13 of Liberia’s 16 tribes. As in many parts of West Africa, it is a tradition heavily intertwined with many social, cultural and religious beliefs. But there is also no law in Liberia that bans the practice, which means it is even more difficult to counter—despite repeated public health campaigns. Just talking about FGM is taboo for many Liberians.

In 2013, OSIWA and Women Solidarity Incorporated (WOSI) began collaborating on a program that had a large, and somewhat controversial goal—ensuring zero tolerance to (FGM). The project began with WOSI leading community conversations and facilitating special forums that implicated all levels of the community, including its influential traditional leaders.

That same year, WOSI conducted a survey in Liberia’s Margibi, Bong and Nimba Counties (where FGM is widely practiced) in an effort to collect data on people’s existing attitudes and perceptions on FGM. The report revealed that 57% of the respondents were not willing to encourage their family members to undergo the practice—and yet, quite curiously, most of them had undergone the procedure or admitted to believing in its utility. A series of forums were then held in communities across the country, including with traditional leaders and practitioners who could collaborate on implementing measures leading to the eventual banning of FGM. These measures include the mandatory registration of practitioners with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the head of the traditional leaders; the imposition of fines for ‘bush school ceremonies’ (initiation ceremonies held in the forest and usually organised by women’s secret societies); the establishment of a working group made up of traditional leaders, key practitioners, lawmakers, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and other members who could make the necessary recommendations to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The WOSI report was generally welcomed by the government, the traditional communities, civic society actors and other international partners as a workable tool and is considered a valuable statistical resource to help design interventions to counter the practice of FGM in Liberia.
In 2010, OSIWA began working with The Women’s Health Education and Prevention Strategies Alliance’s (WHEPSA) on a 10,000 Girls Education and Entrepreneurship Program. This project also includes girls living with disabilities and those from marginalized urban and rural communities. It has been implemented in six different regions across Senegal’s central and eastern areas and, to date, it has involved over 8000 students with the aim to reach 10,000 girls by 2016. Through a multi-pronged approach—working with school directors, teachers, parents and students alike—they ensure their interventions not only help girls enroll and remain in school, but that the environment there is gender neutral.

WHEPSA runs a variety of programs, from preparing afterschool homework sessions, to providing peer support and review, to engaging in monthly teamwork preparation and bi-monthly parent support meetings, to promoting enterprise development training. The WHEPSA program believes that if girls have the proper conditions in place (a time and place to study) and the practical tools required (books and educational supervision), and if they are in reasonably good health, they stand a much greater chance of succeeding in school and developing educational independence.

Two unique initiatives that WHEPSA carries out include the Citizen Watch Committees and the WHEPSA Mothers Group. The former, made up of participant parents, make systematic visits to schools and follow up with school personnel to ensure target students are attending classes. They also regularly monitor “at-risk” girls (ones who may be exposed to early-marriage practices, for example) to ensure they have the materials and support to be kept in school. The WHEPSA Mothers Groups, made up of mothers and other female relatives, seeks alternatives to the practice of early marriage. They help the girls set up entrepreneurial classes to learn commercial artisanal and food production and even farming techniques so they can become less financially dependent on men. These Mothers Groups are also encouraged to support Senegalese legislation that bans early marriage and female circumcision; to investigate girls’ extensive school absenteeism; to institute policies to ensure girls’ inclusion in math and science classes; and to monitor girls’ participation in education.

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The Women’s Health Education and Prevention Strategies Alliance’s (WHEPSA)
Empowering marginalized communities through girls’ education

Education has long been considered one of the fairest ways of addressing social and economic inequalities and exclusion. And although vital in building active citizenship and promoting democracy, in Senegal, the education system has long since bared the brunt of deepening endemic economic and social crises. In the majority of schools, learning conditions are less than ideal. Over-enrollment, absence of teaching materials, weak management and organizational capacity, absence of water and sanitation, the long distances traveled by children from rural areas, malnutrition and health problems, poverty and illiteracy of parents are just some of the all-pervasive issues that continue to compromise efforts to make education accessible to all. In the end, a large segment of Senegal’s population is ill-educated or uneducated. According to Senegal’s 2012 general report on the implementation of its ten-year education plan (2000-2010), out of 100 students admitted in the 1st grade, only 60 make it to the 6th grade. Girls are among the most disadvantaged, due to several socio-cultural and economic factors.

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Youth Debate
Training young people in the art of debate

Youth participation in public debate is necessary for an effective, open and truly democratic society to function. But learning to debate in a constructive manner is also an art form—a practice that must be truly honed to ensure it is a valuable and respectful exchange of opinions. While debating as a skill has started to fade in many parts of the world, including in Senegal and particularly among the youth (who form more than 60% of the population), it is nonetheless an important part of education and one that OSIWA actively supports.

In 2013, the Foundation began working with OSF Youth Initiatives and the Africa Governance, Monitoring and Advocacy Project (AfriMAP) to organize a six-month project that would restore the culture of debate among young people across Senegal. Between March and May 2013, the program trained over 500 students from four of the country’s main universities. These students were taught how to debate complex subjects, such as constitutional reform; how to do data collection and use the best research methods; how to listen actively; how to construct ideas and formulate arguments; and even to manage their body language.

With the support of OSIWA and OSF Youth Exchange, the two winners of Senegal’s national debating competition went on to the 2014 Francophone World Championship in Paris (in mid-May 2014). Forty teams from 13 countries were represented here, and the young men from Senegal reached the quarterfinals.

While the sustainability of this project will only be known over time, what is certain is that the training has already left behind a legacy.

“We (the former debaters) plan to set up a Senegalese Francophone Debate Federation,” said Ben David Mbao, one of the two Senegalese debates who participated at the Paris competition.

“This initiative will surely help engage plenty more youths in the political affairs of our country,” noted his debating partner Maguatte Gaye.

Since the project began, debating clubs have sprung up in three of Dakar’s post-secondary institutions, and other local non-governmental organizations have expressed interest in developing similar partnerships with OSIWA.

SIERRA LEONE: Educational Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ECBVI)
Empowering the visually-impaired

In Sierra Leone, despite having an Education Act (2004), which guarantees education among students/pupils in a non-discriminatory way, and a Persons with Disability Act (2011), which should ensure equal opportunities for disabled people, a lack of implementation of both acts means the visually-impaired have seen few improvements. Consequently, this group is still largely subject to consistent and systematic discrimination and neglect.

The Freetown-based Educational Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ECBVI) conceived of one way to address this problem. In 2013, this organization began working with OSIWA on an innovative and strategic project to set up an audio and visual library and resource center for blind and visually-impaired people. The project provides the first resource center of its kind for Sierra Leone’s blind, replete with an electronic library, audio versions of textbooks for primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, provision of sign language learning material for the hearing-impaired and speech-impaired and 150 braille textbooks.

The project has immensely helped promote students’ access to learning materials in readable tactile form, which was something previously unavailable. Additionally, the project helps build the self-esteem and confidence of its students and provides a platform for advocacy for the promotion and protection of the rights of people with disabilities.

Thomas Allieu Executive Director of ECBVI said, “I dropped out of university because I didn’t have access to my notes in braille form. This center was established to give students the opportunity to read and access learning materials to achieve their education dreams which I did not have years ago.”
Sierra Leone Cultural Conservation Project (SLCCP)
Using art and culture to preserve national identity

In post-war countries, the rebuilding process often places great emphasis on restoring the economic and political frameworks that were destroyed during the conflict period. But addressing the cultural aspects are equally important in ensuring the sustainability of a strong and united social and national identity.

In Sierra Leone, the Cultural Conservation Project (SLCCP) seeks to do exactly that: they invested in the revival of traditional culture, local artistic approaches and spaces for education and dialogue. In 2011, the SLCCP was launched by The Africa Film Festival Inc, with support from OSIWA, as a sustainable and ongoing arts and cultural program that includes a three-year youth audiovisual workshop.

The project is managed by the celebrated Sierra Leonean, Mahen Bonetti, who directs the Africa Film Festival in the USA. She partners with the Sierra Leone Museum to provide in-depth training to young documentary artists and media-makers, engaging them in the creation of public arts and media programs for the local community.

Particularly successful parts of this project include workshops on photography and the technical and narrative aspects of video.

The photography classes allowed participants to hone their skills in the classroom, and then document places and events of particularly significant national, cultural and historical importance, such as Bunce Island, the site of an 18th-century British slave castle and slave trading site.

The images were used to make postcards, which continue to be sold and distributed at the National Museum in Freetown and on CPP’s website (www.cccp.africanfilmny.org).

In the video workshops, students learned how to produce both feature-length and short-form films, as well as how to document important national or cultural events. The Executive Director of iRepresent Film Festival in Lagos, Femi Odugbemi, led a series of classes on how to “do more with less.” The Nigerian-filmmaker taught students about making high-quality, low-budget films; how to find story ideas; and technical aspects such as shot composition, lighting, sound, editing, marketing and publicity. He was supported by Concept Media, a Sierra Leonean media company that is complementing Femi’s work.

Project participant Musa Islam Kamara said that he hopes his training with the CPP will help him become a better filmmaker overall. “There are still stories of Sierra Leoneans that are untold. I want to tell these stories in my own style and in my own way.”

Salim M. Jalloh, another SLCCP project participant, has slightly different aspirations. “I would like to use this opportunity as a documentary filmmaker to act as an activist and in order to be a voice for the voiceless.”

As part of the workshop, participants shot and edited a short documentary film about Sierra Leone’s recent successful elections and the international community’s expectations of violence. The short film, entitled From the Ashes can be viewed on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqQO1pN91_w

I would like to use this opportunity as a documentary filmmaker to act as an activist and in order to be a voice for the voiceless.

Salim M. Jalloh
SLCCP project participant
COTE D’IVOIRE: Plateforme de la société civile pour la paix et la démocratie (PSDPD)
Theater for human rights

During the long years of conflict in Cote d’Ivoire, people living in the rebel-held north were exposed to many acts of violence—from bombings and air raids to massacres, rapes and extra-judicial killings. Now that peace has returned to the region, the Bouaké-based Plateforme de la société civile pour la paix et la démocratie (PSDPD) created a program to educate people about human rights, and especially the rights of women and children.

As the level of illiteracy in the region is high, PSDPD resorted to a new outreach tool—theatrical performances. Such performances have proven to be an effective, informative and even entertaining way to deliver messages on human rights. PSDPD organized five major performances in large public spaces in the region and distributed videos of their plays in the smaller villages. They also performed in schools, churches and at other public events throughout the region—including at a special performance organized by the World Bank for International Women’s Day.

The use of participatory theater and drama to educate the local community and raise awareness about issues such as women and children’s rights, female genital mutilation and peaceful coexistence is proving to be an effective means to move them from conflict and abuses to a new space of rights awareness, hope and common purpose.

A female leader of Kotolo village near Dabakala in central Cote d’Ivoire after a community awareness program noted, “It is the first time I’m participating in such an activity. I did not know that women have the same rights as men. I know that female circumcision is not good, but I did not know that it can make a woman infertile. I am very happy because I have learned many things through this activity in our village.”

Similar sentiments were expressed by a young student of Katiola Primary School when she noted, “I learned from the play that while children should respect their teachers, they (children) also have rights: the right to go to school, the right to health etc. As soon as I get home, I’ll talk with my parents and friends that circumcision is not good.”
GHANA: International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA-Ghana)
Legal aid and empowerment for women

A society where the majority of the population faces discriminatory practices will never achieve its full developmental or civic potential. Engrained cultural attitudes and archaic patriarchal practices pose serious challenges to the achievement of constitutional and international law obligations, especially with respect to women’s rights.

Ghana, like with most countries, has signed the international agreements and has domestic legislation that obligate the government to promote, protect, and respect the rights of women. However, mandated state institutions have not been able to honor these obligations, and as a result, customary laws and practices that discriminate against women persist. These issues are particularly dire in cases where the victims are poor women who do not have the knowledge, skills or resources to claim their rights. With OSIWA’s support, FIDA-Ghana has been working in the Greater Accra region to meet these challenges. They are doing so not only by providing legal representation for women, but also training them to defend their own rights and assist others in doing so. The project further aims to equip state actors, who have the responsibility to uphold the rights of women, with skills to function competently.

The way the program works is simple. The women can visit and seek FIDA’s assistance on various issues ranging from disputes between married or common-law couples, the non-payment of child support, custody and visitation rights, women’s inheritance, disputes over estates of deceased persons or even how to apply for letters of administration. FIDA also refers cases to the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit of the Ghana Police Service and other service providers.

“Even though there are still obstacles that block access to justice, we are working diligently to remove those obstacles through referrals, mediation, information, education, legal advice and assistance,” explained FIDA’s Program Coordinator.

“Take for example the case of (this woman) Akweley (not her real name). Prior to her visit to our access to justice center, she was emotionally disturbed. Her husband abused her physically and emotionally. He even threw her out of their matrimonial home and took another woman. Due to this, she had to live in her little kiosk by the roadside. The zenith of it all was when she lost her only son, who was just 17-years old and was hit by a truck in December 2012. Through the help of FIDA, Akweley was able to get compensation from the State Insurance Company of Ghana for the death of her son. We also helped assist Akweley in finding more suitable accommodation. Akweley is just one of the many women we are assisting through this project.”

SIERRA LEONE: Fourah Bay College Human Rights Clinic
Human rights clinics in Sierra Leone

The University Clinical Legal Education project at the Freetown-based Fourah Bay College is designed to engage students in practical human rights work and social justice education. The project, which is implemented by the students, provides hands-on experience in human rights-related work and advocacy. During an internship project, a student who was attached to Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) developed a curriculum on gender court monitoring and did a study on the “Essence of Military Aid to Civil Power” (MAC-P). Other students attached to the Centre for Accountability and Rule of Law (CARL), for example, authored and co-authored articles on the criminal justice system, the judiciary and children’s rights. These articles were published in CARL’s 2013 and 2014 quarterly newsletters and can be accessed on their website: http://bit.ly/1i05LEh.

Those students assigned to work with AdvocAid and Timap for Justice (two organizations dedicated to strengthening access to justice and providing legal and paralegal services) monitored police stations and the prison to provide justice services to detainees. At AdvocAid, the students helped review cases of female detainees in custody and to facilitate their release. Students assigned to Timap worked on a rape case of a three-year old girl until the suspect was finally brought up on charges.

Under the School Education Project (SEP), the students formed human rights clubs in six senior secondary schools. They gave talks on human rights in selected school assemblies, which gave pupils the opportunity to receive human rights education that would otherwise not be part of the curriculum. Panel discussions were also held on the role of state institutions in protecting human rights, which provided a platform for students to engage with representatives of the police, the judiciary, the human rights commission, the media and members of civil society organizations. The clinic project presents students with a valuable opportunity to learn and engage in human rights work outside their academic work.
West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI)

Empowering West Africa’s civil society

One of the central goals of OSIWA is to support a robust and active civil society across West Africa. Civil society organizations in West Africa fulfill a number of roles. They often act as watchdogs on issues of governmental corruption. They provide services that the state cannot or will not. And they mobilize citizens for positive change in their communities. But many such organizations often say they need help in order to continue their work—not just money, but training, research and dialogue about solutions.

OSIWA set up the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) as a spin-off in 2005 to step in and fulfill this need. Over the last decade, WACSI has built a reputation as an influential and effective training hub and resource center for the capacity building of civil society organizations across West Africa. During this period, WACSI has implemented over 90 capacity building programs that have benefited over 2158 practitioners from 2015 organizations helping them build skills and uphold acceptable standards.

WACSI adopts an innovative approach for capacity building using training, coaching and mentoring. This is to ensure that best organizational standards are upheld within civil society organizations across the region.

Emilienne Coulibaly, the coordinator of Côte d’Ivoire’s Association of Women Lawyers, said that WACSI’s training was just what she and her organization needed to function better. “Prior to these trainings, I did not understand how civil society organizations function. I did not know how to write proposals, manage projects, manage personnel, engage in policy advocacy,” said Coulibaly. “Today, thanks to the trainings by WACSI, I have been able to write my first proposal which has been submitted to donors for consideration. I now share my opinions in a strategic way on issues related to women’s rights in the country.”

Danso Camara, the executive director of the Union for Development and Cooperation (UDEC) in Guinea participated in a WACSI training in 2012 to help his organization run more efficiently. “After the training, we shared the knowledge learned with our board and staff. This enabled us to clearly define the role between our board and staff. Board members no longer interfere into the day-to-day running of the organization’s activities, which was prevalent prior to 2012,” he said.

In addition, WACSI has established the Next Generation Internship, which provides a six-month to twelve-month professional experience to young West Africans at the beginning of their careers in the civil society sector. Anthony Kolaco, a 2013 Next Generation intern, said it was a career-defining experience. “The challenging tasks I performed, working in different West African countries—Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia—further enriched my experience. I was imbued with new perspectives on governance issues, leadership, capacity building, and civil society’s role in promoting development in the region.”

When Kolaco finished his internship he returned to his home country, Liberia, and started a new job as a program officer with the National Youth Movement for Transparent Elections (NAYMOTE). To date, the internship program has benefited 19 young Africans who will become a valuable pool of future civil society leaders on the continent.
Between 2011 and 2013, West Africa was marked by a series of major elections in Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Gambia and Senegal. West Africa Democracy Radio (WADR) reported on elections in each one of these countries and worked with its network of 50 partner community radios, across ten countries, to gauge people’s views and expectations during the election period. WADR’s reports went beyond the updates of the results to also include electoral observation news, in-depth analysis, interviews, stories, country profiles and portraits of the candidates.

During the Senegalese presidential elections in 2012, for example, WADR (in partnership with OSIWA and the local think tank Initiative Prospective Agriculturale et Rurale) collaborated with 30 community and rural radio stations nationwide to provide live coverage of the two rounds of voting. Through this partnership, WADR was able to broaden its reach into the rural zones, allowing citizens in these smaller communities—areas often neglected by both politicians and the media—to express themselves and feel validated and justified in doing so.

While the election-coverage during this 2011-2013 period was notable, WADR did more than cover elections. WADR also recorded exclusive interviews with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, both of which took place during the Open Society Foundation’s Global Board meeting in Dakar in April 2013. On this occasion, President Sirleaf talked about the post-crisis situation in Côte d’Ivoire and the border situation between that country and Liberia. In the 6-minute interview with Kofi Annan—the first of its kind for WADR—the former UN Secretary General spoke about how democracy can be ensured in Africa, the reconciliation process in Côte d’Ivoire, the role of the independent electoral commission in Guinea and his perspectives on (the then) upcoming elections in Mali.

In 2011, WADR was awarded a Knight-Batten Award for Innovations in Journalism for a dynamic website created in partnership with the Czech-based nonprofit organization Sourcefabric, in recognition of the professional quality and social relevance of WADR’s programming. The award was received by the station’s director at a ceremony held at the Newseum, an interactive news and journalism museum, in Washington, DC.

In addition to broadcasting across Dakar’s airwaves, WADR broadcasts programs via satellite on community radio stations, provides live streaming on its website (wadr.org) and delivers podcasts through its Soundcloud platform.
The stories we have shared in this brochure are just some of the ways that OSIWA is supporting governments, civil society organizations and local institutions in West Africa to work toward better social, economic governance, political governance and justice.

Looking forward, we know that West Africa will continue to be full of surprises. In a region where many states teeter on the edge of fragility, threats to peace and democracy remain endemic challenges. But there are ways to manage them and ways to surmount them. Countries can manage these problems by having the right social infrastructure in place—strong institutions, a culture of transparency and accountability, a capable civil society, rule of law, and legal protections for the rights of all people. West Africa has been through many struggles over the last decades, but OSIWA is and will continue to support the current wave of positive reforms.

In this next three-year strategic cycle (2014-2017), OSIWA is funding activities that promote the core values of an open society and that fall within its three programmatic pillars—economic governance; political governance; and law, justice and human rights. OSIWA’s priorities remain centered on elections and election monitoring, the construction of more equitable frameworks for the management of natural resources, and the promotion of the rights, inclusion and empowerment of minority groups.

OSIWA is also expanding into new territory with a new focus on agriculture and food systems. We are also now including Mali as its tenth country of focus. More than ever before, the Foundation must be flexible and attuned to the rapidly changing environment within which we work. The nefarious effects of climate change on food security—resulting in lower crop yields, spurring conflicts over land tenure and prompting rising food prices—means it is an issue that can no longer be overlooked, especially in its relation to governance and rights issues. In this regard, OSIWA will try to address these concerns through support for agricultural research and initiatives that help smallholders produce and process their crops.

In our work in Mali, we hope to support national dialogue and cohesion efforts and deepen understanding of the ongoing crisis and potential threats to peace and security in the sub-region. We also hope to support the constitutional reform process and conduct advocacy to ensure the constitution contains provisions that ensure that Mali remains a secular, open, and democratic society where the rule of law prevails.

In spite of many crises, surprises, shortcomings and short-lived successes, the opportunities that lie in the sub-region are enormous. OSIWA and its partners can play an important role in: building strong, transparent, and accountable government institutions; promoting and empowering active citizens including women, youth and the persons with disabilities; and advocating for rule of law, justice, and human rights at the local, national and regional levels. Our determination to see a West Africa that is safer, freer and more equitable has only grown stronger.
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