Senegal’s 2014 penitentiary administration annual report estimates that 4.95% of their prison population are under the age of 18. But according to police and gendarmerie reports, this number is actually much greater. There are several reasons for under-reporting, including the avoidance of closer scrutiny and critique of policies and practices that may undermine the rehabilitative intent of prison, as well as the systematic abuses of human rights that often take place behind prison walls. There is also another and perhaps less obvious factor involved: youth in Senegal face heavy social stigma and criticism, including by friends and family, once released. While Senegal’s judicial system is comparatively more advanced than in other countries in the region there is still a tendency to assume a punitive, rather than rehabilitative approach to incarceration. This means that, more often than not, convicts do not learn the necessary career or life-learning skills when they are in prison. This makes it all the more difficult to reintegrate and forge social ties once released.

In 2006, the Youth Urban Media Academy (YUMA), an association founded by well-known local rap artist “Matador”, was created in response to a flood that left thousands of people homeless on the outskirts of Dakar. They soon grew into a multifarious organization committed to fostering youth engagement across Senegal’s socio-political life, including working with young offenders.

In March 2014, after having already worked with the Ministry of Justice, YUMA embarked on a year-long pilot project targeting former youth detainees. They began offering courses to nine young male participants in filmmaking, photography, languages (English and French), and career and lifestyle counselling. The program included four sessions per week over a period of six months. The idea was to allow these former detainees to “tell their own stories”, empowering them to share in creative and informal ways on topics relating to human rights, prison reform and other social justice issues.

At the end of this project, in October 2014, the nine participants screened their short documentary films at a public gathering in Dakar, followed by vibrant discussions on poverty, unemployment, child begging and street hustling. The young men were given the platform to explain to the audience, which included their own mothers, their motivations, desires and future plans. For many, it left them feeling empowered and supported.

One participant said: “The project allowed us to find ourselves again and gives us courage to succeed.”

“I feel so proud,” said one of the YUMA instructors. “These guys are now able to use their skills to build new images of themselves.”

To ensure the sustainability of this project, YUMA intends to set up a mentorship program so these skills will be passed on within the community.
Standing up for disability rights in Sierra Leone

There are approximately 180-220 million youth living with disabilities around the world. In Sierra Leone, while there is a lack of specific or in-depth statistical data, the UN estimates there are at least half a million people living with disabilities—some a result of atrocities committed during their civil war, others due to birth defects or accidents. Among the youth population specifically, some estimate it could comprise as much as 34% of the youth demographic. What is certain is that in Sierra Leone, as across much of Africa, persons living with disabilities face enormous challenges and discrimination. Aside from the practical issues such as higher costs for medical care, compromised access to a majority of public and private spaces and higher rates of unemployment, persons living with disabilities are subject to heavy social stigma. As such, their voices are often silenced and they hold little, if any, political or social position that would allow their opinions to be heard. While Sierra Leone ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in May 2009 and introduced the Persons with Disability Act in 2011 to address their particular human rights concerns, more still needs to be done to defend their needs and interests. Development planning, programming for the inclusion of persons with disabilities and implementation of laws that protect persons with disabilities, for example, have large gaps that have inadvertently mitigated against the full participation of youth with disabilities. As a result, this group has become further disenfranchised and continue to be at risk for other serious health issues, such as HIV/AIDS.

In 2011, the African Youth with Disabilities Network (AYWDN) was created as a pan-African organization committed to uniting and empowering the disabled youth community across the continent. They work by influencing regional policies and programs that address the specific challenges faced by this group. The local coalition of AYWDN-Sierra Leone launched in 2012, and a year later, embarked on a project set to institutionalize the branch and actualize the implementation of both the CRPD and Persons with Disability Act. They did so by setting up a National Steering Committee that advocates and engages stakeholders in various parts of the country for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in decision making processes. They also engaged in media campaigns to ensure greater visibility of their actions, including through the printing of banners and t-shirts carrying messages of non-discrimination and inclusion. And thirdly, they carried out capacity building workshops for five AYWDN staff and 40 network members. This project has been successful in building a cadre of dynamic disabled youth activists who are actively engaged in advocacy issues affecting them.

Sahr Samuel Sorie is a Steering Committee Member from Kono who now works as Chairman for Operation Clean the City-Kono: “At first I was a bit hesitant to join. Little did I realize the dramatic changes that AYWDN would bring both to my own life and for youth with disabilities in Kono and the country. Now, I will never look back. I will continue to challenge policies and work with my fellow campaigners to influence key decision-makers in Kono and Sierra Leone.” The AYWDN-Sierra Leone network is gradually becoming more institutionalized and showing greater involvement with key stakeholders, such as the Commission on Disabilities, the Ministry of Education and the city councils (who are adapting and changing the way they traditionally viewed persons with disabilities in their society).

Jamesina King, Vice Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, collaborated with AYWDN to train at least 40 youth with disabilities on advocacy and campaigning skills. As King said during her keynote speech at the Network’s launch: “I have no doubt that this network and all of its members – the dynamic and talented young men and women around the country - are equipped and stand ready for sustained advocacy to ensure that policies, programs, laws, institutions and even the Constitutional Review include and take into account the needs and interests of youths with disabilities, and that their voices are heard.”
When it comes to defending the rights of youth and children in Senegal, there are two major issues that persist: the exorbitant number of children living on the streets and the lack of effective restorative justice mechanisms to help minors in conflict with the law post-incarceration.

The street children and “talibe” issue is estimated to encompass more than 50,000 young boys living in Senegal. Many of these youth, the majority under 12 and some as young as four, are drawn to Senegal either by force or by their own will (runaways) from neighboring countries and end up in “daaras” (koranic schools). While the government has time and again made attempts to solve what could effectively be deemed a social ‘crisis’, either through the banning of begging entirely or the clamping down on charlatan ‘marabouts’ (fake spiritual leaders of Islam) who abusively force their young disciples to beg for rice, sugar and money, the issue has had little success in abating.

Parallel to the talibe problem is how incarcerated minors are treated behind closed doors, including how poorly their basic needs (food and sanitation) are accounted for, through to how they are educated and prepared for their eventual social reintegration. Prisoners often face particular difficulties from a societal perspective, both during and post-incarceration. This can be especially damaging for youth, who have their whole lives in front of them and may not ever ‘recover’ from the heavy social stigma that falls on them once having served time “behind bars”.

To help address both the issue of talibes and incarcerated minor, the Thies-based NGO Association pour le sourire d’un enfant (SUE), began a program that promotes child and youth rights by ensuring alternative education and creating stronger synergies between key actors in the areas of justice, religion and civil society. Between January 1 and July 31, 2014, the organization reached nearly 6,000 talibes, street children and minors in conflict with the law. For the street children, they offered literacy and sports activities through their daily “school bus” classes, in addition to a food distribution and agricultural program to help draw kids away from the street. For the incarcerated minors, they helped put in place a health clinic at the prison, and ensured a daily educational program that includes literacy and sports classes. They also helped provide judicial aid assistance for nearly 120 young detainees and guaranteed one out of every two prisoners had at least a primary level of schooling.

The SUE project is also working on a unique initiative that uses fencing as a socio-educational activity to build self-confidence, sense of self and respect for others. Street children partake once a week, while incarcerated youth (male and female who are serving three years or longer) attend twice a week. Special classes targeting SUE educators and penitentiary agents are also offered, which allows them to also participate and learn from this innovative approach to restorative justice.

Here’s what some fencing participants had to say:

“Psychologically, the fencing helps me get peace and concentration,” explains one 18-year old male who is serving a sentence for infanticide.

“Fencing makes me forget I am in prison. I can just come here, forget all my troubles and play,” says a 16 year old female.

“As a result of these (fencing) sessions, the penitentiary workers have been able to gain the trust of the minors, creating a space that allows them to open up and tell them their personal stories. It also teaches the youth about honesty,” says one fencing trainer.

“Fencing can play a huge role in calming kids and teaching them how to accept defeat,” explains a psychologist working on the SUE program.

A feature-length documentary is currently being made on how fencing is used as restorative justice in Senegal’s penitentiary system.

Sourire pour un enfant (SUE)
Promoting and protecting youth rights in Senegal

Two boys learn fencing as part of a restorative justice project.

Minors in conflict with the law participate in bi-weekly sessions.

The young boys (and girls) are taught various fencing techniques as a way to help build discipline, self-control and trust.
In 1989, as part of Ghana’s government effort to decentralize power, fight deprivation and ensure greater political participation from all sectors of society, a district level system of governance was put into place. Wholly organized into 110 districts has, in the last 25 years, grown to 170. These measures have helped improve political participation among Ghanaians (including among women who represent a relatively high number of voters), which is essential in creating accountable governments and delivering on relevant local development policies. However, when it comes to persons living with disabilities (PWDs), who make up an estimated 5,180 million people (20% of Ghana’s population), they are still kept at arm’s length from any meaningful involvement in politics. This exclusion can partially be attributed to discrimination, negative social perception owing to cultural prejudice and low economic status. Helping bridge the gap between PWDs and ensuring their active participation in the political realm requires making them feel concerned and capable of the rights of PWDs through advocacy, awareness raising, mobilization and livelihood support. In 2012, they began a one-year project to help push for the realization of the rights of PWDs to participation (as stipulated in the 2006 Persons with Disabilities Act); to better self-advocate; and to build the required skills to effectively vie for political positions in local government. They started the project with a call for input submissions from the disability movement within the district assemblies. They also set up a committee comprised of national disability network members who reviewed the legislative terms of the Disability Act and drafted a policy position. Through this project, GSPD has successfully trained 20 PWDs (many of whom are currently district assembly members); 25 aspiring members; and 30 PWD leaders from six districts on the political decentralization system, campaigning methods and advocacy training.

Benjamin Amankwaah is an Assembly Member of Ohemaa Park in the New Juabeng District, Ghana’s Eastern Region: “The project has completely changed my life. People think that because we are disabled, we cannot do anything useful in life, but because of (you), we are now part of those who make decisions in our community. Because of my physical disability, people used to disrespect me, but I always knew that God had created me with something and I am now one of those people who commands respect in our community. I am only so glad for this. I will be standing for re-elections in the upcoming local elections and I am very confident that I will win because of the work I’ve been doing, especially for my disabled brothers and sisters.”

Since 1980, the Ghana Society of the Physically Disabled (GSPD) has been promoting and protecting the rights of PWDs through advocacy, awareness raising, mobilization and livelihood support. In 2012, they began a one-year project to help push for the realization of the rights of PWDs to participation (as stipulated in the 2006 Persons with Disabilities Act); to better self-advocate; and to build the required skills to effectively vie for political positions in local government. They started the project with a call for input submissions from the disability movement within the district assemblies. They also set up a committee comprised of national disability network members who reviewed the legislative terms of the Disability Act and drafted a policy position. Through this project, GSPD has successfully trained 20 PWDs (many of whom are currently district assembly members); 25 aspiring members; and 30 PWD leaders from six districts on the political decentralization system, campaigning methods and advocacy training.

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In 2014, Transparency International’s (TI) whose work focuses on stemming corruption, embarked on a year-long project that would help catalyze a West African youth community in improving the quality of governance in local communities across Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Senegal. They set up two main activities, a Youth Integrity Camp and a Social Entrepreneurs’ Initiative (SEI), that would expose youth to discussions and debates on accountability and integrity; and motivate innovative minds to develop new methods, tools and projects to fight corruption. One of the main concerns raised at the onset of this project (and more generally in working with a foreign-based organization such as TI), was how it would involve and benefit the growth of local organizations. To help ensure the sustainability and transfer of skills beyond those select participants to the Youth Camps and SEI, and build a strong and viable youth community, the project took a two-pronged approach: directly, by involving participants to return to the camps to train other young people; and indirectly, by producing communications material such as a website, social media pages and mailing lists that continue to promote and improve the engagement and awareness of young people in West Africa.

Said Alexise Ouedraogo, from Côte d’Ivoire, was the winner of the SEI. He is producing a series of films to educate school children about the negative effects of corruption: “I want to change the mindset at the grass-roots level, in order to change the mind set at the top. Seminars and workshops run by teachers’ associations or other actors in the education sector are nothing new and in practice they don’t seem to work. By informing the primary victim of corruption of their rights and responsibilities, through education, I want to enable them to use their voices, however small, to say ‘no’ and impose change in a step-by-step manner.”

“The competition proved that young people from West Africa have great ideas to defeat corruption. Submissions showed deep understanding of how corruption affects young people’s future and how they can be part of the solution,” said Transparency International Regional Board Member Rueben Lifuka who served on the competition jury.