About OSIWA

The Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) is part of the Open Society Foundations global network and one of four foundations in Africa. OSIWA is dedicated to the promotion of inclusive democratic governance, transparent and accountable institutions and active citizenship across the region. OSIWA envisions a West Africa where people enjoy basic freedoms, everyone can participate meaningfully in civic and political life, inequalities and inequities are minimized, exclusion gives way to greater appreciation for pluralism, and governments are accountable and corruption is on the wane.
Introduction

This year’s issue of Our Stories highlights the immense work some of our partners are engaged in to enhance citizens’ participation; improve accountability and awareness of citizens’ rights; increase freedom of and access to information; and ensure greater observance and respect for the rule of law.

We highlight some of the remarkable work our partners are engaged in to support citizens, institutions and governments as they advance open society values in West Africa. Some of this work has included, advocating for the advancement of the rights of youth, women and persons with disabilities - ensuring they participate in decision-making process and that their voices are heard in both public and political spaces.

Our partners have also continued to work with the relevant government at national and local level to address the issues affecting youths that come in conflict with the law, with the key objective of rehabilitating and reintegrating them back into society.

Furthermore, the work of our partners on the ElectionSituation Room (ESR) platform has ensured greater citizen participation in electoral processes.

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) has continued to strengthen the institutional and operational capacities of civil society organizations for increased and effective policy engagement, and the promotion of development, good governance and democratic values.

West Africa Democracy Radio (WADR) has found its feet and is more than ever working to facilitate exchange of information, protect and defend the ideals of democratic and open societies by disseminating development information in West Africa.

Our Stories offer a unique insight of the contributions our partners are making. As a Foundation, we are immensely grateful to them for their passion, hard work, commitment and dedication.

Abdul Tejan-Cole
Executive Director
Civic engagement and inclusive participation
Engaging today’s youth for tomorrow’s change

Social Change Factory works to transform every citizen into an agent of change and to revitalize social leadership - a type of leadership often neglected. Their philosophy is simple: in order to move the continent forward, you need to change the perspectives of future decision-makers. In other words, today’s youth.

To help achieve this vision, SCF launched a program known as Voix des Jeunes (VDJ), where dozens of university students come together and work in small teams to find solutions to a particular socio-economic problem.

“Voix des Jeunes creates a space for young people, who constitute a majority of the population in Senegal and across Africa, to investigate existing, working solutions to some of the continent’s greatest challenges and promote them in a nationally-televised competition,” said Lydia Hickman, the project coordinator for VDJ.

To prepare for this final competition, participants go through short, but rigorous, boot camps, which takes place across the country. There, they receive training by national experts on analyzing the problems, identifying potential solutions, strategy
development, public speaking, teamwork and communication techniques. Participants also conduct in-depth research, engage in discussions with different stakeholders and analyze solutions from even the most remote areas of Senegal to present and promote viable solutions that would have otherwise remained unknown.

The boot camps are also used as opportunities to do community service in the areas that the teams travel to. For many students, this is the first time they’ve had the chance to visit other parts of Senegal and devote some time to community work.

During the most recent competition, 32 solutions were presented, related to pertinent community development themes, such as education, healthcare, agriculture, the media and good governance. In addition to the solutions, each team presented their strategy on how the identified solution could be scaled up so that more communities within the region could also benefit.

“Our participants are advocates of a somewhat radical mentality - one in which the youth abandon the fatalist mentality [that is] so rampant in our society, [in exchange] for one that views problems as opportunities to propose solutions,” Hickman said. “The outcome? An ecosystem of young people actively seeking out real, life-changing solutions capable of transforming their communities, their countries and their continent.”

Throughout the course of the competition, there were marked improvements in the confidence and conviction expressed by participants, as well as the pragmatic and innovative qualities of the strategies they were presenting. Despite the competitive nature of the event, the spirit of teamwork, open collaboration and mutual admiration between participants is apparent.

“**It is no longer a question of competition but rather a personal and professional challenge in order to present a solution that will allow all these students to learn better and be more competitive in the job market and that of entrepreneurship.**”

Charly Loukakou (ESMT), VDJ 2015 contestant
In addition to the participants, the general public, including thousands of young people, are targeted throughout the program via television and social media, with the aim being to raise their awareness and inspire confident action. Through the popular hashtag “#SoyonsSolutions” (meaning “Let’s be the solution”), the program witnessed young people starting to perceive themselves as the implementers of solutions.

“I had the chance to meet people who have had a positive impact on me and I know now that my role is to have a positive impact on the society in which I live,” said a 26-year-old Congolese student, Samantha Tracy Deborah Bickini, who took part in Senegal’s 2016 Voix des Jeunes program.

By the time the live final comes around, these students have joined a network of young, proactive people and an online community of over 45,000 followers on Facebook. With the help of our 52 ambassadors speaking out, with proven solutions, innovative strategies, conviction and drive, the Voix des Jeunes program was able to reach out, raise awareness and push for young people to become an active part of the solution, not the problem.
Debating for social and political change

African Heights Foundation
Ghana

The African Heights Foundation (AHF), a youth-driven civic advocacy and leadership development NGO in Ghana, has held a series of debates, moot court competitions, and training programs across schools and universities in Ghana over the past three years. The goal is to help students develop their capacities to think critically and analyze relevant political, developmental and human rights issues, as well as advance the effective use of freedom of expression.

“The project provided a challenging but deeply fulfilling privilege of student leadership in building an enduring culture of debating as an integral part of the University experience in Ghana, and the establishment of a strong network of like-minded young people with regular meetings for debating the ideas, policies and values on which our country and continent should be based,” said Joyce Okyerewa Danso, the president of Legon Debate Society and founding president of the newly established Ghana Universities Debate Association (GUDA).

The hypothetical moot court cases explore topical issues of human rights and constitutionalism with respect to Ghana’s criminal justice system, especially the right to a fair trial under article 19 of the Constitution of Ghana. The cases have also dealt with matters of discrimination and sexual violence, and the progress towards gender equality.

This will contribute to the development of responsible young leaders and increase civic participation towards building a more open and democratic society that is anchored in both traditional values and sound institutions in Ghana.

“Ghana, like most countries in West Africa, has been democratic for over two decades now,” said Dennis Armah, the president of AHF. “But even though we’ve been choosing our leaders by elections,
we think it’s necessary to have more young people involved... in democracy, which is mainly using debates and other means to resolve disputes and advocate for politics.”

To encourage Ghanaian youth to get involved in debating, the Foundation, in partnership with the University of Ghana, organized the 8th Pan African University Debate Championship (PAUD), dubbed ‘Legon 2015’, last December. The competition, the first ever to be hosted by Ghana, helped young people develop debating skills such as persuasive writing and public speaking, critical analyses, logical thinking, tolerance of divergent views, teamwork and cooperation.

It also equipped students with the requisite civic knowledge and skills for effective participation in public decision-making, and trained young leaders and citizens to commit to democratic and human rights values, constitutionalism, the rule of law, social justice and the elimination of all forms of unfair discrimination.

Participating countries included Zimbabwe, South Africa, Liberia, The Gambia, Nigeria, Togo, Burkina Faso and Ghana, with 92 competing teams.

“I think it has made a great contribution in getting Ghanaian youth more civic minded and also to train hundreds of them to master the skills of debating which is a key civic skill and also to get an interest in issues of contemporary importance, mainly from the perspective of democracy and human rights,” Armah said.

Participants agreed that the event was hugely successful.

Caleb Kudah, who has been participating in the debates since 2014. Said: “We went all the way to become one of the first Ghanaian scholars [to attend the] World University Debating Championship, which can be likened to participating in the FIFA World Cup. But the greatest treasure is in gaining the ability to do precise, logical, structured thinking that allows engagement of all caliber of persons on a wide range of issues. Thanks to African Heights Foundation and OSIWA for giving impetuous to our passion to make our world better through debate.”

“At the end of the day, we are not debating to debate, we are debating to go out there and make a contribution...”

Jamie Mightie, Winner of the Best Debate Award and student from University of Witwatersrand from South Africa

Such activities and testimonials highlight the need for stakeholders to provide greater support for civic leadership training in universities in Ghana and West Africa to support the advancement of the young democracies in the sub-region.
The freedom to reintegrate

Africulturban plans and executes most of its activities in the suburbs of Dakar, home to the majority of the capital city’s population. These areas are mostly made up of young people who face a number of challenges including poverty, unemployment and overcrowding within their homes. Many of them have had to quit school and fend for themselves. Some of these young adults come in direct conflict with the law and, as a result, end up in jail.

Upon their release from prison, many of them face stigmatization, few have access to education or work opportunities. Many fall back into their previous habits, thus entering a vicious cycle of conflict with the law.
“Two out of three young offenders return to prison as over 65% of ex-detainees will re-offend. Upon their release, they usually have nothing to occupy them and often end up back on the streets, repeating their past mistakes.”

Thierno Sow, Director of the Fort B Prison and Correction Facility

“When you get out, when you leave prison, society looks at you a bit differently compared to those people who have never been in prison,” said Moustapha Sall, a project manager at Africulturban. “It’s important these youth have the chance at an education and to find work.”

In 2013, Africulturban launched the pilot phase of a social reinsertion program working with former juvenile detainees; and through this program, the Youth Urban Media Academy (YUMA) was born.

YUMA welcomed nine young ex-detainees (aged 18 – 21) from the Fort B Prison, the only juvenile detention center in Senegal, who have had similar experiences and challenges in life. The first cohort of ex-detainees had either never received an education or had dropped out of school, and was living in adverse conditions.

Despite the challenges, the prison director identified ex-detainees who held common skills and artistic aspirations and collaborated with Africulturban in helping them regain control over their lives by harnessing their talents.

**The YUMA Way**
The first cohort of ex-detainees took courses on how to shoot photos and videos, computer and online community management over a period of 6 months. With the lessons learned from the first cohort, the academy recognized the importance of diversity when working on social reinsertion, and so expanded its selection criteria beyond ex-detainees to those at risk of incarceration.

The second cohort of YUMA welcomed six young adults, three of whom, though having faced similar life experiences, have not been incarcerated. Adjustments in selection criteria also took into account participants’ creative and artistic skills, coupled with their willingness to improve their language skills.

The variety of courses, spanning from graphic design, digital music production, social skills and leadership, as well as the bilingual nature of the training (English and French), meant that YUMA was able to target disoriented youth and begin a process of equipping them with skills and attitudes needed for social reintegration.

“I am no longer the troublemaker that my family and friends knew me to be,” said Moudou. “The program has helped build my skills in a number of different areas and I can now rely on my experiences at YUMA to help me each day. Before I would keep to myself and not talk much but I have noticed a change in myself. I now carry a camera with me everywhere I go; taking pictures of anything that is interesting. I am happy because so many young people from where I come from in Pikine didn’t have the same opportunity as I did to learn.”

**Street Talks**
YUMA also organizes dialogues and discussions in various neighborhoods to reinforce the community’s support for the young people. Street Talk allows YUMA residents and their families to share their experiences in a theater-like style format, under a tent. This setup representing more of a family-oriented environment is one way the academy raises awareness about social reinsertion.
These Street Talks have been a mixed bag of success and challenges, reflecting the hard journey to reinsertion. While some families have been comfortable telling their stories about former detainees finding their feet again, and discussing the role of mothers in the social reintegration process, others have proven sensitive and emotionally-tense for participants, resulting in a number of walk-outs.

Still, the project remains important for both the former juvenile detainees and the development of the country.

*Please note that names have been modified to protect the identity of the mentioned.

“With these programs, we have the opportunity to give them a chance at reintegration into society and to make something of themselves, and when people have the chance to development individually, they can contribute positively to society and development.”

Moustapha Sall, Project Manager, Africulturian
Building fiscal citizenship and transparency

L’Association Promotion Jeunesse Unie pour le Développement (PJUD)

Benin

The Promotion Jeunesse Unie pour le Development (PJUD) in Benin works to help involve young people in the country’s sustainable development and foster participation in good governance practices.

“Democracy can’t start if the base is shaky, if there are no checks on the government,” said Cyrille Djowamon, the executive director of PJUD. “We need to create conditions so that resources are mobilized toward their priority, and the priority is the community members.”

Key components of PJUD include the installation of “one-stop shops” for administrative services, as well as innovative community development financing initiatives.

The one-stop shops allow for easier communication and interactions between citizens and local leaders, and centralize communal financial resources by eliminating all intermediaries usually involved in financial transactions. Eight communes have benefitted from these one-stop-shops since December 2015.

“Thanks to the program, fiscal resources collected by the Beninese commune of N’Dali, in 2015, for example, increased by almost 35 percent - the equivalent of more than US$18,000. This meant that an additional 35 percent of resources could be allocated to critical health, education and sanitation needs within the community.

“There are many financial resources that should come to the community that don’t come,” Djowamon said. “So we need to help manage that, so that resources are accounted for and managed locally.”

“The people are no longer opposed to paying a fee for the provision of services related to civil status because ATMs remove fake fees and bypass the slowness of the administration.”

Sabi Koba Yaya, Chief of Market and Economic Services, N’Dali Commune

Both PJUD and the Commune are at the center of the collection and management of local resources. Throughout the project, PJUD oversaw the installation and management of the one-stop-shops. To complement these efforts, the Mayor’s office recruited 12 agents who, after undergoing training with PJUD, were able to operate the local one-stop-shops.
The success of this initiative inspired authorities from two other communes (Bassila and Kandi) to finance the installation of a one-stop-shop using internally generated funds.

Over the course of 2014, PJUD in collaboration with local authorities also launched a campaign to raise awareness about fiscal stewardship in 10 communes in northern Benin. The campaign, carried out in the local languages of Bariba and Dendi, and in French, used community radio broadcasts and focus groups held in the mayor’s office, to talk about the importance of securing revenue locally, and called for transparent and participatory governance of funds.

As a result of the campaign, which has strengthened the public’s trust vis-a-vis local authorities, a catalogue of public services, which lists fixed prices for each commune, was widely distributed. To this date, five communes have their own catalogues. In addition, the mayor’s office now systematically displays services and fees for all to be aware of.

Thanks to the installation of these one-stop-shops, for more than a year now, communities have been able to mobilize, centralize and secure local financial resources. Inhabitants from these different communes continue to express the need for further accountability and demand to be well-informed and involved in the governance of their resources.

Based on the success of the project, PJUD has received special recognition from the head of the International Organization of La Francophonie and has been invited by the Organization to present its work.

“We needed to insure that when someone demands a certain service, like issuing a birth certificate, the price is on sign, so that when you come in, the price can’t change. It must always be the same price for everyone, whether you come in wearing a business suit or t-shirt and shorts.”

Cyrille Djowamon, Executive Director of PJUD
Informing citizens of the delivery of education services

Public and Private Development Center (PPDC)
Nigeria

The Public and Private Development Center (PPDC) aims to increase citizen participation in governance through procurement monitoring. This particular initiative addresses what seems to be a major concern of Nigerians, which is how health and education services are procured.

PPDC monitors the government-led project to build Al Majiri schools in northern Nigeria, steered by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) and supervised by the Ministry of Education.

The Al Majiri education system dates back to the pre-colonial period when the less privileged traveled from afar to gain knowledge under the tutelage of an Islamic scholar. Most of the Al Majiri schools were run by local scholars called Mallams who, over time, and with little support from the state, were saddled with caring for their students. Today, many students resort to begging or working odd menial jobs to make ends meet.

To address this issue, the Federal Government made the decision to subsidize Al Majiri education as part of the basic education system and awarded over 100 contracts to build Al Majiri schools across Northern Nigeria. PPDC sent procurement monitors, who, using the 2011 Freedom of Information Act, request certain information including a needs assessment, the value, status and name of the contractor of the project. Over time, procurement monitors can verify the existence of these schools.

“What we saw over the years was that if we were able to access information, much more quickly in an accessible format, in a way we can make sense of it, more focus could be used to monitor [these schools] based on performance and progress, which could lead to better education services.”

Seember Nyager, Chief Executive, PPDC
“So that’s why we are excited about the fact that UBEC is now providing reports on how well things are performing, because we have access to the information that helps us to do that,” said Seember Nyager, the chief executive of PPDC.

In the Gwagwalade Settlement in Abuja, for example, PPDC found that even though the school was completed in 2012, members of the community of Gwagwalade were never notified and therefore, the school was never used.

Following this discovery, procurement monitors set up a meeting between the Mallams, members of the community, the Ministry of Education, UBEC and SUBEB. As a result, UBEC promised to liaise and keep the scholars and students informed about the progress being made with the school.

“The other insight from the project was how coordination between the government and other entities can make information available in a way that makes sense,” said Nyager. “Now many communities know the number of schools that were not functioning, the number of health centers not in operation. And this has led to positive change.”

The dialogue between the different stakeholders resulted in the establishment of accountability mechanisms to ensure that such cases are not repeated. UBEC has also become more responsible for providing data on public procurement. On the next visit of the procurement monitors, the school was being painted and UBEC anticipated that this school would soon open to members of the community.

“Our ultimate goal is to change the way government gets things done.”

Seember Nyager, Chief Executive, PPDC
One of OSIWA’s strategic objectives is to help ensure the integrity of elections in the sub-region and to promote inclusive democratic governance based on transparency, accountable institutions and active citizenship in West Africa. OSIWA believes that active citizen participation, more responsible media coverage and responsible and professional Election Management Bodies (EMBs) will help improve the quality and credibility of elections in the sub-region.

To this effect, OSIWA has been promoting the use of the Election Situation Room (ESR) model by domestic civil society organizations (CSOs) to contribute, through active participation, to credible, transparent and peaceful elections throughout West Africa.

The ESR, a monitoring mechanism that was first used in Nigeria in 2011, has since been implemented throughout the region in countries including Senegal, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, Guinea, Cote d’Ivoire, and Benin, as well as Southern Africa and Eastern Africa.
ESR Achievements to date

It has impacted positively on elections in terms of transparency, violence prevention and access to information.

It has contributed to building synergies between different actors (state authorities, security forces, CSOs, media, youth groups, bloggers association, etc) for a frank collaboration that was maintained beyond elections.

In some countries, it has helped national CSOs gain and reinforce their credibility. CSOs involved in the ESR received direct feedback from EMBs, Media but most importantly from the public and were encouraged to continue the governance monitoring after the election.

The ESR provided an opportunity for youth groups to engage more on governance issues. In Benin for example, it enabled youth to enroll in prestigious Leadership programs that will help shape them to be the leaders of tomorrow.

CSOs have expanded their work beyond election days. Most of the electoral cycle has been successfully monitored by CSOs for the past elections in the sub-region. In addition to that, and depending on specific country context, issues relating to key aspects of the electoral process e.g. gender, youth, disabled, electoral violence, electoral corruption, etc. are also monitored and dealt with.

As the ESR goes beyond Election Day, the report drafted by CSOs often comprised of recommendations in terms of post-election recommendations and action steps aimed at improving the integrity of future elections. Such recommendations often include critical electoral reforms advocated for by CSOs.

The ESR has moved from being a tool solely used by CSOs to one now used widely by other actors interested or involved in the electoral process. For the past years and elections, ECOWAS automatically sets up its own ESR (Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, Benin, etc). ECOWAS benefited from OSIWA’s technical support to achieve this objective. Some EMBs – like Nigeria’s INEC – systematically did the same. The AU also showed interest during its observation mission for Cote d’Ivoire’s presidential election, recommending that the tool should be implemented for all elections taking place on the continent. As such, OSIWA’s efforts to popularize and support the ESR for credible electoral processes have paid off given the way in which the platform has been embraced across the continent and beyond.
OSIWA continued its efforts of making the ESR available to all through the ESR Toolkit project (developed jointly by OSIWA and AfRO). The ESR model will indeed be more open to the general public as OSIWA takes bold steps towards making the ESR toolkit available to the public as open source data. The toolkit, also known as the Open ESR, has been developed by high-level ESR experts and practitioners from the continent to help any organization or individual that wants to implement an ESR without hiring technical experts thanks to the comprehensive training materials and a software that make up the toolkit.

“It was during [Benin’s] presidential election of 2016, during one of the most extreme electoral competitions, with a highly uncertain electoral process, that the Election Situation Room facilitated cooperation amongst multiple stakeholders, and included citizens, in order to obtain the open and transparent environment needed for elections.” said Julien Oussou, the national coordinator for WANEP-Benin. “Without the ESR, the 2016 presidential election in Benin would not have been ‘another victory for democracy,’ recognized and welcomed by the world.”

OSIWA intends to move forward to new challenges but still provide technical support where it is needed. The foundation hopes to explore alternative uses of the Open ESR platform while ensuring this useful tool is accessible on a web-hosted platform.
Spotlight: Election Situation Room Intervention in Nigeria’s 2015 Elections

Before the 2015 elections in Nigeria, the Situation room developed an Election Situation Room communication strategy plan. The strategy plan helped to:

1. Increase advocacy around the elections.
2. Prepare the electorate for the new and complex voting processes, issuing of regular statements calling out political candidates and their supporters who engaged in hate speech.
3. Assist in the development of monthly briefing documents and facilitate the holding of bi-monthly meetings between CSOs and major stakeholders around the elections.

On Election Day, the Situation Room had different layers of participants as follows:
(a) The Expert/Analyst Chamber
(b) The Technical Team; and
(c) Field Observers.

The ESR carried out in depth analysis of the electoral process as it proceeded. This made it possible for adjustments to be made by INEC, kept the Security agencies on the alert to maintain non-partisan disposition and provided the media with important issues that were brought to the attention of the public. The Situation Room was able to share its perspectives on the elections with international observer groups from the African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and other observer groups. The analytical viewpoints of the Situation Room helped to shed light on the understanding of the international observer groups giving them context that they could not have had otherwise.

One of the most critical part of the work of the Situation Room during the elections, was the periodic release of reports and alerts. These reports were released after very open and democratic debating process and the drafting of the papers were open to contributions from all present. Where points were not clear, contacts were often established with officials of INEC or the Police, or with observers in the field.

These interventions by the Situation Room altogether were extremely important in the successful and relatively non-violent conclusion of the 2015 elections in Nigeria.
Food Security and Land Rights
Using renewable energy to ensure sustainable living and farming for women

Regional Committee for Women’s Solidarity for Peace in the Casamance (CRSFPC) / USOFORAL

Senegal

Improving food security is critical in West Africa. The ability of women to participate as social and economic agents in food systems, particularly in the face of climate change, is essential to building fairer and dynamic societies, which promote equal access to opportunities and resources.

Thanks to an innovative project in Senegal’s southern Casamance region, which was implemented in 2015 by the Regional Committee for Women’s Solidarity for Peace in the Casamance (CRSFPC)/USOFORAL, a number of women are now able to prepare three meals a day for their families, using biogas – a gaseous fuel that is produced by the fermentation of organic matter, such as animal dung.

“From this point forward, I get dressed going out and I also wear perfume before I enter my kitchen to prepare lunch,” said Fatou Binetou Sane, who is a proud mother from Kindion who uses biogas to cook.

Her family is one of 20 chosen families currently participating in USOFORAL’s food security project in Senegal’s Ziguinchor region.

Because biogas in this area are made using cow dung – requiring approximately 100 kilograms of dung per unit - the first step was to increase the available livestock in the villages.

Each committee was responsible for their cattle and monitored the management of biogas production units. In addition to
this, one-hectare farming blocs were set aside to grow vegetables using fertilizer from the units of production, which inhabitants were taught how to operate and maintain.

Seynabou Male Cisse, the coordinator of CRSFPC/USOFORAL, recounts how the arrival of biogas brought the community together:

“During the installation of the first digesters, the communities mobilized to fill up the cistern,” she said. “On some occasions, up to three tons of cow dung was needed to fill it... Women gathered to farm together. For over 20 years, you would never see communities or families from different ethnicities coming together to farm.”

This segregation was not always the case, but rather a result of separatist movements, which increased tensions within the village and created a sense of distrust between community members. Casamance has been facing a rebellion since 1981, which has torn communities apart and resulted in not only numerous displacements of populations, making cohabitation between different ethnic groups difficult, in some instances.

But now, women are putting these differences aside to improve food security in their communities.

Thanks to the 52 tons of fertilizer produced each year from each biogas production unit and the wells that supply water to the farming blocs, women are able to

**Biogas: everyone thrives!**

Everything happens in a cistern, which is the central unit of production for biogas in Kindion and Yabocounda. Cow dung is collected and mixed in with water in wells that are 4 m3 deep called digesters. The hole overlooks a dome where the cow dung becomes biogas. Every day, the biogas travels through a pipe to the kitchen or an oven that can be lit. In Kindion and Yabocounda, a quantity of 4 m3 is enough to allow the preparation of three meals a day as well as for gas lamps. Cow dung and water need to be added to the digester on a daily basis. At the end of the process, the excretions resulting from the process is used as fertilizer.
According to USOFORAL: “This presents a major [achievement] for us, [because] not only will it alleviate the workload of women, which enables them to build and broaden their skillset for other activities, but it also presents the opportunity to strengthen food security through milk and vegetable production, and the diversification of revenue sources.”

use the time typically allocated to fetching firewood to plant organic vegetables, as well as take part in other activities, such as conflict and community management, or even just listening to the radio.

One woman recounted her success with excitement: “I used fertilizer around my mango tree as a test and the tree was greener!”

With additional time on their hands, the women received technical training on the production, transformation, and commercialization of farming products. They are expected to produce up to 10 tons of vegetables, with parts of the harvest going to their own consumption and the rest to sell on the market. The quantity of fertilizer has also proven to be enough for use in the rice fields and for fruit trees.

The community management committees also distributes a calf to each family while taking into account each family’s socio-economic status, which is reviewed each year. This will help inform the number of future biogas units to set up.

CRSFPC has signed an agreement with the Senegalese government to build and install 600 biogas digesting units in the next four years in Casamance as part of the National Program for Domestic Biogas (PNB-SN).
Conflict resolution for the management of shared resources

Association pour la Redynamisation de l’Élevage au Niger (AREN) Niger

Farmers in West Africa have been increasingly facing difficulties accessing vital and key resources due to climate change and the constant struggle to become more resilient.

Over 90 percent of the population in the communes of Tagazar, Tondikandia and Imanan, located in the Tillaberi region of Niger, rely on agriculture and farming to generate an income. It is within this context that the Association pour la Redynamisation de l’Élevage au Niger (AREN) initiated a project aimed at facilitating equitable and regulated access to agro-pastoral resources.

The goal is to ensure that farmers are more aware of legal texts that govern farming, while improving conflict management systems and building social cohesion among different groups.

“Henceforth, the populations [will] manage conflicts and find solutions on their own.”

Boubacar Dabougui, Mayor of Imanan in Niger

Peace Building from the bottom-up
AREN has set up a platform for dialogue with members in each zone, bringing together administrative and traditional authorities, representatives from women and youth collectives, NGOs from the area and technical
services. This platform was essential in promoting dialogue and exchange to prevent conflicts during the months of October and November, when farmers typically take time off.

This platform, a space for conflict prevention, has led to a wide dissemination of a collective inventory of shared resources such as pasturelands, ponds and water stations, and has helped to facilitate the demarcation of grazing lands for animals. Most important, the populations from three zones have been sensitized on the rural code of Niger.

According to Boubacar Dabougui, the mayor of Imanan, before the platform was set up, conflicts used to be very violent and were mostly managed by the chief of the district. The lack of awareness around what shared resources existed, coupled with a poor understanding of the rural code, made natural resource governance nearly unmanageable. The mayor, who is also a member of the platform, now sees the positive implications that the platform and the inventory will have on future leadership: “Now my successor will have a reference and will be better able to manage social problems that will affect the community,” he said.

By virtue of the platform’s inclusive approach, the general population now feels more implicated in matters relating to governance of natural resources in their communities, making these systems more credible in everyone’s eyes.
Understanding and advocating for improved land tenure

Rights & Rice Foundation
Liberia

Natural resources in Liberia, if properly managed, could contribute significantly to the country’s development.

One of the projects spearheaded by the Rights and Rice Foundation (RRF) aims to improve citizen participation in natural resource governance, leading to more accountability and better work benefits for Liberians.

“The country has a history of over 60 years of natural resource extraction with little impact to the development, especially in areas from where the resources are extracted,” said James Yarsiah, the founder of RRF. “If managed in a transparent and accountable way that contributes to the country’s development, natural resources could be seen as a rallying point for citizens around the country to work towards building lasting peace.”

To engage communities, the Foundation developed training modules on participatory planning processes and simple proposal writing skills. In addition, they trained and mentored emerging leaders, including traditional leaders, women, youth, and persons with disabilities, from community-based organizations in two counties on inclusive development, advocacy and good governance.

“Our programs are important in the area of natural resources work to expand the space in which many more citizens can effectively participate in decision-making around benefit sharing of the country’s resources...” Yarsiah said.

“Our theory of change in this regards is that when people in the communities where forests and mining are taking place begin to see evidence of tangible development of their lives and communities, then we can say that the benefits from natural resources will eventually benefit the entire country.”

James Yarsiah, Founder of Rights & Rice Foundation
RRF has also been working extensively to promote food security and sustainable livelihoods and make land governance, through legislation, more transparent and more equitable for small-scale farmers, especially women.

“The lack of access to food, the lack of availability at prices affordable by ordinary Liberians, the lack of income capacity to enable families to obtain the right and balanced food intake, thereby contributing to malnutrition and the entire circle of poverty, is an area we like to work to change,” Yarsiah said. “And to work towards food security we are keen on working for a people-friendly land tenure that works especially for small holder farmers.”

In collaboration with the Sustainable Development Institute, RFF created the Civil Society Working Group on Land and Community Land Rights comprised of 19 organizations from across the country. The working group is now recognized by Liberia’s Committee on Lands, Mines, and Environment. The noticeable impact here is that civil society has gained its rightful place among key policy and national stakeholders and from now on, any major forum discussing land rights has to include this working group.

Communities affected by concession companies are now empowered to engage these companies with regards to worker’s benefits and other fees. For example, community members from Sarzanor in the district of Quadu Bondi, where the Liberia Cocoa and Coffee Corporation (LCCC) is cultivating 6000 hectares of cocoa, were able to identify their benefits in the agreement and are presently engaging the LCCC management and the Government to obtain what is owed to them.

With all these achievements, the RRF and their partners have put in place advocacy platforms including the first “People’s Forum” of land rights, which brought together CSO representatives, Land Authorities and Legislators and other Key Government actors. The first of such forums was convened in Monrovia and involved 82 participants.
“Boundouwandé has always been known for its two majestic jewels: its lush palm grove and a backwater abundant with fish,” recounted Aissatou, who was born, raised and married in the small Guinean village. “Hunting, fishing and harvesting have allowed us to live in peace, joy, and dignity.”
Now, these ‘jewels’ are being destroyed by a mining company looking to profit from natural resources found within their land.

Guinea is a country rich in natural resources, including diamonds, bauxite, iron ore, gold, oil and gas. More than a dozen mining companies currently operate within the country, generating more than 240 million US dollars in revenue each year. But little has been done to develop or improve the living conditions of nearby communities. Poverty remains pervasive.

According to article 165 of the Constitution, local collectives are entitled to 15 percent of certain mining activities, including taxes for extraction. Unfortunately, these laws are rarely enforced by the government and most communities lack information about Guinea’s mining code. They are unaware of their rights. The companies often don’t even consult communities before beginning operations.

Now that is starting to change.

Since 2012, AMINES has been giving a voice to river communities in mining zones throughout Guinea and arm them the information they need mobilize to fight for their rights, while advocating on behalf of local populations.
Aissatou, who says she has not slept since the Guinea Bauxite Company (CBG) intensified its activities in the Tyankounayé mining district in the Sangarédi Prefecture, is thankful for their help.

“They [CBG] have silted our backwater, damaged our palm groves, destroyed our dwellings, and sterilized our lands,” she said. “But thanks to [AMINES], they will not silence our voices.”

With support from OSIWA, AMINES is helping Boudouwande and dozens of other villages stand up to these mining giants.

Over the past year, they’ve created and screened five documentaries that address the rights of mining communities, as well as the violations of human rights, the socio-economic problems faced by mining communities and the environmental degradation caused by mining, such as the destruction of farmable land, and the pollution of air and water.

An important component of the project is the focus on women, young people and other vulnerable and marginalized groups, who are often left out of negotiations between the mining companies, the government and local authorities.

“One of the observations we made before this project started was that these local communities were not aware of their rights,” said Ibrahima Niang OSIWA’s country officer in Guinea. “They didn’t know what the law was, what rights were given to them by the law. They didn’t know how they could mobilize to fight against the behavior of mining companies. The local authorities didn’t have capacity to raise funds for local development and basically these people were just feeling so weak in front of the giant mining companies.”

In the past, mining companies rarely consulted with community members. Now, thanks to AMINES, they try to make sure community concerns are taken into account. Following smaller discussions, AMINES helps organize public debates and advocate for the rights of these communities.

“It’s quite important that we bring together the mining communities, local authorities and mining companies so that they can all discuss and agree on the best way to tackle these issues,” Niang said. “It's a unique opportunity to find some solutions to the problems... and create and implement an advocacy plan.”
He continued: “The communities, they didn’t think they could really get something out of the mining activities, but this project has empowered them in many ways. It has given them the knowledge so they know what their right are,” he said. “This project has also given them tools, because they know how to hold these companies accountable and how to advocate for their own rights and they know how these companies operate...Now they have the power now to put pressure on mining communities to change their minds to change their plans. If they were planning to build a mine somewhere and the community thinks it will cause damage they have the power to change their minds.”

In places where mining is already underway, AMINES is helping villagers take advantage of certain resources that mining companies build in an attempt to please the communities, such as schools or health clinics. The mining companies often fail to staff them with teachers or doctors and other basic supplies, and the structures are never used.

“Look at that school whose doors have remained closed, or that clinic that has never treated a patient,” Aissatou said. “Is this the compensation we deserve?”

AMINES is also helping communities fight for the restoration of the environment. In the past, when mining companies abandoned a site, they just left. Now they are being encouraged to replant trees, fill in the large holes they created and level mountains of debris.

Aissatou remains hopeful things will continue to improve.

**Although our village has lost much of its luster of yesterday, we remain committed to our region,” she said. “We do not let go.”**
Winning back the rights to land

Namati
Sierra Leone

On February 17th, 2016, the High Court in Sierra Leone ordered the Chinese company Orient Rubber Agriculture Ltd to restore 1,486 acres of land to dozens of landowning families from whom it was unlawfully taken in the village of Nimiyama. Namati, a legal empowerment organization, stepped in to provide free legal support and representation to the indigenous landowners.

“It was terrible. The landowners approached us and said they had been chased off their land. They couldn’t farm or raise their animals. They had lost their homes.”

Danial Sesay, Program Officer, Namati

It was a landmark victory for community rights.

The story began in late 2013, when, unbeknownst to the landowners, the Paramount Chief (PC) of Nimiyama Chiefdom in the District of Kono in Eastern Sierra Leone, along with other local authorities, agreed to sell land to Orient Rubber Agriculture Ltd for US$130 per acre. Upon hearing this, landowners expressed their deep discontent and subsequently faced intimidation and harassment from the PC and his entourage.

The community was barred from accessing their land after the chiefs publicly declared that ownership of the land had been transferred to the company. As a result of this decision and unlawful restriction, this predominantly farming community was deprived of their livelihood for over two years.

Located 184 miles from the capital, and with no lawyers residing in the area, Namati’s Legal Empowerment Agents (LEAs) helped to bridge the gap in legal services and provided support to the people of Nimiyama. After conducting the necessary groundwork, Namati attempted to mediate a discussion between the chiefs, the company and the landowners. But the chiefs
and company failed to cooperate, and the case was formally filed at the High Court of Sierra Leone in February 2015.

A year after the hearings, the High Court found the sale agreement illegal and granted an injunction restraining all respondents from dealing with the land in the future. The court ordered both respondents to hand over full ownership of 1,486 acres of land and to pay back damages worth the equivalent of US$85,000 to the landowners.

Regrettably, the chiefs’ actions in the Nimiyama case violated the very basic duties they owed to the people. The sale of the land was neither in the interest of the people nor beneficial to their wellbeing. Preventing the landowners from accessing their land to grow crops not only threatened their livelihoods but it also violated their rights under both national and international law. In total, eight villages and 70 landowning families were impacted in the Nimiyama case. Since the restriction 27 months ago, the families have now returned to their land and it is business as usual.

“You can see the happiness on their faces, now that they possess their land again, now that they are back to work on their land.”

Danial Sesay, Program Officer, Namati

“The first seeding after the ruling has just begun and soon they will be harvesting again.”

After the news of the judgment was published, several communities facing similar challenges with mining and agricultural companies have approached Namati for legal assistance.

“This is the first time this has happened for land,” Sesay said. “It has shown people it is possible that things do happen. Before people were saying: ‘We don’t have confidence in the court.’ But with this case, we gave people confidence that they also can take their cases to court and that there is the opportunity that justice prevails and they can win such cases.”
Equality and Anti-Discrimination: Access to Justice
Ending violence against women - One step at a time

When people are aware of their rights, they feel more empowered to make the right decisions on behalf of their own communities. This is what ABAEF has been trying to accomplish in its work towards putting an end to violence against women and girls in Benin. Their approach has focused on raising awareness about law N°2011-26, adopted on January 9th, 2012, on the prevention and repression of violence against women and girls, and making the legislation more comprehensive for local communities. Specifically, ABAEF has been supporting and providing counseling and legal representation to women and girls in the communities of Ouidah, Kétou and Adja-Ouèrè in Benin.

In an effort to propagate the law and make it more comprehensible to a much wider section of the population, a series of awareness raising sessions on the risks associated with gender-based violence were organized. These sessions brought together large numbers of community members, with attendance of up to 100 people. In this space, community members were able to voice their specific needs, which were then integrated into future activities.

In the second phase of the project, approximately 2,000 women and men attended several sessions designed to raise their awareness of the law. At these sessions, brochures written in local languages were distributed to all attendees. These brochures contained a simplified explanation of the legislation and the supporting texts associated with this law.

Such sessions empowered women to stand up for their rights. In Kpoulpou, for instance, one woman, AJ*, whose husband refused to pay school fees for their children after marrying another woman, was able to finally sit down with her husband and use the information she learned to get him to take responsibility for the kids.

Monitoring committees were also set up in each district to provide support for an estimated 250 victims of violence. Positive changes in the behavior and attitudes of some of the men in these communities, especially towards women, has been seen. Women are now being treated with more respect.

“Our settlement [of a physical abuse case], the husband made a commitment before the committee never to beat his wife,” said one of the ABAEF program facilitators. “Interviewed later, the woman...says her husband has never laid a hand on her and that he has fulfilled his commitment to date.”

Through the monitoring committees, a mediation support program has also been put in place, providing a better alternative to men who feel that violence towards women is their only option.

In addition, community members from every district were informed on a regular basis through interactive local radio programs about the work that ABAEF or partner committees were doing within their communities.
Empowering women through human rights education

Genre Environnement Pauvreté Santé
Niger

Founded in 2003, the NGO Genre Environnement Pauvreté Santé (GEPS) promotes women and girls’ rights and empowerment in Niger - a very necessary mandate given the country’s high gender inequality rates. Specifically, GEPS carries out activities and implements projects that improve women’s participation and representation in local decision-making processes in the commune of Liboré, not far from Niamey.

Their strategy is to provide human rights education to women and men through training and dialogue. Women’s economic power is reinforced through training on income-generating activities and community life, as well as other activities that include advocating for better representation of women within administrative and traditional authorities and decision-making processes.

“Before the project, the spouses of the women in my collective had a hard time accepting that women could also make decisions,” said Roukeya Moussa, one of the participants. “Some women were frequently beaten when they didn’t follow their husband’s orders.”

Now, their husbands understand that their spouses’ participation has a positive impact on household income and provides a balance for parental duties, particularly when providing for children’s education.

“When my child is sent home from school because he doesn’t have a pen, I can now buy him a pen and send him straight back to school, without waiting for my husband to return in the evening,” said another participant, Ramatou Hassane.

With GEPS’ support, women now say they understand the importance of registering their children at birth for school enrolment later. They are also aware of the importance of getting a marriage certificate to inherit land and other goods in the case of a spouse’s death.

Thanks to GEPS’ advocacy efforts, the mayor’s office of Liboré decided to create the post of Advisor on Gender. Nominee Mariama Madougou became the first person to occupy the position with a mission to ensure that women’s needs are identified and met within the commune’s decision-making processes.

“We are mostly proud of the women’s turnout to run for the next municipal elections.”

Chaibou Halimatou, Programme Officer at GEPS
The right of persons with disabilities to engage in politics

Voice Ghana
Ghana

The inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in all public and political spaces is an ongoing challenge. Disability rights and advocacy organizations, such as Voice Ghana, continue to demonstrate their resilience and dedication to ensuring the active participation of PWDs in local governance and the process of civic engagement at the grassroots level in Ghana.

“Generally, there is a negative social perception of persons with disabilities,” said Charles Nyanti, the programs manager for Voice Ghana. “Society normally considers them to be people who are a liability to their society; they can’t do anything. So generally when programs and activities are going on, they don’t think seriously about persons with disabilities...This means PWDs, who are also part of the community, are not being listened to...But now the platform has been created for them to share and dispense ideas and discuss issues affecting persons with disabilities with local officials.”

In 2015, 22 Self-help Groups (SHG) and PWD organizations in 10 districts in Ghana’s Volta Region benefitted from a training on the new local government systems and on how to participate in the development planning processes led by the District Assemblies (DA). An additional 100 PWDs, including 53 women and 47 men, were mobilized by the SHGs to engage their respective DA on key social development issues affecting their community. As a result of this, they had face-to-face meetings with DA members to talk about the key issues that affect them.

Following the sessions, the planning officer of the Akatsi-North District Assembly, Prince Adu Gyamfi, said: “The Assembly now regards the PWD community as any other community, whose needs are beyond only periodic hand-outs”.

Xorlarli Doamekpor, a PWD and secretary of the Norvilorlor Association at Ave-Dakpa in Ghana’s Volta Region, agreed.
“Besides being actively represented in the district’s Public Hearing Sessions there is free-flow of information between us, PWDs, and the District Chief Executive and the Assembly as a whole,” he said.

Participants say they now feel more empowered to demand benefits from provisions of public goods and services, as well as community development programs.

Voice Ghana also prepared 36 PWDs from Techiman, Sunyani, Cape Coast, Takoradi and Kpando to run in elections held at the DA level. 12 PWDs ran as Assembly Members in their respective electoral areas, while the remaining 24 ran as Unit Committee Members. Despite some progress, there were shortcomings in the electoral process by the Electoral Commission; with three PWDs who were running as DA members and seven PWDs as Unit Committee members withdrawing from the race. In the end, 14 PWDs – 11 men and three women – won the election to sit as Unit Committee Members in their respective districts.

Moving forward, Voice Ghana will continue to champion the Inclusive Development approach so that PWDs can effectively and meaningfully participate in the development of their communities and the larger society.

“Our view is that everything we do, everyone must be inclusive... and that’s what the assemblies are focusing on now,” said Francis Asong, the executive director of Voice Ghana. “Beneficiaries are now building their self-advocacies skills...They will continue to demand their rights and their needs from local assemblies.”

“Ghana goes to the polls on 7 December 2016 and you can see that some of these advocacy skills that the beneficiaries gained from the program, they are using that to engage the electoral commission to include them, to work as polling staff, and also engage for better transparence for their needs during political campaigns”

Francis Asong
Executive Director Voice Ghana
Social Innovation
West African startups get their first push on a bus ride

Ampion, which stands for ‘Amplifying Pioneership’ is an international impact-based organization, founded in 2013 on the principles of entrepreneurship and the transformative power of technology-based business models. They pride themselves and their partners on constantly innovating and creating. Ampion’s goal is to be at the forefront of the mobile development industry and actively shape how technology will transform and revolutionize the continent, by offering targeted support to young entrepreneurs and enabling them to create the best technology ventures possible.
My name is Joseph Zotoo and I am a social entrepreneur from Ghana who founded FindMe, a web and mobile application where users can mark a location on a digital map, and receive a unique location code which can be customized for any purpose. This code can then be shared easily with anyone through WhatsApp SMS or email. The concept of FindMe came about in response to informal address systems in Africa which has not only cost businesses and the government in revenues but people’s lives in emergency situations. I believe this app could also be useful for intelligence and data gathering for both cities and countries.

I joined the Ampion Venture Bus West Africa when, with my team of students and colleagues, I was in the midst of researching problems and solutions which I could turn into. When I heard about Ampion and the training they provided, I did not hesitate for one second. I can now say that I truly got more than the training I needed! It was on the Venture Bus that FindMe was created. The team, with their experience and expertise, helped me run FindMe, which opened several doors and significantly contributed to my personal development.

When people ask me about my experience, I like to say that Ampion gave birth to me as an entrepreneur. Before Ampion, I would’ve described myself as a small business owner replicating other business styles, but now I can describe myself as an entrepreneur who discovers, initiates and leads different teams in solving problems and turning them into businesses. I remember Ifeanyi [Co-Founder of Ampion] telling me to not be afraid to fail and that as an entrepreneur, you have to keep going even if you will face difficult moments.

Those words have kept me focused. Today there is a team of students that I worked with before joining Ampion who are now running two startups and doing very well.
Spotlight: Queturah

My name is Keturah Ovio-Onoweya, I started an e-commerce company called “Queturah” that is dedicated to fostering sustainability of people, culture, and economy in the African creative space. Simply put, we make it easier for African artisans to sell online to a local and international market.

By the time I got on the Ampion Venture Bus, I was gearing up to launch Queturah. I am quite adventurous and the sound of traveling in a bus along the coast was just splendid! Being on the venture bus definitely helped me to identify the needs of my community, to formulate a business model through intense coaching sessions and pitch my startup. I also appreciated getting real-time feedback on my business idea from those I traveled with and those I met along the way.

Since the end of the trip, I have been able to pitch my startup to different investors more effectively and I have more of a global mindset which is helping me to think through how to scale up.

Since its founding, Ampion has been able to support 400 entrepreneurs from 24 African countries, as well as from 10 other countries around the world. They also helped to create 80 African startups.

“We want to inspire as many young people as possible to become entrepreneurs...to create their own jobs, their own futures, their own economic empowerment and independence”

Fabian Guhl, Founder and CEO of Ampion

“I believe a country with strong class of S&Es [scientists and engineers] might be more favorable towards developing democracies than countries or societies without small, medium-sized entrepreneurs and without social businesses,” said Fabian Guhl, the founder and CEO of Ampion.

Ampion uses a unique multi-tiered approach that “enables experienced and prospective entrepreneurs to find like-minded young people from across Africa and the world to form partnerships and found startups.” Through their three main programs - the Venture Bus program, the
Fellowship program, and the Accelerator program - African-based entrepreneurs receive the support and guidance needed at the various stages of their start-up life cycles.

Venture Bus, for example, brings together aspiring entrepreneurs and tech experts from all over the world for a seven-day road trip in each region of the African continent. Venture Bus West Africa took place from September 17 – 23, 2015 with 40 participants including business experts, developers and designers focusing on e-health, fin-tech, and governance. The tour kicked off in Abidjan, Ivory Coast and continued to Ghana, Togo, Benin, ending in Nigeria.

Along the way, participants, or ‘Ampioneers,’ discover different startup eco-systems by visiting investors, technology hubs and corporate innovation centers. They also stop in communities to identify local needs and develop innovative solutions to existing problems. The tour concludes with a visit to a major entrepreneurial conference, where one team is selected to present their prototypes.

After the bus tour ends, participants continue to receive support from local and international mentors to develop their business ideas. Ampion also facilitates introductions with investors who are seeking social business investments in Africa.

Selected participants can then take part in the four-month Fellowship program, which provides online courses, office space, operational support and seed funding, to help make their start-ups a reality.

Beyond the tour, the Ampion team facilitated the first Tech Innovation Weekend by the African Development Bank Group in Abidjan in October 2015. The aim of the conference was to find technology-led solutions from West Africa to better the lives of women and youth. A 72-hour contest was held to motivate participants to transform their ideas into practical technology innovations. One of the four winners is Ampioneer Coliba, a mobile platform for managing urban waste that was co-founded by Ivorian social entrepreneur Yaya Bruno Kone, who plans to pilot his prototypes in Ghana.
Using sports therapy to empower juvenile detainees

Association pour le Sourire d’un Enfant (ASE)
Senegal

Olympic silver fencing medalist from the 2016 games in Rio, Daryl Homer, stands before a group of juvenile detainees in a small gymnasium in Thies, Senegal. He shows them a series of fencing moves, including advances, retreats and lunges, before facing off with each of them.

Homer is there as part a training program run by the Association pour le Sourire d’un Enfant (ASE), which promotes fencing as a therapeutic sporting activity for juvenile detainees and orphans. It is a groundbreaking initiative that has been hailed as an innovation in Senegal.

“People make mistakes. So any time you have the opportunity to aid with rehabilitation and help them get reintegrated into society, you are doing something great.”

Daryl Homer, Olympic Silver Fencing Medallist

For 25 years, ASE has been coming to the aid of street children and juvenile detainees. They received a special recognition from the Ministry of Justice in 1999 for their human-centered approach to the juvenile detention system and for ensuring that juvenile detainees are provided with adequate health care, food, rehabilitation and guidance they need while in detention.

As part of a two-year program for restorative justice in Thies, boys and girls from the juvenile detention center meet twice a week for fencing sessions. The fencers, who are typically aged between 10 and 17 years old, face off against each other or their coaches, and sometimes even with their assigned prison guard – who is also a trained instructor. Using fencing as a restorative, rather than punitive, approach has proven to be successful in Thies.

Behind the masks are the smiles of young boys and girls who have lived their lives feeling neglected by society. Through this unique combative sport, they learn respect for one another and opponents are viewed as adversaries to whom they always owe consideration and common courtesy. By absorbing the rules of the game, they learn to win and lose in a fair and dignified manner.

“Hopefully the takeaway from the fencing training is that they are important and have their own gifts,” Homer said. “It can also be used as a tool to reintegrate them into society, while making them think more independently and turning them into quick thinkers.”

The concept was initially met with reluctance but has since evolved, gaining popularity among the prison administration and Ministry of Justice in Senegal, who continue to be impressed by the positive impact such an initiative has had on these youth offenders. This, in turn, has had a positive impact on their lives post-release.
“Fencing changed my life. It gave me hope and helped build my confidence because I was able to challenge the boys. I enjoyed winning against them.”

Josephine, ex-detainee and current fencer

“I was suicidal because I thought I was never going to get out of prison,” said one participant, Josephine.

This innovative approach, which was a new experience, is fully supported by the judiciary and prison officials. The results have exceeded expectations. First of all, promotion of human rights by prison officers whose look on juvenile detainees has deeply evolved thanks to the fencing sessions that they are involved in. Their approach based on dialogue and trust has replaced the repressive one. In addition, the fact that the training results in a diploma for prison officers contributes to their socio-professional recognition and fulfillment often undervalued in prisons.

The practice of fencing renews confidence in themselves and respect to educators. It’s in these instances that several girls have confided the suffering they experience during incarceration and their anxiety for the future. Listening to educators in a «neutral» environment allows them to express their questions about the reasons for their arrest, the procedural delays, and the proposed penalties.

“We have a saying here that fencing only makes good people. So it’s great to see a program using fencing in that way...It’s never too late to try and succeed.”

Daryl Homer, Olympic Silver Fencing Medallist
Free, Quality and Independent Media
Promoting dialogue and strengthening democracy through the radio

Radio Democracy
Sierra Leone

Radio Democracy is one of the most popular media channels in Sierra Leone. Over 80 percent of the Sierra Leonean population has access to it, and it is one of the means by which people can hear and learn about important political events happening in the country. Organizations like Radio Democracy aim to broaden dialogue and strengthen democracy using interactive media platforms to reach diverse groups of the population.

“We get a lot of feedback from local and international partners about the reporting we do and the impact that it has on Sierra Leone,” continues Asmaa James, the station manager.

Due to its growing popularity, residents from Bo, which is Sierra Leone’s second largest city, expressed a high demand for Radio Democracy’s programs, and as a result, they were finally able to install a transmitter in Bo on November 17th, 2015. A pilot program was launched to provide a platform where the public could assess the work of various ministries. Panelists captured public feedback where the best and worst performing ministries were graded on their performance. Plans are being made to extend the grading system to the other government departments and agencies in the future.

“We give voice to the people...and we broadcast issues of national relevance. In the morning, people cannot sit down without listening to us...”

Asmaa James
Station Manager, Radio Democracy
Social media continues to play a major role in disseminating information, especially amongst the younger generation. Today, more listeners are tuning into Radio Democracy by live streaming programs on the website and uploading podcasts on social networking sites such as Facebook.

Many of the programs relate specifically to this new generation.

“The youth are becoming aware of what is happening around them and you see them, a lot of them, are complaining about politicians,” James said. “So we had a program in the evening where youth came on and talked about what is happening and what they want the government to do and in the meantime we called policy makers and the ministry and we call government officials to come and respond to the issues of what the youth are saying.”

Radio Democracy also recently launched three new programs: De debate, One on One, and Patience, Beatrice and Elfrida.

De Debate, for example, has policy makers, politicians, parliamentarians, and political party officials debating policy positions and interests. In 2015, the government showed their interest and trust in these programs, by having 110 government ministries, department and agency officials take part in the radio programs.

Additional issues that are covered on the show are energy and environment, gender and education.

One on one, on the other hand, puts the spotlight on successful citizens who have played critical roles in helping to shape Sierra Leone’s development. They also share the strategies and motivations behind their contributions.

To address the high rates of teenage pregnancy and school dropouts among teenagers and young adults, producers launched Patience, Beatrice, and Elfrida, a radio show where women advise teenage girls and young women on matters of education, sexuality and leadership.
Unearthing unethical mining practices from Africa’s own Investigative Lab

African Network of Centers for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR)
Regional

When the Panama Papers were leaked in 2016, the African Network of Centers for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR), with the support of OSIWA, and in collaboration with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and other media partners, began an unprecedented, year-long investigation into the offshore accounts of some of Africa’s most prominent figures.

ANCIR’s team of dozens of investigative journalists used the leaked emails, corporate records, financial spreadsheets and other open data documents to expose the “misuse of corporate secrecy and hidden wealth in Africa.”

“What we did, which I think is different from other Panama media houses, is that we used information that was already available and in the public domain,” said Khadija Sharife, ANCIR’s investigative editor for the Panama Papers project. “Because until the last minute, I think until about March [2016], it [the Panama Papers] were 100 percent confidential. So we used different techniques and strategies from a lot of the foreign media houses and we got very good responses.”
“It was exciting to see very good journalists come into their own.”

Khadija Sharife, ANCIR Investigative Editor, Panama Papers Project

Such investigations have led to increased accountably across the continent and showed the importance of being able to freely access official and public data. They also highlighted the need to ensure that governments allocate tax revenues and other resources to those who need them most.

What followed was the publication of some 50 articles and, in mid-2016, two whistle-blowing, which uncovered the fraudulent financials dealings and secret hideaways in offshore tax havens of high-level African politicians, celebrities, drug traffickers, prominent businessmen and others.

“Africa was one of the most productive continents in terms of this project and that’s largely in part to OSIWA,” Sharife said.

The investigations exposed dozens of illegal activities in more than 20 countries across the continent - everything from missing taxes from oil revenue in Uganda and Nigeria, to FIFA-related infrastructure deals in Namibia to “dubious” diamond mining operations in Sierra Leone, and shady business deals in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

This was the first time African journalists participated in transnational investigations into Africa affairs.

“Journalists from Sierra Leone or Niger, and so on, finally representing their own countries, instead of being represented by foreign media houses,” Sharife said. That was the thing that gave me the most pride: we were able to see that it was not a lack of talent; it’s just a lack of resources that doesn’t enable these journalists to fulfill the role that they should have within their own countries.”

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that the continent loses $150 billion each year due to illicit financial flows – a tremendous amount of money in the world’s poorest continent.

“We planted the seed of accountability, in the sense that journalists now have this role and governments must start being responsive to the journalists,” Sharife said. “And what this project did specifically was to engage the issue of accountability, of transparency, of strong democratic institutions, is to look at how financial reportage from companies and the demands from governments on those companies is organized and arranged.”
Special

Ebola
A regional battle worth fighting
When the Ebola virus first struck West Africa, back in 2014, few agencies were quick to respond. No one quite knew what they were dealing with or how to best help.

While the international community and local governments have since learned many lessons about outbreak control and response, the aftermath remains grim in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

More than 28,000 cases were reported in the three most-affected countries. An estimated 11,300 people died, including health workers, who initially lacked proper training and protective gear.

Many of those who survived continue to face debilitating health complications and stigmatization. Some can no longer work. Additionally, thousands of children lost one or both parents to Ebola. Students missed out on nearly a year of education due to closed schools.

Travel restrictions negatively affected local economies, particularly in those communities that rely on cross-border trade and tourism.

Health clinics and hospitals remain understaffed and lack materials. But thanks to funding by organizations such as OSIWA, hundreds of thousands of people have since benefitted from Ebola programs, which were aimed at not only ending the outbreak but also helping those who were affected by it.

In total, OSIWA has awarded more than US$ 3,000,000 since the epidemic hit the region to help finance dozens of Ebola-related projects, implemented by 11 partners across the region. Initiatives ranged from community outreach and education campaigns to improving the lives of survivors and orphans.

The goals were to raise awareness about a disease previously unknown to the region, help to rebuild already weak health systems, which had been ravaged by years of civil war and conflict, and help those who had been worst affected by the virus.

Thousands of health workers and community volunteers were trained in outreach and prevention.

In late November 2015, OSIWA held a photo competition to highlight the work of journalists who had been on the front lines of the outbreak and to give people “a glimpse into the human side of the epidemic.”
Community Workers

For a long time, many West Africans didn’t believe Ebola was real. Even as they watched their friends and loved ones die from this “mysterious” illness, they refused to listen to what health workers were saying. Rumors spread quickly and many people began to fear doctors.

It was only after local organizations began to recruit and teach respected community members about the virus, including symptoms, prevention measures and the importance of seeking medical help at treatment centers, did transmission begin to slow.

Unlike the fear and distrust that many felt towards international doctors and nurses, communities had faith in their local authorities.

When they spoke, people listened.

On the frontlines of these efforts were OSIWA’s partners, such as the Development Education Network of Liberia (DEN-L), NAYMOTE, the Public Health and Development Initiative (PHDI) in Liberia and Search for Common Ground (SFCG) in Guinea.

Young people were particularly effective in spreading Ebola messages. NAYMOTE, for example, deployed some 200 youth volunteers to go door-to-door and post flyers around town.

They estimate they were able to reach more than 50,000 people with life-saving information.

“I’m so proud of the work I did because I know that I helped save numerous lives and aided government efforts in eradicating the deadly Ebola virus from my country.”

Joshua D. Cleon, NAYMOTE Volunteer

PHDI, who also trained volunteers to act as contact tracers, reached more than 82,000 people with their education campaigns and community meetings – the majority of whom were illiterate.
populations in the more remote areas of Liberia.

“That the disease was halted in its tracks can be attributed for the most part to active community involvement in infection prevention and control measures.”

Dr. Jeanetta K. Johnson, Program Director for PHDI

SFCG took a slightly different approach. Using their expertise in community dialogue as part of conflict resolution, they hosted a series of nine Ebola education workshops in southeastern Guinea, which brought together key community members, including village elders, women, young people, health professions and representatives from local NGOs. They then opened a dialogue, while teaching participants things such as Ebola symptoms and prevention methods. They also dispelled common rumors about treatment and doctors and reemphasized the importance of trusting health specialists.

This was particularly important to help reduce the widespread distrust of and resistance to doctors and foreign aid workers.
Many, especially early on in the outbreak, were shunned by their family and neighbors, for fear they were still contagious.

That’s when OSIWA partners, such as the Development Education Network of Liberia (DEN-L) and NAYMOTE stepped in to provide survivors with financial and material help, as well as psychosocial support.

Beneficiaries received a number of food and nonfood items, including rice, oil, cooking utensils and other household necessities.

They were also given a small stipend to pay for new clothes and school fees for their children.

As part of the ECAP Project, NAYMOTE also held community meetings in which survivors were given the chance to share their stories and experiences with Ebola. Listeners had the opportunity to ask questions, share their concerns and ultimately engage with the survivors.

“Thank God for people like DEN-L that came to create awareness in the community, urging the community to see us as humans.”

Ma Nowah, age 55, Ebola survivor from Bong County, Liberia

Survivors

Despite the high death toll from Ebola, more than 17,000 people did survive. Though many might consider them the “lucky ones” their struggles were far from over after they left the Ebola Treatment Units (ETUs).

Some returned home to find they had nothing left: all of their belongings had been destroyed to prevent further transmission of the virus. Others had lost their jobs while they were sick.

Those that were now unemployed were given money to jump-start a small business or project, to help get them back on their feet financially.

As part of the psychosocial support initiatives, DEN-L and NAYMOTE worked with both survivors, and their families and communities to reintegrate them into society and help reduce stigma. Tactics ranged from public theater skits to going door-to-door to explain that survivors were not contagious and should be treated as heroes, not outcasts.
Afterward, a number of social events were held to allow everyone to interact.

“For the survivors, themselves, expressing such agony and being heard for the first time was a relief to them and a recipe to reduce the pity they felt for themselves,” explained Joseph Cleon, a media and communications officer with NAYMOTE. “The exercise transported them back from miles of emotional and physical isolation to a point where they felt they no longer felt ashamed. The empathy and hugs they received from their neighbors at these meetings raised their hopes again and brought them great joy.”

NAYMOTE also set up a volunteer-run call center to help reduce survivor stigma and dispel any myths that callers may call in with. They supplied callers with facts and also encouraged them to welcome back survivors, by sharing a meal with them or visiting their home. This helped to show others that they had no reason to be afraid of survivors.

Similar efforts were made in more than 40 schools across Liberia, where ECAP communicators worked with students to help reduce the stigma against child survivors in the classroom.
Radio & mobile phones

One of the most effective means of disseminating information about Ebola proved to be radio broadcasts. From news spots to jingles to soap dramas, radio is by far the most popular source of information in West Africa, particularly in rural areas, where people don’t have access to TV or the internet. A single broadcast can reach millions of people each day, in even the most remote parts of the country, without ever having to bring people together and risk further transmission of the virus.

A number of OSIWA partners took advantage of radio’s popularity and created special Ebola episodes that broached topics from Ebola symptoms to means of transmission to prevention measures to stigma reduction.

“The Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone was initially characterized by low levels of knowledge about the virus and a lack of coordination of the media sector to effectively respond to emerging communication challenges and the information needs of audiences,” said Musa Sangari of BBC Media Action.

Search for Common Ground (SFCG), for example, worked alongside the Sierra Leone Pharmacy Board and the Ministry of Health, to produce more than 40 episodes of Radio Soap Dramas that focused on lessons of Ebola prevention. They then partnered with 27 independent radio networks across the country to broadcast them. SFCG also produced short jingles, in three languages, that aired throughout the day during other programs and reminded people to do things such as wash their hands or seek medical attention if Ebola-like symptoms are observed.

BBC Media Action broadcast similar messages as part of their ‘Ebola Full Stop!’ project, which broadcast 26 different public service announcements (PSAs) in nine languages across 41 stations in Sierra Leone. In addition to the one- to two-minute PSAs, they also produced 20 half-hour Ebola specials, which discussed different aspects of the Ebola virus each week, interviewed guest experts, responded to listener questions and shared the stories of survivors.

Both partners used mobile phone surveys to follow up with listeners to see what lessons had been learned. The feedback and results proved to be quite positive. BBC Media Action found that 68 percent of the adult population listened to their shows on a regular basis.

In Liberia, mobile phones were also used by NAYMOTE to set up the country’s first Ebola Awareness Call Center. In addition to sending out ‘message blasts’ with information regarding the virus, people could also call or send messages to a hotline and ask questions. Volunteers in the call center – mostly young people – would respond with messages approved by the Ministry of Health.

NAYMOTE estimates they were able to provide life-saving information to more than 6,000 people who called in or sent messages.

“The PSAs and radio programs were critically important in dispelling myths, rumors and misinformation and providing life-saving, relevant and accurate information to audiences.”

Ma Nowah, age 55, Ebola survivor from Bong County, Liberia
Conclusion

West Africa’s Ebola outbreak highlighted a number of weaknesses in local health systems that now, more than ever, need to be fixed.

Governments must work with local and international organizations to rebuild and strengthen their health systems. More doctors and nurses need to be recruited and trained.

More budget money must be invested in health programs. Clinics and hospitals must have reliable access to water and electricity. Shelves must be stocked with the medicines and supplies needed not only to treat patients but to keep health workers safe.

It is no longer acceptable that a woman must walk miles and miles just to give birth at a clinic a few towns away, or that there are just 11,000 health workers for a population of 4.5 million, as is the case in Liberia.

Countries need to start working towards providing universal health care coverage so that all citizens have access to quality health care.

They must also work together to strengthen cross-border surveillance systems.

During the outbreak, a number of OSIWA partners, including PHIL and Alima, trained more than 1,000 health professionals in Liberia and Guinea on infection prevention and control (IPC) methods. If doctors and nurses had received such training prior to the Ebola outbreak, it is likely thousands of lives would have been saved.

Refresher courses now need to be administered to those already trained. The tens of thousands of health workers who have not received IPC training still need to be. This will be vital should another outbreak of any sort occur.
WADR on the Frontlines of Ebola: A firsthand account

“When the Ebola virus disease broke out in West Africa, West Africa Democracy Radio (WADR) had to choose between covering it from Dakar, through telephone interviews, or sending someone from the Dakar office to cover it on the frontline.

After series of discussions, I succeeded in convincing the station management to let me travel to Sierra Leone in August 2014 to report firsthand on the outbreak.
Though I had succeeded, it was only a matter of time before unforeseen challenges began to spring up. Senegal had since shut its borders to people coming from Ebola-affected countries and travel agencies were only selling one-way tickets to Freetown. They could not guarantee any return flights, citing the obvious risk of contamination and transmission of the virus.

But after numerous efforts, we succeeded in securing a return booking.

Over the following weeks, I traveled around Sierra Leone - interviewing Ebola survivors, their families, frontline healthcare providers, policymakers and ordinary citizens. Out of these engagements the “Sierra Leone Ebola Diary” was born. The Ebola diary was a daily short feature on different aspects of the epidemic, broadcast on WADR every weekday.

Though WADR succeeded in telling some of these untold stories to our audience, I was not immune to the emotional bruises, which I lived with on a daily basis covering the outbreak. The Ebola outbreak proved to be the most devastating assignment I had ever undertaken throughout my career as a journalist.

Crying became a nightly routine each time I returned to my hotel room, after having spent my days seeing just how much devastation the disease had caused.

One image that I am yet to shake off was when visiting a hilltop community in Freetown. I climbed up the hill alongside the Red Cross body collection team to collect the body of an elderly man who had died from Ebola. For the next few days and months, the thought of him lying inside his tiny room, as his children and neighbors wailed and cried, kept popping in my head.

The Sierra Leone Ebola Diary Series really put WADR in a rare position of authority on Ebola. Other media outlets, as well as ordinary people, relied on our reporting for information. Following the series, WADR was invited to a number of conferences and seminars to share our unique experience covering Ebola.

Ground Zero
We felt that in order to bring about a sense of completeness to our coverage of Ebola, going back to where it all started was necessary. In June 2015, I traveled to Meliandou, a meeting point
of the borders of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone in Guinea’s southeastern forest region. Meliandou was the ground zero of West Africa’s Ebola outbreak and the purpose of my visit was to have a broader idea of how a family tragedy in a small, forested village could have escalated to become a regional catastrophe.

In Meliandou, I had the opportunity to meet the father of the little boy who first contracted Ebola in the sub-region. Through him, we were able to tell our audience how Ebola was transmitted from his household to the rest of the village, spreading to neighboring villages and towns before crossing borders into Liberia and Sierra Leone. From there, based on the community healthcare workers’ explanation, I was able to follow the passage of the transmission chain, reporting on how it spread from Meliandou to other villages. My four-part series, broadcast on WADR, featured survivors, families of the victims, healthcare workers, local authorities and ordinary people. Among them was an old woman banished from her village and accused of witchcraft after her son, a taxi driver, became the first person to contract Ebola in the village. We also succeeded in telling the stories of how community care workers and contact tracers were still dealing with the trauma and the memories of Ebola.

If there’s one thing I am sure of, it is that after my experience in Sierra Leone, I will never be the same.

The various affected communities I encountered during my period of reporting continue to remain a significant part of my thoughts each time I reflect on the Ebola epidemic.

Sheriff Junior was nominated for the 2015 CNN MultiChoice African Journalist of the Year award for the Ebola Diary Series
Spin-Offs
Strengthening West Africa’s CSOs through capacity building: West Africa Civil Society Institute

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), based in Accra, Ghana, was initially a project managed and run by OSIWA. Since 2007, WACSI has been fairly autonomous, becoming a leading player in the area of civil society capacity building and advocacy. Achievements in 2015 include hosting a variety of training programs, producing a number of important publications, convening civil society gatherings and tracking the evolution of civil society in the West African sub-region.

Enabling Civil Society to Boost Transformation in West Africa
West Africa cannot achieve sustainable development without a strong, credible, influential, effective and efficient civil society sector. In 2015, WACSI continued to implement deliberate and strategic capacity development programs to strengthen 321 civil society organizations (CSOs) from 10 African countries. Some 423 practitioners from these CSOs were provided with skills and knowledge that enhanced their performance and helped their organizations to achieve increased milestones.

Investing in Policy Advocacy and Influencing
The institute in partnership with USAID’s Ghana Feed the Future Agriculture Policy Support Project enhanced the capacities, knowledge, and skills of 42 Non-State Actors including farmer-based groups and community-based organizations
in governance and leadership, networking, fundraising, advocacy, policy formulation, analysis and implementation. These grantees were drawn from independent civil society organizations and networks of civil society organizations working to promote the effective implementation of agricultural policies.

Michael Pervarah from the Association of Church-Based Development NGOs found the advocacy training both timely and relevant. The association has now developed and is currently implementing an advocacy plan to engage with their target communities and the government of Ghana on food security issues.

**Mobilizing Civil Society to Engage Drug Policy Reform**

WACSI is the coordinating secretariat of The West Africa Drug Policy Network (WADPN). WADPN is a budding network of civil society organizations from the 16 West African countries with more than 400 members. From the frontline of the call for drug policy reforms in West Africa, the major achievements of the network include active participation in the development of the West Africa Common Position, which calls for drug policy reform grounded in public health and human rights towards the UNGASS 2016, signed and endorsed by the government officials in attendance of national and regional meetings.

A significant achievement was the Ghana Chapter engaging with the National Parliamentary Select Committee on Security and Interior for their inputs and contribution to the New Ghana Narcotics Control Commission Bill currently before Parliament.

The Chapter called for the introduction of harm reduction in the bill, alternatives to incarceration and disproportionate sentencing for drug users in comparison to producers. The Chapter fully enlightened the Parliamentarians on the issue, which resulted in having the harm reduction services included in the new Bill.

In addition, the Benin Chapter trained media practitioners on the need to help drug users, by enlightening journalists about human rights reporting so that they do not depict drug users as criminals, but rather as people in dire need of assistance.

The Network continues to advocate for the implementation of the recommendations that emanated from national consultations in three “champion countries” - Benin, Ghana, and Senegal - calling for them to be included in the UNGASS final outcome document.
Empowering Civil Society to tell their Stories
WACSI also empowered staff of Oxfam in Ghana and some of its partners with hands-on digital communications skills enabling them to register their presence on social media and enhance their visibility. The hands-on skills gained by Oxfam staff and its partners, such as Peasant Farmers Association of Ghana and the Ghana Trade and Livelihood Coalition, helped them to effectively raise awareness for their collective efforts to alleviate poverty in Ghana through social media platforms.

Grooming the Next Generation of Leaders
With support from the Ford Foundation, WACSI initiated the process of nurturing middle-level civil society practitioners to strengthen their leadership profile through the Civil Society Leadership Institute (CSLI) program. Twenty participants from five West African countries – The Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone – took part in this program, which is a trail blazer in West Africa.

The practitioners acquired leadership skills and in turn used the knowledge and skills gained from this two-week program to influence positive systemic changes within their respective organizations and promote social transformation in their society.

In addition, the Institute delivered capacity development programs on resource mobilization, financial management, monitoring and evaluation, networking and alliance building and service management for different civil society groupings in the region and beyond.

WACSI in 2016
WACSI strives to make a greater impact in 2016. The institute plans to support at least 350 CSOs in Africa and groom at least six West African leaders for the next generation through its Next Generation Program. The institute would explore new capacity strengthening initiatives to support civil society groupings that work on the following themes: food security and climate change, democratic governance, peace and security, technology and next generation leadership. WACSI will also invest in knowledge learning and sharing around issues that affect the relevance, operations and sustainability of the civil society sector.
West Africa Democracy Radio (WADR)

Ebola. The trial of ex-Chadian President Hissane Habre. Election coverage in Benin and Niger. These are just a few of the big stories that West Africa Democracy Radio (WADR) covered in 2016, in addition to their daily news briefs, magazine reports, interviews, entertainment shows and other various programs.

Using a team of correspondents and local reporters from 10 countries in the region, as well as staff based in their headquarters in Dakar, Senegal, WADR continues to bring people up-to-date information about the latest regional and world news, while promoting and defending democratic ideals.

“Our core is news,” said WADR’s station manager, Soulyemane Niang. “Citizens need good quality news, relevant news, before they can make decisions on who to vote for or who to support, etc. So information is very important to us.”

Shows begin as early as six AM for their morning listeners and run until 10 o’clock at night. They are broadcast in both French and English via a series of nearly 40 partner stations, which are based in communities throughout West Africa.

WADR also streams all of their shows on their website (www.wadr.org), which has quickly been gaining popularity among the African diaspora living abroad, as well as among citizens in countries such as The Gambia, where it can be difficult to have access to unbiased political news. Their number of online listeners reached an all-time peak this year, and will become a target audience in 2017.

They also produce podcasts, which are shared via the online audio platform Soundcloud.

As WADR continues to work to innovate and stand out within the media world, they recently became the first francophone radio station to partner with the fact-checking organization Africa Check. Each Friday, WADR investigates and debunks popularly-accepted ‘facts’.

For now, they are doing “soft” news investigation, such as can urine really cure certain ailments and does Nigeria really have high speed trains. The goal is to soon be able dig deeper and get into more controversial and contentious issues throughout the region, using investigative and online-data journalism.

“There is a real need to fact check the information that is coming from leaders,” Niang said. “Our hope is to be a source of information in terms of fact checking and to ensure that what people are being told by their leaders is actually true and accurate.”

WADR has also begun partnering with the United Nations and other international organizations to promote awareness about key activism holidays, such as International Women’s Day and Freedom of the Press Day.

“The more people know about these important issues,” Niang said, “the more rights they will have.”
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