OSIWA 2021 – 2024 Strategy

1. Context: State of West Africa, Challenges and Opportunities

With a population of over 390 million people spread across 15 countries and a median age of 18.2 years, West Africa is a youthful, vibrant, diverse, complex and important geopolitical space for Africa and the globe. It is a highly volatile region with progressive gains in political, economic and social spaces, often fragile and prone to fast reversals. Relative strong economic growth figures have not translated into substantial improvements for citizens. Within communities at the grassroots, there are alternative systems and voices which give hope, but are marginalized.

At the end of 2018, West Africa was Africa’s most democratic subregion;1 elections and political changeovers have become routine and constitutional term limits are mostly respected. Citizens agency has increased in engaging economic equality and justice, social dynamism, vitality and public debate. The whistle blower policy in Nigeria and the new anticorruption law in Guinea gave some impetus to the anti-corruption fight; and the appointment of an independent prosecutor in Ghana signaled a bold new move for accountability. Across Guinea, Sierra Leone and Mali, mining communities are increasingly finding their voices and governments are taking courageous steps in regulating exploitation of natural resources by international corporations. These trends are sustained by increasing voice of citizens and robust youth demographic. Internet access and social media have created immense access to information and powerful platforms for citizens’ voices.

These positive trends are under threat as West Africa remains the theatre of geopolitical interests and proxy wars, fueling insecurity. Impunity in public, corporate and social setting is the norm, the space for dissent is dwindling, economic and gender inequality continues to grow, political and social polarization is expanding alarmingly among young people. And even though constitutional term limits are mostly respected, leadership transitions in public and social life are nearly non-existent with the recycling of mostly older, mostly male leaders. As authoritarianism rises, democracy is in decline and citizens are increasingly losing faith that routine elections can translate into more progressive and accountable leadership. The region’s protracted insecurity challenges have morphed into a criminal enterprise with deep seated interests making resolution difficult. The stability of the Sahel, including the Burkinabe Corridor is in peril, ungoverned territories under the control of insurgents and terrorist groups are expanding, and the adverse effect of disrupted trade, climate change and food (in)security is fueling violence and impoverishing citizens. The geo-politics and geo-economics at play in the Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, Lake Chad Basin, the Mano River and their complex intersection with various elites in private sector (foreign corporate interests) and the State has enabled the capture of the State and democratic processes. The other major challenge is the redistribution of population within countries alongside cross border migrations in the face of climate change and insecurity. This spatial redistribution of populations portends dangers to open societies as manifest in the fatal clashes across the sub-region between pastoralists and farmers, which reinforce narrow ethnic and religious identity politics.

The biggest challenge facing the region is poor governance alongside rapid urbanization and population explosion. It is the root cause of extractive and abusive political, social and economic systems which stalls justice sector reforms, limits inclusive economic growth, denies citizens basic public services, such as health and education, compromises democratic institutions and promotes and creates conducive conditions for insurgency. Judiciaries in the region are increasingly politicized, and governments operate above the law; utilizing their often-dubious majority in parliament to pass laws that stifle dissenting voices and protect the interest of those in power.

Countries who used to have strategic interest in promoting democratic governance in West Africa are focused on their own internal problems, check-mating China, and throttling migration. They have consequently backed away from their

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commitment to democratic values that hitherto undergirded their actions and helped West African democratic forces. The reduced global oversight has resulted in West Africa’s elected autocrats and reluctant democratic leaders benefiting from the existence and emergence of authoritarian/anti-democratic/illiberal role models in the leaderships of China, Russia, Turkey, and the United States. Governments are side stepping international and continental accountability to statutes and protocols by drawing on the resources of countries like China, Russia, the Gulf States and Turkey who offer no pre-conditions around democracy in their relationships.

The novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) is ravaging the world, leaving in its trail widespread devastation and deaths. The expectation was that Africa, with little emergency preparedness, weak social welfare systems and weak public institutions, would be badly impacted by the virus however, it turns out that, ‘Africa has many lessons to teach the world about how to be resilient and how to be creative.

2 For the region, the assessment of the impact of the pandemic must be twofold: first wave (March - August 2019) and second wave (December 2020- to date). Although COVID-19 is a public health crisis, the first wave had drastic consequences on economic, social and political developments and the disruptions wrought by it contain several lessons for legal, social, political, and economic reforms. COVID-19 has exposed underlying economic structural crisis in West African countries, the terrible conditions of life for the vulnerable in our society and the absence of social safety nets. The existing gaps in access to public services such as health care and education are being exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic. The closure of schools across the region places a spotlight on communities without the resources or support to access some form of (distant) education. COVID-19 response emergency laws are resulting in human rights abuses and arrests of indigents; detention facilities are crowded and the courts, whose limits have been exposed by the virus, are overburdened.

Of the top ten countries (reported case) on the continent as of May 2020, half are in West Africa, exposing the inadequacy of our public health care and economic systems. There will be more fatalities and infections in West Africa with the second, more aggressive wave, as evidenced by the rise in daily infection rates but while it is unlikely that it will be on the scale of Europe or the United States, the impact of COVID-19 is and will be disproportionately felt by women and the poor. The world will not remain the same and it will not be business as usual after the virus runs its course. It is unlikely that COVID-19 will be the last epidemic or pandemic and West Africa must rethink and reformulate priorities to plan for this.

Despite these challenges, West African citizens are aware of the mobilizing effects of technology and access to information and are using these tools to challenge unjust corporate power and rein in their governments flouting laws. Citizens growing interest in understanding how government works provides a unique opportunity to mobilize and catalyze citizens for action. The internet and social media provide new frontiers for information and mobilization to amplify unheard voices and harness new forms of social organizing for positive change in Senegal, Nigeria, Guinea, Benin and Ghana. Some examples include sit-ins and demonstrations led by organizations in Senegal such as Doyna, Unies Vers’Elle, Dafa Doy etc. that led to the revision of rape laws in 2019, citizen protests in Guinea led by Mouvement FNDC (Front National pour la Defense de la Constitution) that resulted in poor voter turnout for the controversial and contested constitutional reform and movements such as #OccupyGhana and #dropthechamber in Ghana against government corruption and excess, #womanifesto in Nigeria advocating for women’s rights and #ENDSARS social movement and mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria.

New social enterprise entities are providing technological resources to counter lingering criminal and social justice challenges and the region’s youth are in a prime position to take advantage of technology and creative arts to build a culture of value driven civic engagement with the power to disrupt the status quo and take on patriarchal customs.

While we recognize the immense opportunity for improving transparency and accountability through technology and laws, we are cognizant of the role technology and social media play in weaponizing disinformation, deepening prejudices and fears

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2 WHO Covid19 Briefing No. 25. Turns out that our understanding of the gaps in our health care system and the experience with Ebola made West African countries proactive about checking temperatures and enforcing hand washing. Senegal was often held up as a standard for managing the pandemic: Senegal’s quiet COVID success: Test results in 24 hours, temperature checks at every store, no fights over masks. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/05/06/covid-19-why-senegal-outpacing-us-tackling-pandemic/5659696002/
and compromising elections. As we continue to champion freedom of information laws and the capacity of investigative journalists to go beyond state secrecy veils, we will harness opportunities to address disinformation and digital rights.

2. OSIWA’s Distinctive Role and Approach

OSIWA exists to serve the constant struggle for justice as demanded by West Africans. We support progressive political, social and economic choices. In doing so, supporting and sustaining the agency of West African vitality and dynamism is non-negotiable. We are a uniquely West African organization predominantly funding West African born and bred CSOs while looking for new ways to engage citizenry.

OSIWA’s role is to ensure that civil society in the region is expanding, resourced, networked and energized to be at the forefront of struggles for justice. As the only funder of social justice and human rights causes with an extensive presence in the region, OSIWA sustains and enables an ecosystem of civil society actors who champion open society values.

OSIWA has a distinctive regional role of straddling the supply and demand dimensions of governance through a combination of flexible grant-making, proactive advocacy, internally generated initiatives, research, partnership building, technical assistance, convening power and strategic litigation.

OSIWA works strategically with civil society and with States when the situation lends itself to doing so. Our unique relationship with individual States and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) creates opportunities for dialogue between and amongst States, civil society and policy makers at both national and regional levels. This approach and positioning allows us to create space for discussing difficult and sensitive, yet pertinent issues affecting the region.

OSIWA also has a niche in its ability to forge collaborative and concerted efforts nationally and regionally among funders in the region. OSIWA has a long and strong relationship with the African Union (AU) and its agencies, especially the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR). We have developed and will continue to build on our alliances with like-minded organizations, such as the Ford, MacArthur and Hewlett Foundations, and the Department for International Development (DFID) in order to build stronger networks, reduce duplication of efforts and maximize resources. In our partnerships and collaborations, we always ensure that our full independence is maintained and we remain focused on our strategic priorities.

3. Strategic Goals, Theory of Change and Notable Changes

3.1 Strategic Goals

Our goal over the next four years is to raise demands for better governance and protect democracy and improve its dividends i.e., justice, equality, security and economic opportunity. This strategy focuses on citizen agency, including social movements and citizens interest groups, by enhancing their ability to organize and mobilize for real democratic change, demand for transparent and accountable governance systems, challenge the marginality of excluded groups, both in public and private sectors; and disrupt patriarchal spaces. The strategy focuses on three overarching and closely related areas of work. These are to:

• Protect the civic space and, increase integrity in the democratic process and accountability in democratic institutions;
• Strengthen citizen agency to hold state and corporate actors to account and make economic development work for the poor;
• Amplify and build local agency for the enforcement of the rights of vulnerable and under-represented groups.
Region-wide programs will support country programming (in the 10 focus countries) across all the three strategic goals and program coordination, collaboration and teamwork will be strengthened. The strategy also seeks to build linkages at various levels: among the different strategic goals, country programming, OSF network programs and other OSF foundations.

3.2 Theory of Change

Drawing from learnings in the previous strategy, we have amended our theory of change. Our last strategy revealed to us that information alone may not necessarily spur action. Our theory of change now reflects our new assumption that access to information needs additional support to translate to action. In the current West African context of insecurity, climate change, closing civic space, persistent public and private sector corruption, and violations of the rights of minorities and other key populations, we need to invest in and support informed citizens to organize, mobilize, be vigilant and push back. Our assumption is that if citizens are adequately informed, have the tools for organizing, and see the benefits in organizing, mobilizing and demanding accountability, they will apply the required pressure to influence public policy and attitudes, and demand for responsible and responsive governments that work for the best interest of the citizens of West Africa.

New theory of change:
If organized and empowered citizens apply pressure to change society, leadership and policies, and there is transformation of power, socio-economic relations, and institutions then long-term systemic change can be achieved in West Africa.

3.3 Notable Changes

What is new?
OSIWA will be methodical, over the next four years, about nurturing a culture of community organizing and mobilizing for a new social agenda across the region. Why? One, our current strategy is based on assumptions around the existing social contract between citizens and governments fueled by informed citizens who raise demands. Our experience so far indicates that not enough citizens are making the connection between what they know and what they should do, or demand and apathy is growing despite bursts of inspiring social movements. Two, the problems in the region are interconnected and complex and beyond the capacity of the small, increasingly attacked, civil society groups to constantly engage on. There is a need to expand the definition of civil society and swell the numbers of citizens equipped to organize around any and all issues they care about. Three, organized citizens are at the heart of all aspects of our work and our evolving theory of change: what do informed small holder farmers do about land grabs, what will informed communities do about broken election promises, what will women do about sexual harassment and how will all these groups achieve the transformations they desire? Four, the key social, economic or political shifts across the continent have not been the products of elections; they have been the products of informed, organized citizens and OSIWA must invest in strategic protest and contestation within successful and personalized frameworks for organizing. Technology, social media and disinformation have deepened existing social divisions and an individualistic, celebrity culture makes collaborating even harder. However, building, improving and democratizing the art of organizing is a challenge that OSIWA must take to achieve our mission of enabling open societies and inclusive democratic governance based on transparent and accountable institutions and active citizenry.

OSIWA will be deliberate about taking every opportunity to encourage partners, governments and co-funders to invest in building data and where possible, advocate for citizens documentation for development. COVID-19 has shown the dangers and confusion the absence of effective data management and national documentation/civil registry can trigger. We need

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3 According to the Afrobarometer, more Africans are prepared to trade liberties for security and support for freedom of association is declining (Afrobarometer Policy Paper No.55, April 2019) yet only 46 percent of West Africans are satisfied with the state of democracy. Even fewer – just 15% – are insistent enough on better democracy to form a bulwark against authoritarian encroachment. (Afrobarometer Press Release February 26 2019)
conscious and informed policy decisions in order to address this. Governments and institutions need data and documented citizens to accurately plan, evaluate existing social programmes effectiveness or ascertain whether available resources are being allocated to address the most urgent and serious development issues. Faced with the reality of COVID-19, it is clear that basic economic and demographic data and proper civil registration is critical.

**What will we do more of?**

With this new strategy cycle, we will be bullish about the demand end of our theory of change: engaged citizens. A major shift in this strategy will be our approach. In our programming, we will increase our support to amplifying voices and organizing communities as the main agents of change in society.

We are going to increase our investment in advocacy as a major tool as all our work and ambitions have elements of advocacy. Amongst other things, our advocacy will focus on strategic engagement with progressive forces within West Africa, ECOWAS, AU, the academic and corporate space etc. and aim at incorporating new partners, vectors and actors (informal and non-formal) of change and groups whose values align with ours to: tackle the undue influence and abuse that corporate power has built over the years; defend against rising authoritarianism and preserve the independence of policy and decision-making for West African leadership – advocating for limiting outside interference that does not hold West Africans progress at its core. We will continue our work with faith, religious and broader set political leaders on conflict management and community peace-building and social cohesion.

**What are we adapting and discontinuing?**

We will discontinue our work around citizenship in its current form. Instead, we will reorient it to focus on the root causes of the issue related to citizenship. Our previous investments in the sector positions partners in Cote d’Ivoire and Guinea to push for implementation of recent national reforms while we focus our efforts on root causes of the issues within our work on rebuilding peace and social cohesion, preventing and countering violent extremism and enhancing security.

Our work on elections will focus on structural and technical issues that impact on the legitimacy of elections, with special attention to pre- and post-election issues that will ultimately determine election day outcomes. In the past, OSIWA has supported the Election Situation Room (ESR) model and toolkit to enhance the integrity of electoral processes and this has been adapted and replicated in other regions with other funders, however we will no longer be investing in traditional election observation.

4. Strategic Pillars

4.1 Democratic Governance

Under the Democratic Governance pillar, OSIWA will seek to protect the civic space and increase integrity in the democratic process and accountability in democratic and public institutions. The work will be carried out under 3 portfolios: Defense against authoritarianism, Electoral Integrity and Enhancing security. Central to these three portfolios, is our work on citizens organizing and mobilization which will be our key implementation tool.

4.1.1 Defense against authoritarianism

West Africa is witnessing democratic regression and corresponding shrinking civic spaces. The space is contested by power holders and a small group of civil society organizations and even smaller groups of active and engaged citizens. As a result, the key values of open society – freedom, justice, inclusion - are under threat. In an effort to uphold those values, the goal of this strand of work is to improve and keep the civic environment open by leveraging civic actions and advocacy opportunities to counter authoritarianism, including 3rd termism, corporate and foreign enablers, and the tools and channels that new authoritarianism uses to legitimize itself such as securocrats, cyberspace disinformation, social bribery and conflict. This is
our priority focus under the democracy governance pillar because of its overarching impact on the promotion of accountable and responsive governance environment.

We will rise-up to the challenge and help CSOs adapt and design new ways of mobilizing and organizing based on culture, history and innovation. This will be achieved by encouraging and supporting the expansion of the concept of civil society and the design of new sustainable models for CSO/NGOs which are increasingly under internal and external attack, building a culture of organizing, backing nascent social movements, supporting civic actors working in ungovernable spaces, and development of narratives around the positive role of CSOs and fellowships.

We will amplify defense against authoritarianism by growing the number of engaged and equipped citizens in the region. Key approaches include the use of organizing tool kits, supporting social movements, using edutainment for civic education, design and implementation of social accountability tools and strategic litigation to promote human rights and social change. We will provide legal support for civic actors and journalists facing judicial and state harassment in their quest to provide citizens with credible information and facilitating access of human rights defenders (HRDs) to regional and global support mechanisms and to advocate for a legal defense fund for HRDs at risk.

We will partner with AfRO, HRI, OSI, PIU, OSF Haiti Foundation (Fokal), Art Exchange, ECOWAS, influential diplomatic missions, Frontline Defenders, WACSI, WADR, local communities, and African Commission on Human and People’s Rights and other relevant actors.

4.1.2 Promoting integrity in the electoral process

One indication of democratic regression is the frayed social contract between government and citizens. Elections lacking in integrity result in elected officials who are disconnected from and unaccountable to citizens. The legal exclusion of viable candidates, militarization of elections, compromised voter registers and abuse of state power to further partisan interest, are among some of the key gaps that have been revealed by an assessment of elections and democracy in the region. As a result, key values of open society – justice and participatory democracy are increasingly under threat. As an effort to uphold these values, the goal of this strand of work is to improve the integrity of elections.

We will mainly focus on removing barriers (legal, administrative, political, economic and social) to universal and equal political participation, facilitating citizens’ access to information around the electoral process. We will discontinue our work on holding elected officials accountable given that our presimeter initiative has taken off in the region. We will support a convening to review the presimeter initiative as a way of supporting the field and managing our exit.

We will support think thanks; policy and legislative reform initiatives; and CSOs on how to address situations of force majeure in the management of electoral processes (especially postponement of presidential elections) in West Africa.

We will support policy discussions around our areas of focus and reflections around cyber-enabled threats, and, promote the use of edutainment and technology to improve citizens’ access to electoral information and integrity of electoral process.

We will support integrity assessments of key electoral operations such as voter registration and adoption of legal frameworks. These assessments will be critical in our advocacy for legal reforms and policy changes.

In achieving the above, we will work closely with like-minded organizations, local tech firms, election management bodies (through ECONEC), domestic and international election observation groups, media regulatory bodies, judiciary, investigative

* These include the Global State of Democracy indices, Andreas Schedler’s seven conditions that should exist if regular elections are to fulfill the promise of effective democratic choice; Larry Diamond’s definition of democracy and Robert Dahl’s ingredients of democracy.
reporters, CSOs and election think tanks and expert bodies. We will continue to work closely with AfRO and the OSF Executive office.

**Promoting Security Sector Governance and Countering Radicalism**

The lack of respect of human rights principles in the fight against violent extremism contribute to radicalism and insecurity. In addition to the violent conflict between the military and insurgents, we have conflict between communities across ethnic and religious lines, conflict between the state and the human rights communities and conflict between the military/civilian forces and civilians. Mis/disinformation and lack of transparency around the human rights abuses results in the absence of objective narratives from the field and limited opportunities for communities caught up in the conflicts to tell their stories and be part of designing workable solutions. The goal of this strand of work is to promote security sector governance and respect for human rights in addressing radicalism and managing conflicts in West Africa.

We will support CSOs, media and the public to increase popular pressure around security sector accountability on human rights, military spend and civilian task forces. We will also support multiple narratives to ensure that communities have a voice in telling stories of their security challenges.

We will support the change of narrative around insecurity and terrorism to focus on governance gaps and increase community agency.

We will partner with AfRO, HRI, IMI, CSOs, media, traditional and religious leaders, the public and research and advocacy on the links between terrorism, organized crime, climate change and foreign interference (cattle rustling, kidnapping, trafficking, poaching etc.)

### 4.2 Economic Justice

Our goal is to support West African economic systems that are fair, respect fundamental rights, redistributive and create sustainable wide-ranging opportunities and protections for all. To achieve this, we will anchor this work on: Rebuilding social contracts through common goods (health and education); Improving the governance of natural resources to diversify economic structures; and building new economic realities that shape just climate and economic transitions.

#### 4.2.1 Social Contracts and Public Services: Protecting and promoting Health and Education for all

At the center of building strong social contracts between citizens and governments, is the trust that citizens will be able to access quality, efficient and effective essential services. Although there has been progress, for far too long these have remained elusive for many, particularly those traditionally underinvested in. A lack of regard for basic rights, poor governance, and inadequate financing, as well as weak leadership and feeble institutions have undermined the provision of quality public health and education services in West Africa. This is a threat for changing economic systems and democratic stability. The goal of this work is to promote citizens’ access to quality, inclusive public health and education as a fundamental right. We will do so by supporting movement building, empowering citizens to fight corruption and address the ramifications of commercial expansion/privatization in the delivery of these services, as well as support progressive decision makers. We plan to address this from three perspectives.

- **Rights**: Most West African states have recognized the rights to health and education, with some doing it constitutionally. We will support the mobilization of citizens and processes that put the right to health and education as core policy principles. We will particularly support an agenda for removing regulatory social, cultural and financial barriers that limits the ability of women, the poor, vulnerable, marginalized, and the remotely located to access public services.

- **Governance**: We will put citizens at the core of movements addressing corruption and the regulation of the role of corporate actors (support the ability of citizens to influence, track and obtain redress for abuses in the management of public resources and unregulated privatization in health and education sectors). This will include strengthening
anti-corruption tools, monitoring public procurement processes, making widespread use of access to information regulation, better monitoring of national free quality public education systems, as well as universal access to healthcare.

- **Financing:** We will look to advance pathways to support domestic public services financing and influence the governance of aid/debt/private sector and global health and education financing. Recognizing that global responsibility to preserve health and knowledge needs to grow, we will look to shape and influence global conversations on the governance of aid and global health and education financing.

We will partner with CSOs, global, national and regional alliances and movements, regional bodies working on health and education governance especially those serving vulnerable groups including women and children, people with lived experiences and people who use drugs while strengthening collaboration with our network programs (PHP, EJP, and ESP) and continue to use resources for joint programming to do this work.

**4.2.2 Natural Resources Governance: A Pathway to Diversified Economic Opportunity**

The extractive sector has for long been the bedrock of economic activity in West Africa, and in many countries, accounts for a substantial part of state revenue. It has however, faced the plural challenges of not only being largely opaque, at odds with the necessary social, environmental or economic rights and protections of people, they have also not led to a necessary diversification of economic activity in a way that could provide much wider opportunities to citizens. The goal of this strand of work is to support the social and political capital of citizens in creating the conditions for better governed extractive industries that respect rights and lead to long term economic transformation and opportunity.

- **Rights:** We will support the adoption and implementation of policies, laws and practices such as the Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) framework to protect community rights, reduce opacity and discretion and improve resource management in the natural resource sector nationally and regionally.

- **Accountability:** We will continue to support efforts to advance transparency on contract and beneficial ownership, transparency locally and globally aimed at mitigating rampant corruption. We will support domestic efforts that address fiscal leakages and loopholes undermining government revenue from mining and oil and gas sectors. In parallel, we will support efforts for public pressure for accountability in the management and reinvestment of revenues.

- **Transformation:** We will supply targeted policy support to countries looking to develop and expand on long term plans to transition away from extractive industries, and towards diversified, climate sensitive and people centered systems.

We will partner and collaborate with African foundations on continental campaigns, and EJP to advance harmonized and coherent policies and ability building of critical actors in this area of work.

**4.2.3 New Realities: Power in Economic and Climate Transitions**

The effects of the global pandemic can either reinforce current power structures or help chart a path for rebuilding economies around justice, equality, social protection, and climate transitions. As we enter a time of potential cyclical crises in the coming years, not always health related, building resilience in economic transformation will support and enable progressive West African voices (citizens, academia, private sector) to play a much bigger role in shaping the future of economic thinking, resilience planning, policy and its tethering to democracy and justice. The goal of this work is to enable West African voices to play a bigger role in shaping economic and political discourse and alternatives. We plan to address this from three perspectives:

- **Just Transition:** At a crucial time in the global climate debates, it is fundamental that African voices influence domestic policy and global discourse. We will strengthen West African agency and the interests of formal and
informal groups of workers, as well as research and advocacy centers to engage in just transitions climate plans, particularly around agriculture, energy and infrastructure.

- **Regional Integration:** The regional integration agenda provides West African countries with a framework to build agency in improving both trade governance terms and practice, as well as address from a stronger bargaining point, broad financing for development concerns, notably debt vulnerabilities, for the benefit of citizens. **We will support both citizens led movements and regional processes putting forward ways to increase opportunities and protections of formal and informal workers in trade agreements, as well as increase civil society’s involvement and influence in easing debt restructuring and international financial institutions governance.**

- **New Economic Thinking:** We will support West African voices and groups advancing for new economic ideas, policies and politics. **We want to see the emergence of gendered, feminist and sustainable agendas for economic progress, which challenge and propose alternatives to the orthodoxies of current economic planning.** We will support multidisciplinary research, applied policy alternatives and social dialogue, that build political pressure for change.

**We will partner with AFRO, OSJI, HRI, and EJP on climate change and land reform by engaging in knowledge exchange, information sharing and joint programing. OSIWA will also work with farmers unions, academia, think tanks advocates, women and youth led groups at regional and local level to advance this work.**

### 4.3 Equality, Justice and Human Rights

The goal under the Rule of Law and Human Rights pillar is to **promote and build local agency for the enforcement of the rights of vulnerable groups**, especially as it relates to access and opportunity for the excluded, poor and under-represented in communities. To achieve this, we will work across three portfolios: **Criminal Justice and Sanction Reform, Equality and Inclusion (of women, persons with disabilities and LGBTIQs), and Rebuilding Social Cohesion.**

#### 4.3.1 Countering the criminalization of poverty and supporting innovative justice delivery

While justice delivery remains an endemic problem, the dysfunctions of the criminal justice systems across the region are well documented and disproportionately affect poor and vulnerable persons. Years of underinvestment, corruption and lack of innovation in the justice sector often lead to poor outcomes for persons who come in contact with the system. The many emergency measures recently adopted to tackle COVID-19 have made an already bad situation worse. The measures have not only increased police abuse and violence but have compounded inhumane and degrading treatment of mostly poor people who have been subjected to arbitrary arrest. **The goal of this strand of work is to reduce barriers to the fair administration of criminal justice in order to meet the justice needs of the most vulnerable.**

We will streamline our interventions, within community justice mechanisms and the formal criminal justice system, to focus on the entry point of the criminal justice system, which is at the heart of the challenges vulnerable persons face when they come in contact with the system. The withdrawal of most donors in this area leaves OSIWA as one of the few organizations in the region working in this area.

**We will build on successes in the use of low-cost local technology solutions in Senegal and Sierra Leone for enhancing coordination and accountability and extend the work to other countries. A new initiative in this area will be to support budding local social enterprise entities in the criminal justice sector to support innovation in the sector. This has become even more urgent with the coronavirus pandemic where in-person justice services are disrupted by the emergency restrictions imposed to fight the pandemic. Our advocacy for the adoption by West African states of e-justice services therefore takes on a new significance in this context.**

Through creative campaigning, advocacy and strategic litigation, **we will challenge discrimination in law enforcement against the marginalized**, especially in the enforcement of petty offences laws and start experimental work on police accountability.
We will also take advantage of law reform processes to promote due process rights and sentencing reforms, including for drug related offences.

We will deepen our collaboration with HRI and OSJI in this area of work and explore new areas of collaboration with the GDPP.

4.3.2 Confronting inequality and exclusion of under-represented groups

All West African countries are parties to major international instruments which prohibit discrimination, yet institutionalized exclusion fueled by social and cultural stereotypes continues to be widespread. COVID-19 has laid bare and exacerbated some of these inequalities especially with respect to women who bear the burden of homecare and make-up the majority of frontline workers as well as the informal economy.

While the region has seen a lot of progress in girl-child education and a progressive discourse on women’s political participation, this has not translated into tangible gains in the field. Women in the region continue to suffer from unprecedented levels of violence and exclusion from effective participation in the political, economic and social affairs of their communities. In the same vein, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) continue to be excluded and subjected to inhumane and degrading treatment, while the existence of a plethora of homophobic laws and attitudes continue to expose LGBTIQ persons to violence and human rights abuses.

The goal of this strand of work is to amplify the voices and work of discriminated and under-represented groups to constructively organize and engage in the promotion, protection and respect of their rights. The focus will be to equip these groups with the tools and knowledge necessary for navigating the complex cultural, religious and socio-economic dynamics which enable and sustain discrimination, in order to change harmful societal norms and practices.

The anchor of this work will be on women, especially those who face multiple discriminations, with a specific focus on tackling violence. We will leverage the recent upsurge in feminist and women’s social movements in the region to challenge inaction against violence and discrimination and strengthen the advocacy and mobilization capacity of the various movements for the defense of women’s rights. Emphasis will be laid on delocalizing organizing in urban centers to rural areas. We will also support economic empowerment initiatives, including social impact opportunities for women in rural areas and urban peripheries.

The impact of COVID will be disproportionately felt by vulnerable groups, especially PWDs and LGBTIQs who, due to societal attitudes, are already marginalized and discriminated against. Like the survivors of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) who were shunned by their communities and discriminated against due to the stigma around the EVD, we foresee that COVID-19 will also bring about a new category of vulnerable people. We will advocate for an integrated approach to ensure that PWDs are not left behind in COVID-19 response and recovery by supporting PWD networks and possible new survivor groups to meaningfully engage and actively participate in post pandemic response and recovery.

We will continue our collaboration with HRI to support organized groups of persons with disabilities and LGBTIQ groups to challenge discriminatory laws and attitudes and document and expose rights abuses.

4.3.3 Rebuilding Peace and Social Cohesion

West Africa is a region with a long history of conflict and the ever-present specter of volatility occasioned by ethnic rivalries, competition for resources, lack of opportunities and exclusion. The situation is exacerbated by growing instability and violent extremism in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. In the affected areas, the social fabric has been torn apart leaving the communities deeply divided. Invariably, young people who are the most affected are an easy target for recruitment into terrorist and armed groups. The securitized approach to counter-terrorism efforts in the region has also alienated local populations who feel invaded and under threat from security forces who routinely violate rights with impunity. This approach has also been characterized by the marginalization of minority groups and ethnic/religious discrimination, which are the same conditions conducive to spread of terror and violent extremism. Decades of violent politics and ethnic and religious conflict
Driven by prebendalism and state capture has frayed social cohesion within communities and made it more difficult for citizens to collaborate to demand for public goods.

The goal of this strand of work is to support initiatives which mend fragile community bonds and address the root causes of conflict, including questions around belonging, identity and citizenship to prevent conflict. We also want to mend/rebuild the social cohesion required for successful citizens organizing and social movement building.

To make peace sustainable, we will make a concerted effort, through strategic advocacy, to connect local concerns to national conflict resolution and reconciliation processes, including accountability for grave crimes and improving outcomes for victims in transitional justice processes.

We will pay particular attention to the plight of women and young people in these areas who are often neglected during national reconciliation processes.

We will focus on the intersection of public goods, social cohesion and human rights to help build understanding of the mutual benefits and rights of all citizens, irrespective of gender, class, and ethnicity, to public goods. The aim will be to build solidarity and inter-connectedness amongst citizens and make it easier for citizens to organize for around mutual rights.

We will partner with AfRO, OSJI and HRI and other like-minded organizations in this area of work.

5. Concepts and Initiatives: Supporting futures thinking, policy process, research and innovation

While OSIWA has traditionally been a grant-maker, we have adapted over the years to offer the most relevant support in the region, extending our toolkit beyond grantmaking. We will use our distinctive role to advance futures thinking/scenario building for the region around core values and opportunities. During this strategy cycle OSIWA will lead and shape progressive innovative ideas and approaches around four concepts and initiatives: (i) data and digital rights; (ii) renewal and dynamism in West Africa’s civil society; and (iii) the use of art and culture to advance its transformative governance agenda.

5.1 Data and Digital Rights

Digital threats to democracy, including hate/dangerous speech are a feature in nearly every election in many West Africa countries, and at the same time, there are crackdowns on civic space by authoritarian regimes threatening freedom online. The COVID-19 has highlighted the urgent need to both collect and analyze data better, and to protect citizens privacy/personal data against surveillance, connect the disconnected (often the more vulnerable groups), and combat dis/misinformation, manipulations, polarization while safeguarding free expression.

Our objective is to support the involvement of citizens groups in the governance of data and digital rights - the design of coherent rights-protecting policies, regulation, and application of technology and data rights.

5.2 Renewal and Dynamism in West Africa’s Civil Society

In the context of closing civic spaces and rising authoritarianism, there is need for renewal and innovation in civil society to counter these trends. However, West African CSOs face leadership transition challenges or the “the founder syndrome” which unnecessarily impedes their dynamism, motivation, credibility and ability to influence policy and make meaningful changes.

We will seek innovative ways to inject dynamism within civil society by creating opportunities for younger CSO leaders to enhance their leadership skills and their internal governance reform processes.
5.3 Art and Culture

OSIWA has long recognized the importance of creativity, history, culture, art and symbolism in driving its theory of change and that a more informed and engaged citizenry will be the catalyst for improved governance required to achieve West Africans vision for a better future.

Within the 2021-24 strategy cycle OSIWA will continue supporting creative activism and artistic spaces. We will also be an integral part of OSF’s [2021-2024] African Cultural Heritage Restitution & Re-appropriation Initiative. We will mobilize stakeholders to build a momentum around restitution, provide technical assistance to governments filing official claims, and support ECOWAS action plan. We will do this work in collaboration with the OSF Art and Culture Program, OSF President’s Office Special Initiatives, AfRO & the Africa Foundations, FOKAL (OSF Haiti Foundation), artistic spaces, ECOWAS, African Union, government, artists, CSOs and academics.

6. Implementation Strategy

Our Programming

Identifying interconnectedness and root cause analysis will guide our implementation strategy. Aspects of our programming which cut across pillars and within pillars will be given priority e.g., building economic power has implications for equality and democratic governance while improving public service delivery benefits from better fiscal policy and resource management. As we respond to unforeseen threats and opportunities within the cycle, a guide to engagement will be whether interventions are designed to tackle symptoms or causes.

We will be deliberate about sequencing our work to provide long term funding to anchor partners, as well as invest in incubating new actors. We will be more deliberate on (i) our technical and organizations support mechanisms to partners; (ii) ensuring that partners and collaborators are as diverse and representative as the region is and (iii) supporting more women and young people leading organizations and movements.

Our People

OSIWA’s greatest resource is the team. We have created an empowering and exciting environment in which everyone can make their contributions to advance open society values.

As part of the strategy process, we have undertaken internal assessments resulting in a review of our organizational structure to align with our new strategy and address operational challenges we have faced. Our structure provides room for improved efficiencies and allows for adjustments and reassignments to ensure we have the skills required to achieve our strategy. Our staff performance management system, with clear responsibilities and accountabilities, is a critical component in the delivery of the strategy and we have taken steps to strengthen decision making through the participation of heads of country offices and other units in the senior leadership team.

We have reviewed our salary structure to ensure that it is equitable, competitive and based on market data.

Our Processes and Systems

We have also reviewed our internal control systems and accompanying processes to ensure efficiency, better coordination and coherence. OSIWA has a dedicated learning, monitoring and evaluation unit and has integrated this in its programming to improve quality and track both progress and challenges at various levels. Through this learning-oriented approach, we will build institutional knowledge and decision-making processes, apply insights and lessons learned from programs and grantees, assess shortcomings, and recommend options for future interventions. We have an in-house communication and advocacy unit that links us and our partners to media outlets, produces and edits advocacy documents on issues that matter to us, in
addition to other sets of publications that reach various audiences consistently. The OSIWA website is the hub of our communications activity and we will continue to innovate around our use of social media to engage.