

# LIVELY-HOODS

*Learning Agenda:*  
In between youth  
livelihoods and human  
rights in West Africa



# Credits

## **Co-research team**

Agnes S. Parker

Faith B. Larmie

Fatmata M. Kamara

Hawa Diallo

Ibrahima Sory Diallo

James Samba

Josephine F. Ngegba

Morlai Augustine Saio Kamara

Mulbah Isaac Flomo

Thomas Kingsley Justice Lebbie

## **Research design and coordination**

Fiammetta Wegner and Gioel Gioacchino

## **Editors**

Gioel Gioacchino

Fiammetta Wegner

## **Project coordination**

Alison Miranda

John Kabia

Souleymane Sagna

Dorah Muhanuuzi

## **Storytelling workshop**

Gioel Gioacchino

Maria Faciolince

## **Pictures**

Fatmata M. Kamara

## **Illustrations and graphic design**

Maria León and Julia Bolaños



# Contents



Introduction .....	5
<b>Part 1 Framing the Learning Agenda .....</b>	<b>7</b>
How to READ this Learning Agenda .....	8
Methodology: How we surfaced the stories .....	9
The co-research team .....	10
Concepts & questions .....	14
<b>Part 2 The stories .....</b>	<b>17</b>
From surviving to thriving .....	18
The link between education and access to the job market .....	26
Discrimination .....	32
Entrepreneurship .....	38
Conclusion .....	46



# About the Fund for Global Human Rights

The Fund for Global Human Rights is an international nonprofit that identifies and invests in the world's most innovative and effective human rights activists, organizations, and movements. Created in 2002 by a group of prominent activists and donors, the Fund connects grassroots human rights defenders with flexible funding, long-term strategic support, and a global network of allies. Since its founding, the Fund has raised and invested \$140 million into the work of more than 1,000 activists and organizations in countries around the globe. Activists supported by the Fund have overturned unjust laws, secured progressive policies, and improved millions of lives worldwide.

## About Recrear

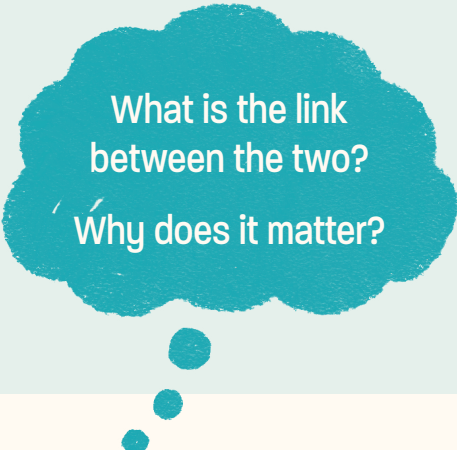
We are a community interested in social transformation from a place of emotional grounding, creativity, co-creation, and care. Our mission is to co-create knowledge that manifests new realities within ourselves, our communities, and humanity. We work with civil society actors, grassroots organizations and social movements as well as INGOs, funders and academia. We design and organize programmes aimed at bringing people together to learn about their inner, collective and social realities in a group setting. Together, we then translate learnings to accompany the healing and transformation of organizations, movements and systems.



# Introduction

**Youth livelihoods:** how young people secure the resources to have dignified lives.

**Human rights:** the freedoms all human beings deserve irrespective of their background or conditioning.



What is the link  
between the two?

Why does it matter?

As we pay attention to the spaces between *youth livelihoods* and *human rights* in West Africa, the experiences of young people start appearing with more diversity and nuance. We notice the barriers, the struggles, and the abuses that young people endure. Young people also show up with their diversity, daily efforts, creative power, innovation, and persistence.

We get to know Fatmata, who drops out of school because she has no money to pay the fees. As she strives to earn a living as a receptionist, she discovers a demand for women photographers in her community. Motivated by this realization, she embarks on a journey to learn photography, ultimately establishing her own thriving business: Girls Behind the Lens.

In this space in between human rights and livelihoods, we connect to Adam's story; we learn about his deep disappointment when his fashion design business is forced to shut down because people in the village are worried he will turn children into "gays."

We witness James's entrepreneurial spirit as he strives to create innovative solutions for individuals with limited mobility, inspired by his wheelchair-bound uncle, a teacher who walked with him to school during his upbringing.

**This publication is designed for civil society organizations, funders, youth activists, and anybody with a serious commitment to reflection and action when it comes to nourishing West African communities with healthier, satisfied, safer, and more-fulfilled young people.**

The purpose of this learning agenda is to inspire curiosity, facilitate profound learning, and provide a roadmap for future research. This is a tool to frame questions, propose activities to address them, and inspire actions for meaningful progress in securing the livelihoods and fundamental rights of young people.

To us, this tool is effective if, as you read, you get to ask yourself something new, challenge your assumptions, go out there and have meaningful conversations with young people, or come up with new project proposals.



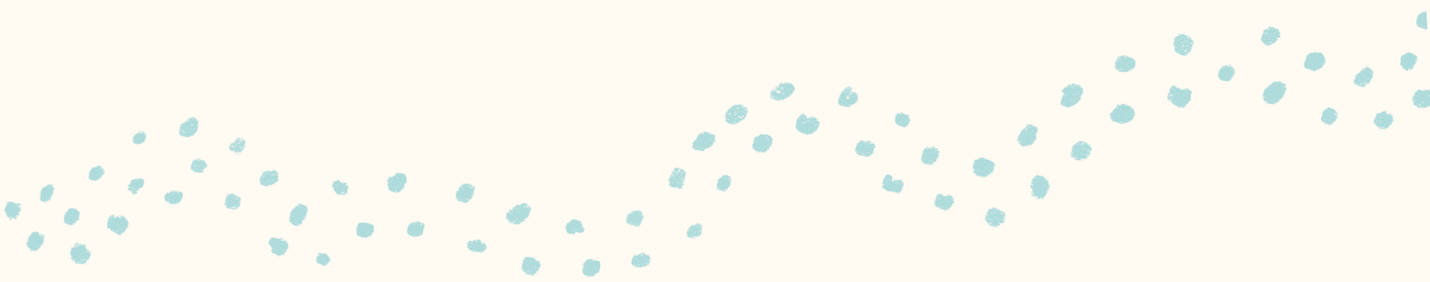
To inspire you, we present real life stories created through the participatory storytelling approach that frames this learning agenda. We focused on stories for their ability to touch emotions, extend our imagination, help us create empathy with people we have never met, grasp complex topics, and learn about how change happens. We trust stories' power to produce, shape, and shift our knowledge.

We invite you to then engage further with this learning agenda by organizing research activities and workshops to contextualize the seed of this research in your community. We hope this document will be a springboard toward more community-led research, which takes seriously that the lack of sustainable livelihoods is one of the root causes for human rights violations toward young people in the region.

Sincerely,  
The Co-Research Team



*If we pay attention, we realize the need for livelihood moves people everywhere: during our workshop in Forecariah, Guinea, while we were discussing the challenges to youth livelihoods, a young man was quietly rowing his dugout canoe around the mangroves, water bottles as fishing floats, catching crabs.*



# 1

# FRAMING THE LEARNING AGENDA



- How to READ this Learning Agenda
- Methodology: How we surfaced the stories
- The co-research team
- Concepts & questions



## How to READ this *Learning Agenda:*

How we came up with this document—who researched and told the stories— will unfold in the next sections: “How we surfaced the stories” and “the co-research team.” Here, you will read the methodologies we used in this process and the biographies of the co-research team. We then include a brief section unpacking some key concepts we will use across this publication.

We organize the learning agenda around four main themes: “From Surviving to Thriving,” “Link Between Education and Access to the job Market,” “Discrimination,” and “Entrepreneurship.”

Each theme is unpacked through key stories that open up the conversation. They are followed by some reflective questions that we hope will inspire you and that might stimulate further explorations.



# Methodology

## How we surfaced the stories

What is the process behind this learning agenda?

In 2019, the Fund for Global Human Rights (the Fund) launched a [participatory grantmaking \(PGM\)](#) initiative to resource [youth civil society in Sierra Leone](#). The PGM pilot was also a tool to sense how partners were framing and prioritizing their work with young people. Of the initial ten groups selected, six were working to advance youth livelihoods. This sparked a reflection within the Fund: Why and how should a human rights fund support youth livelihood projects?

**In 2023, the Fund contracted Recrear as a learning partner to investigate how human rights and livelihoods intersect in the lives of young people in West Africa and to design and deliver a participatory process to create a learning agenda.**

**As part of the process, we put out a call among the Fund's partners and recruited a team of ten youth co-researchers (18 to 25 years old) based in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.**

Co-researchers were engaged for a four-month process: they received a stipend to train and practice how to research their communities through a participatory lens.

They engaged in the following activities:

- **They each were interviewed** by the Recrear team, so as to have the experience of being interviewed and of sharing their insights and personal stories.
- Then, **they participated in three online sessions** that, over six hours, included:
  - an introduction to get to know each other and generate learning questions;
  - a session on storytelling; and
  - training on carrying out semi-structured interviews.

The questions generated in the first session were clustered and analyzed together with the interview notes by the Recrear team. This led to identifying four themes to guide our research. Each co-researcher:

- Picked a theme and **carried out two interviews** to further investigate the theme.
- **Wrote a story** inspired by their interviews.
- **Met in person in Forecariah, Guinea.**

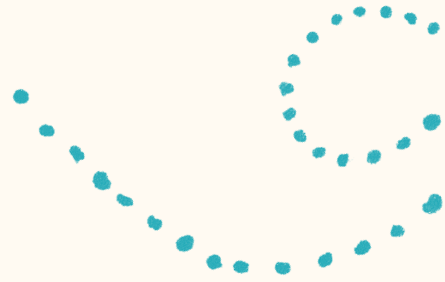
During the in-person workshops, co-researchers participated in:

- A two day storytelling training.
- A talking circle to share their stories.
- A story clinic to review and finalize their story.
- A workshop to share their stories with a group of 40 representatives from civil society organizations in West Africa.

The Recrear team then compiled all the insights generated in this *learning agenda* and reviewed the document with the whole team.

Below, we introduce ourselves as the co-research team.

# The co-research team



**Agnes S. Parker, Liberia**

My name is Agnes and I live in Kakata, Liberia. I am the founder and executive director at Releasing Girls' Potential, a local organization supporting girls through mentorship. My ambition is to see a peaceful Liberia where youths can live and fulfill their dreams. I am also committed to eliminating female genital mutilation. I volunteer for the at-risk youth at Samuel Grime's initiative, and I am an Ambassador at Young Ambassador for Peace-Liberia. I am training to become a journalist with a community radio station in Kakata.



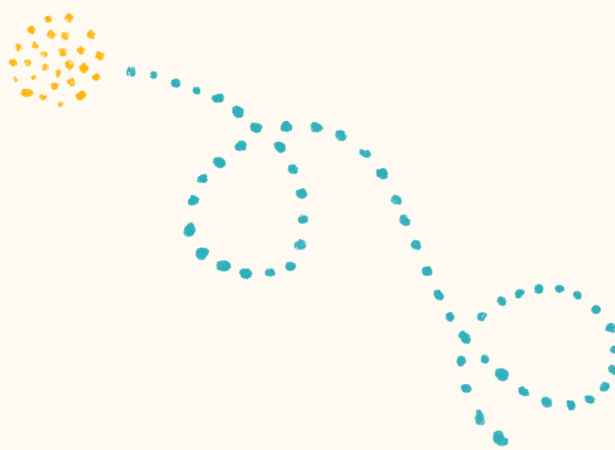
**Hawa Diallo, Guinea**

I am Hawa Diallo, a young Guinean activist. For the last five years, I have dedicated myself to supporting young girls in my country. Since university, I decided to campaign and actively work against violence towards young girls with the Club of Young Female Leaders of Guinea, an NGO with over 500 members across the Guinean territory. I am currently the Administrative and Logistics Manager of the Club.



**Faith B. Larmie, Liberia**

My name is Faith and I am a 24-year-old Liberian. I am currently working as the acting Country Director for Action for Justice and Human Rights. I am trained as a Biologist and Epidemiologist. Above all, I am a Human Rights Activist.





## Thomas Kingsley Justice Lebbe, Sierra Leone

I am the Co-Founder and CEO of TOMDACT SL Limited, Co-founder of GYNP school of technology, Co-founder and programs director of Global youth network for peace, and Executive President of the Mano River youth network. I am a certified business consultant, a website designer, a social worker, and a feminist and youth activist with seven years' experience in the field of gender and inclusion, child protection, education, and sustainable peace building.



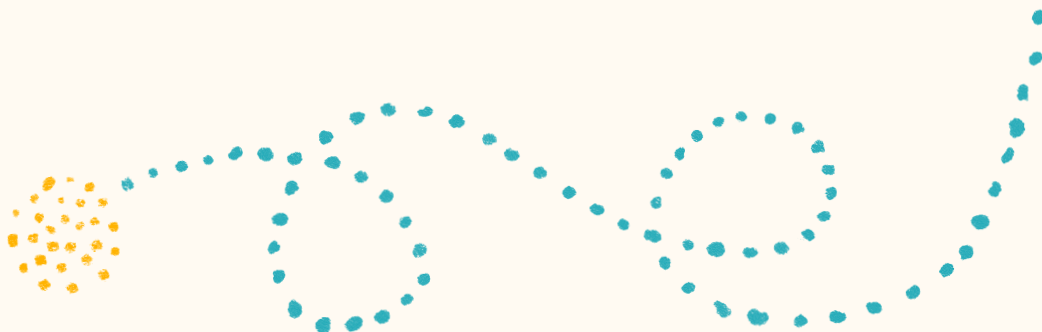
## Mulbah Isaac Flomo, Liberia

I am a Liberian, passionate about advocating for the rights of children and youth. I also work to empower women economically. As a Minister of the Gospel, I spread spiritual teachings. Additionally, I serve as the Chairperson of the National Children and Youth Advisory Board (NCYAB-Liberia). I am also an Entrepreneur, and I founded and currently lead Formidable Empowerment Network (FEN-Liberia).



## Ibrahima Sory Diallo, Guinea

My name is Ibrahima and I come from the Kindia region of Guinea. After completing my university studies in public administration, I ventured into the world of associations working with the MAEJT (African Movement of Children and Young Workers). In 2018, I founded ADEPE (Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs), an organization working to build young peoples' power and protect their rights while advocating for a healthy environment.







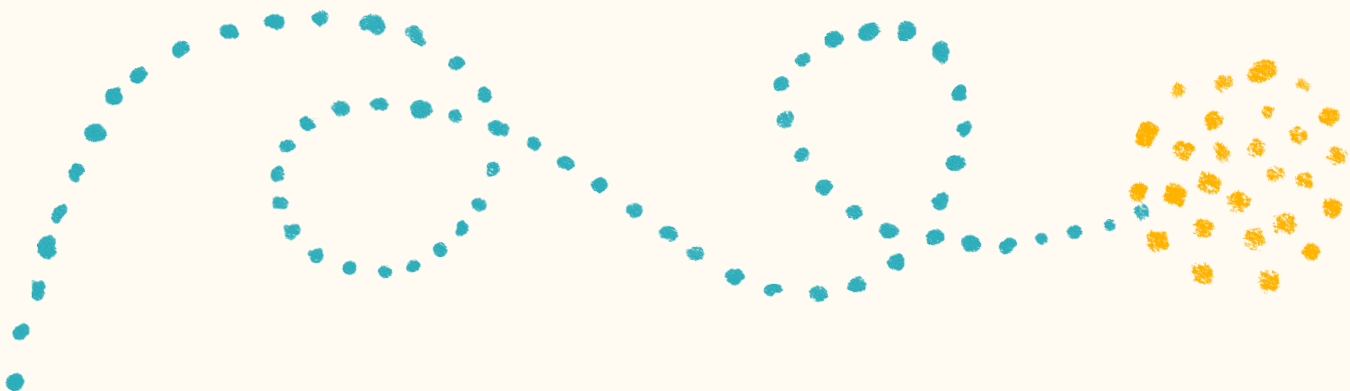
## Morlai Augustine Saio Kamara, Sierra Leone

I am a co-founder and president of Pekin to Pekin Tok for Human Rights. Additionally, I hold the role of founding member and Regional Secretary General of the Mano River Youth Network. In the business realm, I am the founder and CEO of BiSAJ Farms, focusing on agribusiness. Furthermore, I co-founded MASI Investments.



## James Samba, Sierra Leone

I am a problem-solving innovator and passionate advocate for sustainable development, youth empowerment, and inclusivity. I address social and environmental issues, particularly in the areas of disability rights and inclusivity. I also provide entrepreneurship and skills training to young people to empower them and create more opportunities for their growth and development.





## Fatmata M. Kamara, Sierra Leone

My name is Fatmata M. Kamara. I'm a final-year student of Fourah Bay college. I am a photographer and I co-founded Girls Behind the Lens, a group of young female photographers. I am committed to fostering creativity and creating employment for young women and girls in Sierra Leone.



## Josephine F. Ngegba, Sierra Leone

I am a Sierra Leonean third-year student at Institute of Public Administration and Management, (IPAM) University of Sierra Leone, where I am pursuing a BSc in Public Sector Management. I am a youth and child's advocate with over seven years of experience in the field of advocacy and youth activism.

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## Fiammetta Wegner

I am the Director of Strategy and Learning at Recrear where I experiment with participatory learning processes and organizational accompaniment. I co-designed Recrear's participatory storytelling methodology. Recently I have been focusing on strengthening the relationship between funders and grantees, especially youth, feminists and LGBTQI movements. I love to facilitate creative and reflective processes that allow people to connect to themselves and others. I am a mum to a baby daughter and a dancer.

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## Gioel Gioacchino (PhD)

I am the Director of Research at Recrear and I design and implement action research projects all over the world. I am committed to accompanying organizations to transform their culture and reflect on their path. I love writing and facilitating group processes experimenting with a range of creative techniques. I live in Colombia with the community of el Juego—there we use the conflicts that emerge in our day-to-day to develop new conflict resolution methods.

# Concepts & questions



Here we present the questions and themes that acted as a guide throughout the research process. As part of the online workshops, each co-researcher generated one or more questions that felt meaningful to them. We identified four themes that repeated across the questions and created a mother question that would embrace them all. Each theme was then framed through a few key questions that informed the interviews that co-researchers carried out.

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## ***Mother question***

How do young people experience livelihoods as a human right in the context of West Africa?

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### Theme 1

#### ***From surviving to thriving***

- What strategies do young people use to survive economically?
- What needs to change so that young people are not only surviving but are also able to thrive through their livelihoods?

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### Theme 3

#### ***Inclusion/discrimination***

- Who can access livelihoods and who is excluded?
- What forms of discrimination exist and how they impact young people and more vulnerable groups?

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### Theme 2

#### ***Link between education and access to job market***

- In what way the education system and curriculum does prepare young people for work and in what ways does it fall short?
- Where do young people develop their skills to sustain themselves?

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### Theme 4

#### ***Self-employment due to lack of opportunities in the job market***

- Why do young people pursue self-employment entrepreneurship?
- In what way the local economy is enabling or disabling self-employment?



Below, we unpack some key concepts and terms to then let them go in the rest of the publication, centering the more precise and approachable language of stories.

We define the terms **human rights** and **youth livelihoods** in our own words. We then provide some quotes by research participants sharing what they consider **dignified work**, a concept we see emerging in between the definitions of **human rights** and **youth livelihoods**.

## What do we mean when we say youth livelihoods?

*“Securing the necessities of life.”*

*“Supporting one’s existence, especially financially or vocationally.”*

*“It means a survival scheme for independent and sustainable living.”*

*“Activities that lead to financial freedom—ability to leverage and get the revenue you need.”*

## What does it mean for you to have dignified work?

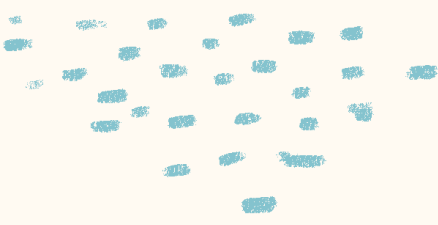
*“I’m relaxed, I’m safe, I have enough money to afford an education.”*

*“It gives me an opportunity to satisfy my own needs, help others in the process, and be able to change society.”*

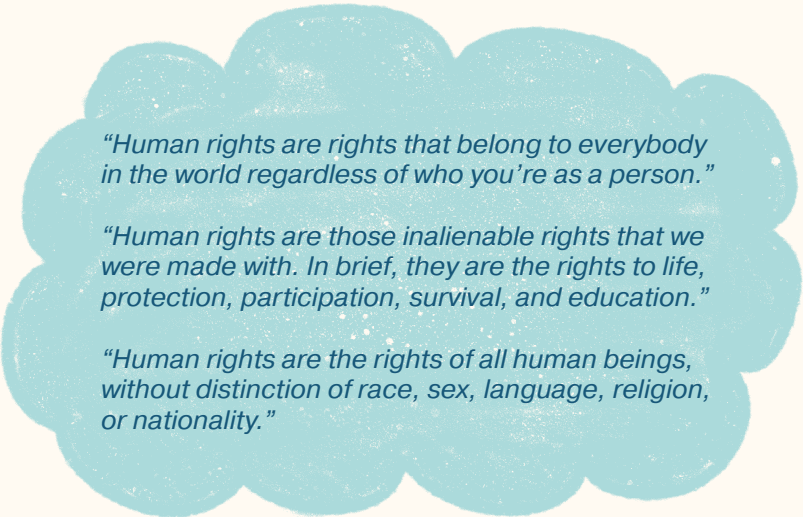
*“It makes me feel happy, excited and blessed.”*

*“To become independent from my family and be able to support my family members financially. I could support them by buying food and paying school fees for my siblings. I would like to contribute to my community too.”*

*“Dignified work enhances the way we think about society, people and the world at large. It gives us new experience and should bring personal, social and environmental advancement. It helps to understand the needs of all the people around us.”*



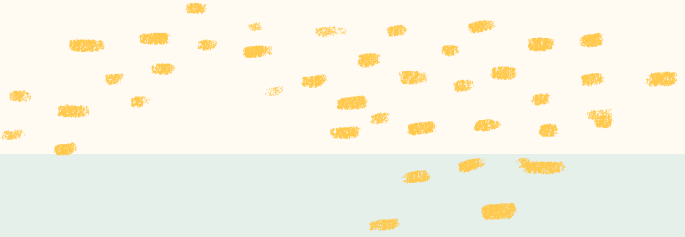
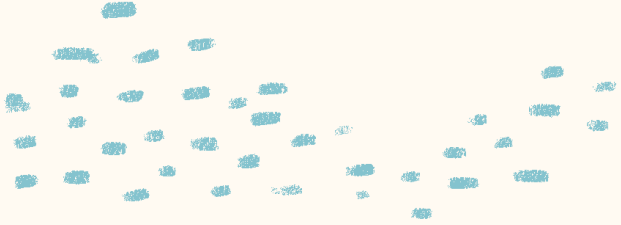
## What does it mean when we say human rights ?



*“Human rights are rights that belong to everybody in the world regardless of who you’re as a person.”*

*“Human rights are those inalienable rights that we were made with. In brief, they are the rights to life, protection, participation, survival, and education.”*

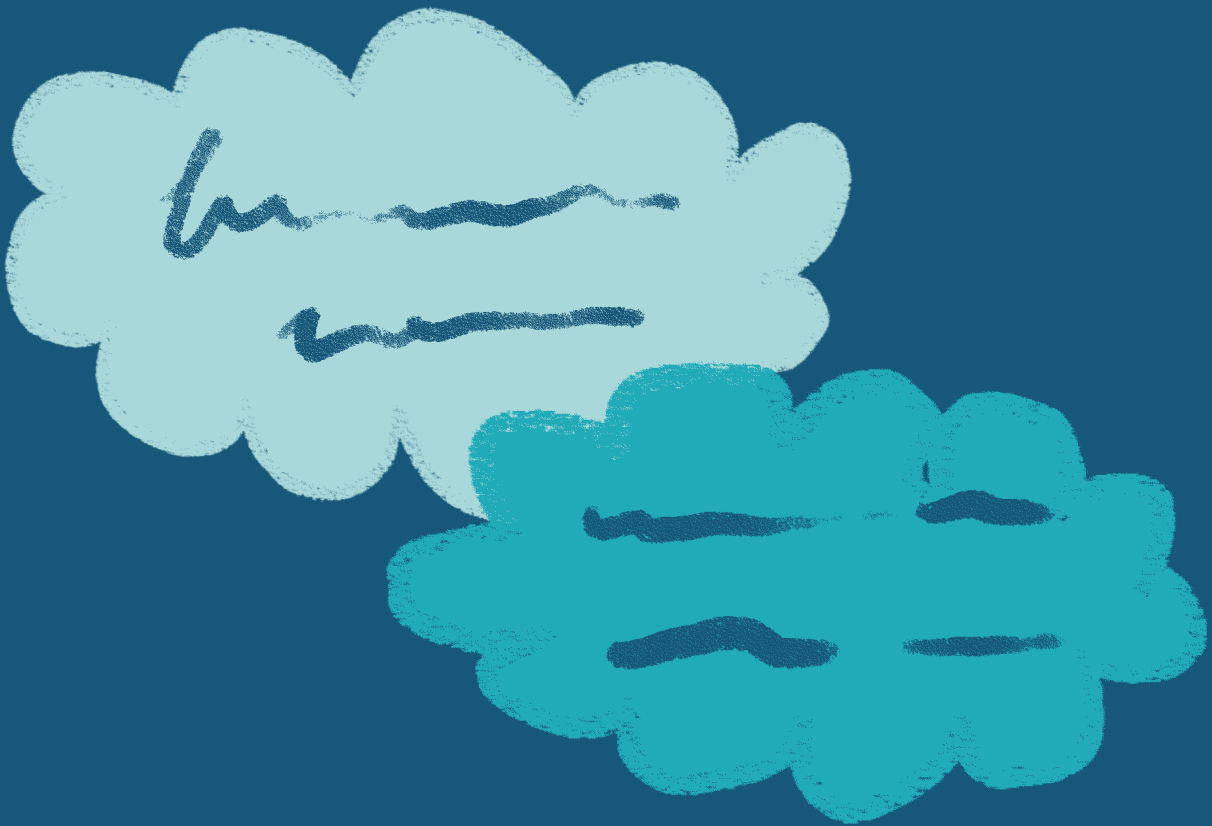
*“Human rights are the rights of all human beings, without distinction of race, sex, language, religion, or nationality.”*



Although these themes allow us to organize the research insights, when you dive into the stories, you’ll become aware of how everything is interconnected: people, ecosystems, institutions, ideas. We invite you to pay attention to how the four themes emerging from this research (from surviving to thriving, link between education and access to the job market, discrimination, and entrepreneurship) intersect and speak to one another.”

# 2

## THE STORIES



- From surviving to thriving
- The link between education and access to the job market
- Discrimination
- Entrepreneurship

# From surviving to thriving





## STORY 1

# Girls Behind the Lens



It's a bright morning and the sun is picking up heat, drying the land outside the office. Fatmata is sitting at her desk. She is a receptionist at a photography studio, where she began working after dropping out of college because she couldn't afford the fees. Today, she is getting ready to go to a rural location with Moses, her boss.

Moses started with photography as a young boy, when he found an old camera in the market. He began by taking pictures of politicians, then slowly started offering the same service to other people in the community, including people who couldn't afford it. He would offer to take pictures for free because he had learned how powerful it was for people to see themselves captured on a shiny piece of paper.

Fatmata has the utmost respect for her boss and, since she started working at his studio a few months back, their bond has strengthened. She is excited about the job today: an NGO wants to profile local women farmers working the land with traditional ancient practices, which are the best to preserve the environment against climate change.



After a three-hour car ride, Moses and Fatmata arrive at the location and meet the women farmers. Moses starts to take pictures, but there seems to be something off. Being from a rural area herself, Fatmata suspects that the women find the idea of being photographed by a man embarrassing and uncomfortable. She suggests maybe she can take a few photos. Moses agrees and effectively the women relax and the photo shoot goes smoothly.

Days later, in the dark room, while looking at the pictures Fatmata had taken, Moses says, "You are really talented!" He pauses and adds, "As far as I know, there are no female photographers in our community, probably in the whole country!" Fatmata feels a shiver in her spine.

In the weeks that follow, Fatmata allows herself to dream about opening her own studio. With no money, little education, and the way their society discriminates against women, she thinks this would only ever remain a dream...

Fast-forward five years, it's a bright morning and the sun is picking up heat, drying the land outside the office. Now, Fatmata is in her own studio. She passes the guard gate and the receptionist and says hi to her colleagues. Everyone at her company, Girls Behind the Lens, is a woman.

Right at the entrance of the studio, there is a picture of the five women, including Fatmata, who founded the organization. Fatmata trained them informally after being trained by Moses. They started with their phones and no studio. With their first grant, they managed to buy some cameras. With their second grant, they bought editing software and rented office space. Fatmata loves her work because, through photography, women can tell their own story.

Now, their business is growing steadily and they also train other girls to become female photographers. Some of the girls that were trained by her and her colleague were able to go back to education, and others were able to secure a livelihood. Fatmata was able to go back to college herself, and now her dreams are getting even bigger. She wants to learn graphic design and documentary filming. She would also like Girls Behind the Lens to open more branches where other girls can become leaders. In the future, Fatmata wants to leave the organization to other girls. She believes that it is important to make space for others.

## Reflective questions

For most young people in West Africa, work is perceived as something that, at best, enables survival, but certainly does not fulfill their dreams. As you read Fatmata's story, reflect on the experiences of young people in your context.

- **What skills, opportunities, or attitudes would allow young people to start and succeed in their own projects?**

In this story, we meet Fatmata as a young woman who had to drop out of school to support herself. Once she saw the opportunity to start a business in photography, a profession dominated by men, she allowed herself to dream. Her success was also possible because she had the impulse to extend the opportunity to work as a photographer to other women.

- **What platforms and support are available or could be available to female youth entrepreneurs in your community?**
- **How can women support other women to amplify their dreams in societies that are dominated by men?**



## STORY 2

# Self-Financing Human Rights Work



*“I come from a family of seven children, I have three big sisters and three little brothers. When my father died, my mother, who had been a housewife, became a teacher in a Koranic school to provide for our needs. We were housed in adverse conditions and had difficulty getting food. All around me, people also suffered: I feel lucky because my family managed to stay together despite the adversities.*

*My friends stayed at my place and shared the food my mother prepared. I remember well: in my room we were seven: my three brothers and three of my friends who were homeless. These were very difficult times for us and we ate only two times / day.*

*During this period, I was disgusted by all the suffering I saw around me, but I had no means to help my community get out of this situation. Since then, I have set myself the goal of helping people who are in need.*

*After university, I started working as a Commercial Agent and, with my savings, I set up a nonprofit organization called ADEPE (Actions for the Rights of Children and Environmental Protection). Through this organization, I managed to support more than 213 children and young people in vulnerable situations.*

*Today, I work with a dealer company as an official representative of major brands in the Republic of Guinea Conakry. I direct 25 percent of my monthly salary to my NGO, and the other part is used for family and personal expenses.”*



Ibrahima, Guinea.

### Reflective questions

As in Ibrahima’s case, inability to fulfill basic needs can be an eye-opener toward social injustices. Where governments and other institutions fail to provide security, young people can develop a strong sense of solidarity as a way of collective survival. Many of the co-researchers involved in this project dedicate time to volunteering or fund organizations with the aim of supporting youths fulfilling their rights. Working as human rights defenders is neither lucrative nor sustainable. To support their work, they do multiple jobs and find a way to cross subsidize their civil society engagement with other income-generating activities.

- **As you read the testimonial above, reflect: What motivates young people to be human rights defenders? Have a conversation with a young person in your community who engages in civil society spaces: What are their personal values and goals? What motivates them?**

# Going Abroad and Risking Life



*This transcript comes from a podcast made as part of group work during the in-person gathering in Forecariah, Guinea, in May 2023. The group was asked to tell a story of the challenges faced by young people as they attempt to sustain their livelihood in West Africa. The audio is [available here](#).*

**[Young woman]:** I work all day without rest. I am really exhausted, and the money I make is not even enough to support my needs. I regret coming to Egypt.

**[Friend of young woman]:** Oh, I am so sorry! I never thought that a potential like you could...

Remember the clothes you made for me? It was so beautiful. You also remember my sister's wedding dress? On her wedding day, many admired her dress.

I am so sorry this could happen to you. Many young people in our community still look up to you as an inspiration to them.

I am so sorry for that.

**[Young woman]:** I know. I used to see the pictures of my friends in Egypt. They took photos from big buildings saying life is cool for them. I thought it could be the same for me. But now, I'm doomed. I remember my father used to tell me...

(MEMORIES)

**[Father]:** My daughter, don't worry. We know life is hard here, and you are not making money here. We are suffering. Your younger ones are suffering. Go to Egypt. You will be paid huge money! You will be paid in dollars! You will be able to take care of us. I have my friend who can help you cross the border. Don't worry.

**[Friend of father]:** Don't worry about anything. Crossing the borders, I have got all controlled, immigration... In fact, as I speak, I have already arranged accommodation. Just last week I sent ten people, and they are living good and they are sending money back home. So you have nothing to worry about, my friend. I will take care of your daughter and everything will be good.

(END OF MEMORIES)





[Young woman]: I was just... The guy said he was gonna take care of me. I was going to get rich and I was going to go to school. But now, his promise is not fulfilled.

I was raped. All the money I brought to Egypt, everything is gone.

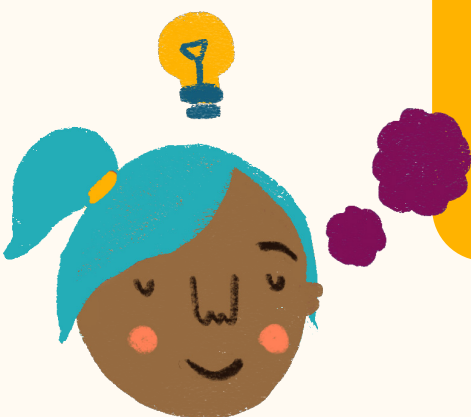
[External narrator]: The nightmare of a dream. This is a story of livelihood, immigration, and economic liberation. This is what a lot of young African girls go through. They believe life is better abroad. But when they get there, they are faced with very harsh realities.

In the past few months, many girls of African descent have committed suicide in Egypt being exploited by families.

### *Reflective questions*

The voices that emerge in this learning agenda speak of stagnant economies, where self-employment is sought due to lack of opportunities in the job market. In order to secure their livelihood, many young people turn to solutions that put their lives at risk or expose them to exploitation and slavery.

- **What needs to change to deconstruct the idea that migrating is the only way for young people to thrive?**
- **What initiatives do you know that support West African migrants and advocate for migration policies to be more humane? How can they be strengthened?**



## What young people say about *surviving and thriving*

*“I have been volunteering for 4 years, and I currently receive some income, although irregular, in my position of Administrative and Logistics Manager at the Club. Now, to have some income and have the resources to continue my engagement with the NGO, I collaborate with a young Senegalese living in Guinea to make local fabric bags. I sell them online.”*

Hawa, Guinea.

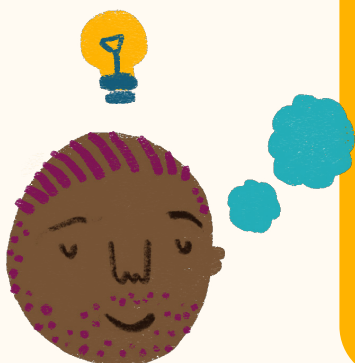
*“We don’t have an income. We collect money ourselves: whoever can in the team puts in some money and then we use it to carry out projects. We don’t have any relationship with any donors, I don’t really know them.”*

Agnes, Liberia.

*“Policies undermine young people. For instance the process of registering an organization is long, time confusing and takes a lot of financial resources. Some government policies are very extractive.”*

Morlai, Sierra Leone.





## Reflective questions

To keep afloat and walk toward their dreams, most young people tend to engage simultaneously in multiple jobs, activities, and businesses. No matter the number of jobs and entrepreneurial activities they engage in, it remains a struggle for young people to lead economically sustainable lives.

- What is the culture around paying young people working in civil society organizations in your community/organization? Are they properly compensated?
- What do you take in consideration to decide how to properly compensate young people working in your organizations?

*“[Young people face] unhelpful societal structures and stigma. Society is not supportive, new ideas are not accepted well. Connections, political and economic interests count a lot here. At the same time, there are very few job opportunities. The economy is stagnant. The job market is impossible to enter.”*

Morlai, Sierra Leone.

*“Youths are often seen as dependent and troublemakers but I would like them to think of themselves as problem solvers. We need initiatives that help youth see their potential and give them the opportunity to develop skills and become self-sufficient. Most people rely on a day-by-day job, or no job. It’s a struggle to live day-by-day.”*

James, Sierra Leone.

- Identify two fixed stereotypes around young people in your community that are neither true nor helpful (e.g., young people are lazy). What program or campaign could you create to change these ideas?



# The link between education and access to the job market





## STORY 1

# Professional Dreams vs. the Reality



\* This is a simplified version of a theater skit that was proposed as part of a participatory storytelling process during the in-person gathering in Conakry in May 2023. The skit was used for a forum theater exercise: a group prepared it to showcase the challenges young people face pursuing an education.

### Scene 1: Dream Denied

[Faith is applying to become a doctor after her degree in biology. She is sitting nervously in a waiting room, holding her CV. The door opens, and Faith meets the selection panel.]

**Panelist A:** Good morning, ma'm. Can I see your CV, please?

**Faith:** Good morning.

[Faith hands her CV to the panel—she is both confident and nervous.]

My name is Faith, and I'm here to pursue my dream of becoming a doctor. I want to be a cardiologist.

**Panelist A:** [looking through the application] Young lady, you have good grades, you studied biology...do you know that competition for medical school is very high? Unfortunately, we cannot offer you a place in the program.

**Faith:** [disappointedly] I have worked so hard for this... what should I do?

**Panelist B:** [sympathetically] Faith, have you considered environmental science?

**Faith:** [disappointedly] Thank you, sir. Goodbye.

[Faith exits the room, feeling lost.]

**Comments from audience:** Faith dreamt of something that was not possible in her context; she did not receive appropriate orientation. She has to reinvent herself.

### Scene 2: The “You are a very beautiful young woman” drill.

[Faith finished her degree in environmental science and is searching for her first job with an NGO. She is dressed in formal attire, carrying her CV. She enters the NGO office for an interview.]

**Interviewer:** [looking at Faith up and down] Welcome, Faith. We appreciate your interest in working with our organization. Please have a seat.

**Faith:** Thank you, sir. I am very interested in this position, sir.

[Faith hands the interviewer her CV.]

**Interviewer:** [taking a quick glance at the CV while smirking] Faith, you don't have much work experience, but I can see you have a lot to offer. What other “skills” do you possess?

**Faith:** [*taken aback*] I studied biology, sir, and then environmental science. I think this job would be a very good experience for me.

**Interviewer:** Yes, Faith, but you know, experience is important. But you are a very beautiful young woman [*he leans forward inappropriately*]. How far are you willing to go to get this job?.

[*Faith is paralyzed, not knowing what to say. She walks away and does not get the job*]

**Comments from audience:** Faith is being harassed. This is so common in our countries for young women to be sexually harassed and treated inappropriately during job interviews. Faith now has relevant education experiences but it's still not enough to get a job because on top of that she needs practical experience.

## Reflective questions

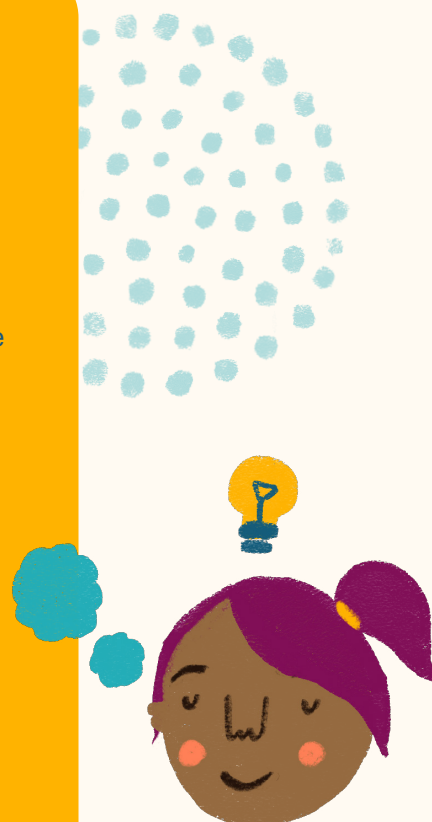
Young people in West Africa recognize dignified work is an important element to enable freer lives. And the first step to their livelihood is getting an education. But co-researchers reflect that education, especially higher education, is a privilege of the few. Those who manage to go to university nevertheless still feel unequipped to find work.

In her story, Faith shares her disappointment with studying to become a doctor only to find out, at the end of her studies, that the profession is regulated and very competitive. Her story points to a lack of effective orientation for young people while in school. Considering the gap between higher education and the job market, we ask:

- **How can education offer activities and practices to prepare young people to navigate and transform society (instead of being overly conceptual)?**
- **How do young people receive mentorship in your context?**

When Faith redirects her career, she meets the challenges of being sexually harassed during job interviews.

- **What are the extra challenges women face compared to men when accessing educational and working opportunities?**
- **What strategies or initiatives exist in your community to combat sexual harassment during job interviews and in the workplace?**



## STORY 2

# Moustapha

*Written by Ibrahima Sory Diallo.*



Moustapha and I grew up together in the town of Dubreka, in the Kindia region of Guinea. While I was growing up, this rural area of Guinea had limited access to public education, a weak presence of the state, and no development NGO. Most young people lived in despair. I met Moustapha when I was 11 years old. I interviewed him because I have always been so inspired by his resilience, determination, and courage.

I still remember how affected I was when Moustapha's dad got sick and eventually died. We were 15 years old. Our paths separated then, in the sense that he had to drop out of school, while I could continue with my education. He dropped out because, suddenly, he found himself responsible for his entire family:

*"My father had married two women and I am the only boy and the oldest sibling. I have four sisters. Our mothers are sellers at the market and my sisters were too young to work. I was forced to drop out of school and figure out how to find means of survival for my family."*

When I share this story, some people tell me, "It was not Moustapha's responsibility to take care of his siblings." I think: sure, in theory. In practice, it is so common amongst the people in my community to step up and support other family members in moments of need.

So, Moustapha needed to take care of his family and wanted his younger sisters to be able to go to school. He did any job he could. He took jobs as day laborer in masonry, carrying bricks and sand or fetching water:

*"I was insulted, paid late. Sometimes I was paid in-kind, for example some rice to eat, but it was insufficient."*

Personally, it touched me deeply to accompany him during this period. I worried about him, but I did not know how to be by his side. I remember thinking Mustapha could be so successful if he could only go back to school...

But then, he surprised me with his resourcefulness. When he was 17, he met Mr. Gassama, a man who had a business doing topographic maps. Initially he offered him a job in construction sites, as a property attendant and selling plots. Moustapha saw this as an opportunity to better provide for his family's needs, so he started working there and slowly gained Mr. Gassama's trust. I remember he was excited about the job. With time, Mr. Gassama agreed to train him:

“Today, I am doing an apprenticeship in topography. I earn some money and I get trained. If I had start-up funds, I would focus on agriculture. It would give me hope to grow food for me and my family.”

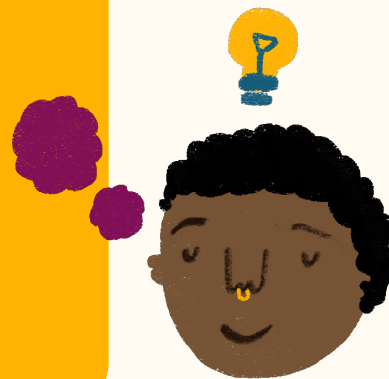
I asked Moustapha if his sisters managed to go to school as he hoped. He responded:

“Brother, it’s impossible to study without support. To study you need money, and if you do not have it, you can not continue your studies - it is not possible. Two of my sisters dropped out and now work with their mothers at the market. My other two younger sisters still study in public schools - they have held on despite all the difficulties.”

## Reflective questions

Moustapha’s story shows how the possibility of receiving on-the-job training can be transformative. So, going beyond formal educational spaces:

- **Where do young people develop their skills to sustain themselves?**
- **What would it look like to incorporate more experiential elements into pedagogical and training programs?**





# What young people say about *the link between education and access to the job market*

*“More and more people don’t have jobs. They leave school because there are no opportunities because of the economic situation. They start working as prostitutes, they don’t see the point of going to school as there is no access to jobs anyways.”*

Agnes, Liberia.

*“My job in this organization changed me a lot, I learned a lot of practical skills that I didn’t learn in school. It advanced my personal growth. It was a real opportunity.”*

Faith, Liberia.

*“Attending international conferences and programmes made me learn about how other young people sustain their rights. Also, I have been exposed to ideas on how other people bring forth their livelihoods.”*

Morlai, Sierra Leone.

*“I went to some conferences and online videos on how to become a leader. These are organized by various NGOs and local youth groups (like Students Against Corruption)—a local organization. I got the inspiration [to found my own company] there. I still go to these types of events and pass on the learning to my team. “*

Agnes, Liberia.

## *Reflective questions*

Young people acquire the skills to secure or build their livelihoods on the go: through informal networks (friends, a mentor), and online free content (such as on YouTube and social media).

Youth-led organizations are also spaces for young people to offer and receive peer-training and attain skills they cannot access elsewhere. Participation in youth organizations and human rights activism provides new perspectives, abilities, and opportunities for personal growth.

- **What is education to you?**
- **What challenges do young people face in accessing relevant education and training programs in your community?**
- **Which educational experiences have enabled you to trust yourself more and did the educational experiences enable you to strengthen your inner compass?**



# Discrimination





## STORY 1

# My Sad Gates

Written by Thomas Kingsley Justice Lebbie.



### ABOUT MOHAMED

Mohamed Sillah is a young person who lives in one of the Amputee houses in Kambia town. Mohamed got his disability at the age of six, as a result of the 11-year-long rebel war in Sierra Leone. Since then, his parents did not send him to school, saying that a one-handed person will not be able to learn or write in school. At age 11, Mohamed decided to register himself in one of the community primary schools.

### EARNING A LIVING

Today, Mohamed is a small-scale commercial farmer, a social worker, a volunteer teacher, and a university student. He earns a little from these sources and yet he has a lot of responsibilities because he uses his earnings to take care of his younger siblings.

**“I get my living through farming and from the stipend I get from my work as a social worker. I have children that I take care of (a brother and two sisters) and they depend on me for survival.”**

At the moment, Mohamed cannot sustain himself financially. He cultivates a small farm and the proceeds from the farm are not sufficient for himself and his siblings. The small stipend from his social work is not enough for him either. As a person with disability, there are works Mohamed cannot do—although he is now educated, most institutions will not employ him just because of his disability.

### THE SAD GATES

**“Yes, I am discriminated against. Yes I have many barriers. I call them MY SAD GATES. As a person living with disability, I am not getting the required support from the government and other agricultural institutions to support my farming. While others are getting support, I am always excluded.”**

Though Mohamed is making so much effort to sustain his livelihood, he confirms that there are too many barriers. When Mohamed decided to go into farming, he was denied access to a piece of land by the community stakeholders. They don't seem to agree that a young person with a disability can go into commercial farming. Even microcredit institutions do not give loans to most young people, especially young people with disabilities. There is an ideology that they might not be able to pay back, so they are simply not given access at all.

Sadly, most programs designed by the government, private, or non-government institutions do not take into consideration the interest of young people with disabilities. Access to education is another key challenge: most schools, skills training centers, and vocational institutions are not accessible to persons with disabilities. This limits them from learning a skill that will enhance their livelihood.

The underlying problem is that people with disabilities are considered worthless in society, thus no one thinks of empowering them.

**“My nightmare is that I have gates that are hard to break, but I am hopeful of getting through.”**

## THE WAY OUT

Mohamed suggests that the way out will be vocational and administrative skills:

**“I want to improve my farming skills as a person with disabilities. I dream of becoming one of the biggest farmers in my country. I also want to improve my administrative skills (proposal writing and other advocacy skills). I also believe that having a job that respects my disability and does not take it as a disadvantage will be great. A work that brings sustainable income, one that will bring food to the table, and take care of me and my siblings. That will advance my human rights.”**



### *Reflective questions*

The inability to contribute to society affects young people at large, but some groups are disproportionately affected. People with disabilities and from poorer backgrounds are often cut out of the society altogether.


- **What needs to happen for differently abled people to be able to use their experiences and skills to gain a livelihood?**
- **Ask people at your workplace or the shops and other businesses you visit regularly: What are some people they consider as discriminated against in your society? Then ask them if they would hire them and why or why not.**





## STORY 2

# Could I Have Thrived as a Gay Person in West Africa?



Thomas shares the story of Adam in front of a small group of civil society practitioners. He goes like this:

*“Adam is a gay. He is from a city in Sierra Leone and his family abandoned him because he is a gay. He wants to open a fashion design business so he goes to a bank but he is denied the loan, because he is a gay. He then manages to put together the money to open up a shop. He has the only fashion design business in town, and you’d imagine he could be very successful. But no, he is not. He is discriminated against, because he is a gay.*

*Parents are scared he will convert their children into gays. Nobody wants to be a homosexual. So he has to close up the shop, and go live in the streets.*

*Imagine you are Adam, be in his shoes: How would you feel? What would you do?*

*Imagine you are the people from the community. What would you do differently to help Adam live a sustainable life?”*

As I listen to Thomas, I am touched by the tone he uses to share the story. By his pauses, his confidence. I am impressed by the way he concludes the story with questions inviting the others to emphasize. Two minutes ago, I was just eavesdropping on the discussion, and now I find myself holding my breath, nervous and curious to see how the others will engage.

The older man in the group speaks next. He says something I cannot rephrase word-for-word, but the gist of it is: *“It is not the responsibility of the community, Adam needs to stay in the closet.”*

I sort of blank out, I start sweating cold. I hear the rest of the interventions in echoes, as if voices came from further away.

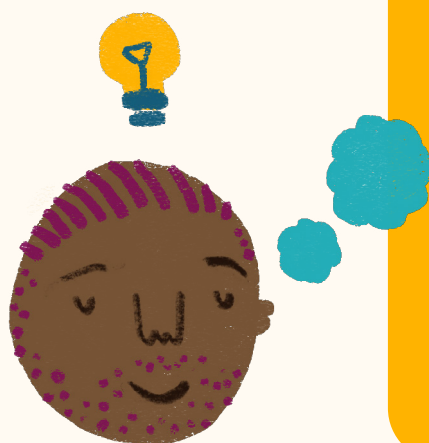
A younger woman shares how her little sister has a friend who is gay. She supported him by inviting him to come out to a close group of friends, so that at least he could be himself with them.

A man from Burkina Faso shares that an embassy had made available a grant for projects on LGBTQI youth. Nobody even applied.

At this point, I realize I am crying. I am there with the memory of coming out to my family as a teenager—the confusion, the panic, my own sense of inadequacy. I am there years later with the privilege of introducing a woman as my partner in a public setting, not worrying about being discriminated against.

I am feeling sad, angry, even guilty. I thought it was hard for me, but at least loving whom I loved was never illegal.

I have no idea what it meant to be gay in West Africa. Could I have worked if I had been born as a lesbian in Guinea, Liberia, or Sierra Leone? Could I have thrived?



### *Reflective questions*

The reality we encountered in this research is one where girls and LGBTQI youth are discriminated against and sexually harassed in their workplace, while setting up their own businesses, and even within their families. In this environment it is impossible for LGBTQI young people to lead a dignified life.

- **Which parts of your identity are accepted by society and which (if any) are you forced to hide? How does it make you feel to hide parts of who you are?**
- **How can people live a dignified life when they are forced to hide part of their identity?**
- **What does solidarity with people who are discriminated against could look like in your community or context?**

# What young people say about *discrimination*

*“Our society is male-dominated in every sector. There is a lot of discrimination towards women and transgender people. Jobs are given to males, even if a female has a better experience or knowledge.”*

James, Sierra Leone.

*“For girls, it is not easy. If there is a job and both a girl and a boy go for it, the job will be given to the boy. And men want to take advantage of girls sexually. A friend just told me her boss owned her money but he said he wouldn’t give it to her unless she engaged with him sexually, this happens so many times.”*

Agnes, Liberia.

*“Even in the human rights sector, it’s difficult to talk about LGBTQI issues, because in our country LGBTQI people are criminalized. Even speaking for or on behalf of LGBTQI people and issues is criminalized. It’s really hard to even talk about them. They find it hard to access work or livelihoods because they cannot even disclose their identity. If they do so they do it at their own risk. We cannot even protect them because it’s banned legally.”*

Morlai, Sierra Leone.

*“Some people in my community see me as a mere street vender/beggar and some see my condition like I am a witch or like I am cursed.”*

Person with disabilities interviewed in Sierra Leone.

## Reflective questions

James, Morlai, and Agnes tell the story of people who struggle disproportionately to secure their livelihood—they are discriminated against for their gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities. Have a conversation with your friends or work colleagues:

- **Imagine a society where people were not discriminated against. (You can do a painting activity using this prompt before starting in the conversation.)**
- **How big is the gap between your imagined reality and the one you live in? What would you need to happen to close the gap?**





# Entrepreneurship





## STORY 1

# Taking a Ride to School



When James was a child, he lived with his uncle Jeremiah, who was a teacher in the local school and used a wheelchair. Everyday, James and Jeremiah would go to school together. When James was a little kid, Jeremiah would take him on his lap and they would ride in the wheelchair together. Then James started walking next to his uncle.

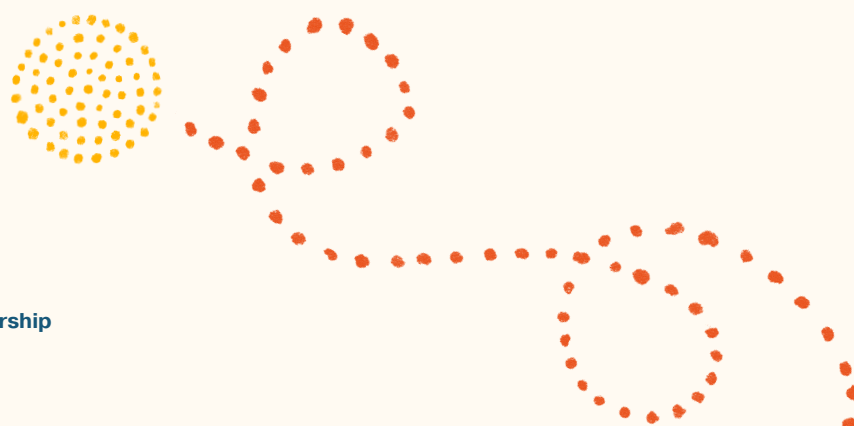
His uncle was fierce. Even when James was strong enough to push his wheelchair, Jeremiah preferred to continue carrying himself. Every morning, he would share stories about the city when he was young, or from the family history, or from ancient myths. James loved to listen to his warm and raspy voice. Despite his smile and captivating stories, James would notice how much Jeremiah struggled on the dirt road, with rocks, holes, speeding cars, and people running everywhere without caring for his condition.

Jeremiah wasn't the only one struggling with lacking infrastructure. Their village had no electricity. When they returned home after school, James could not study because it was already dark. He was behind his mates at school, and this made him feel embarrassed and frustrated all at once.

Then, one day while leaving the house in the morning, James and Jeremiah saw a track full of cable and electricity poles. In the turn of a few days, they were connected to the line. A few months later, James was first in his class.

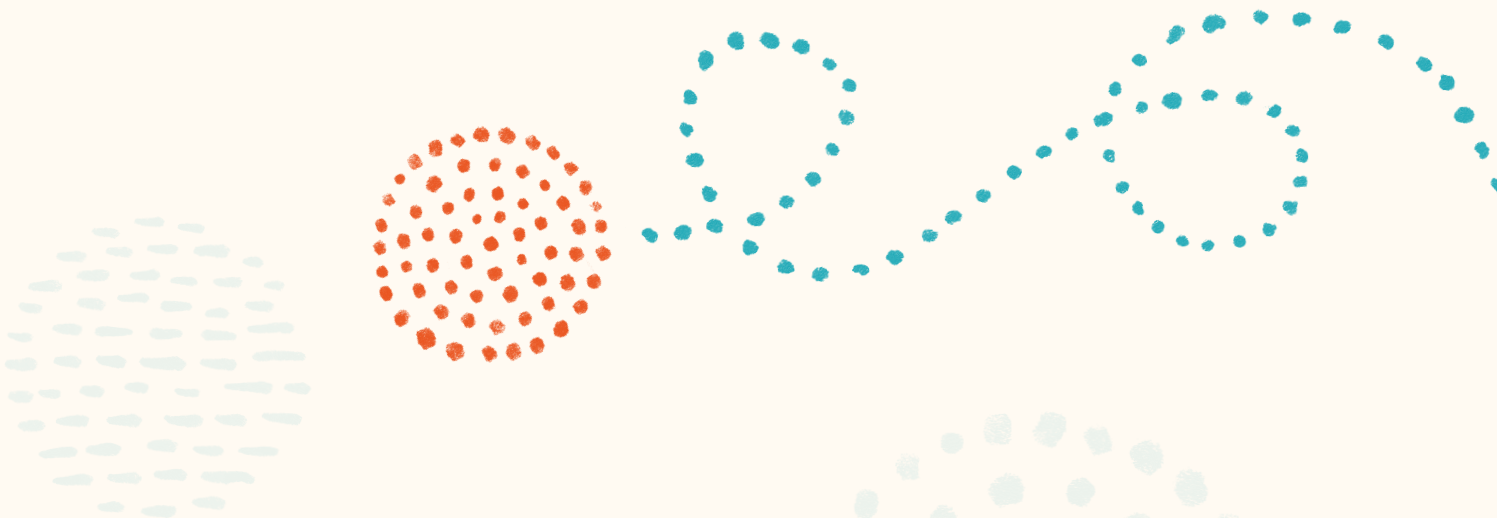
Now, Jeremiah loves to tell this story when they sit at the table for dinner. He has retired and James is a young adult. James never forgot the frustration he felt when he was a kid, unable to study at night, and he managed to turn that frustration into creative energy.

James became a social entrepreneur and founded an organization that finds innovative solutions for the problems he experienced in his community. His first project was to invent a solar backpack. The backpack has a solar panel on top, which absorbs energy while kids walk to school and gives them some energy at night when they need light to study.



Inspired by his uncle's struggles, his second project was to be an electric wheelchair. But James realized with his uncle that it was dangerous and didn't really make mobility easier. Instead, he designed and developed a wheelchair friendly tuk-tuk. This project took on a life of its own and, through some partnerships with corporate firms, James realized his dream to see his wheelchair-friendly tuk-tuk on the streets of Freetown. There are only a few available now, as the project is still in its pilot phase. But people who need access find it super useful because the tuk-tuk is a form of public transport, and they can afford to move around and reach parts of the city they wouldn't dare to go to before.

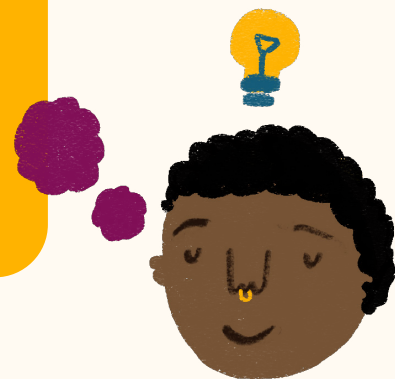
James took Jeremiah to the city, and they went for an amazing ride all over. He was so excited to take his uncle for a ride this time.



### *Reflective questions*

Most of the young people that were engaged to inform this learning agenda have a great sensibility toward the wellbeing of their communities. They see the opportunity to improve their livelihoods going hand-in-hand with that of improving the economy of other young people.

- **What are some problems in your community that have been addressed by young people? What set of skills or experiences made them able to address the problem?**
- **What skills are unique to young people and how can they be potentiated?**



## STORY 2

# My Experience with Network Marketing in Sierra Leone

*This is a small excerpt from an opinion piece written by Thomas Kingsley Justice Lebbie.*

In network marketing, you join a business by making an initial investment to receive some products. Then, you sell the products while you are also expected to recruit new people to become distributors. It is a hierarchical business in the sense that you start earning higher commission rates only when the people you recruit sell more.

When I was “recruited” to become a salesman, I was told all these amazing stories. I was shown photos of a guy in Nigeria who drove around with a big SUV car because of network marketing sales. But then I realized they were all false promises.

I know of so many people who took loans, or used their only savings, and lost their investment feeling frustrated and disoriented.

The problem is that in Sierra Leone poverty has made us so vulnerable, so we believe anything that anyone tells us—we will jump into anything that gives us little money, even if it is not profitable.

To me, network marketing is erasing potential entrepreneurs in Africa: When you are in the “loop” of the business it is harder to see any other opportunities but 90–98 percent of what you are working for goes to the pocket of the business owner.



## Reflective questions

In Thomas's story, we learn about the dark side of entrepreneurship. We see how young people need to be careful not to fall in vicious traps that can exploit and impoverish them while in pursuit of entrepreneurial opportunities.

- **Do you see suspicious activities being marketed as profitable in your country or community? Who is behind them?**
- **What are some obstacles to youth entrepreneurship in your own context?**
- **How can young people be better equipped to navigate entrepreneurial opportunities?**

Thomas points out that to be successful with network marketing, or any other entrepreneurial activity, you need a starting capital.

- **Where and how do young people in your community find access to financial resources to start their projects? What are the challenges associated with it?**





# What young people say about *entrepreneurship*

*“In my country, there are many young people who wanna do business and there are few opportunities and there are few job markets. The only way left is to leverage your talent and build on that to do a business.”*

Agnes, Liberia.

*“I created a side job for me and other young people that I started in 2020 and it’s an agribusiness, we grow, process, and sell vegetables. The profits are saved to buy new crops for next year and support economic and academic goals. Sometimes we get a lot of criticism [from people in the community], people don’t understand that it’s not just a way of getting food, it’s a way of contributing to other young people in my community and the environment.”*

Morlai, Sierra Leone.

*“It’s complicated and challenging, there are lots of expectations from family and society to be active in civil society and entrepreneurship work. It takes a lot of my attention, even if my mental health is not ok, I have to attend to my colleagues and the children and youth we support. People, even colleagues, might think that I make a huge profit but I actually struggle to support my own livelihood.”*

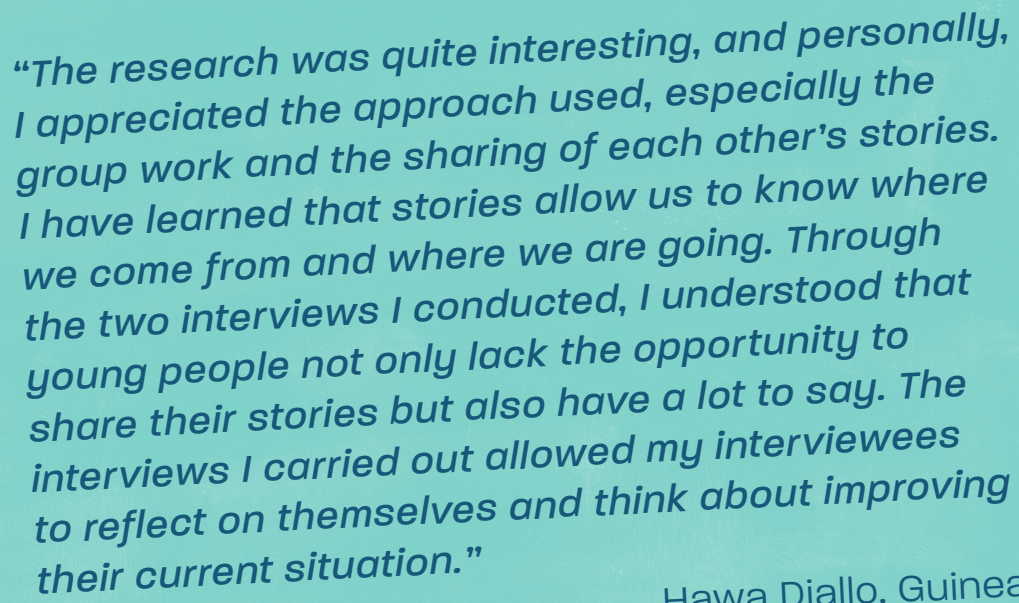
Morlai, Sierra Leone.

## Reflective questions

From the experiences shared in this learning agenda, we see that entrepreneurship can be a way of survival in a stagnant economy, where young people only have the choice to use their talents to make a living. But it can also be a way of contributing to society and the environment. We observe that independent youth organizations and entrepreneurial endeavors tend to have a social aim. Still, it’s important to keep in mind that the entrepreneurship world can put a lot of pressure on the shoulders of young people—it can cause a huge amount of stress and mental issues.

- **What type of ecosystem young people need around them to support their entrepreneurship?**





*"The research was quite interesting, and personally, I appreciated the approach used, especially the group work and the sharing of each other's stories. I have learned that stories allow us to know where we come from and where we are going. Through the two interviews I conducted, I understood that young people not only lack the opportunity to share their stories but also have a lot to say. The interviews I carried out allowed my interviewees to reflect on themselves and think about improving their current situation."*

Hawa Diallo, Guinea.




*"This research was inspiring and I got motivated. The stories were touching and emotional for me. I learned to be a good listener. I learned about resilience, collaboration, and networking."*

Faith B. Larmie, Liberia.



*“Personally, this research experience has allowed me to understand that despite all the difficulties that young people face, through inspiring stories, young people can overcome them and have hope, and even become activists in their respective communities.”*

Ibrahima Sory Diallo, Guinea.



*“This research was a learning process for me. Got to learn and unlearn. The different stories actually have motivated me to become an entrepreneur. I learnt to listen kindly and openly to people.”*

Josephine F. Ngegba, Sierra Leone.



# Conclusion

Thank you for reading! We hope you felt inspired by the stories we shared.

This learning agenda is an invitation to inquire further and discover how youth livelihoods and human rights interact in your community.



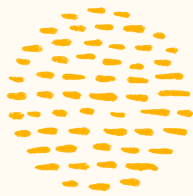


Since we know research is expensive and time consuming, we offer a proposal for how further inquiries could be carried out in a diffuse way.

To engage with this learning agenda, you might:

- Pick up stories and aspects of this research that you find interesting and important for your work and life.
- Carry out some bite-size learning activities. To make it easy to experiment with this, [we outlined a research cycle with step-by-step activities](#). You can adapt and implement all or just parts of it.

[Here](#) you can access the research activities that accompany the stories in this publication.



We look forward  
to continuing  
the conversation!





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THE **FUND**  
FOR **GLOBAL**  
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