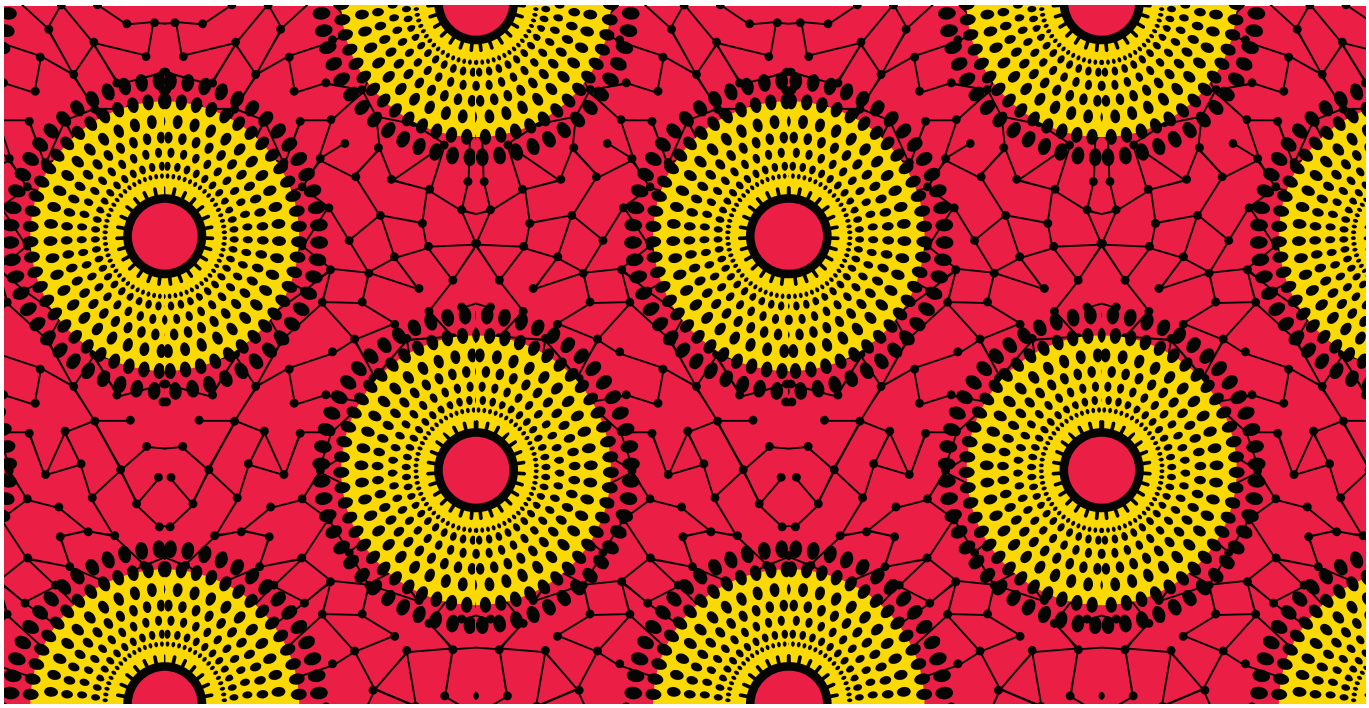
Ford Foundation
West Africa

Celebrating 65 Years of Partnership with West Africa



A journey to social justice

2025 | In-Depth Study

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Foreword
A Story of Those Who Dared to Imagine a More Just Future

For more than six decades, the Ford Foundation has stood with the people of West Africa through profound transformation, resilience, and renewal. From the hopeful days of independence to the challenging periods of political upheaval, and through today's powerful movements for equity, democracy, and justice, our presence in the region has been defined not simply by funding, but by partnership.

This report tells the story of that partnership, a narrative not of transactions, but of trust. It is a story woven through classrooms and courtrooms, village councils and civil society networks, quiet revolutions in thought and bold experiments in action. It is the story of individuals and institutions who dared to imagine a more just future, and of Ford's efforts to walk beside them, listen, and support their visions.

As you turn the pages of this report, you will encounter the lived histories of grantees, fellows, and community leaders who reflect the best of West Africa: its talent, its courage, and its commitment to justice. These stories remind us that real change begins in relationships, and that philanthropy, at its best, is about unlocking the power already present in communities.

Looking ahead, we remain steadfast in our belief that West Africa holds answers not just for the region, but for the world, in how we build inclusive economies, strengthen civic spaces, and uphold human dignity. The challenges are real, but so too is the potential.

On behalf of the Ford Foundation, I offer this commemorative report as both reflection and reaffirmation: of our enduring commitment to the region, of the deep gratitude we feel toward our partners, and of our shared journey toward justice.

Darren Walker,
President, Ford Foundation

Introduction
Ford's 65-year Journey in West Africa

It is a pathway characterized by partnership and perseverance, lit up by trust in people, in their ideas, and in their agency to shape their own futures.

This year marks the 65th anniversary of the Ford Foundation's presence in West Africa. Its first office opened in Lagos in 1960, as the region stood on the brink of independence and immense possibility.

Since then, West Africa has journeyed through waves of liberation, optimism, and upheaval. The early postcolonial decades were defined by state-led development, pan-African aspirations, and bold experiments in nation-building. Yet fragile institutions, uneven economic performance, and struggles over resource control soon exposed the challenges of decolonization. By the late 1970s and 1980s, drought, debt crises, and collapsing commodity prices ushered in hardship and instability, paving the way for military coups and authoritarian rule across much of the region.

The 1990s and 2000s brought new openings and transformations. Multi-party elections became more common, and ECOWAS assumed a stronger regional role in conflict resolution. A vibrant generation of civil society organizations emerged as voices for accountability and human rights. Meanwhile, structural adjustment policies reshaped national economies, expanding private enterprise but often deepening inequality. The discovery of oil, gold, and other natural resources generated both wealth and governance challenges, as rapid urbanization and population growth began to redefine the region's social fabric.

Between 2010 and 2025, West Africa has continued to navigate complexity and change. While democratic institutions remain uneven, civic movements—from #EndSARS in Nigeria to feminist and youth-led campaigns across Ghana and Senegal—have reenergized demands for justice and participation.

> "Ford has offered more than 2,700 grants to 1,098 grantees, totaling over half a billion dollars."

Independence Day: Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa on Nigeria's day of freedom, October 1st 1960.

The region now faces pressing challenges: climate change, insecurity in the Sahel, and persistent inequality. Yet it also enjoys unprecedented opportunities in digital innovation, creative industries, and a rising generation of social entrepreneurs. The enduring struggle has been to turn growth and openness into equity, accountability, and dignity for all.

Amid these shifting tides, the Ford Foundation's work in West Africa has evolved alongside the region's own pursuit of justice and opportunity. From the optimism of independence to today's dynamic movements for inclusion and accountability, Ford's commitment has remained constant. It is to stand with visionary leaders and pioneering institutions working to make societies fairer and more equitable.

This report offers a glimpse into that 65-year journey, told through the work of Ford's many partners—civil society organizations, scholars and researchers, and leaders in government. Much of the story unfolds in Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal. Yet Ford's reach has extended beyond national borders, supporting regional institutions and networks that have championed integration, democracy, human rights, and accountability across the subregion. Over this period, the foundation has offered more than 2,700 grants to 1,098 grantees, totaling over half a billion dollars—an extraordinary record of engagement which reflects both depth and diversity.

This account cannot capture every story or every voice. Not all grantees have been interviewed, and choices had to be made about which experiences to highlight. Many other compelling stories of leadership and change could have been told across West Africa. What follows, therefore, is a representative portrait that gestures to a far broader legacy of partnership and impact.

The report opens with a concise historical overview of West Africa's evolution since independence, placing the foundation's engagement within the region's shifting socio-economic and political landscape. The narrative then unfolds decade by decade, tracing forces that have shaped Ford's work. Each section highlights landmark initiatives and moments of change, featuring insights from leaders across civil society, academia, research, and government. Contributions from Ford Foundation staff—from headquarters and the West Africa office—help connect these initiatives to the foundation's broader mission and values.

The linear progression through the decades is briefly interrupted at the turn of the century to spotlight a distinctive line of work that cuts across all periods: Ford's enduring investment in people through scholarships and fellowships, which have nurtured generations of changemakers across the region. The story then resumes through the most recent decades. Finally, four distinguished voices from Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal share personal reflections that bring Ford's legacy vividly to life.

A Distinctive Way of Working

The Ford Foundation's presence in West Africa has been defined as much by *how* it works as by *what* it supports. From the outset, the foundation understood that lasting social change cannot be delivered to communities: it must be built with them. Ford's staff have worked alongside courageous partners—civil society organizations, research institutions, and reform-minded leaders—to expand opportunity, deepen democracy, and strengthen the institutions that sustain justice.

This partnership-driven approach often meant staying the course through periods of uncertainty and repression, offering accompaniment that went far beyond funding. The foundation worked alongside organizations in high-risk environments, helping them strengthen governance and management systems, navigate crises, and build lasting capacity. In doing so, Ford demonstrated that philanthropy could be a long-term ally in the struggle for dignity and equality. It is much more than just a source of project grants.

> **"Ford's trust in its West African partners—well before "trust-based philanthropy" was coined—helped them grow into resilient, sustainable institutions."**

Proximity to those closest to the problems—and support for their own solutions—has long guided the foundation's approach in West Africa and beyond, while Ford has also remained attuned to global dynamics. "Our West Africa office connects local issues to global conversations and vice versa," notes Martín Abregu, Vice-President for International Programs. "This creates a 'boomerang effect' where efforts start globally, go local, and return for global impact."[1] This interplay is evident today in resource governance and gender-based violence, where local experiences from West Africa continue to shape global conversations.

Long before "trust-based philanthropy" became a recognized concept, the Ford Foundation was already putting its principles into practice—offering flexible, long-term support rooted in confidence in its partners' visions, even before they had proven track records. By taking bold, patient bets on emerging organizations, Ford enabled many of its West African partners to grow into strong, sustainable institutions.

Ford took bold, patient bets on emerging ideas, nurturing them until they could grow and flourish. This commitment to partnership led the foundation to move away from narrow, project-based funding towards more flexible, enduring support that helped organizations grow stronger, more cohesive, and better equipped to sustain social change. The West Africa office played a pioneering role in this shift, embodying the spirit of trust-based philanthropy that would later become a cornerstone of the foundation's global practice.

Here, then, is the story of that 65-year journey. It is a story of partnership and perseverance, of ideas that took root and grew into movements, and of a shared belief that lasting social change begins with trust: Trust in people, in their ideas, and in their agency to shape their own futures.

Footnotes

[1] Interview conducted on October 14, 2025

Historic Overview

1960 – 2025
West Africa's Transformative Decades

The Ford Foundation has partnered with the people of West Africa on their path through independence, fulfilled and dashed hopes, conflicts, political instability, economic difficulties, and successes, as well as in the strengthening of democracy. This overview traces the historical backdrop to the foundation's unwavering and evolving commitment to West Africa.

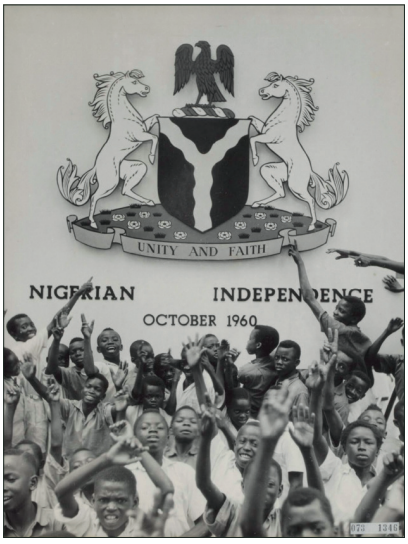
Ford's long-term commitments in West Africa have been shaped by context. Over the past 65 years, each of the countries of the sub-region has experienced a distinct but interconnected evolution, whether through independence, civil conflict, one-party or military regimes or renewed democratic aspirations. In Ford's three anchor countries—Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal—intellectual traditions, civic movements, and state-building experiments have driven change for them and also across West Africa. They have, likewise, informed Ford's priorities.

This chapter explores the broader political and institutional transformations underway in West Africa. It traces the ambitions, crises, and capacities of the countries to which Ford has remained committed over this extended period.

Independence and Early Hopes (1960s)

At independence, West African nations inherited complex colonial legacies that would heavily influence their post-independence statecraft. In Ghana and Nigeria, the British colonial administration had governed indirectly through local chiefs and regional structures. Nigeria, with its vast and diverse population, adopted a federal system at independence to manage its many ethnic and regional interests. Ghana, smaller and more centralized under British authority, became a unitary state led by Kwame Nkrumah, a charismatic pan-Africanist.

> "Each state needed to forge national unity and viable governance after decades of foreign rule."



Young freedom: Celebrating Nigeria's independence in 1960. Hopes were high, but the challenges ahead were great.

In contrast, independent Senegal had a much more centralized administration. This reflected its experience as a French colony under which a large number of Senegal's people were French citizens, governed directly by France. At independence, Senegal maintained a strong French-influenced institutional model, centered in Dakar and led by President Léopold Sédar Senghor—a poet-statesman who personified a blend of African identity and French intellectual heritage.

The euphoria of independence came with urgent challenges. Each state needed to forge national unity and viable governance after decades of foreign rule. Colonial boundaries had combined diverse peoples—from Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and an assortment of minority groups in Nigeria to Ashanti and Ewe in Ghana—requiring new governments to balance ethnic and regional interests. Early on, multi-party democracy was introduced in all three countries.

Development plans detailed ambitious goals for industrialization and social progress. New universities opened, civil services expanded, and citizens embraced self-governance. There were investments in education and infrastructure, often supported by international partners.

Newly independent Nigeria launched training programs for its civil service. Ghana pursued bold projects like the Akosombo Dam to power its economy. Senegal promoted "African socialism" and cultural renaissance, nurturing a post-colonial national identity without the violent upheavals that some neighbors faced. The grand hopes of the time were captured in Nkrumah's famous declaration that Ghana's freedom would be meaningless without the liberation of all Africa.

At the top table: Dinner in 1961 in honor of US President John F. Kennedy, given by Nigeria's Prime Minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa.

Coups and Crises (1970s–1980s)

This hopeful horizon began to cloud over by the late 1960s, as political crises and economic woes unfolded. Nigeria's fragile democracy was shattered in 1966 by a military coup, followed by a counter coup. The Eastern Region, fearing marginalization after pogroms against Igbo people in the north, attempted to secede. The subsequent Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) claimed over a million lives. Though the war ended with the Nigerian state intact, it left deep scars and a legacy of militarization. Nigeria would be governed by a succession of generals until the late 1990s. For ordinary Nigerians, these decades were marked by crackdowns on dissent, curtailed freedoms, and economic instability, despite immense oil wealth.

> "By the late 1980s, economies across West Africa were largely stagnant or in decline, still tied to raw commodity exports and burdened by debt."

In Ghana, the initial exuberance under Nkrumah gave way to dissent as his regime grew more authoritarian and the economy strained. A coup in 1966 ousted Nkrumah. Ghana oscillated between civilian rule and military regimes through the 1970s and 1980s, with just a brief period of civilian rule at the beginning of the 1980s. Under military regimes, many Ghanaians endured shortages, inflation, and the curtailment of political freedoms. There were also bold attempts to restructure its faltering economy that eventually paved the way for recovery but at a high social cost.

Senegal avoided military rule. Opposition parties were limited but not completely banned, and President Senghor cultivated a culture of dialogue. In 1980, he voluntarily stepped down from power, a move that was, at that time, almost unprecedented in post-colonial Africa.

Throughout civilian rule in Senegal, there were, of course, challenges. Severe droughts in the Sahel in the 1970s—combined with global recession—hit hard, leading to unemployment and public discontent. Austerity measures were implemented in the 1980s under pressure from international lenders, and there was a separatist conflict. But military rule was avoided, thanks to strong traditions of civilian authority and an influential civil society, where the Press, labor unions, and religious leaders acted as a check on executive power.

> "People yearned for change. Calls for democracy and good governance could no longer be silenced"

By the late 1980s, two stormy decades of military rule in Ghana and Nigeria had constrained development. Corruption had taken root. Economies across West Africa were largely stagnant or in decline, still tied to raw commodity exports and burdened by debt.

People yearned for change. Pro-democracy movements and human rights organizations, though operating under great threat, pushed back. Calls for democracy and good governance could no longer be silenced.

Kwame Nkrumah: Ghana's initial exuberance fell away as Nkrumah's rule grew authoritarian and the economy stalled.

Democratic Renewal (1990s–2000s)

After years of agitation, authoritarian regimes began to give way. In Ghana, Jerry Rawlings, who had ruled as a military strongman through the 1980s, oversaw drafting of a new constitution. In 1992, the country held multi-party elections, and civilian rule was officially restored. Rawlings stepped aside in 2000, when his presidential term limit expired. Since then, with each election, Ghana has cemented its reputation as one of Africa's most stable democracies, marked by peaceful transfers of power and an increasingly engaged electorate.

> "In 2015, for the first time, an incumbent Nigerian president ceded power peacefully to a victorious opposition."

Nigeria's journey back to democracy was more arduous but no less significant. Civil society and pro-democracy activists endured repression throughout the mid-90s when Nigeria had become a pariah state. However, after the death of General Sani Abacha, its last military leader, Nigeria held elections. The country has remained under civilian rule ever since.

Institutions were rebuilt in the 2000s: there was a new constitution and abolition of decrees stifling the Press. In 2015, for the first time, an incumbent Nigerian president ceded power peacefully to a victorious opposition.

In Senegal, having avoided military rule, voters elected an opposition candidate in 2000, thus ending 40 years of rule by a single party, the Socialists. This peaceful transfer of power to the opposition underscored Senegal's political stability and the strength of its civil society organizations, ranging from the Press to youth and human rights groups. Since then, Senegal's presidents have come and gone but Senegal's vibrant civil society and independent judiciary have helped steer the country away from potential crisis. Since the early 21st century, all three countries have firmly entrenched the principle that governments must work hard for the people's consent if they are to retain legitimacy.

The 1990s and 2000s also saw significant social and economic changes. The economic adjustments of the 1980s began to bear fruit: inflation was tamed and modest growth resumed. Ghana became an economic reform success story in the late 90s, laying the groundwork for poverty reduction in the 2000s. Nigeria experienced an economic upswing buoyed by rising oil prices in the 2000s and its telecommunications revolution, though jobless growth and inequality remained issues. Senegal maintained steady growth as it diversified into services such as telecommunications and banking.

> "A synergy of internal drive and external partnership was an important factor in the gains of the 1990s–2000s."

Crucially, civil society and media flourished across the region, as independent radio stations, newspapers, and, later, internet bloggers started holding leaders more accountable. Organizations focusing on human rights, women's empowerment, and governance obtained greater space to operate.

The Ford Foundation and other international partners that had quietly sustained local initiatives under authoritarian regimes, stepped forward in this era to support initiatives such as legal aid for victims of human rights violations, truth and reconciliation commissions to address historical grievances and past abuses, and the strengthening of new institutions.

This outside support meshed with strong local leadership and vision, as West Africans took charge of rebuilding their countries. A synergy of internal drive and external partnership was a key factor in the gains of the 1990s–2000s, from Ghana's respected Electoral Commission to Nigeria's network of human rights groups that pushed for accountability.

Slowly, the broader regional context inspired cautious optimism. Democratic norms were taking root in West Africa. Corruption, poverty, and security threats had not vanished, but instability no longer seemed inevitable. This period laid the groundwork for tackling long term, developmental and social issues.

> "Young people—a 'youth bulge'—dominate these societies. Half the population is in their late teens or younger."

The 21st Century: Population Boom and Social Change

By the 2020s, West Africa had changed dramatically, both demographically and socially. Nigeria's population has exploded to over 200 million—a four- to five-fold increase in just 65 years—making it the seventh most populous country in the world, and by far the largest in Africa. Today, Ghana's population exceeds 30 million, roughly five times its level at independence, and Senegal's has grown to about 17 million, a similar five-fold jump.

Young people—a "youth bulge"—dominate these societies. Half the population is in their late teens or younger. Tens of millions of young people are seeking education, jobs, and a voice in society.

Today, more than half of Nigeria's population live in urban areas. The picture is similar in Ghana and Senegal. It's a tremendous change from 1960, when West Africa remained largely rural and only about 15–25% of Nigerians, Ghanaians, and Senegalese lived in cities. In the subsequent decades, rural families migrated *en masse*, as agriculture struggled and new industries clustered in cities. Lagos, a port city of just a few hundred thousand residents in 1960, has mushroomed into a megacity of over 15 million people—a sprawling metropolis of towering buildings, dense markets, and endless traffic. Accra and Kumasi in Ghana, and Dakar in Senegal, have similarly swelled into major urban hubs, their streets teeming with commerce and culture.

West African innovators: From Nollywood's films to Accra's tech start-ups and vibrant arts and music scenes in Dakar.

Today's challenges include housing shortages, congestion, and ever-increasing demands for jobs. However, these cities are also centers of innovation, from Nollywood films in Lagos to tech start-ups in Accra and vibrant arts and music scenes in Dakar. A teenager in Kano or Kumasi can stream the latest music, take online courses, or organize social movements via social media. This is a quantum leap from the 1960s when information travelled mainly by radio or newspaper.

Young West Africans are fueling cultural renaissance and entrepreneurial ventures. They see themselves as part of a global community. But inequitable access to quality jobs and social services has led to disillusionment.

In Nigeria, the #EndSARS protests in 2020 saw young people rally against police brutality and broader injustice. In Senegal, young people have challenged presidential overreach. At election time and through their civic advocacy, Ghana's young citizens remind leaders that, unless there is progress, peace cannot be taken for granted.

> "West Africa's history teaches that political freedom must be matched by economic opportunity."

Social indicators have improved—literacy rates are higher, and life expectancy has risen. Indeed, Nigerian, Ghanaian and Senegalese babies born today can expect to live into their sixties or beyond, two decades longer than in the 1960s. Yet all three countries grapple with poverty, especially in rural areas and among historically excluded communities.

Rapid industrialization did not materialize as hoped—Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal remain heavily dependent on exporting raw materials (oil and gas, minerals, cocoa, peanuts, fish) and importing finished goods. This economic structure, a holdover in part from the colonial era, limits job creation.

West Africa's history teaches that political freedom must be matched by economic opportunity. However, it also highlights people's resilience and innovation that can drive the region forward, even when leaders falter. There is a collective understanding that good governance, accountability, and investment in people are vital to realizing the promise of independence in full.

Ghana's alternating political traditions have taught it the value of accommodating different political perspectives under the umbrella of constitutional rule. Nigeria's hard experience with civil war and dictatorship has underscored the importance of federal balance, dialogue, and civilian control of the military. Senegal's long-standing civilian rule, bolstered by a vibrant civic culture, exemplifies how consensus and respect for diverse beliefs—religious, ethnic, and political—can yield stability.

Throughout this journey, partners such as the Ford Foundation have walked alongside people in West Africa. This has been true from the late 1950s, when Ford supported some of the first educational and public administration programs in newly autonomous West African countries, to the tough 1980s, when it quietly funded human rights groups under repressive regimes—and into the 21st century where it has invested in institutions empowering the next generation.

> **"Ford emphasized local leadership, remaining steadfast during crises, and focusing on equity and justice."**

The backdrop of history has shaped the Ford Foundation's approach as well: emphasizing local leadership, remaining steadfast during crises, and focusing on equity and justice in times of change.

A half century ago, West Africa's pressing questions were about nation-building and self-rule. Today, they are about deepening democracy, shared prosperity, and harnessing the potential of millions of young citizens. The following chapters explore how the Ford Foundation and its partners have contributed to the journey—investing in people, ideas, and institutions to help realize the brighter future that those independence celebrations envisioned so many years ago.

Chapter 1

1960 – 1969
Building Institutions as Pillars of Young Nations

Ford invests in individuals, education, and research, laying the foundations for deeper knowledge, informed practice, stronger policies, sound leadership, and effective government.

In October 1960, jubilant crowds in Lagos watched as the green-white-green flag of Nigeria rose over the city, heralding the nation's independence. The scene echoed Ghana's similar celebrations in 1957 and Senegal's in August 1960, as wave after wave of West African nations stepped out from colonial rule into sovereign independence.

Those early days of independence carried a contagious hope—a sense that anything was possible. Newly independent governments, led by charismatic national leaders, aspired to build strong nations on solid foundations of education, self-reliance, and social progress.

It was in this atmosphere of promise that the Ford Foundation began its engagement in West Africa in earnest. Its very first grant in the region was made in 1958 during the period of increasing self-rule in Nigeria, even before the country's formal independence in 1960. The foundation supported training for government workers in Nigeria's Western Region. This early choice signaled a broader strategy: to help new nations stand on their own feet by strengthening the capacity of their core institutions and personnel.

> "Newly independent countries grappled with transforming the euphoria of independence into concrete improvements in people's daily lives."

Across West Africa, newly independent countries grappled with the formidable challenge of transforming the euphoria of independence into concrete improvements in people's daily lives.

Independence Day 1960: Nigeria's new Prime Minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, addresses the nation as Britain's last Governor-General looks on.

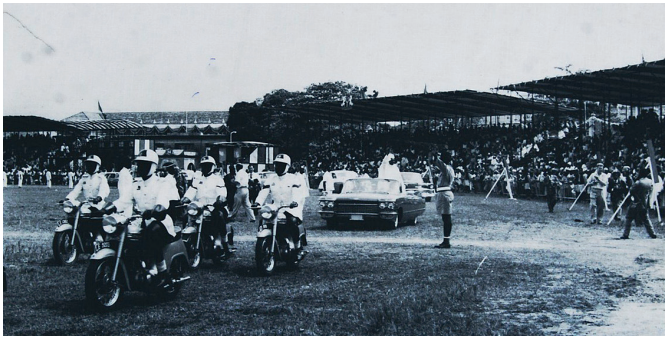
The Beginnings of the Ford Foundation in West Africa

The foundation's work in West Africa began in 1958 with a first grant to the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. The following year, a first representative was appointed for Nigeria.

In 1960, the Foundation signed its first Country Agreement with the Government of Nigeria. In 1966 it expanded its regional presence with the opening of a field office in Accra, Ghana.

In Ghana, founding President Kwame Nkrumah pursued a bold vision of African unity and self-determination. In Nigeria, Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa called for national unity in diversity, urging citizens to work together despite their differences. Senegal's poet-president Léopold Sédar Senghor placed cultural renaissance and education at the heart of his vision for the new republic.

Though each nation charted its own course, all faced the same inherited challenge: a shortage of highly skilled local capacity. Universities could be counted on the fingers of one hand, seasoned civil servants with policy-making aptitude were rare, and the technical skills needed to drive development were hard to find. Yet, determination to close these inherited capacity gaps was strong, and partners like Ford stood ready to help build institutions and train a new generation of leaders.



Out with the crowd: Nigeria's Prime Minister waves to his people after receiving the instrument of Independence.

Building Public Service Capacity

One of the first priorities of the Ford Foundation in West Africa was human capital development and education—investing in individuals who would manage the young nations. As colonial officials departed, "gaps in the manning of key government departments became conspicuous,"[1] one Ford report of that time notes. Creating a cadre of skilled administrators emerged as a matter of pressing urgency. In Nigeria and Ghana, Ford supported the training of civil servants and strengthening public administration.

Grants made in the 1960s were directed mainly to government—at both the national and regional levels—and to academic institutions. This preference was rooted in prevailing thinking about development, which positioned governments as the central drivers of national progress. It also identified universities as the key institutions for producing the knowledge and skilled human resources that were vital for nation-building.

The Institute of Administration at the University of Ife exemplifies this two-pronged approach. The institute was launched in 1963 after a Nigerian government committee, chaired by Chief Simeon Adebo,[2] flagged the shortage of trained administrators as a bottleneck to governance. The Ford Foundation committed an initial grant, funding staff, library resources, and facilities for the institute. Meanwhile, a partnership with the Institute of Public Administration in New York brought further support.

The Institute of Administration at Ife became a flagship: a durable, Nigerian-led institution, combining rigorous academic training with applied research, which anchored the country's efforts to Africanize its civil service. It introduced postgraduate diploma and master's programs, published the Quarterly Journal of Administration, and educated hundreds of graduates who entered the Civil Service.

The foundation also supported establishment of civil service training centers in Kaduna and Enugu. It sponsored workshops in public administration, management, and human relations training throughout the early 1960s that prepared additional cohorts of civil servants. In Accra, Ghana, Ford strengthened the newly created Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), advancing the same philosophy of building local capacity to professionalize governance.

> "Higher education was seen as driving nation-building, cultivating talent and generating policy research vital to the region's development."

Ibadan as a Hub of Intellectual Independence and Experimentation

Education, in a broad sense, was a cornerstone of the Ford Foundation's early strategy in West Africa. Higher education was seen as driving nation-building, cultivating talent, and generating policy research vital to the region's development. The foundation made major grants to strengthen the young universities—from the University of Ghana at Legon to the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. It provided funding for faculty training, laboratories, libraries, and curriculum development. In Senegal, Ford helped the University of Dakar to establish the Center for African Linguistics, and it supported development of a comprehensive West African atlas. Across the region, textbooks were printed, lecture halls were built, and curricula were modernized. Each grant represented a brick in the foundations of self-run educational systems.

The University of Ibadan was the center piece of Ford's higher education investment in the region. There, the foundation's ambition to upgrade universities as engines of development reached its peak. Over 65 years, its Office for West Africa contributed over $8 million to the university.

Ibadan had been founded in 1948 as a college of the University of London and became a fully-fledged and independent Nigerian university only in 1962. During this first decade of independence, Ford's support helped to transform Ibadan from a colonial outpost into an African university of global standing. "The Ford Foundation emerged not merely as a benefactor, but as a true partner in progress," recalls Professor Kayode Adebowale, the current vice-chancellor. "Its engagement transcended simple financial aid. It represented a profound investment in the future of Africa's scholarship, education, and leadership." [3]

> **"Perhaps the most iconic and transformative outcome of this partnership is establishment of the Institute of African Studies – a bold statement of intellectual independence and self-discovery, by Africans, for Africans, and for the world."**
>
> **— Dr. Kayode Adebowale, Vice-Chancellor, University of Ibadan**

That investment was wide-ranging. Ford's support helped to equip laboratories, expanded the library, and funded fellowships, as well as providing finance for visiting professorships that made the university a truly international center of learning. This support also contributed to enduring intellectual capacity, most visibly by backing the establishment of the Institute of African Studies in the early 1960s. As Professor Adebowale observed: "Perhaps the most iconic and transformative outcome of this partnership is the establishment of the Institute of African Studies—a bold statement of intellectual independence and self-discovery, by Africans, for Africans, and for the world."[4] The Institute became a nucleus of Africa-centered scholarship, advancing work in history, languages, music, drama, and politics, and nurturing a generation of innovative thinkers—such as historian J.F. Ade Ajayi[5] and geographer Akin Mabogunje[6]—who carried out pioneering work and gained global acclaim. The Arts Theatre, later associated with the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka[7], also grew from this intellectual ferment.

Intellectual independence: The University of Ibadan was a focus of Ford's regional investment.

Ford's investment in Ibadan seeded research with immediate policy relevance. The economics, sociology, political science, and geography departments produced data and expertise that informed Nigeria's development planning and contributed to the creation of the Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research (NISER). Thus, by 1970, Ibadan had become a respected center of scholarship in Africa, and a contributor to national development strategies.

Meanwhile, Ibadan was the site of a landmark agricultural initiative: the establishment of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in 1967, with Ford and Rockefeller Foundation support. IITA focused on improving staple crops such as cassava, yams, maize, and sorghum. It developed high-yield and disease-resistant varieties adapted to African conditions. Ford provided financial support for the institute's startup costs, for the construction of IITA's facilities, and for its annual operating budget, driven by a conviction that agriculture was key to sustaining Africa's development. IITA quickly became

World-class African research: The Ford Foundation supported the new International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in 1967.

a hub for training African agronomists and farmers, hosting conferences, and on-farm trials across the region. Its collaboration with the University of Ibadan meant that generations of postgraduate students benefited from the institute's world-class laboratories and library resources. Reflecting on his own doctoral studies, Adebowale noted how this collaboration gave Nigerian researchers access to resources that would otherwise have been out of reach.

National Library: Ford funded its development as part of its strategy of building up Nigeria's key institutions.

Reimagining Secondary Education

Aiyetoro Comprehensive High School—a visionary experiment in rural western Nigeria—testifies further to Ford's deep commitment to education. This innovative secondary school became a laboratory for new teaching methods. Students at Aiyetoro followed a "comprehensive school" curriculum that blended academic subjects with practical vocational skills. It was a quite disruptive innovation compared to the old British grammar school model. Dr. Adam Skapski, a Polish educator working with Ford, championed this approach. "We must adapt our schools to our own needs," he would urge Nigerian educators during workshops.

To allow them to see a variety of approaches worth adapting, Dr. Skapski organized "travelling seminars," taking groups of Nigerian teachers to observe classroom practices in America and Europe. Thanks to the experience, the teachers adapted and implemented locally relevant innovations back home. The result was a fresh generation of educators, excited to make learning more appropriate to African realities, whether through agricultural projects or the introduction of technical drawing classes in secondary schools.

> "For the first time, the curriculum reflected our communities, our crops, our history—not just England's."

Adam Skapski—Visionary Educator

Among Ford's early collaborators was Dr. Adam Skapski, a remarkable educator who left an indelible mark on Nigeria's school system. Born in Poland in 1902, he had been a professor and even Minister of Education in the Polish government-in-exile during World War II. He arrived in Nigeria in 1959 as a Ford Foundation consultant on technical education and he quickly became a driving force for reform. Dr. Skapski championed "comprehensive schools" which combined academic learning with practical training, believing this better served Nigeria's needs than the colonial curriculum. He organized traveling seminars for Nigerian educators, introduced industrial arts and agriculture courses, and helped establish the University of Lagos Curriculum Center. Many of his ideas were piloted at Aiyetoro Comprehensive High School. Colleagues recalled his passion for using local materials in teaching and empowering Nigerian teachers to lead change. His influence endured through the educators he mentored, shaping boards and schools across the country. When he died in 1968, he was buried in Aiyetoro, near the school he helped build—a lasting testament to his devotion to Nigerian youth and education.

By the mid-1960s, Ford had also helped Nigeria develop its home-grown curricula by supporting establishment of CESAC—the Comparative Education Study and Adaptation Center at the University of Lagos. These initiatives sowed the seeds for a post-colonial education system that valued both intellectual and practical skills.

"We were building something of our own," recalled a Nigerian headmaster from that period. "For the first time, the curriculum reflected our communities, our crops, our history—not just England's." Such shifts, modest as they were, instilled pride and relevance in education during the decade of independence.

Funding students overseas: Ghana's Kofi Annan, future United Nations' Secretary-General, joined other Ford alumni studying in the US.

Training Tomorrow's Leaders

Education wasn't only about institutions. Ultimately, it was about people. The first generation of post-independence technocrats, academics, and civil servants was, in large part, supported by the Ford Foundation. Throughout the 1960s, Ford invested heavily in fellowships and training to empower individuals in West Africa. Many young scholars and professionals received scholarships to pursue advanced degrees abroad. It also paid for them to attend regional training workshops—short-term, practical programs held in different West African countries to strengthen skills in fields such as agriculture, law, public administration, management, leadership, and education. By 1969, the West Africa office was awarding more than 30 travel and study grants annually to Nigerians, Ghanaians, and other West Africans to build expertise and international networks. Many returned home to become pioneering figures in their field.

Nigeria, for example, urgently needed economists and planners after independence; Ford responded by funding overseas training for 10 bright Nigerian economists in the 1960s, many of whom returned home to accept key positions in government. Similar stories played out in Ghana, where Ford fellowships supported graduate training in public administration—seeding the ranks of a competent civil service. These personal success stories created a ripple effect. As West African graduates of Ford programs rose to prominence, they carried with them a commitment to public service and the spirit of international cooperation they had experienced.

Adebayo Adedeji—Economist and Educator

In 1960, on a Ford Foundation fellowship, Adebayo Adedeji studied at Harvard's Littauer Center (later the Kennedy School), where he earned his Master of Public Administration. Returning to Nigeria, he became the first Nigerian director of the Institute of Administration at Ife, transforming it into a premier center for civil service training and applied research in governance.

His later career traced the long arc of Ford's investment in people: Federal Commissioner for Economic Development and Reconstruction after the Nigerian civil war, architect of the country's Third National Development Plan, and, ultimately, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa.

Professor Adedeji's determination was evident from his youth—he once recalled refusing to abandon his educational ambitions even in the face of family pressure. As a teacher in the early 1960s, he noted that students "took themselves very seriously" because they knew they were preparing to lead a newly independent nation.

Supporting Agriculture, Health, and Family Planning

The Ford Foundation also supported a range of projects at a community level. In Eastern Nigeria, for example, it helped fund a rural improvement initiative to modernize village farming techniques. Field demonstration teams taught farmers about improved seeds and simple machinery, while also introducing community development ideas such as cooperative societies. In Côte d'Ivoire, Ford funded training of agricultural extension agents to assist farmers in remote areas.

These agents were meant to link agricultural research with local communities, providing farmers with the methods and skills to increase crop yields. This emphasis on agriculture pursued a clear objective: to translate the promise of independence into reality through improved livelihoods and greater food security for ordinary citizens.

Alongside such community-focused efforts, the foundation also worked with governments to strengthen national planning and administration. To that end, it embedded senior U.S. economists and other specialists within pivotal institutions. In Nigeria, it sustained support for the Federal Economic Planning Unit and national development planning. In Ghana, it provided advisory roles in government reorganization, economic policy, and population programs. Across French-speaking West Africa, the foundation explored new projects in economic planning, business administration, and language teaching to help reduce post-colonial dependence.

Sharing knowledge: IITA bridges research and farming for sustainable growth.

Public health and family planning emerged as another forward-looking priority. As populations grew rapidly during the post-independence boom, leaders began to recognize links between population, health, and development. Ghana took a pioneering step. In March 1969, it became the first country in West Africa to adopt an official policy on population growth: it launched a national family planning program. The Ford Foundation played a multifaceted role in this landmark decision—providing expert counsel to the Ghanaian government on population strategy and supporting local capacity-building in demography and reproductive health through targeted grants. Ghanaian health workers were trained, and clinics began offering family planning counselling and services. These groundbreaking, yet delicate, undertakings paved the way for more comprehensive reproductive health efforts subsequently.

Ibadan students in 1963: The university evolved from a colonial outpost to an African university of global standing.

Building Foundations, Facing Fragility

By the early 1970s, Ford's impact in West Africa was perceptible. Hundreds of Africans had already benefitted from advanced education and training opportunities. Universities and institutes had been established or had expanded, agricultural research capacity was much greater, and new debates on social and economic policies were taking shape. Increasingly, Nigerians, Ghanaians, and Senegalese were steering their own development—the goal that Ford and its partners had embraced at independence.

Forthcoming events would soon test that optimism. Military coups in Ghana and Nigeria in 1966, followed by Nigeria's civil war from 1967 to 1970, exposed the fragility of these newly independent states. Nevertheless, even in those turbulent years, institutions built in the 1960s endured, and the foundation remained quietly engaged.

> "This emphasis on agriculture pursued a clear objective... improved livelihoods and greater food security for ordinary citizens."

Footnotes

[1] Ford Foundation. Staffing and Development of the Public Service of Northern Nigeria, 1961.

[2] Born in Western Nigeria, Simeon Olaosebikan Adebo (1914–1994) became an Okanlomo (Chief) of the Yoruba people. After earning a law degree from London University and being called to the Bar, he rose through the Ministry of Finance and Treasury to head the Civil Service and serve as Chief Secretary to the Government of Western Nigeria in 1961. The following year, he moved to New York as Nigeria's UN representative and later became UN Deputy Secretary-General and Director-General of UNITAR (1969–1972). He went on to promote democratic values and strengthen development policy, leading several corporations, the National Universities Commission and the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, and serving as chancellor of Obafemi Awolowo University and, for eight years, Lagos University.

[3] Interview conducted on August 5, 2025

[4] The Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan was formally established by an Act of Senate in July 1962 as the first interdisciplinary African-focused research institute on the continent. From the outset it concentrated on research, teaching, and publications in African history, law, music, the visual and performing arts, anthropology, and related fields. Within its first decade, the institutealso developed dedicated facilities such as the Center for Arabic Documentation (1963), a museum, an archive of sound and vision, and a traditional medicine documentation and research center, each aimed at preserving and advancing African cultural and intellectual heritage.

[5] J. F. Ade Ajayi (1929–2014) was a leading Nigerian historian of the Ibadan School, known for emphasizing historical continuity in African history and for his balanced use of oral and written sources. His rigorous, dispassionate scholarship gave African perspectives greater recognition in global historiography, particularly through studies on Yoruba history and colonial Lagos. Ajayi highlighted the role of religion and education in shaping Nigerian nationalism, while later advocating Pan-Africanism as a stronger foundation for independence and identity.

[6] Akinlawon "Akin" Mabogunje (1931–2022) was a Nigerian geographer, widely regarded as the "father of African geography.". He was Africa's first professor of geography at the University of Ibadan, where he pioneered research on urbanization and regional development, and later became the first African elected as an International Member of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences.

[7] Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) is a Nigerian playwright, poet, and activist, and the first African to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (1986). Educated at the universities of Ibadan and Leeds, his work fuses Yoruba traditions with modernist forms. He is renowned for plays such as Death and the King's Horseman and his outspoken defense of justice and human rights.

Chapter 2

1970 – 1979
Nurturing Knowledge Through Difficult Times

Amid war, coups and austerity, the Ford Foundation committed to bold efforts at reconstruction, backing African research, sustaining higher education, promoting mother-tongue schooling, investing in agricultural science, and supporting regional integration.

The 1970s was a stormy decade for West Africa, marked by political upheavals, economic swings, social pressures, and military coups.

In Nigeria, the end of the civil war brought some relative peace but also revealed enormous tasks in terms of reconstruction, rehabilitation, and reconciliation. Fortuitously, an oil boom helped the country to face some of the post-civil war challenges. It transformed Nigeria almost overnight, especially in the main urban centers and the manufacturing sector. This transformation brought its own problems, most notably in the neglect of agriculture, the exodus of the young from the rural areas, growing pressures of rapid urbanization that overwhelmed planners, plus the entrenchment of patronage under successive military regimes. Despite the nation's immense natural wealth, Nigerians had to navigate uncertainty through growing and glaring economic mismanagement under authoritarian rule that curtailed their freedoms.

Ghana followed a similarly turbulent path: post-independence optimism gave way to repeated coups and deepening economic decline. Emerging institutions built after independence were gradually eroded and social frustration heightened among the people. Senegal, on the other hand, preserved more political openness and stability, albeit under a dominant party system presided over by President Sedar Senghor.

> "Ford redirected its efforts toward food security, health and population, and education, with a new emphasis on women's roles."

Building learning: The International Institute of Tropical Agriculture survived the civil war to become a major intellectual asset.

The region was battered by shocks. A prolonged Sahelian drought devastated agriculture, including livestock. It triggered famine and displaced millions, leaving lasting scars on food systems and livelihoods. The 1970s' global recession further strained the region's economies and set the stage for an external debt spiral. Research and higher education suffered: universities and research centers—once seen as key drivers of development and leadership—faced shrinking resources and recurring crises of governance.

Amid this volatility, West Africa's leaders refreshed Pan-African ideals previously evoked during struggles for independence. With the technical support of the UN Economic Commission for Africa and their own new-found political will, they pursued regional economic integration, seeking innovative forms of cooperation to anchor stability. These efforts culminated—see the end of this chapter—in creation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975.

The Ford Foundation in West Africa

In 1970 the Foundation opened a field office in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Accra's office closed in 1973 as did Abidjan's in 1974, but the Lagos office remained in continuous operation.

Shifting political and economic currents in the 1970s forced the Ford Foundation to recalibrate its work in West Africa. Building on earlier support for universities and agricultural research, Ford redirected its efforts toward food security, health and population, and education, with a new emphasis on women's roles across these sectors. The foundation expanded into francophone countries—though Nigeria and Ghana remained central. A regional office in Abidjan opened in 1970 and selective initiatives were sustained through regional institutions.

As bilateral and multilateral aid expanded and government staff capacity became overstretched, Ford moved away from advisory roles with states and concentrated on strengthening local institutions. It supported universities and independent research centers to build policy analysis capacity, while also backing local organizations in community-based development and nascent rural credit associations. Its approach combined targeted project funding alongside leadership development that linked grassroots actors, academia, and policymakers.

Ford distinguished itself by enabling African-led research, training, and grassroots innovation, rather than simply filling institutional gaps. Its consistent commitment to equity and to expanding opportunities for women further set it apart from larger donors that focused primarily on assisting government.

Women focus: Ford supported women's roles in farming, health and education.

Recovery, Research and Regional Integration

Even in times of political turmoil, the foundation continued to strengthen the people and institutions that were vital to recovery and progress. It helped the University of Nigeria at Nsukka rebuild a campus in 1970 that had been devastated by the civil war. In Ghana, in 1975, its support kept the University of Cape Coast's science labs open despite crippling budget cuts, while fellowships allowed lecturers from Legon to pursue advanced training abroad. Across the region, the message was clear: higher education would not be abandoned, even during the hardest times.

> **"A deliberate long-term commitment: to cultivate institutions and talent that would ensure West African countries could shape their own educational futures."**

This commitment also shaped Ford's evolving strategy to develop higher education. Having earlier focused on building and equipping universities, it shifted progressively towards enabling research and policy studies to improve the quality and effectiveness of education systems. Two regional frameworks highlighted this ambition: first, the francophone West African Education Research Training Program, anchored at Laval University in Quebec; second, the anglophone West African Education Research Program, managed directly by the foundation.

Each program emphasized doctoral training, collaborative projects, and a stronger culture of regional cooperation. This new higher education strategy focused on building African capacity to conduct research and apply evidence for educational development. Rather than relying heavily on foreign advisors, it fostered local competence: professionals able to assess policies, analyze how schools functioned, and link education to broader social and economic change. The programs encouraged empirical studies into what determined school achievement, collected data that could be

shared across the region, and built a critical mass of researchers within universities, ministries, and institutions such as the West African Examinations Council.

Rebuilding Vocational Education at Nsukka

The devastation of Nigeria's civil war left the University of Nigeria at Nsukka in ruins. This was most visible in the Industrial Technical Teacher Training Department. Workshops had been looted and stripped bare: machines dismantled, laboratories emptied, and even the departmental library carried away. By 1970, when the program reopened, students were studying drafting without electricity. Training proceeded under makeshift conditions.

The Ford Foundation stepped in to help reactivate the program. Consultant Dr. William Wolansky, working closely with the university's leadership, spearheaded a plan to restore equipment, procure new machinery, and redesign laboratories for a modernized curriculum. Funds were also earmarked for textbooks, teaching aids, and scholarships, as well as graduate fellowships abroad to train a fresh generation of Nigerian instructors.

Amidst the ruins, the commitment of staff and students was striking. Mr. F.C.N. Agbasi, a senior lecturer, and Mr. J.C. Igbo, a technician, kept classes going despite the absence of functioning labs, improvising wherever possible. One young graduate, Mr. Cyril Nya, left for a master's program in industrial education in the United States with the expectation that he would return to bolster the program's depleted faculty. Others, such as Mr. Ifeanyi Okafor, accepted new teaching positions, determined to rebuild.

With Ford's support, Nsukka's vocational education program began to recover quickly. Enrolment rebounded, and the Dean of Education called it the faculty's top priority, recognizing the urgent national need for vocational teachers to support Nigeria's reconstruction and industrial growth. The foundation's assistance thus helped restore not only classrooms and workshops, but also a sense of purpose: training teachers who would in turn prepare thousands of skilled technicians essential for a nation emerging from war.

By the late 1970s, the foundation was also encouraging wider disciplinary engagement, drawing economists and sociologists into the study of education. Guided by the Abidjan office, this approach combined empirical rigor with regional collaboration. It marked a deliberate long-term commitment: to cultivate institutions and talent that would ensure West African countries could shape their own educational futures.

Maintain learning: Rebuilding education was vital after the destruction of Nigeria's civil war.

Academic and Research Hubs Drive Agricultural Innovation

Agriculture was a central pillar of West Africa's development agenda. Universities in Nigeria emerged as regional leaders in agricultural research and training. The University of Ibadan advanced graduate studies in agricultural economics and food policy, while Ahmadu Bello University became a hub for rural policy and innovation. It drew students from across the region and, by the late 1970s, highlighted women's critical roles in food systems and rural development.

IITA Joins Global Research Network

In 1971, the IITA became the first Africa-based center admitted to the new Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)—a network launched that year by the World Bank, FAO, and UNDP to pool international resources for advanced crop research. The Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, whose earlier conferences paved the way for CGIAR's creation, were key partners. IITA's entry connected its pioneering tropical crop research to a durable global funding and research network.

Language—The Overlooked Dimension of Learning and Development

In the early decades of independence, both policymakers and donors often underestimated the role of language learning and development. The landmark Ashby Commission report on higher education in Nigeria (1960/61), for example, devoted just 5 lines out of 8,000 to language, while the Conference of African States on the Development of Education in Africa, held in Addis Ababa in 1961, recognized local languages but did not prioritize them. Yet language was not a neutral instrument: it carried the weight of identity, access, and modernization, and could easily become a source of division as of unity.

The Ford Foundation's early projects in Nigeria and Ghana reflected the prevailing view of the 1950s—focusing on English as a second language for civil servants, radio programs, and language laboratories. By the late 1960s and 1970s, however, the foundation's perspective had shifted. Language was now understood as central to education and national development, with a new emphasis on bilingualism and the use of African languages in schooling.

A striking example is the Yoruba Six-Year Primary Project, which sought to develop mother-tongue teaching materials across 5 subjects. Ambitious and often hampered by a lack of reliable baseline data, the project nevertheless symbolized a turning point: recognition that children learn best when taught in a language they know. At the University of Ibadan and the University of Ghana, Legon, Ford supported departments of linguistics and sociolinguistics, training scholars who began to produce grammars, readers, and research rooted in African contexts. Regional sociolinguistic surveys—though costly—helped to create models for language planning that informed later educational reforms.

The Ford Foundation supported the *Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar* in Senegal. This funding aimed to strengthen research into African languages, improve English and French teaching, train African linguists, create teaching materials, and build a documentary collection. Over a third of the grant was allocated to Wolof, financing research, publications, and the compilation of a dictionary.

The lessons from this work were mixed. Many initiatives relied heavily on expatriates, and systematic evaluation remained rare. Political sensitivities around "glotto-politics"—whether to privilege English, French, or local languages—meant leaders often avoided open debate, fearing it might destabilize fragile national identities. As one internal survey of the foundation put it: "The last thing Africans were ready for was a discussion of language difficulties—and yet, without it, the promise of mass education would falter." Nevertheless, Ford's persistence helped cultivate a generation of African linguists and educators committed to showing that development could not be divorced from language.[1]

Meanwhile, institutions such as the *Centre Ivoirien de Recherches Économiques et Sociales* (CIRES) in Abidjan, and the National University of Benin, gained prominence. Underpinning these developments was the Ford Foundation's strategic support, which strengthened universities as engines of regional expertise and positioned them to shape policy and practice beyond national borders.

Alongside these universities, the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) at Ibadan grew into a continental hub. Buoyed by sustained support from Ford and others, it flourished during the 1970s—developing disease-resistant maize and cassava varieties, convening scientific conferences, and training graduate students from across Africa.

Training Awards: Shaping the Next Generation

Ford's support for fellowships and training remained central and expanded, building on initiatives developed in the 1960s, further helping to nurture skills and leadership capacities.

Nearly half of all Ford training awards to Africans in the 1970s were managed through the Lagos office, supporting more than 400 Nigerians alone. These awards ranged from PhDs to short, applied courses. By the late 1970s, nearly three-quarters of fellows pursued their studies within Africa itself, many at the University of Ibadan or at IITA, also in Ibadan, demonstrating the continent's increased higher education and training capacities.

However, challenges remained: women accounted for fewer than 10% of recipients of support while programs that aimed to bridge francophone and anglophone lines often struggled. To address these issues, Ford emphasized support for women in training within agriculture, and extended opportunities for international travel to women engaged in development projects.

Experimenting in Maternal and Child Health Services

By the mid-1970s, the Ford Foundation had made maternal and child health a cornerstone of its population and family planning work in West Africa. Its sustained partnership with the Institute of Child Health at the University of Lagos demonstrated this commitment. Ford invested significant funds, to transform the institute into a laboratory for family health care. The goal was to combine local training, applied research, and service delivery, developing experimental models that could inform Nigeria's emerging national health policy.

> **"The Institute of Child Health exemplified Ford's approach: investing in institutions that connect policy, research, and practice to reshape health systems."**

Support was multifaceted. There was funding to train Nigerian health professionals, upgrade the institute's evaluation capacity, and foster international exchange—notably through collaboration with Johns Hopkins University in the United States. Partnership with Ford extended to communication and advocacy: in 1977, the foundation financed a documentary film on basic health services, designed to inform policymakers and practitioners. At community level, the Institute of Child Health pioneered integrated maternal and child health and family planning clinics. They emphasized community participation and tested low-cost services for poor urban settings.

IITA scientist: The institute's global stature helped it turn into a continental research hub.

Professor Olikoye Ransome-Kuti[2] —Nigeria's first professor of pediatrics and a pioneering reformer—and his colleagues used the institute as a base to shape the National Basic Health Services Scheme. Training modules developed there were adopted for schools of health technology nationwide. By the end of the decade, the Institute of Child Health had become both a model and a resource center, exemplifying Ford's approach: investing in institutions that could connect policy, research, and practice to reshape health systems.

Ford's traditional emphasis on supporting building of national institutions was soon complemented by a sustained focus on the local level. This set about ensuring that communities, with their own practices and resources, were central to developing practical and affordable solutions. This philosophy took shape in Nigeria, where the Rural Maternal and Child Health/Family Planning project in Calabar demonstrated how basic health services could reach rural communities by integrating family planning with routine maternal and childcare, while also training Traditional Birth Attendants to strengthen their role within the health system.

Child health: Nigeria's Institute of Child Health became a model for health systems.

Similar initiatives in Itigidi and Yahe (each in Cross River State, southeastern Nigeria) and Garkida (Adamawa State, northeastern Nigeria) reinforced this approach, placing community participation at the heart of service delivery and showing how local initiatives could be mobilized to advance maternal and child health.

This community-centered philosophy extended beyond Nigeria. In Ghana, the foundation supported the National Family Planning Program, launched in 1970 to implement the country's first national population policy as part of a broader strategy to slow rapid growth and advance development. Ford facilitated Ghana's first nurse training in family planning and helped pilot community-outreach clinics, integrating family planning into basic health services and reinforcing the government's early efforts to link population control with national development planning.

Centering African Perspectives in African Studies and Global Debates

Development emerged as a defining theme in academic debates of the 1970s, with Africa often invoked as a case study, but rarely represented by African voices. In 1973, African scholars created in Dakar the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) to tackle this imbalance. Its mission was to establish a platform where African perspectives could shape global debates on development. CODESRIA became associated with a Pan-African critique of dependency and underdevelopment theories, led by the renowned economist Samir Amin, its first Executive Secretary. It also provided space for diverse debates which brought together researchers across the continent.

> "Ford's support opened opportunities for advanced study, publishing, and leadership development that became the foundation of African intellectual life."
>
> — **Dr. Godwin Murunga, Executive Secretary of CODESRIA**[3]

How to develop Africa? CODESRIA centers African perspectives on development.

Ford's first grant to CODESRIA—in 1973, for a workshop program and development research databank—reflected an early bet on the organization's potential. Over time, this partnership came to embody the foundation's philosophy of long-term engagement with promising African institutions—supporting them to consolidate, adapt, and ultimately stand on their own. Later, in 1992, Ford helped launch CODESRIA's Governance Institute. It was established to bring young African academics to Dakar for up to 6 weeks to reflect on governance. "It helped cultivate a generation of African scholars specializing in this field," according to Godwin Murunga[4], Executive Secretary of CODESRIA since 2017.

When structural adjustment and political liberalization were reshaping the continent, the Governance Institute brought together young African academics to reflect on democracy and governance. More than 500 alumni passed through in successive cohorts, many of them becoming leading scholars, policy advisors, and public intellectuals.

Among them were Dr. Victor A.O. Adetula, leading Nigerian scholar with a career that spans both African and international institutions; Richard Ssewakiryanga, a prominent Ugandan policy researcher, civil society leader, and governance expert; and Dr. Godwin Murunga from Kenya, who entered the Governance Institute in 1997 as a young scholar and went on to become CODESRIA's Executive Secretary. "Ford's support was pivotal," recalls Murunga, "opening opportunities for advanced study, publishing, and leadership development that became the foundation of African intellectual life."[5]

Over the years, CODESRIA has demonstrated its capacity to bring policymakers and academics together at critical moments. In 2005, it convened a landmark meeting in Abuja where Presidents Obasanjo of Nigeria, Mbeki of South Africa, and Wade of Senegal debated governance reforms—an important example of research informing high-level policy dialogue. In 2019, CODESRIA again showcased this convening power by organizing a series of policy dialogues with African governments and institutions to foster collaboration and strengthen partnerships. Today, CODESRIA remains a Pan-African reference point for social science research and debate.

In the 1970s, Ford also launched its ongoing commitment to regional cooperation in the political and economic domains. It backed the newly established Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975. Ford saw ECOWAS as a vehicle to bridge the Sahel–coastal divide, strengthen regional trade and development policies, and foster collaboration across anglophone and francophone West Africa. The foundation's funding for studies, training, and travel helped build ECOWAS's early institutional base and informed its first policy debates on trade, customs, and migration.

In the early 1990s, Ford would provide catalytic support to the revision of ECOWAS's founding treaty by enabling meetings of the Committee of Eminent Persons. Its proposals shaped the 1993 revision that transformed ECOWAS from primarily an economic bloc into a more comprehensive regional organization, combining economic integration with political cooperation, peace, and security.

Later, in 2006, Ford's backing helped strengthen the infrastructure and institutional capacity of the ECOWAS Court of Justice, ensuring observance of law and justice in the interpretation of treaties, protocols, and conventions. Most recently, beginning in 2020, the partnership has turned towards eliminating gender-based violence. Ford's support has enabled ECOWAS to craft regional strategies and policies and to drive the implementation of action plans across member states.

Local resilience: Ford shifted its emphasis to helping communities get stronger.

A Legacy of Persistence and Trust

By 1980, despite a turbulent decade, the Ford Foundation's steady support had helped West African institutions to build resilience, endure, and adapt. Working with academics, community leaders, reformers, and farmers, Ford had shifted from providing technical assistance to strengthening local resilience, planting seeds—in education, community development, and health—that would bear fruit in the decades ahead.

Footnotes

[1] The Ashby Commission directly influenced teacher education in Nigeria. It was set up by Nigeria's Federal Minister of Education in April 1959 to conduct an investigation into the country's needs in the fields of post-school certificate and higher education, over the next 20 years (1960-80). Among the 9 members of the Commission were 3 Nigerians: Professor K.O. Dike, Principal of the University College Ibadan (1960- 1962) and later Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan (1964-1967); Senator Shetturia Kasilim, the Waziri of Bornu; and Dr. S. Onabanliro, the Minister of Education for Western Nigeria in 1960. Sir Eric Ashby, a Briton and former President and Vice Chancellor of Queen's University, Belfast, was chairman. These individuals made extensive tours of Nigeria, Great Britain, the United States, and some parts of West Africa, during which they collected both written and oral evidence from people of all walks of life such as voluntary agencies, employers of labor, public service commissions, governors and some selected individuals.

[2] Olikoye Ransome-Kuti (1927–2003) was Nigeria's first professor of pediatrics and a pioneering health reformer. Trained in Dublin and London, he returned to Lagos to transform child and maternal health through community-based primary care, initially supported by the Ford Foundation. He later founded and led the Institute of Child Health at the University of Lagos, which became a hub for innovative research and training. As Nigeria's Minister of Health (1985–1992), he established a nationwide primary care system and became one of the most respected figures of an otherwise turbulent government. Known for his integrity and advocacy, he also used the death of his brother, Fela, from AIDS to break a national silence on the epidemic.

[3] Interview conducted on July 31, 2025

[4] Interview conducted on July 31, 2025

[5] Interview conducted on July 31, 2025

Chapter 3

1980 – 1989
Building from the Ground Up

Community-driven development responded to political and economic failure at the top. Ford supported grassroots farming initiatives, child and maternal healthcare, a human rights approach to migration, and museums that reflected people's lived cultures.

The 1980s became a far more turbulent era for West Africa. Plummeting commodity prices, mounting debt crises and austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund turned what had been uneven growth into what many came to call a "lost decade." The result was increased poverty, declining incomes, rising food prices, and weakened state services. People were worse off. Urban workers faced wage freezes and unemployment, while rural producers encountered falling crop prices. Governments could not maintain investments in health, education, and infrastructure, leading to sharp falls in child survival and literacy rates. Rural areas suffered most as limited resources were concentrated in urban centers.

Politically, the region oscillated between authoritarian rule and hesitant liberalization. Civilian governments were often interrupted by military regimes, and democratic practice was often skewed by single-party dominance. Senegal stood out for its relative stability and peaceful leadership change, while Ghana experienced cycles of authoritarian rule and controlled transitions. Nigeria, by contrast, remained under military rule beyond the decade's close, its brief civilian experiments repeatedly overturned. This wider climate of repression ensured that basic rights remained fragile across West Africa: military regimes silenced dissent, restricted the press, and curtailed civic activity, fueling demands for legal reform and inspiring some of the earliest regional human rights initiatives.

Kano marketplace: Austerity led to poverty, declining incomes and rising food prices.

Amid the turmoil of the 1980s, the Ford Foundation confronted a stark new reality: the institutions it had nurtured in the 1960s and 1970s—universities, research centers, and state agencies—were struggling under economic siege and constrained by authoritarian rule. Recognizing these limits, Ford adapted. It increasingly acknowledged that stronger social foundations were needed to succeed in fostering inclusive societies.

The foundation was pushed to expand its approach by the decade's defining challenges—economic austerity, fragile governance, deepening poverty, and the widespread denial of civil and political liberties. It would focus more on participatory development, in place of top-down development, the long-dominant model in which technocrats within governments were seen as the primary drivers of progress.

This approach insisted that historically excluded communities should have a direct voice in shaping the policies and programs that affected their lives. It placed culture at the center, recognizing local knowledge, and practices, and cultural identity as relevant resources for development. As human rights and governance cautiously entered development debates, they also began to find a place in the foundation's programming.

> "The focus shifted to participatory development, in place of top-down development, in which technocrats within governments were seen as the primary drivers of progress."

The foundation began to move beyond a narrow focus on family planning towards more comprehensive concerns with maternal and child health. This shift reflected both global debates and local realities, as mounting criticism of coercive demographic targets converged with national concerns in West Africa about high maternal and childhood rates of mortality.

These currents reinforced the foundation's own strategic evolution. It was deliberately turning towards empowering citizens, grassroots organizations, independent researchers, and human rights defenders. This was both a practical response to fragile states and a principled embrace of democratic values.

Cultivating Participation: A New Path for Rural West Africa

Throughout the 1980s, the Foundation made the fight against rural poverty its foremost programmatic priority in West Africa. This emphasis reflected agriculture's critical role: more than 70% of people relied on farming, livestock, and fishing. Yet the sector faced declining per-capita food production and a collapse of traditional export crops. Large, technology-heavy projects often proved too costly or complex to be sustained and collapsed once external support ended.

> "Ford became convinced that lasting progress required approaches grounded in farmers' realities rather than imposed from above."

The Ford Foundation drew important lessons from the failures of large-scale donor programs centered on dams, canals, and other technology-heavy schemes. These projects often proved costly, unsustainable, and poorly adapted to local realities. In Nigeria, for example, inadequate planning left massive irrigation schemes delivering less water to farmers while increasing their vulnerability. Similar setbacks were evident in Ghana, Senegal, and elsewhere in the subregion, where ambitious state-led projects struggled to produce tangible benefits for smallholders.

Farmer-Managed Irrigation Pilot

In northern Senegal, Ford adapted a model from its Asia programs—training local water-user groups to manage their own irrigation systems. Instead of relying solely on government engineers, farmers took charge of scheduling, maintenance, and fee collection. "It gave us pride," said one farmer-leader. "For the first time, we felt ownership over the land and the water."

Tackling rural poverty by empowering local communities: Ford made this issue a programmatic priority in West Africa in the 1980s.

Ford became convinced that lasting progress required approaches grounded in farmers' realities rather than imposed from above. It supported initiatives such as the West African Farming Systems Research Network (WAFSRN), which promoted farmer-centered research, on-farm trials, and regionally led collaboration. The move made Ford's interventions more participatory, practical, and empowering for local communities. Ford also supported the West African office of the International Irrigation Management Institute, created in 1984 to tackle poor performance of large-scale irrigation schemes. It maintained support for the IITA which also promoted participatory, farmer-focused, and regionally grounded research.

In Senegal, Ford supported the *Fédération des Organisations Non-Gouvernementales du Sénégal* (FONGS), one of the first national federations of rural organizations in West Africa. FONGS united peasant associations, cooperatives, and grassroots Organizations across Senegal. A 1987 grant was pivotal: it enabled FONGS to purchase shares in the national agricultural bank, giving farmers a direct stake in the formal financial system and moving power from the state and external actors to rural

communities.
Through FONGS, Ford could strengthen farmer organizations, local capacity, and knowledge systems—supporting agriculture in a way that was bottom-up, sustainable, and empowering. But FONGS was also about representation, citizenship, and democratic voice. Thus, Ford connected rural development with governance and human rights.

In 1982, the foundation supported the Technology Consulting Center (TCC) in Kumasi, Ghana, to advance rural water technology. Ford's rural vision extended beyond its core countries, recognizing Burkina Faso—second only to Senegal—for its strong rural institutions, including the West African Regional Rural Radio School and the Association of Burkinabe Midwives.

However, many rural communities—especially women and underserved groups—still lacked access to resources, markets, and a voice in decision-making. The foundation recognized the need for a more robust, collaborative mechanism to support grassroots organizations and build their institutional strength. This led to creation of the Program for Research and Producer Support in 1989. PRAP brought together peasant leaders from Senegal, Mali, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Guinea. Their collaboration laid the groundwork for the founding of the West Africa Rural Foundation (WARF) in 1993, with the Ford Foundation playing a catalytic role. WARF later became the region's first African-governed grant-making body, designed to re-grant funds, strengthen farmer organizations, and embed rural voices in development planning. In 1998, the Ford Foundation awarded its first endowment grant in West Africa to the West Africa Rural Foundation (WARF).

> "Farmers' organizations have become powerful voices in policy arenas, helping shape the very programs that affect their lives and livelihoods."
>
> — **Ngouye Fall, Executive Director of the West Africa Rural Foundation (WARF), speaking about the transformation of West African farmer organizations into key actors in rural development.**[1]

Elevating Maternal and Child Health as Core Priorities

Ford grants in the 1980s moved to promoting a broader form of primary health-care delivery—especially maternal and child health—in Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo. In Nigeria, long-term support for the University of Lagos Institute of Child Health turned it into a laboratory for low-cost family-health care and community-based maternal and child services. In Benin and Togo, the foundation helped to launch the region's first francophone training courses in management of family health services, later adopted in national medical training.

Flagship efforts such as Nigeria's Safe Motherhood Initiative and the West Africa–wide Prevention of Maternal Mortality (PMM) Network generated evidence that influenced health policy and practice. Established in the late 1980s with Ford Foundation support, the PMM Network brought together hospitals, public-health researchers, and ministries of health from countries including Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal. It carried out rigorous studies into the causes of maternal deaths, piloted low-cost interventions such as emergency obstetric care, and turned its findings into practical guidelines that helped shape national safe-motherhood policies and later informed World Health Organization recommendations.

Staying well: Enhancing community capacity to improve maternal and child health.

Acknowledging Human Rights as Foundation of Development

By the early 1980s, the political landscape in West Africa was marked by contradictions. On paper, governments were beginning to signal a willingness to embrace democracy and rights, most notably through the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Arusha Charter on popular

participation and freedoms. But, in practice, most countries remained under authoritarian or single-party rule. Civic space was tightly controlled, judiciaries were weak and politicized, and abuses—ranging from arbitrary detention to censorship and child exploitation—were pervasive and rarely held to account. For marginalized and vulnerable groups—such as women, children, and people in detention—access to justice was virtually nonexistent.

The 1983 "Ghana Must Go" expulsions in Nigeria exposed another critical dimension of rights in the region: migration. Faced with economic downturn, the Nigerian government ordered the mass expulsion of more than a million West African migrants—most of them Ghanaians but also citizens of Togo, Benin, and elsewhere. Families were uprooted overnight, stripped of their livelihoods, and forced to return across borders with little more than what they could carry in the plastic bags that gave the episode its enduring name. The crisis revealed the fragility of regional integration, the gap between ECOWAS free-movement commitments and state practice, and the absence of protection for migrants as rights-bearing individuals.

> "These interventions aimed to turn abstract rights commitments into practical protections by strengthening institutions, widening civic space, and amplifying the voices of marginalized people."

In this context, the foundation supported the University of Lagos Borderlands Conference in the mid-1980s. The meeting gathered scholars, lawyers, policymakers, and activists to examine how cross-border migration was reshaping rights in the region—from the legal status of migrant workers and refugees to land disputes and questions of citizenship. Ford helped place migration squarely within the human rights agenda, connecting local experiences to the broader frameworks of the African Charter and the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons.

At first, Ford was cautious in branding its programming as "human rights," wary of antagonizing often authoritarian governments. By 1982, however, the foundation adopted a pragmatic approach—pursuing tactical entry points that seemed less confrontational. These included supporting human rights education and research or promoting the enforcement of legally recognized rights, while gradually opening up space for broader rights promotion and protection.

One strand of work addressed the weakness of legal institutions, which left international commitments meaningless in practice. In Côte d'Ivoire, Ford supported the *Centre Ivoirien de Recherches et d'Études Juridiques* (CIREJ). This allowed it to convene its first human rights conference in 1985 and to conduct a study on land allocation—pioneering work that linked disputes over migration and land rights to broader questions of justice.

Protecting girls: Ford supported rights monitoring centers and action against abuse.

In Senegal, Ford turned to academia as one of the few semi-autonomous spaces for debate. In 1984, it supported the Faculty of Legal and Economic Sciences at Cheikh Anta Diop University to launch a human rights education program and research on constitutional reform. A 1985 grant went to the *Centre d'Études et de Recherches sur la Démocratie Pluraliste dans le Tiers-Monde* (CERDET). This helped create a platform for independent analysis of democracy at a time when pluralism was tightly constrained.

Ford also focused on opening civic spaces and empowering citizens. The Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (NIALS) used Ford support to mount a women's rights media campaign, run legal clinics, and conduct research on justice administration. Ford also backed the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Nigeria, one of the country's most active women's rights

organizations. It provided free legal aid to women and children and pressed for reforms to strengthen gender equality. These initiatives prepared the judiciary for democratic governance and ensured that women's rights became part of the national rights conversation. In Senegal, Ford provided grants to *Conseil des Organisations Non-Gouvernementales d'Appui au Développement*. CONGAD trained local paralegals, embedding legal knowledge in communities. Meanwhile, exploratory support for *Réseau Africain pour le Développement Integré* (RADI) considered new models for accessible legal aid.

Finally, Ford invested in protecting vulnerable populations most exposed to abuse. Across the region, rights violations often occurred where citizens were least able to defend themselves—in prisons, police stations, and within families. Determination to bring hidden abuses to light was reflected in support for the African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect and for children's rights monitoring centers. Efforts to improve prison conditions and police conduct pursued the same logic: address the everyday violations of constitutionally guaranteed rights that were undermining trust in justice and governance.

These interventions aimed to turn abstract rights commitments into practical protection by strengthening institutions, widening civic spaces, and amplifying the voices of marginalized people. At a time when few others took this path, Ford was helping West Africa to bridge the gap between lofty charters and people's lived realities, laying essential groundwork for the region's democratic transitions in the coming decades.

Museum renewal: The West African Museums Program supported a regional approach, involving museum professionals across the region.

> **"The goal was to make museums socially relevant and alive, responsive to the needs and problems of communities."**

Museums as Civic Spaces: Culture in the New Development Paradigm

The West African Museums Program (WAMP), established in 1982, was surprising but deeply significant. It sought to revitalize museums across anglophone and francophone West Africa.

A growing chorus of voices—from UNESCO and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) to African intellectuals and policymakers—argued that development should not be reduced to economics or infrastructure alone. Culture was increasingly recognized as a vital dimension of human dignity, social cohesion, and democratic participation. People should be able to see themselves, their identities, and their histories reflected in the processes of change. In this view, cultural institutions became not luxuries but essential civic spaces. Here, communities could interpret their past, imagine their futures, and negotiate social belonging.

Museums were being challenged to shed their colonial legacy as static "temples" of artifacts and engage with the societies whose heritage they held. Likewise, Ford's global cultural strategy sought to make cultural institutions more socially relevant, inclusive, and participatory.

With support from Ford's West Africa office, art historian Philip Ravenhill explored a regional approach to museum renewal, leading to WAMP's creation through a Ford grant to the International African Institute in London. WAMP soon evolved into an African-governed network, headquartered in Dakar. It offered short courses, technical assistance, workshops, and exchanges for museum professionals across anglophone and francophone West Africa—Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and beyond.

It aimed to redefine museums: linking collections to contemporary creativity, democratic culture, and community life; giving museums a public face that could foster civic dialogue and strengthen community identity.

By 1990, WAMP had become Ford's most successful West African cultural initiative, a model for other regions. It demonstrated how international cooperation—backed by Ford and later by Rockefeller and other donors—could catalyze local capacity while deliberately transferring leadership to African professionals. WAMP helped transform museums from colonial-era repositories into centers of civic engagement and cultural creativity, an achievement that resonated far beyond West Africa in the wider movement to "Africanize" museums and to place cultural heritage at the heart of development.

Ford also provided grants to strengthen national cultural institutions. In Nigeria, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments received support in 1983 to develop photographic and computerized inventories of its holdings. This created the first systematic, digital record of a national collection. It was a crucial step in safeguarding heritage, reducing risks of theft or loss, and giving Nigeria credible leverage in international conversations about the return of looted artifacts. In Senegal, the National Archives received a grant to computerize its cataloguing system and train staff. This ensured that fragile historical records were preserved and made more accessible for research, policymaking, and civic education.

Grassroots Work That Set a Pathway for the Return of Democracy

By the close of the 1980s, West Africa had endured a decade of economic austerity and authoritarian rule, yet the groundwork for change was taking shape. The Ford Foundation responded by reorienting its work—linking development to rights, strengthening grassroots and cultural institutions, and supporting early civic engagement. These shifts laid the foundations for the 1990s, when democratic openings would give these emerging actors and ideas a larger stage.

Footnotes

[1] Interview conducted on August 14, 2025

Chapter 4

1990 – 1999
Sowing Seeds for Renewal in Difficult Times

Amid political uncertainty and economic austerity, there ran deep undercurrents for democratic renewal. Ford stood alongside civic struggles, as citizens pushed for justice, accountability, and inclusion. The foundation supported human rights defenders, independent journalists, women leaders, and grassroots organizations whose courage and vision reshaped the democratic landscape.

The 1990s were a period of transition between eras in West Africa. After decades of authoritarian rule and severe economic crises, much of the region began to move—unevenly—toward civilian rule and multiparty systems, greater civic participation, and enhanced regional cooperation. Human rights movements, women's organizations, and independent media began to flourish and rapidly gain traction. However, these democratic openings unfolded against a backdrop of persistent poverty, increasingly fragile institutions, and some of the harshest social and health conditions in the world.

Six of the world's ten poorest countries were in West Africa, where fragile bureaucracies and weak health and education systems left women, children, and young people especially vulnerable. Maternal mortality remained among the highest globally, harmful traditional practices persisted, and HIV/AIDS began to spread more widely, straining already fragile systems. Structural adjustment to the economy and state neglect of public services deepened the damage. Meanwhile, entrenched gender inequalities limited women's abilities to claim their rights and access essential services.

Violent conflict was common. Civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone devastated those countries and displaced millions of people, while Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal's Casamance region all experienced political instability. These crises highlighted the many challenges that post-independence states faced. Insecurity was regional, as refugee flows, cross-border fighters, trafficking of light weapons, women, and children, and illicit trade, especially in tobacco and hard drugs, spilled across

Bold new campaigns: From evidence to action that bridges policy and practice.

borders. In response, ECOWAS took unprecedented steps to mount peacekeeping operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone, foreshadowing its later role as a regional guarantor of stability.

> "The Ford Foundation became a key partner for reformers and civil society."

New possibilities also slowly—and painfully—emerged. The political openings of the 1990s sprang from years of struggle. In Nigeria, pro-democracy activists and human rights advocates such as the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) and allied groups, faced intimidation, detention, and even exile as they pressed for an end to military rule. Their persistence—often putting them at great personal risk—paved the way for a return to civilian government in 1999. Across the region, unions, women's networks, independent journalists, and faith leaders challenged authoritarian regimes and demanded accountability. Civil society organizations began engaging policymakers and pressing for international commitments—such as those made at the Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994) and the Beijing Women's Conference (1995)—to be enacted into laws implementable on the ground. Fortunately, some governments were at last partnering with civic actors, though gains remained fragmented and uneven.

Paths varied across West Africa. Nigeria remained under a tough military government, until citizens won space to participate in public life, as democracy returned in 1999. Ghana followed a steadier course. President Jerry Rawlings consolidated constitutional government, overseeing modest economic growth but with persistent poverty and debt challenges. Senegal's ruling Socialist Party retained power but presided over political liberalization and reforms which improved electoral fairness.

The Ford Foundation became a key partner for reformers and civil society. It supported human rights and democratic governance, improving women's health and status. It helped underserved communities to build sustainable livelihoods, and it provided strategic support to individuals and institutions seeking to consolidate the gains of democratic transition. The foundation also set up a dedicated arts and culture program in West Africa.

Ford picked investments that would catalyze further development. It focused on a small number of innovative, long-term initiatives. Its goal was to strengthen durable institutions with leaders who would anchor democracy, equity, and social justice across the region.

Fighting for human rights: Ford sought to anchor democracy, equity, and social justice.

Ford's Human Rights Program in West Africa

The Ford Foundation established a fully-fledged program on human rights and governance after Nigeria's military government announced its timetable in 1990 for a return to civilian rule. This shift built on the foundation's more cautious 1980s portfolio, focusing on human rights education, legal aid and conditons of detainees.

Elsewhere in West Africa, democratic openings were taking shape. In Ghana and Mali, for example, new constitutions enshrined rights in 1992, at least on paper. Community radio stations began to break state monopolies over information. ECOWAS and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights made valiant, if not always successful, efforts to introduce enforcement mechanisms at a regional level, working with the judiciary and local law enforcement agencies. Human rights groups pushed to translate constitutional promises into lived realities, though these organizations were small and often relied on external support.

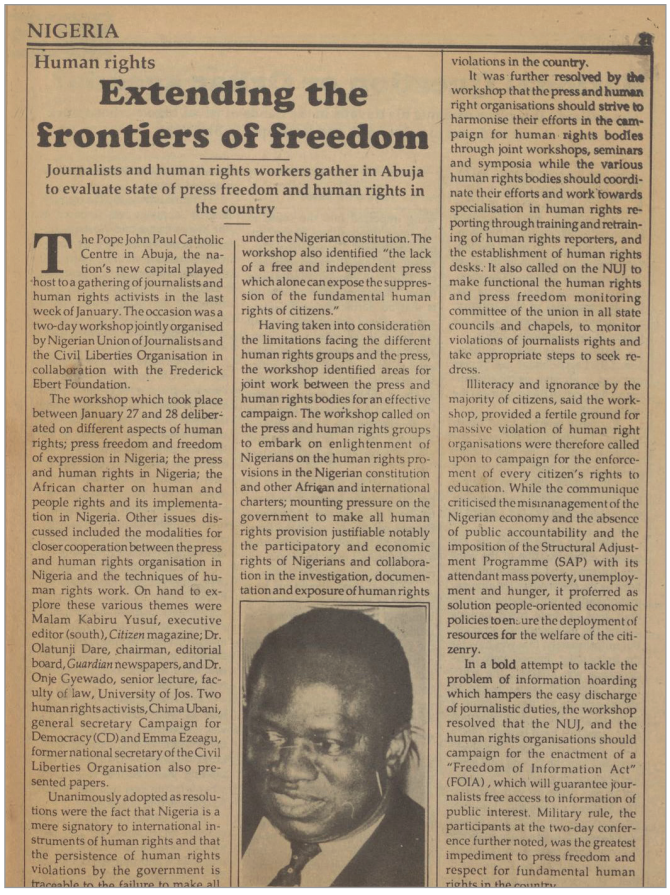
> "Our philosophy was accompaniment. To walk alongside partners, not just write cheques—helping them stay strong and independent even under military rule."

The Ford Foundation worked to sustain the free flow of information and foster open public debate on democracy in West Africa. It supported initiatives promoting peace and conflict resolution, funding key regional actors: the Center for Democracy and Development in Abuja, which analyzed ECOWAS peacekeeping; the Media Foundation for West Africa in Ghana, which advanced independent reporting on conflicts; the Center for Development and Conflict Management Studies in Sierra Leone, which strengthened local capacity for dispute resolution; and International Alert, which partnered with local organizations to build networks for violence prevention across the region.

Ford also encouraged pioneering NGOs, civic groups, and local governments to design and implement practical, community-based projects that would increase transparency and accountability in public affairs. "Our philosophy was accompaniment," Akwasi Aidoo, Ford's West Africa representative in the 1990s, reflects. "To walk alongside partners, not just write cheques—helping them stay strong and independent even under military rule."[1]

Seeding Nigeria's Human Rights Movement

The Ford Foundation played a pivotal role in shaping the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), Nigeria's first human rights NGO. Founded in 1987, the CLO quickly became a leading voice on prisoners' rights and state abuses. In its early years, it reflected the passion of activism more than the structure of an institution. Even before providing funding, Ford staff mentored CLO's founders, offering strategic guidance and international visibility that lent credibility in a hostile political climate. Through this partnership, CLO's leaders came to recognize the need for stronger institutional foundations, appointing a full-time National Secretary to ensure continuity under military rule. Beyond grants, Ford's sustained mentoring and personal relationships—described by CLO veteran Chidi Anselm Odinkalu as "impossible to quantify"—helped steady the organization and embolden Nigeria's broader human rights community..



NIGERIA

Human rights

Extending the frontiers of freedom

Journalists and human rights workers gather in Abuja to evaluate state of press freedom and human rights in the country

The Pope John Paul Catholic Centre in Abuja, the nation's new capital played host to a gathering of journalists and human rights activists in the last week of January. The occasion was a two-day workshop jointly organised by Nigerian Union of Journalists and the Civil Liberties Organisation in collaboration with the Frederick Ebert Foundation.

The workshop which took place between January 27 and 28 deliberated on different aspects of human rights; press freedom and freedom of expression in Nigeria; the press and human rights in Nigeria; the African charter on human and people rights and its implementation in Nigeria. Other issues discussed included the modalities for closer cooperation between the press and human rights organisation in Nigeria and the techniques of human rights work. On hand to explore these various themes were Malam Kabiru Yusuf, executive editor (south), *Citizen* magazine; Dr. Olatunji Dare, chairman, editorial board, *Guardian* newspapers, and Dr. Onje Gyewado, senior lecture, faculty of law, University of Jos. Two human rights activists, Chima Ubani, general secretary Campaign for Democracy (CD) and Emma Ezeagu, former national secretary of the Civil Liberties Organisation also presented papers.

Unanimously adopted as resolutions were the fact that Nigeria is a mere signatory to international instruments of human rights and that the persistence of human rights violations by the government is traceable to the failure to make all

under the Nigerian constitution. The workshop also identified "the lack of a free and independent press which alone can expose the suppression of the fundamental human rights of citizens."

Having taken into consideration the limitations facing the different human rights groups and the press, the workshop identified areas for joint work between the press and human rights bodies for an effective campaign. The workshop called on the press and human rights groups to embark on enlightenment of Nigerians on the human rights provisions in the Nigerian constitution and other African and international charters; mounting pressure on the government to make all human rights provision justifiable notably the participatory and economic rights of Nigerians and collaboration in the investigation, documentation and exposure of human rights violations in the country.

It was further resolved by the workshop that the press and human right organisations should strive to harmonise their efforts in the campaign for human rights bodies through joint workshops, seminars and symposia while the various human rights bodies should coordinate their efforts and work towards specialisation in human rights reporting through training and retraining of human rights reporters, and the establishment of human rights desks. It also called on the NUJ to make functional the human rights and press freedom monitoring committee of the union in all state councils and chapels, to monitor violations of journalists rights and take appropriate steps to seek redress.

Illiteracy and ignorance by the majority of citizens, said the workshop, provided a fertile ground for massive violation of human right organisations were therefore called upon to campaign for the enforcement of every citizen's rights to education. While the communique criticised the mismanagement of the Nigerian economy and the absence of public accountability and the imposition of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) with its attendant mass poverty, unemployment and hunger, it proferred as solution people-oriented economic policies to ensure the deployment of resources for the welfare of the citizenry.

In a bold attempt to tackle the problem of information hoarding which hampers the easy discharge of journalistic duties, the workshop resolved that the NUJ, and the human rights organisations should campaign for the enactment of a "Freedom of Information Act" (FOIA), which will guarantee journalists free access to information of public interest. Military rule, the participants at the two-day conference further noted, was the greatest impediment to press freedom and respect for fundamental human rights in the country

In the Press: Journalists and human rights activists demand protection for citizens' rights at meeting on Nigerian press freedom. (*Citizen*, February 1993)

Nigeria exemplified both the threats to human rights, and the potential for change. Arbitrary arrests, censorship, and violent repression were common. Activists and journalists faced detention and harassment: fundamental freedoms remained suspended. Amid such repression, the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) was founded in 1987 in Lagos as Nigeria's first non-governmental human rights group.

The CLO would become a seedbed for Nigeria's broader human rights movement, as many of its early activists who were its staff members established new groups with distinct missions. Human Rights Watch Nigeria and the Constitutional Rights Project (CRP) were founded to focus on strategic litigation and constitutional reform. The Centre for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN Foundation) worked on police reform and community policing, while the Legal Defence and Assistance Project (LEDAP) provided free legal representation to victims of human rights abuses and campaigned for criminal justice reform.

> "From the beginning, they were consistent and backed a young organization determined to embed human rights in Nigeria's ecosystem."

CRP, a Ford partner, defended political detainees and victims of state abuse, as well as pioneering strategic litigation to challenge arbitrary detention and extrajudicial killings. It also invested in public education, using radio call-in shows and dramas to provide working-class Nigerians with practical knowledge of their constitutional rights. Despite constant harassment, CRP helped shape a legal culture to underpin Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999. It soon became a respected legal watchdog, its annual reports becoming essential for human rights groups, researchers, and international observers. For this work, Clement Nwankwo, CRP's founder and long-time director, received the 1996 Martin Ennals Prize for Human Rights Defenders.

Ford also helped cultivate a broader ecosystem of organizations advancing social and environmental justice. Among these were emerging NGOs defending socio-economic rights, such as the Social and Economic Rights Action Center (SERAC), which fought forced evictions and environmental degradation in the oil-rich Niger Delta. Another early partner, Environmental Rights Action (ERA)—founded in 1993 in Benin City—became Nigeria's leading environmental justice group, championing community rights to a healthy environment, particularly in areas affected by oil exploitation. With Ford's early support, ERA documented pollution and human rights abuses, trained local activists, and pressed both government and multinational oil companies to strengthen environmental standards and ensure community participation in decision-making.

Once civilian rule returned, Nigerian civil society's fresh challenge was to help public institutions deliver human rights. The CLEEN Foundation became the first Nigerian human rights group to argue, in 1998, that real reform required working with the state as well as applying outside pressure. With Ford's support, CLEEN pioneered evidence-based advocacy on how to improve policing and public safety. Criminologists, lawyers and researchers gathered data, trained officers, and proposed practical reforms. "The Ford Foundation is one of our earliest supporters," notes Peter Madhuama, the current Executive Director. "From the beginning, they were consistent and backed a young organization determined to embed human rights in Nigeria's ecosystem."[2]

CLEEN's advocacy helped create the Police Complaints Response Unit in 2015 and framed national debate on law enforcement. It showed how human rights work can transform public institutions as well as challenge them. Ford's support then enabled CLEEN to expand. More than 20 years on, CLEEN remains pivotal. During the 2020 #EndSARS protests, it acted as both watchdog and partner, pressing for accountability while reminding police leaders of their rights-based training. Today, it mainstreams GBV prevention in policing and puts officers on the front line of community outreach. In 2021, after CLEEN's founder, Innocent Chukwuma, passed, Ford endowed a Lagos Business School chair in his name to embed his ethos of rights, accountability, and community engagement among future public leaders. "It has never been a master–servant relationship but one of support and challenge," Peter Madhuama reflects on the partnership. "We share a common value: making real social change."[3]

Liberal innovator: Innocent Chukwuma, founder of CLEEN Foundation, which argued that real reform required working with the state.

Ford pursued a similar approach, across the region, of building institutions and leadership capacity. The Panos Institute's West Africa program pioneered the use of community radio as a tool for grassroots participation and public debate across the region. Established in the early 1990s, with early support from the Ford Foundation, Panos helped set up local community radio stations and train staff. Rural and marginalized communities could share information, discuss development challenges, and hold leaders accountable. In Ghana, Ford supported the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), which became a leading advocate for constitutionalism, rights education, and independent electoral monitoring. In Senegal, it worked with organizations such as RADDHO (*Rencontre Africaine pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme*), one of francophone Africa's strongest rights networks, which combined local advocacy with regional solidarity. It also enabled Social Alert to build regional networks on labor and socio-economic rights. Building national anchors and regional connectors ensured that human rights' activism became increasingly networked so it could shape democratic transitions across West Africa.

Ford's approach was not merely to fund individual "trees," but to connect them into a thriving "forest," recalls Akwasi Aidoo, Ford's West Africa representative in the 1990s. The foundation pursued this by fostering trans-local and transnational linkages, helping grantees move beyond what Aidoo called "the syndrome of projectitis" through sustained support for capacity building and resource mobilization. This strategy, he noted, was guided by Ford's "golden rule" of grantmaking: "to help those you love to escape from you." By connecting partners to other donors and opening new opportunities, Ford sought to ensure its grantees' long-term autonomy and resilience.[4]

Rights-based Reproductive Health

Ford's commitment to women's health in West Africa began evolving in the 1980s, moving away from narrow population-control measures. By the early 1990s, this approach developed further, focusing more deliberately on sexual and reproductive health issues—areas not yet high on the public agenda. "The guiding principle was always to figure out what difference you can make," says Akwasi Aidoo. "What are the gaps, the areas where there's so much work to be done but there isn't enough philanthropic support? Where's your niche?" [5]

"Ford was bold and daring"

A conversation with Professor Ayo Atsenuwa, – a leading Nigerian lawyer

You worked with the Ford Foundation both as a grantee and later as a consultant. How do you remember its role in Nigeria during the 1990s?

Atsenuwa: The mid-1990s were very repressive in Nigeria—arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions, disappearances, even killings were commonplace under military rule. Yet it was also a time when civil society began to find its voice. Ford's boldness stood out. Even though it did not act frontally, it supported what I sometimes call the "underground movement," helping human rights groups publish, organize, and even get people out of the country to attend international meetings under difficult conditions. Without that support, I doubt we would have seen the vibrant civil society space that Nigeria enjoys today.

How did this translate into institutional development?

Atsenuwa: Ford didn't just fund projects; it invested in institutions. It took risks with emerging groups, providing not only program grants but also institutional support—funds for rent, staff, or even matching funds for sustainability. That made all the difference. Organizations like the Civil Liberties Organization, from which many others later sprang—CLEEN Foundation, Environmental Rights Agenda, and Constitutional Rights Project —were able to survive and mature because Ford was willing to back them when others would not.

You later authored a report for Ford Foundation in 2008. What were your key findings?

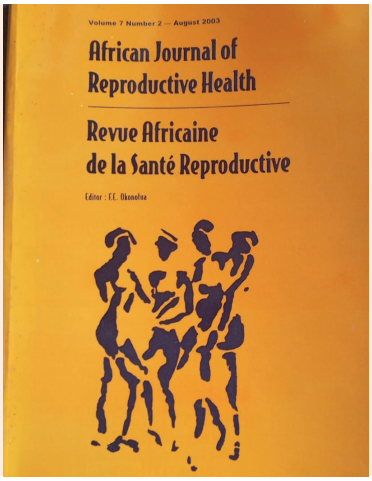
Atsenuwa: The report looked back at 50 years of Ford's work in West Africa. My conclusion was clear: Ford played a catalytic role in the democratization process and in human rights development. From its early focus on research and universities in the 1960s and 1970s, it shifted in the 1990s to supporting civil society at a critical moment in Nigeria's transition. It took risks, encouraged innovation, and nurtured institutions that remain central to human rights work today. Without overstating, one can say that the Ford Foundation helped to lay the foundations for the civil society that we now take for granted.

Ms Ayo Atsenuwa, Professor of Law at the University of Lagos, holds LL.M. degrees from Warwick and London and is a Solicitor and Advocate of the Supreme Court of Nigeria. Her expertise spans human rights, criminal justice, gender studies, and health law. Beyond academia, she led the Legal Research and Resource Development Centre and has consulted for UN agencies, DFID, USAID, CIDA, and the Ford Foundation. A committed advocate of law reform, she continues to advance human rights and governance across Africa.

> “Reproductive health had to confront stigma, empower women and adolescents, and integrate prevention, sexuality education, and rights advocacy into mainstream health work.”

Pilot initiatives on maternal health, vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF), reproductive tract infections, and sexually transmitted diseases marked a gradual reorientation toward a broader agenda centered on women’s health and rights. This new direction gained momentum in the early 1990s, reinforced by the landmark 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women. These gatherings reframed reproductive health as a matter of rights, equity, and social justice.

The outbreak and rapid spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic made Ford’s new approach more urgent. The virus was spreading rapidly, particularly among women and young people, not least because of years of official denial. HIV exposed the fragility of health systems and the social costs of silence around sexuality. For Ford, this confirmed that reproductive health could not be confined to demographic targets or clinical services. It had to confront stigma, empower women and adolescents, and integrate prevention, sexuality education, and rights advocacy into mainstream health work.



From Benin City to the Continent: WHARC reshaped women’s health discourse with the African Journal of Reproductive Health.

Realizing this vision wouldn’t be easy. “Sexual and reproductive health in West Africa was a politically sensitive subject,”[6] Babatunde Ahonsi, Ford’s program officer, observes. Governments operated in contexts that saw women as second-class citizens and resisted the idea of young people claiming rights or accessing services. A culture of silence surrounded sex, sexuality, violence against women, and incest, making them difficult to address. Women’s leadership in households, communities, and public policy was limited. Government responses were marked by indifference, apathy, and denial.

> “Framing the issue through the lens of youth was particularly effective. It resonated with West African leaders accustomed to declaring that young people are the future of our countries.”

The Ford Foundation partnered with bold organizations—civil society groups, academic institutions, and independent think tanks—to set the stage for informed dialogue with government. Evidence produced by these partners began to shift official attitudes. Women’s Health and Action Research Centre (WHARC) in Benin City was a good example. It grew into a leading national voice for reproductive health—publishing the influential African Journal of Reproductive Health—while also transforming services on the ground, from rural clinics to mobile support for survivors of gender-based violence. WHARC showed how a small Ford seed grant could grow a transformative institution.

Data generated by Ford’s grantees showed the scale of Nigeria’s health crisis: a country with just 2% of the world’s population accounted for around 10% of global maternal deaths, among the highest rates worldwide. The burden of reproductive health challenges fell disproportionately on young people, damaging the country’s prospects. “Framing the issue through the lens of youth was particularly effective,” explains Ahonsi. “It resonated with West African leaders accustomed to declaring that young people are the future of our countries.”[7]

Ford's partners broke new ground. Action Health Incorporated (AHI) defied a conservative backlash to introduce youth-friendly clinics and sexual education. When banned from Lagos schools in 1992, AHI built alliances with parents, teachers, doctors, and journalists, turning hostility into engagement. "Ford's grant—enabling the 1999 National Conference on Adolescent Reproductive Health—catalyzed the national work in advancing young people's health and development in Nigeria," recalls Adenike Esiat, AHI's co-founder and executive director. "It moved our efforts beyond a single state and gave the issue a national focus. It was as if the whole nation was waiting for this." [8]

This landmark conference brought together, for the first time, government officials, NGOs, professionals, and young people to set a national agenda. "It gave rise to the development of a national adolescent reproductive-health strategy," adds Adenike Esiat. "It became the grounding for everything we are seeing now in the status of adolescents and young people in Nigeria."[9]

> "The Community Life Project stepped off the beaten track in HIV prevention, embedding it in markets, salons, schools, churches, and mosques."

Girls' Power Initiative (GPI) was also determined to confront discriminatory norms and break long-standing taboos. It was founded in 1993 by Bene Madunagu and Grace Osakue—two Nigerian feminists—to empower girls to speak about sexuality and claim their rights. "Women were socialized to endure and accept abuse," explains May Ekidu, GPI's Edo State coordinator. "The founders recognized that the only way to break the cycle was to begin with girls."[10]

Supported early by the Ford Foundation, GPI established safe spaces and weekly sessions where girls of different ages could learn about their bodies, rights, and choices. "Before this, a girl speaking out was a taboo,"[11] says Comfort Igbeme, now coordinator in Cross River State and herself a GPI alumna. "Parents would say: 'you will marry anyway, why go to school?' " Over time, parents who once resigned themselves to early marriage, began keeping their daughters in school, and alumnae of GPI became leaders themselves. "People are now aware," Comfort concludes. "They know girls have rights and they speak up. We are not where we want to be, but we have moved—and we are still moving."[12]

Ford's long partnership made these breakthroughs possible. "Ford Foundation molded us," May reflects. "They believed in our vision and helped us stand tall. With Ford's support, GPI expanded from Edo and Cross River to Akwa Ibom and Delta, later also to Bayelsa and Abuja."[13]

By the late 1990s, Ford's reproductive health portfolio converged with its HIV/AIDS engagement. Civil society coalitions supported by the foundation helped to shape Nigeria's first National Policy on HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections and the creation of the Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS, ensuring affected communities had a seat at the table. Ford's partners trained journalists to report on maternal mortality and HIV without stigma, and empowered women living with HIV to advocate nationally and regionally. This integration of rights, health, and HIV prevention reflected Ford's holistic approach: improving services, shifting norms, and embedding accountability in governance.

Battling HIV: Members of the Vegetable Sellers' Association watch a video on HIV/AIDS.

The Community Life Project (CLP) stepped off the beaten track in HIV prevention, embedding it in markets, salons, schools, churches, and mosques. It also treated health holistically, linking HIV awareness to nutrition, sanitation, self-esteem, family life, and livelihoods. "Ford recognized that CLP was never about a single theme—HIV/AIDS or otherwise—but

about the model itself," Ngozi Iwere, CLP founder, emphasizes. "We created a model grounded in social capital—one that can be used to tackle challenges of every kind."[14] With Ford's backing, CLP scaled its community engagement model nationwide, proving it could adapt across cultures and contexts and evolve beyond the health sector.

Ford also supported complementary initiatives by civil society organizations such as Women's Health and Economic Empowerment in Nigeria, which tied maternal health to microcredit and training. By the end of the 1990s, often with Ford's support, integrated models were taking root across Nigeria, showing how women and young people could gain both the knowledge to safeguard their health and the skills to earn a living.

In the south, Life Vanguards turned sexuality lessons and leadership workshops into a springboard for small businesses, so that young people would leave not only wiser about their bodies but ready to start earning. Far to the northwest, the Youth Advancement Organization of Nigeria helped teenagers learn about reproductive health while picking up trades and the confidence to lead in their communities. Meanwhile, in the rural Midwest, the Owan Women's Health and Empowerment Project brought women together to talk openly about health and to launch small income-earning ventures, giving them a stronger voice at home and in village life. These efforts captured the Ford Foundation's bold aim: to support—and inspire others to adopt—programs that link reproductive education with sustainable livelihoods for women and young people living in poverty.

Ford applied this approach across West Africa. In Ghana, it supported action research on adolescent health at the University of Ghana which shaped national policy and school curricula. The work focused on sustaining HIV awareness and prevention among out-of-school young people in Accra, combining research with follow-up interventions to reinforce knowledge and safe practices. The foundation supported several organizations in francophone West Africa—primarily in Senegal—that advanced policy reform and advocacy across key sectors.

Ford supported the African AIDS Research Network (RAES), which brought together scientists and community advocates from multiple countries to share research and push for stronger HIV prevention and treatment policies. It also supported the Union for African Population Studies (UAPS), which organized cross-border research and forums to give governments and researchers the evidence needed to address reproductive health challenges. In addition, Ford strengthened the Association of African Women for Research and Development. AAWORD amplified women's voices in economic and social policy debates: it trained a diverse group of women leaders to advocate for fairer trade and more equitable development.

> **"The foundation focused on Community Development Associations (CDAs) and cooperatives that used microloans and small businesses to fight poverty and help members create jobs, buy equipment, and build assets."**

Strengthening Livelihoods in Nigeria during the 1990s

Nigeria's economy was in deep distress at this time. Living standards fell sharply—by the late decade, nearly half the population lived on less than a dollar a day. Clean water was scarce, many children did not survive infancy, and illiteracy was widespread, placing Nigeria among the world's poorest countries. Poverty was most severe in rural areas, especially among small farmers, but cities were also hit badly. With few opportunities in formal jobs, most Nigerians survived through small businesses. Yet banks offered little support: they avoided low-income and rural clients, while repeated bank failures destroyed public trust. Government credit schemes promised help but were often undermined by politics and mismanagement, reaching a tiny share of those in need. As a result, millions turned to informal options—local savings groups, cooperatives, NGOs, and moneylenders—to scrape together small sums needed to trade or earn a living.

Microfinance in Nigeria: LAPO helped Nigerians build livelihoods and break the cycle of poverty.

Ford supported a strategy of "participatory development," enabling local people to organize and run their own projects. The foundation focused on Community Development Associations (CDAs) and cooperatives—large membership groups, mostly women in poverty —that used microloans and small businesses to fight poverty and help members create jobs, buy equipment, and build assets.

Ford expanded this effort by funding organizations to train and support CDAs. The West Africa Rural Foundation was set up in Dakar with substantive seed-funding from Ford. Meanwhile, the foundation helped create the Nigeria Community Development Foundation (CDF) in 1993 to provide cooperatives and other membership groups with grants and loans. It supported, among others, Community and Women Development (COWAD), Development Exchange Center in Bauchi, Farmers Development Union (FADU) in Ibadan, Country Women's Association of Nigeria in Ondo State, Development Innovations and Network, Imo Self-Help Organization Njikoka in Imo State, and the Lift Above Poverty Organization (LAPO).

Promoting a collaborative and network-oriented approach among all these organizations, Ford also fostered the Community Development and Microfinance Roundtable (CDMR). "They were a movement," explains Adhiambo Odaga, program officer at the time.[15] We formalized it as the Community Development and Microfinance Roundtable to spread standards and peer learning."

> "Ford recognized that poverty is as much about voice and agency as about access to capital."

By the mid-1990s, these community groups, drawing on traditional savings practices, were recording loan repayment rates above 95%. Even as the wider economy declined, many members managed to increase their incomes and build assets. Beneficiaries, especially women, also gained better health and greater social empowerment.

In 1998 the foundation commissioned a review to capture best practices and plan for scaling up and outreach of microfinance institutions. However, important challenges remained for Nigeria's microfinance NGOs: high operating costs, weak management systems, limited business skills, and poor staff pay. Many borrowers outgrew basic microfinance products but, lacking training in small-business development, could not be "graduated" to commercial banks, which were themselves wary of lending to low-income people. These gaps made it hard for microfinance NGOs to attract commercial investment. CDMR itself required further capacity building to set industry standards, create a code of conduct, and help its members advocate for policy change. This review set the stage for continued work in the forthcoming decade.

Mapping Power: In Anchau, Kaduna State, Hajiya Aishatu saw how the palace, mosque, and police station formed a triangle of power—one that left women outside its bounds.

Ford recognized that poverty is as much about voice and agency as about access to capital. Ford's push for democratic consolidation reached villages through participatory theatre led by the Nigerian Popular Theatre Alliance (NPTA). Professor Oga Steve Abah and colleagues at Ahmadu Bello University had already pioneered "Theatre for Development" during the mid-1970s to help people find their voice, reflect on their realities, and act for change. Abah stresses: "The first level of empowerment for anybody is voice: if people cannot speak or articulate their problems to authority, nothing else matters."[16]

Lift Above Poverty Organization (LAPO)

It all started with 300 naira and a vision. In the late 1980s, the Nigerian economy was reeling, and poverty was rife. "I took 300 naira—about five naira to a dollar then," recalls Dr. Godwin Ehigiamusoe, rural cooperative officer at that time, and later head of LAPO. "I gave 100 naira each to three women in my church."[17] That simple gesture became the seed of LAPO.

Ehigiamusoe 's concept was radical: he likened poverty to an octopus with three tentacles—material deprivation, poor health, and social exclusion. He insisted that microcredit would work only if coupled with health education and social empowerment. The Ford Foundation spotted his idea in a newsletter by the famous Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and made a leap of faith. In 1991, LAPO received its first $20,000 grant to prove the concept. "We felt this was about innovation, about proving feasibility," Ehigiamusoe says. "The foundation was one of the few agencies willing to stay in Nigeria during the dark years of military rule, and they believed in us when nobody else did."[18]

LAPO launched community roundtables where villagers debated priorities and designed solutions, rooting microcredit in broader dialogue. The organization trained women, not just to manage loans but to treat childhood illnesses with oral rehydration and to challenge restrictive customs through amateur dramas and a weekly television program, "Bridging the Gap." Impact was measured in stories, explains Ehigiamusoea. "A mother who could afford chicken twice a month instead of once, a girl sent to school thanks her mother's earnings: that's impact."[19]

Ford's greatest legacy has been the institution it helped to build. In 1995, worried about how easily founder-led NGOs could falter, Ford organized a governance workshop. Ehigiamusoe still remembers the moment: "Ford's impact goes beyond money," he says. "They cared about building institutions."[20] The experience created a spark—he pulled together a professional board, set up proper departments, and began investing in his staff, laying the groundwork for lasting change.

Over three decades, LAPO has grown from a handful of visionary people into an impressive ecosystem that includes Nigeria's largest microfinance bank and fifth largest employer of the country with more than 7,000 employees, a licensed microinsurance company, health facilities and a monotechnic that trains microfinance practitioners.

Founded in 1989, NPTA was created to take this practice beyond the university, building long-term relationships with communities and training local groups to use theatre as a tool for problem-solving, accountability, and inclusion. Later, in 2000, with Ford's support, NPTA established the Theatre for Development Center (TFDC) as a hub for training, documentation, and field practice—linking academic insight to grassroots action.

Participatory theatre turned villages into spaces for dialogue and problem-solving. This became a rehearsal for democracy. Facilitators helped villagers map their environment and dramatize issues—health, education, land rights—through songs, dance, and storytelling. In one mapping exercise in Anchau, Kaduna State, a woman named Hajiya Aishatu suddenly saw how the palace, mosque and police station formed a triangle of power excluding women. "I have lived in this community all my life, yet I had never noticed that they stand close to each other in an alliance oppressing us," she says. She marched into a meeting women had never attended and declared that no decisions would be valid without female voices.

In 1999, as Nigeria exited military rule, Ford supported NPTA's Changing Games project. It brought civic education and rights awareness to rural Borno, Kaduna, and Katsina and pressed for participation by women and young people. Subsequent work, such as Building Bridges, used theatre to defuse religious tensions in cities like Kaduna and Kano, helping formerly divided neighborhoods create joint youth associations and shared forums for dialogue.

Media, Arts, and Culture in a Decade of Democratic Opening

The foundation supported the awakening of democracy by strengthening the media. The Office of West Africa also became the first regional office to design a dedicated arts and culture program, helping revive creativity that had long been stifled under military rule. "Through media, theatre, literature, and film, Ford's partners exposed abuses and broke taboos," explains Akwasi Aidoo, then regional director of the West Africa Office. "It created spaces for women, young people, and marginalized groups to claim a voice."[21]

In Ghana, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) was founded in 1997, with an initial grant from the Ford Foundation to empower media and civic voices for democracy, development, peace, and stability. This initial funding was not project-specific but provided core support helping to set up and drive the organization's vision. The MFWA grew into a regional watchdog operating across 16 countries through national partner organizations. It has trained hundreds of journalists every year and provides legal aid to those who are harassed. Its advocacy has helped repeal criminal libel laws in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone and push adoption of Access to Information laws—today West Africa has the continent's largest number of such laws. Ford also backed MFWA's partnerships with major radio stations to strengthen election coverage and ensure more transparent polls.

"Working with the Ford Foundation has been a truly rewarding experience," says Sulemana Brahima, Executive Director of MFWA. "They were unusually flexible and trust-based, giving our young organization the space to explore and innovate without heavy bureaucracy." He highlights Ford's deep understanding of nonprofit dynamics: "That experience empowered MFWA to speak frankly with other funders about unsustainable models—even turning down grants that came with unviable overheads."

> "Through media, theatre, literature, and film, Ford's partners exposed abuses and broke taboos. It created spaces for women, young people, and marginalized groups to claim a voice."

In a climate of severe repression in Nigeria, the Ford Foundation helped incubate the Media Rights Agenda (MRA), founded in 1993 by lawyers and journalists to protect reporters from arrest and censorship. MRA soon realized that the deeper challenge was access to information. With Ford's backing, it scoured colonial era statutes in several countries for clauses allowing requests for official documents and it trained activists to use these laws. MRA played a pivotal role in drafting Nigeria's Freedom of Information bill and campaigned with others for nearly 20 years until the law passed in 2011. With Ford's support, it has launched a portal that tracks ministries' responses to requests, ensuring that the law is not a dead letter.

Strengthening West Africa's Cultural Life and Creative Voices

Ford played a pivotal role in West Africa's cultural reawakening. It invested in theatre groups such as PEC Repertory Theatre and the Performance Studio Workshop, which trained new performers and staged original Nigerian drama, including a landmark 1999

Media Foundation for West Africa

In 2021, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) launched The Fourth Estate, a non-profit investigative newsroom combining public interest investigations with training. Using Ghana's Right to Information law, it has published dozens of investigative reports and trained many journalists. Its exposés have helped trigger investigations, suspensions of corrupt contracts, and led nearly 300 government officials to declare their assets. In 2024, the World Justice Project awarded The Fourth Estate the Media and Information prize, highlighting how MFWA has become a model of accountability journalism across Africa.

production of Things Fall Apart. Other initiatives used performance as a bridge between art and activism, from promoting local governance and peacebuilding in the Niger Delta to engaging young people in arts and environmental projects through the Jazz 38 Centre for the Arts.

> "The Ford Foundation's fingerprints were everywhere—yet mostly behind the scenes, letting local leaders take the spotlight."

Ford's support aimed to strengthen institutions and link tradition with modern needs. The University of Ibadan received grants to deepen research on governance, health, and traditional art forms, while documentaries and multimedia projects brought cultural heritage to wider audiences. Ford supported the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies to document Asante history and heritage, and it funded a pan-African effort to harmonize African languages. Women's contributions to culture were also highlighted, through support for the Cultural Action Network which recorded women's roles in crafts, and to Women Writers of Nigeria which sought to amplify female voices in literature.

Literature, writing, and new media became tools for dialogue and identity during this period of transition. Ford supported national conferences of Nigerian authors, workshops for women writers, and even a poetry caravan that traveled from Senegal's Gorée Island to Timbuktu, celebrating creativity across borders. To professionalize cultural practice, the foundation funded training in arts management, equipped film institutes, and television producers, and supported women's groups' introduction to new electronic communication tools. It also advanced media pluralism and journalist training through partnerships with the Panos Institute, the West Africa Journalists Association, and the Media Foundation for West Africa—helping ensure freer expression across the region.

Communicating for Change (CFC) is a striking example of art used for social change. This Nigerian media NGO emerged in the mid-1990s. Led by filmmaker Sandra Mbanefo Obiago, CFC blended documentary production with behavior-changing campaigns on sensitive themes such as democracy, governance, and female genital mutilation. It pioneered innovative ways to reach audiences, from pre- and post-screening surveys to turning long distance buses into mobile cinemas. When broadcasters and Nollywood producers shied away from taboo subjects, CFC would step in—partnering with directors like Tunde Kelani and mentoring a new generation of socially conscious filmmakers, including Kenneth Gyang and Yinka Edwards.

Ford's sustained support was critical. Core funding helped CFC register as an NGO, secure legal support during Nigeria's political transition, and to strengthen its governance and leadership. This stability gave CFC the freedom to experiment—producing public service announcements during democratic transitions and developing bold new forms of popular, socially engaged storytelling. By the time CFC closed in 2011, it had reshaped how Nigerian filmmakers approached social issues, leaving a lasting example of how creative expression can be both entertaining and transformative.

Legacy: Hope Replanted

By the close of the 1990s, the socio-political scene in West Africa was unmistakably changed: civilian governments had returned, community radios crackled across the airwaves, and citizens were demanding justice, accountability, and inclusion. The Ford Foundation's fingerprints were everywhere—yet mostly behind the scenes, letting local leaders take the spotlight. Its true legacy was not only in programs, but in possibilities. Grantees were not merely surviving the 1990s—with Ford's backing, they were positioning themselves to lead the new millennium as the world entered the 2000s.

Footnotes

[1-2] Interview conducted on July 3, 2025
[3] Interview conducted on July 29, 2025
[4-5] Interview conducted on July 3, 2025
[6] Interview conducted on July 21, 2025
[7] Interview conducted on July 21, 2025
[8] Interview conducted on August 12, 2025
[9] Interview conducted on July 29, 2025
[10] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025
[11] Interview conducted on August 12, 2025
[12] Interview conducted on July 25, 2025
[14] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025
[15] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025
[16] Interview conducted on August 13, 2025
[17] Interview conducted on August 13, 2025
[18] Interview conducted on July 7, 2025
[19] Interview conducted on August 8, 2025
[20] Interview conducted on August 13, 2025
[21] Interview conducted on July 3, 2025

Investing in Individuals and Leadership

Ford's innovative fellowship programs supplied skilled graduates to West Africa's newly independent bureaucracies. Its later—more inclusive—focus transformed prospects for disadvantaged individuals and marginalized communities while highlighting ways for countries to nurture the potential of all citizens.

The Ford Foundation's mark is unmistakable in the biographies of many people who have shaped West Africa. Across six decades of shifting regimes, evolving institutions, new opportunities, and persistent challenges, one element has remained constant: Ford's investment in people.

Ford recognized the transformative power of individual potential, long before "capacity-building" became a shorthand in development discourse. It placed trust and resources in people with vision, resilience, talent, and courage. Some were preparing to enter public service as their countries gained independence, when trained civil servants were urgently needed. Others came from settings where universities were still emerging or scholarships scarce. Many faced political or economic upheavals, limited opportunities, or social barriers. Among them were emerging leaders whose talent was not always reflected in school records and who were often overlooked, yet whose potential was vital.

Ford has supported individuals in impressive and diverse ways. This chapter explores its philosophy in practice, highlighting how investments in young people have been a consistent theme, and have led to an enduring impact.

"Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family."

—Kofi Annan,
Former UN Secretary General,
and Ford Fellow

Cultural exchange: Kofi Annan, a young Ghanaian and future UN Secretary General, arrives in the US to study.

In the 1960s—during the very early post-independence years—Ford helped train administrators, providing skills desperately needed for effective government. It offered higher education scholarships and travel grants—frequently abroad—that exposed recipients to fresh knowledge and perspectives. These intellectuals, activists, and advocates returned home with ideas that shaped national debates and policies. Ford's initiatives were ambitious to make a difference at scale.

Investing in people achieved influence far beyond any single program or grant. Meanwhile, the foundation drew inspiration and renewed purpose from those it supported, in relationships marked by respect and care.

Opening Pathways Through Education

Ford always recognized education as a gateway to leadership. Hundreds of scholars and professionals received Ford-funded scholarships to pursue advanced degrees abroad or to attend workshops that helped them gain expertise and build networks. Many later became pioneering figures in their fields.

A young Ghanaian, Kofi Annan, who, in 1960, left for college in Minnesota on a Ford scholarship, later became Secretary-General of the United Nations. He, like many contemporaries, testified to how Ford broadened his horizons early in life. Similar stories unfolded across Ghana and Nigeria, where Ford fellowships supported graduate training in public administration, seeding the ranks of a competent civil service, and developing leaders across the region.

A generation later, Ford's educational support continued opening doors—sometimes through the simplest of encounters. In the mid-1980s, Abubakar Balarabe Mahmoud, a Nigerian lawyer, was already serving as a young state counsel in Kano when he heard of the International Development Law Institute in Rome, which trained lawyers from developing countries to work effectively with global partners. Funding was a challenge, until—while on a trip to Lagos—he decided to "knock on the Ford Foundation office door".

"I had no prior appointment," he recalls. "I just said that I'd like to meet the head of the mission." Within minutes, a senior staff member agreed to support his three-month training. "No formalities, no back and forth. Very supportive. I can't forget her support," he says. After patiently securing the required government clearance, he received the scholarship and left for Rome the following year.

The experience, Mahmoud says, "was really transformative on many, many fronts". Among 30 participants from Africa, Asia, and South America, he gained practical lawyering skills and a wider perspective on the roles of law in development. He remembers a contract review competition—"you actually see your progress"—and weekend trips to Italian cities and museums, where the works of Leonardo da Vinci revealed "the multi-dimensional nature of knowledge and how the division of knowledge is, in fact, a human creation".[1]

"I came out a different lawyer—keen on the mechanics of the law, but also aware of the overarching framework and context," he reflects. "Without the scholarship, I probably wouldn't have had this exposure, and my career would have taken a different trajectory. It was a catalyst, undoubtedly."

Mahmoud went on to become Attorney General of Kano State, co-found a prominent law firm, lead the Nigerian Bar Association, and serve on the boards of leading companies and national institutions. His story, like Kofi Annan's, shows how a timely scholarship—and the trust to award it—can spark a lifetime of leadership.

The International Fellowship Program: A Bold Bet on Justice[1]

By the turn of the century, the foundation had launched numerous successful fellowship programs. These initiatives focused on building capacity in specific fields, such as women's studies or the social sciences. Others strengthened academic disciplines within universities by supporting scholars and promising students on PhDs abroad, enabling them to help staff programs back home.

However, the foundation was not satisfied. It sought innovation. "For all of that successful work, there had never been anything really focused on the question of building greater equity in higher education," reported Joan Dassin, reviewing the fellowship record. "Access and opportunity were not the themes,"[2] she concluded as she considered recommendations for the new millennium.

The International Fellowship Program (IFP) had a bold new vision. "We can use a program like this to address two problems at the same time," Dassin explained to senior management and trustees. "We can build individual capacity and knowledge, which is a standard rationale for a scholarship program, but do it in a way that also helps to open access to people from systematically excluded communities, whoever those people might be."

Ford committed an unprecedented $285 million to launch the IFP in 2001, followed by an additional $75 million in 2006. The IFP intentionally sought out community leaders and activists—many the first

> **"Selection emphasized civic engagement and leadership, rather than test scores."**

Launching the IFP: From Vision to Reality

The International Fellowship Program was launched in 2001, as higher education was regaining recognition as central to development policy. The World Bank's Peril and Promise[3] highlighted the need for renewed investment, and Ford's trustees seized the moment with what became the foundation's largest-ever single program commitment.

The program's structure reflected Ford's global reach. Local partner organizations recruited and supported fellows on the ground, while a small New York–based Secretariat—run by the Institute of International Education (IIE) on behalf of the independent International Fellowships Fund (IFF)—provided global coordination. Oversight rested with the IFF, ensuring both flexibility and accountability.

Selection was rigorous. Independent committees, often drawn from the communities IFP sought to serve, managed the process. To safeguard integrity, Ford staff did not sit on panels, and, in politically sensitive contexts, applications were even reviewed across borders (e.g., Nigerian candidates assessed in Ghana). The core requirement was a written application linking study plans to community impact; interviews were used selectively.

Placement was equally carefully managed. The IIE handled placements in the U.S. and Canada, the British Council in the U.K., and NUFFIC in the Netherlands, while regional universities across Asia, Africa, and Latin America hosted many fellows—demonstrating that quality graduate education extended far beyond a handful of elite institutions.

in their families to even imagine graduate school—who had long been excluded because of birthplace, gender or social background, and offered them the opportunity to pursue advanced study. This broke with the practice of recruiting already privileged graduates into prestigious universities. The IFP was a true "big bet," recalls the then-president Susan Berresford[4], an unprecedented commitment, with no guarantee of success but the promise of transformative impact, if it worked.

By 2013, IFP had awarded more than 4,300 comprehensive fellowships across 22 countries. These grants covered tuition, living costs, travel, and academic expenses, removing financial barriers entirely. Fellows attended over 600 universities in nearly 50 countries, with roughly a third in North America, a third in Europe, and the remainder at institutions within their own regions. More than 100,000 people applied for just over 4,300 awards, underscoring both the hunger for opportunity and the program's selectivity.

The IFP was distinguished from traditional scholarship programs by its philosophy, not just its scale. Selection emphasized civic engagement and leadership, rather than test scores. Many had non-traditional academic backgrounds, so IFP created pre-academic supports—from English language training to academic writing workshops.

The program's networking model was a crucial innovation. Fellows were organized into cohorts and encouraged to maintain connections through alumni associations, rather than studying alone. This meant individual degrees translated into collective leadership and advocacy, rippling far beyond university campuses. IFP challenged entrenched assumptions in international education, proving that academic excellence and social relevance can, and should, go hand in hand.

Fresh learning: A Nigerian Ford Foundation alumna is supported in her studies by an instructor.

IFP In Numbers

Global (2001–2013)

- $360 million total investment ($285 million in 2001 + $75 million in 2006)
- 4,300+ fellows from 22 countries
- 100,000+ applications >> ~4% acceptance rate
- 600+ universities in nearly 50 countries hosted fellows
- Degree levels: majority Masters, some PhDs
- Roughly ⅓ in North America, ⅓ in Europe, ⅓ in regional/home universities

Nigeria (2001–2013)

- 174 fellows from Nigeria
  - 43% women
  - 41% from disadvantaged northern states
  - 9% with disabilities
- Nearly all Nigerian fellows studied abroad (53% U.K., 40% U.S.)
- 95% completion rate (95% Among Nigerian Fellows)
- 86% returned to live in their country, with 44% returning to home communities
- Fellows contributed to education, gender equality, community development, and policy reform (including disability rights and public-sector employment quotas)
- Similar return and leadership patterns observed among fellows from Ghana and Senegal

West Africa's IFP Story

The IFP's impact in West Africa is striking. It opened graduate study opportunities to people who had long been excluded—women, people from rural areas and underrepresented groups, as well as to fellows with disabilities. Nearly all 174 Nigerian participants completed their degrees, mostly in the U.K. and U.S., and most returned home afterwards, disproving fears of a "brain drain".

Many then stepped into roles in education, community development, and gender equality work. They used the skills and credibility gained abroad to strengthen their organizations, win new grants, and even push for policy changes. Women, in particular, advanced into leadership positions, challenging entrenched barriers in their fields. Fellows from Ghana and Senegal, likewise, turned their IFP experience into leadership roles across education, advocacy, and public policy.

> "Becoming the first professor in her field from her community—male or female—inspired young women to imagine new futures."

Impact on Alumni and Beyond: Stories from West Africa

Out of many powerful accounts, two stories[5] from IFP alumni particularly highlight how these opportunities translated into leadership and social change:

Titi Yakubu—Breaking Barriers for Women in Northern Nigeria

Titi Yakubu grew up in Bauchi State, within a traditional Muslim emirate community where women's education was rarely supported. She used her IFP fellowship to pursue a master's degree in Sustainable International Development at Brandeis University near Boston. Returning home, she championed professional development within her organization and became a visible role model. Her progress toward becoming the first professor in her field from her community—male or female—inspired young women to imagine new futures. Her story demonstrated that women could study abroad, return, and contribute meaningfully, without losing their values or community ties.

Ernest Ogbozor—Humanitarian Leadership Amid Conflict

Ernest Ogbozor has worked with communities displaced by religious conflict in northern Nigeria, in his job as a Cooperation Field Officer with the International Committee of the Red Cross. His IFP

education gave him the knowledge and confidence to navigate humanitarian crises and advocate effectively for those affected. In Bauchi State, he became a trusted presence among displaced families, while his expertise also found a platform in international media such as Al Jazeera. His story shows how an IFP fellowship could transform personal opportunity into frontline humanitarian leadership.

These stories exemplify a wider pattern. Many graduates moved rapidly into senior roles in government ministries, universities, NGOs, and international agencies, progressing to senior posts far more quickly than peers with similar backgrounds. Their advanced degrees became tools to shape public policy, strengthen social services, and drive education reform.

Alumni channeled their expertise into gender equality, human rights, rural development, and conflict resolution. They often founded or expanded local NGOs and advocacy networks so that equity and inclusion remained central to their professional lives. Their success translated into concrete benefits at home: mentoring younger students, creating local scholarships, and launching community-based research and development projects. IFP transformed individual lives into engines of collective change.

The IFP also changed institutions, public policy, and regional development thinking. Universities across West Africa became stronger and more inclusive as they adapted admissions, mentoring and preparatory courses initially to welcome Ford alumni from rural and communities who might previously have been shut out. These changes outlived the program itself, widening access to graduate education for future generations.

> “Graduates became visible advocates for equity in education, health, governance, and human rights.”

International gathering: Ford Global Fellows join their peers at the foundation’s New York headquarters.

Graduates formed a critical mass of socially committed leaders. They became visible advocates for equity in education, health, governance, and human rights. They helped to design and implement national and regional reforms, and to embed social justice concerns in public agendas. IFP also seeded lasting networks of scholars and practitioners across West Africa. These cross-country alliances—working on issues from gender equity to conflict resolution and public health—continue to influence debate and policy, long after the program’s close.

Building on the program’s legacy, the foundation launched the Ford Global Fellowship in 2020. This 10-year, $50 million initiative emphasizes networks, solidarity, and leadership in action. Instead of funding degrees, the program invests directly in mid-career leaders drawn from the communities most affected by inequality, offering stipends, tailored learning opportunities, and spaces for collaboration across regions. West Africa is among 11 regions represented, ensuring that the program maintains Ford’s long-standing commitment to nurturing local leadership, while connecting fellows to a broader global community of practice.

Ford’s investment has nurtured a generation of leaders. Their influence continues to ripple across West Africa, long after their fellowships have ended.

Footnotes

[1] Susan Berresford, former President of the Ford Foundation, about the IFP, in an interview conducted on September 18, 2025

[2] Ford Foundation Oral History Project; interview with Joan Dassin, November 12th, 2025

[3] World Bank, Higher education in developing countries: peril and promise, 2001

[4] Interview conducted on September 5, 2025

[5] These stories are drawn from IIP, Transformational Leaders and Social Change: IFP Impacts in Africa and the Middle East (2018).

Chapter 5

2000 –2009
Making Democracy Deliver for People

A wave of democratic renewal swept West Africa. Ford sought to achieve real dividends—justice, dignified childhoods, safety, gender rights, cultural freedom, creativity, and a safeguarded heritage—particularly for marginalized people. It backed civil society's shift from protest to partnership in order to shape policy and establish accountability.

The decade began with a surge of democratic optimism in West Africa, as nations long under military rule had moved toward elected governments. In December 2000, Ghana celebrated its first peaceful transfer of power between rival parties since independence. That same year, Senegal ended four decades of Socialist Party dominance at the polls, renewing its political landscape. Nigeria's 2003 elections, though flawed with irregularities, signaled that the return in 1999 to civilian rule was an enduring democratic shift.

Civil society, and an increasingly independent media with diverse ownership, had become a key force for change, accountability, transparency, and citizen participation. NGOs, professional associations, faith-based networks and community organizations—once defined by their opposition to military or one-party rule—had to learn to adapt. To remain relevant and effective, they had now to move from protest to policy engagement, coalition-building, and structured dialogue with the very democratic institutions they had fought to create.

This shift was vital for Ford to remain relevant and effective. Meanwhile, these governmental institutions were still finding their footing. Parliaments, judiciaries, and electoral commissions across the region struggled to assert their independence and earn public trust, underscoring how gradual and contested the process of institutional consolidation could be.

Economic transformations were equally significant. In Nigeria, rising global oil prices funded ambitious public spending but fueled dependence on commodity revenues and the deepening of rent-seeking politics. Ghana achieved broad growth while Senegal diversified into services, tourism, and infrastructure.

Community development training: Ford supported rights to be claimed in practice, not just promised on paper

But across the region, structural weaknesses—narrow tax bases, limited industrialization, and reliance on external finance—persisted. For ordinary citizens, the dividends of growth and democracy were uneven: poverty, unemployment, and corruption remained high, and frustration occasionally spilled into unrest. Yet, the consolidation of the microfinance sector, youth-led entrepreneurial ventures, and mobile phone growth opened new opportunities.

> "This was the decade when justice meant building, not just protesting. We invested in the institutions people were finally free to imagine."

Artists, filmmakers, writers, and journalists flourished, challenging entrenched taboos, breaking the silence around corruption, gender inequality, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and maternal mortality. Nollywood developed into a continental cultural powerhouse, marrying entertainment with social critique. The arts emerged as an engine of creativity and social change.

Community leadership training: CLP equips grassroots actors with the knowledge, skills, and tools to drive locally led change.

Justice Meant Building, Not Just Protesting

The Ford Foundation entered a period of strategic evolution. Under military rule in Nigeria, Ford had to tread carefully: operating as a legitimate actor required government permission, and open dissent was impossible. Yet the foundation quietly nurtured an emerging civil society, supporting independent voices through targeted grants and programs. As elected governments replaced regimes hostile to dissent, the foundation's understandably cautious support for civil society and independent voices expanded into more overt help for new democracies to deliver justice—strengthening courts, civil society watchdogs, and regional institutions. The goal was for rights to be claimed in practice, not just promised on paper.

"This was the decade when justice meant building, not just protesting", recalls Adhiambo Odaga, former West Africa Regional Director. "We invested in the institutions people were finally free to imagine."[1]

Nigeria's system of justice required urgent attention. "A major task facing a civilian government under a democratic dispensation," explains Yemi Osinbajo, former Attorney General of Lagos State, "was how to transform a ministry—that had been concerned only with enforcing decrees—into a Ministry of Justice, one where citizens were assured fair access to justice, where people's rights were recognized, respected, and enforced, and where citizens could turn to the courts and other justice institutions with confidence."[3]

Yemi Osinbajo, former Lagos Attorney General on Ford's support to justice reform:

"Of course, there was government funding as well. But in those early days—when no one knew how the reforms would unfold—the Ford Foundation was willing to take the risk. They placed full confidence in the blueprints we presented, and their seed funding allowed us to move quickly. Without that support, the reforms might still have happened, but they would have taken much, much longer."[2]

Ford provided early funding for a strategic partnership with Lagos State government. It supported Attorney General Osinbajo's bold reforms to restore judicial credibility and make justice accessible to all, especially people in poverty. "Before I was appointed Attorney General," recalls Osinbajo, "I had been secretary to a policy committee on the justice sector, and we had actually drawn up a blueprint for the government's work at the time. So, when Ford came in, we had several conversations about what we planned to do. They were really the very first to support some of the important work we started back then."

The first step was free legal services for people in both criminal and civil cases—by creating the Office of the Public Defender in 2000 in Lagos State. Osinbajo recalls: "The Office of the Public Defender could step in to redress not only institutional violations but also infringements of people's rights by other citizens—particularly in widowhood cases, and in situations where people were oppressed in one way or another by individuals who held power over them."[4]

The second step was establishment of Citizens Mediation Centers—offering a fast, informal way to resolve civil disputes, ease court backlogs, and discourage justice outside official authority. "In our first year," Osinbajo recalls with pride, "the Citizens Mediation Centers handled about 8,000 landlord and tenant cases—nearly four times the magistrate courts!"[5] Delivered free of charge, these reforms significantly lowered barriers to justice. The innovations were institutionalized in law in 2007 and the model was soon adopted by the Federal Government and replicated across several states.

Lagos State soon became a national model for reform of the justice sector and for police accountability. Another milestone was the Coroner's System Law of 2007. It mandates inquests into all sudden, unnatural, or suspicious deaths—police custody deaths and medical negligence could no longer be quietly ignored. With Ford's support, civil society organizations—most notably the CLEEN Foundation—were pivotal in shaping the law and advancing broader reforms to protect citizens' rights.

Resolving conflicts at home: Ford's partners promoted awareness that human rights extend to every part of life — including the home.

Securing Rights Across Borders: Building a Regional Scaffold for Justice

Ford recognized that human rights in West Africa required a broader, regional approach. It sought to strengthen institutions that could still uphold rights when domestic systems faltered. So, it supported both the Community Court of Justice of ECOWAS and the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA) in Banjul. Partly thanks to this support, innovative regional mechanisms became credible guardians of rights across national borders.

The ECOWAS Court of Justice, created in 2001, benefited from Ford's grants. Funding modernized its facilities and technology and allowed it to operate with the efficiency and professionalism of a contemporary tribunal. Support for recruiting and training bilingual staff meant the court could serve English- and French-speaking states, and deliver decisions more quickly, so clearing backlogs and strengthening the court's reputation as a regional reliable arbiter of human rights cases.

Ford also supported the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA). Founded in 1998, it trained lawyers and NGOs in the strategic use of regional human rights instruments. The IHRDA built a cross-border network of legal advocates who could litigate cases before the African Commission on Human and People's Rights and the ECOWAS Court. Thus, protection of human rights became a genuinely continental effort.

> "The Ford Foundation helped to ensure that truth and reconciliation processes delivered justice and healing."

Truth, Reconciliation, and Building Inclusive Societies

After devastating conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia, the Ford Foundation helped to ensure that truth and reconciliation processes delivered justice and healing. In Nigeria, it supported the work of the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission.

Community drives the nation: The Second National Conference on Community Development, held in Abuja, Nigeria, 2009.

In Sierra Leone, the Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) and the Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD), both supported by Ford, mobilized citizens to participate in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). They ensured that grassroots voices—especially those of women, young people, and rural communities—were heard. Civil society coalitions were funded to monitor hearings, press for accountability, and keep recommendations alive in public debate. Ford provided, via the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), vital technical expertise that bolstered the commission's credibility and built local capacity for transitional justice work.

> "It ensured that truth-telling was about building stronger, more inclusive societies for the future, not just about documenting the past."

In Liberia, Ford supported the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), which facilitated victim testimonies and community-level truth-telling forums, and the Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG), which coordinated civil society engagement with the Liberia TRC. Women's groups, including the

Women NGOs' Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL), received support. This ensured that gender-based violence and women's experiences of war were central to the process. As a result, ordinary Liberians felt ownership of the post-war transitional justice process—reparations and reconciliation were placed firmly on the national agenda.

> "Socio-economic rights could be legally enforced, and even the most vulnerable communities could hold governments and corporations to account."

Ford supported Nigeria's "Oputa Panel"—formally known as the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission—in the early 2000s. Adhiambo Odaga, then a program officer, recalls: "When President Obasanjo—himself a former trustee of the foundation—received the Board of Trustees during their visit to Nigeria, he emphasized the importance of shedding light on what had happened under successive military regimes."[6]

Ford's support enabled the Oputa Panel to investigate human rights abuses committed between 1966 and 1999. Ford understood that West Africa's conflicts were deeply interconnected across national boundaries. It therefore invested in regional organizations such as the West Africa Network on Peacebuilding (WANEP), headquartered in Accra, and the Center for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa), based in Abuja, to foster cross-border learning and to link local experiences with wider policy advocacy. Ford strengthened both local and regional actors. As a result, it ensured that truth-telling was about building stronger, more inclusive societies for the future, not just about documenting the past.

From Access to Justice to Human Dignity

Democracy's promise required advances in economic and social rights—to livelihood, health, housing, and education. Yet half of Nigeria's population were living in extreme poverty and infant mortality ranked among the highest globally. Civil society organizations, backed in their infancy during the 1990s by Ford, were now shaping national debates on entrenched inequalities. The Social and Economic Rights Action Centre (SERAC) was particularly influential in defending the rights of people experiencing poverty in Nigeria. SERAC's community organizing, media advocacy, and strategic litigation challenged forced evictions, environmental destruction, and deep poverty.

Checking up on government: Gatherings of community groups supported each other to address key issues.

SERAC pursued a landmark 2001 case, SERAC & CESR v. Nigeria, before the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. This case exposed the Nigerian government's complicity, alongside multinational oil companies, in devastating Ogoniland: farmlands and rivers ruined by oil spills, villages attacked by security forces, and residents killed or displaced. The Commission ruled that Nigeria had violated the African Charter. For the first time, it recognized socio-economic rights as legally enforceable—affirming rights to health, adequate housing, food, life, and a clean environment. By supporting SERAC, Ford helped to transform an ambitious local NGO into a continental precedent-setter. It had shown that socio-economic rights could be legally enforced and that even the most vulnerable communities could hold governments and corporations to account.

All this meant that democratic rights amounted to much more than voting. They extended to village councils, community development plans and budget hearings. With Ford's support, visionary leaders in Nigeria and Senegal strengthened mutual assistance and self-help associations, enabling them to assess their needs and own their development.

"These are organizations which don't even appear in the usual definition of civil society organizations," explains Ngozi Iwere, founder and Executive Director of Community Life Project, established in 1992 and a long-standing Ford Foundation partner, beginning with an HIV/AIDS initiative. These groups have

brought together people who are truly left behind—the last milers. "Community-based organizations, as they are called, hold tremendous capacity for agency," points out Iwere. "Once that capacity is strengthened, they step forward—because no one has a greater stake in making governance work and ensuring their voices are heard."

Ford's partners also supported government departments engaging directly with communities, enabling local citizens to shape development plans and push for more inclusive budgets. Iwere explains: "We work with governments in a collaborative, non-adversarial, way. We hold them accountable, but we also give them a stake in that accountability."[7]

Ngozi Iwere, founder of Community Life Project, reflects on inequality in the civic space:

"There is a form of inequality that people rarely talk about—the domination of civic space by elite civil society organizations and voices. Citizens with education and resources form NGOs, speak loudly, and often claim to represent the concerns of low-income or marginalized groups. But, in reality, they dominate the space and speak on behalf of others, rather than enabling those communities to speak for themselves. Through CLP, Ford has supported an effort to bridge this gap—addressing inequality in civic engagement and amplifying voices that are usually left out of the conversation."[8]

Meanwhile, the Socio-Economic Rights Initiative (SERI), a long-standing Ford partner, advanced a right to health as a legally enforceable economic and social right. It monitored federal health budgets against Nigeria's Abuja Declaration commitments and built civil society capacity to track spending and demand stronger public health investments.

Civic rights were also enhanced in the environmental field. "People in the Niger Delta live in appalling poverty while billions of dollars of oil are pumped from their lands," says Nnimmo Bassey, a leading Nigerian voice for environmental and economic justice, and co-founder of Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria.[10] ERA/FoEN, a key Ford Foundation partner in advancing environmental justice, mobilized communities to track state budgets and press officials to channel oil revenues into health, education, and infrastructure. It also led high-profile campaigns to hold oil multinationals accountable for chronic oil spills and gas flaring.

Eze Onyekpere, from the Social and Economic Rights Initiative (SERI), discussing the role of the Ford Foundation in supporting civil society organizations:

"The Ford Foundation dares to step into unexplored terrain—backing innovative ideas where other development partners hesitate—and to support emerging organizations that cannot yet show the track record most donors require." [9]

Children's well-being was another fertile area for rights development. Tens of thousands of children were estimated to be living or working on the streets of Lagos and other Nigerian cities, making the need for intervention both urgent and immense. Child Life-Line (CLL) emerged as one of Nigeria's leading child-protection NGOs for these street-involved children. With the foundation's support, it ran a reception center in Gbagada for immediate shelter and assessment, and a residential center at Ibeshe for longer-term care. CLL focused on family tracing and reunification, catch-up education, and vocational training, placing children in apprenticeships or back in school. Through counselling, healthcare, and community outreach, it reintegrated vulnerable children and reduced the risks of life on the streets.

Women's Rights and Gender Equality as Cornerstones of Democratic Progress

Democratic transformations in West Africa raised hopes for freedom and equality, but those promises remained largely unfulfilled for many women. Maternal mortality remained alarmingly high, gender-based violence was pervasive and reproductive agency was denied. Ford sought to ensure that democratic gains reached women's lives, bodies, and voices.

Changing the law: Campaigning by many civil society groups, including Baobab, resulted in the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, passed in 2015.

Baobab for Women's Human Rights was one of Ford's partners. In the early 2000s, several women were sentenced to death by stoning or to flogging across northern states in Nigeria. "We took up their cases and we won every single one," says Yeyebuiteko Salami, Baobab's Executive Director. Baobab not only saved lives but also set critical legal precedents, by demonstrating how such rulings could be overturned in higher courts. Baobab also became a leading legislative advocate. "We didn't just react to unfair laws by defending victims," Salami explains. "We proactively worked to change those laws."[11] The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, Nigeria's first federal law of its kind, was passed in 2015, thanks to a decade of campaigning by Baobab, alongside many other NGOs.

> "Socio-economic rights could be legally enforced, and even the most vulnerable communities could hold governments and corporations to account."

Sexuality and Reproductive Health

The Ford Foundation also expanded its work on sexual and reproductive health and rights, as women's groups, youth movements, and civil society tied health to dignity and equality. A key factor was knowledge and evidence generation springing from research partnerships, launched in the 1990s that deepened in the 2000s. "We used evidence to spotlight reproductive health challenges in policy circles and the wider public, sparking informed conversations on how government should respond,"[12] explains Babatunde Ahonsi, then Program Officer.

This approach helped shape debates on abortion, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, maternal mortality, and other reproductive health challenges that disproportionately affected young people. The foundation supported the Nigerian Institute of Medical Research to conduct applied HIV/AIDS studies, create a national epidemiological database, and develop a surveillance and evaluation center. Across West Africa, it supported the development of reproductive health research, policy, as well as capacity building. It backed organizations such as Senegal's African AIDS Research Network, the Association for Research on Women and Development, and the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Medicine, as well as Ghana's Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research.

Ford recognized that organizations closest to communities were uniquely equipped to connect with young people, counter stigma, and push for policy reform. In Lagos, it supported Health Matters which worked with out-of-school adolescents—those most vulnerable to exploitation and infection—to reduce HIV and other sexually transmitted infections while also equipping young people with leadership and income-earning skills.

In northern Nigeria, where social taboos around sexuality were particularly strong, the Adolescent Health and Information Project combined reproductive health education with broader youth development, opening fresh possibilities for girls and boys alike. The Youth Advancement Organization of Nigeria took this further in the northwest. It offered young people confidential, youth-friendly services. The AIDS Alliance in Nigeria trained civil society groups and journalists nationally how to analyze health budgets and advocate rights of healthcare access for people experiencing poverty and those living with HIV.


Weekly Trust

Sexuality education for schools:

Who will accept it?

Prof Hagher's new play debuts in Zaria

Education controversy: A June 2002 cover story sparked national debate and led to renaming the national sexuality education curriculum, allowing states to adapt it to their cultural contexts.

Ford was among the first to support networks of people living with HIV/AIDS to organize, challenge stigma, and demand treatment themselves. Positive Action for Treatment Access "played a big role in giving a human face to HIV/AIDS and helping to destigmatize the disease", recalls Ahonsi.[13] Other catalytic investments by Ford also forged unexpected alliances that expanded and sustained Nigeria's HIV response. Several grantees collaborated with the Nigerian Business Coalition Against AIDS, established in 2003. It mobilized corporate resources, coordinated workplace HIV programs, and reinforced national efforts in prevention, treatment, and care.

Africa Regional Sexuality Center

Ford recognized that breaking the silence around sexuality was as urgent as expanding access to health services. In 2001, it provided seed funding for the Africa Regional Sexuality Resource Centre (ARSRC) in Lagos—one of Africa's first institutions dedicated to thinking and speaking openly about sexuality. ARSRC trained young African scholars and activists, published groundbreaking research, and reframed sexuality as a matter of rights, equity, and justice. Its fellowship programs equipped leaders to carry these debates into classrooms, policy arenas, and civil society spaces across the continent. ARSRC complemented Ford's grassroots grantees—from people living with HIV demanding treatment to journalists challenging silence on maternal mortality—by anchoring their struggles in African-led knowledge and discourse. Together, these efforts gave Ford's interventions multi-layered effectiveness, combining activism with scholarship, capacity building, national impact, and regional reach.

Ford supported media as a driver for change. "The foundation invested in building media capacity," explains Ahonsi. "So, journalists could become credible champions of issues such as maternal mortality, gender-based violence, and HIV/AIDS."[14] Reporters were trained through the Development Communications Network to cover maternal health and HIV with rigor and empathy, forging links between newsrooms, civil society, scientists, and policymakers. This enabled accurate, timely reporting that kept safe motherhood and sexuality education on the political agenda while holding officials accountable for failures. The Grassroots Health Organization of Nigeria complemented this work at a grassroots level. It harnessed communications to encourage behavior changes, built skills, and helped develop enterprises to improve the reproductive well-being of women in rural northern Nigeria.

All these activities propelled policy reform. Nigeria launched a comprehensive reproductive health policy, embraced greater involvement of people living with HIV, and adopted a National Women's Policy. At state level, laws against female genital cutting and child marriage took hold, rooting rights in local law.

Education proved to be another key front. The National Council on Education approved a curriculum for comprehensive sexuality education in 2001—rolled out as Family Life and HIV Education—which reached nearly half a million students in Lagos alone by 2009. That same year, guidance for youth-friendly health services was introduced, evolving into national standards to guarantee young people respectful, confidential care.

The sum of all these actions was impressive: millions of women and young people gained knowledge and freedom to make their own decisions about sexuality, reproduction, and health. That is the true measure of millennium shifts in the foundation's strategy.

Economic Empowerment and Opportunities

Microfinance in Nigeria, the promotion of entrepreneurship and, less visibly, support for pension reform were all part of the foundation's commitment to economic improvement, particularly for voices long gone unheard.

> "I told myself I had to find a bank willing to work with us. Nigerian banks were aggressive, but I needed one that would listen. Everyone kept saying, 'Go and talk to Fola Adeola'."

Fola Adeola's warning: "We will create a society of extremely talented people with no work."

Small community finance organizations—cooperatives, rotating savings groups, and NGOs like the Lift Above Poverty Organization (LAPO)—were lifelines for low-income households, but funds were limited, repayment cycles often broke down, and the money rarely "revolved" in a sustainable way. They could not scale up or connect with Nigeria's capital markets, which held far greater potential to fund entrepreneurship and growth.

Recognizing this gap, the Ford Foundation supported Nigerian reformers trying to link grassroots lending to formal finance. It helped them to convene stakeholders and by creating opportunities for shared learning. Finding the right partners was critical, recalls Adhiambo Odaga, then Ford's West Africa Regional Director. "I told myself I had to find a bank willing to work with us. Nigerian banks were aggressive, but I needed one that would listen. Everyone kept saying, 'Go and talk to Fola Adeola', renowned founder and CEO of GTbank. Eventually, at a social event, a friend said, 'There he is. Let me introduce you'."[15]

With Adeola's support, a collective brought together Ford grantees, academics, and practitioners in community development finance, alongside the Central Bank of Nigeria. With technical input from Afrinvest, a Nigerian investment banking and asset management firm, this group explored how small-scale revolving loan funds could be structured in ways that attracted sustainable investment.

Ford sponsored study tours to India and Bangladesh—countries with long histories of commercial microfinance—as well as to the United States and Mexico. As Odaga puts it, "Ford didn't invent microfinance in Nigeria, but it helped turn it into a field."[15] By equipping reformers and connecting them to global experiences, Ford supported Nigerian-led initiatives that fed into the Central Bank's 2005 Microfinance Policy Framework—the country's first comprehensive policy for the sector.

Meanwhile, entrepreneurship was being reframed as a pathway to empowerment and development. Ford backed institutions that could give this idea practical expression. FATE Foundation had been established in 2000 by the same Fola Adeola to make entrepreneurship a compelling alternative to employability.

The idea for FATE came to Adeola during a recruitment exercise at his bank. More than 2,000 young Nigerians applied, most of them bright and capable, yet only a few could be hired. Watching so much talent walk away, Adeola reflected: "If we keep rejecting 2,000 candidates, we will create a society of extremely talented people with no work."[16] The FATE Foundation was created to enable aspiring and emerging Nigerian entrepreneurs to start, grow and scale their businesses. Early Ford support strengthened its governance, curriculum, and delivery capacity, so a promising initiative could serve thousands.

Supporting new entrepreneurs: FATE Foundation was created to help them to grow their businesses.

By the end of the decade, Fate's Aspiring Entrepreneurs Program had become Nigeria's longest-running entrepreneurship certificate program, seeding firms across sectors. These included: Mona Matthews (a lawyer-founded leather footwear brand that grew from a side venture into a national label); Winich Farms (an agribusiness aggregator linking smallholders to markets, now responsible for about 40 direct, and about 200 indirect, jobs); and Toque Cosmetics (a shea-butter based beauty company that scaled to two production factories and began UK market expansion). It has produced a lengthening pipeline of bankable, job-creating ventures.

Pension reform was another focus of Ford's economic improvement strategy. Nigeria's pension system was collapsing—leaving workers without security and depriving the economy of reliable long-term capital. President Olusegun Obasanjo, himself a former Ford Foundation trustee, appointed Fola Adeola, Fate Foundation's founder and also a banker, to chair the National Pension Reform Committee.

With Ford support, Adeola and fellow policymakers studied pension models in Latin America and Asia, learning how other countries had modernized their systems. Their work culminated in the Pension Reform Act of 2004. It replaced the struggling state scheme with a contributory, market-driven system and established new regulatory institutions.

"Impact isn't measured by the size of the grant," reflects Joy Ehinor-Esezobor, who has been managing Ford's grants for the last two decades. "This was a small but highly strategic investment that translated into systemic change."[17] The reform gave workers—especially women and low-income workers previously excluded from formal protections—the means to build secure savings throughout their careers and avoid poverty in old age. At the same time, the growing pool of pension funds became a vital source of domestic capital, channeled into infrastructure, housing, and enterprise.

Building the Next Generation of Ethical Leaders and Entrepreneurs

Ford's wider strategy for economic empowerment recognized that long-term growth depends on people as much as on policy. Leadership, Effectiveness, Accountability & Professionalism (LEAP) Africa was founded in 2002 to prepare young Africans for values-based leadership.

> "Young change-makers are not content to passively observe problems; they are taking the initiative to address issues in their communities, countries, and across Africa."
>
> **— Amabelle Nwakanma, Director of Programs and Partnerships, LEAP Africa[18]**

Working with youth aged 14–35, LEAP built a model that linked personal transformation with organizational effectiveness and civic participation. Its programs fostered education, employability, entrepreneurship, active citizenship, and wellbeing—anchored in the conviction that young people are leaders today as well as tomorrow.

The Ford Foundation was catalytic from the beginning. Early grants strengthened LEAP's entrepreneurial capacity and produced influential publications like Defying the Odds and Building a Culture of Ethics. "Ford's flexible, long-term support gave LEAP Africa the space to reflect and refine its strategy, while also building the systems and processes that ultimately anchored its resilience and fueled its growth"[19], reflects Kehinde Ayeni, LEAP Africa's Executive Director.

> "Your success is their success."
>
> **—Kehinde Ayeni, LEAP Africa Executive Director[20]**

Two decades on, the results are striking. "From 80,000 direct participants in LEAP's trainings across 48 countries, the impact rippled outward—each entrepreneur we trained went on to employ others, sustain families, and strengthen communities," explains Ayeni. "By the time we traced those connections, the reach had grown to nearly 5 million lives."[21] Many alumni say the experience gave them the confidence, networks, and know-how to turn good ideas into thriving enterprises and lasting change.

These ripple effects are visible everywhere: alumni refusing bribes, running for public office, reshaping norms of integrity in their workplaces, and mentoring the next wave of leaders. As one participant reflected: "LEAP is not just about training individuals; it's seeding a new culture of ethical leadership. Many of us are now in politics, business, and civil society—and we carry the same DNA of values-driven leadership. I see myself as part of a generation that refuses to accept 'business as usual.'"

Ford's partnership, grounded in trust and co-creation, enabled LEAP to grow into a beacon of ethical, African-led leadership, embedding the democratic hope of the early 2000s in the next generation.

Creative advocacy: a CLP Youth Drama Troupe performing during World AIDS Day, 2004.

Media, Arts and Culture

From Dakar to Lagos and Accra, the 2000s saw a cultural renaissance. The Ford Foundation supported filmmakers, theatre groups, and historians who used art to inspire civic action— building on its arts and culture work begun in the late 1990s. The work brought human rights narratives to screens and community halls in Nigeria, preserved ancient manuscripts, and reclaimed African narratives across the region. In West Africa, the arts are more than aesthetics: they are a living language of memory, identity, and debate. Ford began treating culture as a civic force, addressing the decay of manuscripts, the neglect of museums, and a lack of support for artists, while also recognizing the arts as a growing source of livelihoods, especially for young people in creative industries.

> **"Artists are the truth-tellers of society. When others cannot speak, art speaks."**
>
> **—Margie Reese, former Program Officer.[22]**

Artisanal crafts are central to this story. In Ghana, President John Agyekum Kufuor announced a Special Presidential Initiative (SPI) in the early 2000s to transform the country's traditional crafts—kente weaving, woodcarving, and other artisanal work—into an engine of income and exports. The SPI trained artisans in modern design and finishing techniques, provided small grants and equipment to cooperatives, and promoted Ghanaian crafts at international trade fairs, giving the sector political visibility and positioning it as a pillar of national economic strategy.

Ford's own grantees reinforced this momentum: Aid to Artisans Ghana (ATAG) combined design innovation with market access so that basketry, beadwork, and woodcarving could reach global buyers without losing their cultural authenticity. Meanwhile, in Nigeria, the Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation (BOF) used its annual Harmattan Workshop to build artistic capacity, encourage cross-generational experimentation, and keep traditional motifs alive.

Ford focused on ensuring that diverse voices—particularly those of women and marginalized groups—were heard through initiatives such as Ghana's community-based Radio Ada and Nigeria's African Radio Drama Association. They used radio dramas and listening clubs to spark civic engagement and share vital knowledge. The media, arts, and culture had become a central pillar of Ford's West Africa program—safeguarding history, revitalizing performance, and positioning culture as both a vehicle for social change and a vibrant arena for democratic life.

Grassroot development: CLP using its well-tested model to train community development officers in Sapele, Delta State, Nigeria, 2003.

Restoring Trust in Heritage Institutions

Ford set out to strengthen West Africa's museums, which were burdened by stereotypes of poor staffing, inadequate facilities, and weak conservation practices, often used to justify withholding the restitution of cultural objects. In the mid-2000s, the foundation helped broker a partnership between the British Museum and Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments that provided training for Nigerian museum staff. Just as importantly, it offered British Museum professionals opportunities to learn how to interpret African objects with greater authenticity.

This exchange strengthened conservation methods, improved curatorial practices, and began to reshape relationships between African and European institutions. "It helped ensure that West African heritage could be preserved—and presented—by those who know it best," recalls Margie Reese, then Ford's program officer in West Africa.[23]

> "A core Ford Foundation principle is that lasting impact comes not from directing local custodians of heritage, but from enabling them to carry forward their own mission."

The results were concrete: a renovated education gallery, a children's field-trip booklet authored by Nigerian staff, and All Is Not Lost, an exhibition at the National Museum in Lagos that returned long-stored works to public view. "This exhibition showcased pieces once thought lost," Reese explains with emotion, "effectively combating the myth of vanished heritage and capturing public attention."[24] Together, these efforts reinforced the credibility of Nigerian museums, demonstrating that they had the expertise and authority to safeguard their own heritage while contributing to wider debates on restitution.

Meanwhile in Mali, the Ford Foundation partnered with the *Association pour la Sauvegarde et Valorisation des Manuscrits pour la Défense de la Culture Islamique* (SAVAMA -DCI), an association founded by Dr. Abdelkader Haïdara to protect Timbuktu's legendary manuscripts. These works, produced between the 13th and 19th centuries, span an extraordinary range—from religion and theology to science and medicine, history and politics, literature and poetry. They even include guides to daily life.

Preserving ancient culture: Ford partnered with SAVAMA in Mali to protect Timbuktu's legendary manuscripts, some 800 years old.

Reese remembers walking with Dr. Haïdara through the houses of Timbuktu, seeing "fragile pages leather-bound in such exquisite ways that scholars today probably couldn't figure it out, carrying knowledge in languages the world once said did not exist"[25]. She describes it as a defining moment in her career—a humbling encounter with resilience and vision which continues to shape her work. It also reinforced a core Ford Foundation principle: lasting impact comes not from directing local custodians of heritage, but from enabling them to carry forward their own mission.

Intersecting Performing Arts and Social Impact

In West Africa, the performing arts have long been more than entertainment. "They are a way to communicate, to spark reflection, and to open conversations that might not happen otherwise", explains Reese.[26]The Ford Foundation had already recognized this potential in the 1990s, when it backed theatre groups using drama to address governance, peacebuilding, and social issues. Having seen how community theatre could influence attitudes and behaviors at the grassroots, the foundation expanded its support to both local troupes and emerging cultural institutions that could take this impact to scale.

> "When people saw Ford's name on our work, other funders followed."

It worked with partners such as the National Alliance for Development Theatre and the Jos Repertory Theatre, which used performance as a tool for education and civic engagement. Their productions tackled everything from HIV/AIDS and drug abuse to discriminatory norms, democracy, and elections. In southern Nigeria, one troupe staged plays that showed village chiefs the devastating impact of traditional inheritance practices on widows and their children.

In Mali, artists in Timbuktu conveyed crucial health information about disease transmission in culturally resonant ways to communities beyond the reach of conventional media. On the ground, it was often the village leaders—whose word carried the greatest weight—who needed to be persuaded. Reaching them called for patience and respect, creating space for them to think through issues themselves and arrive at their own conclusions.

This surge in socially engaged performance helped lay the groundwork for a broader creative renaissance. When Bolanle Austen-Peters opened TerraKulture in Lagos in 2003, Nigerian theatre was all but silent. The country's once celebrated stage tradition had faded under economic strain; few believed live performance could matter, let alone sustain itself. Austen-Peters imagined something different: a place where Nigerians and visitors could encounter the country's creativity in all its forms—a gallery, bookstore, restaurant, and eventually a purpose-built theatre and film studio.

Ford's support came at a decisive moment. A 2008 grant for cross-cultural art exchanges allowed young Nigerian artists to take up residencies in Ghana, while TerraKulture hosted emerging local talent in its gallery and studio. Many of those early participants are now among Nigeria's best-known contemporary artists. Just as important, Ford's backing gave credibility to the venture. "When people saw Ford's name on our work," Austen-Peters recalls, "other funders followed."[27]

Rescuing treasures: SAVAMA dispersed the Timbuktu manuscripts in metal trunks from public libraries to private homes, and onto Bamako.

That early seed support helped TerraKulture grow into Nigeria's leading private arts institution. Its theatre has premiered original musicals that now tour internationally—from London's West End to Cairo and Barbados—while its film arm has taken Nigerian stories to global audiences. With Ford's support, Austen-Peters produced 93 Days in 2016, an award-winning film about Nigeria's successful Ebola response, which reached viewers from major festivals in Chicago and Berlin to Netflix. Two decades on, TerraKulture employs more than 80 staff and has trained tens of thousands of young creatives. It shows that art can be both enterprise and civic education: reviving a dormant theatre scene, creating jobs for a new generation, and presenting Nigerian stories to the world with confidence and pride.

By the end of the decade Ford's investments had helped museums, performers and custodians of ancient texts show the depth and range of West Africa's creative genius. The result was more than a series of projects: it was a sturdier cultural infrastructure—able to preserve memory, inspire public dialogue and place knowledge, creativity and freedom at the heart of democratic life.

Seeding African Philanthropy

This overview of the Foundation's work in West Africa in the 2000s would be incomplete without noting two major initiatives that embodied Ford's vision for the continent: the creation of TrustAfrica and seed funding for the African Women Development Foundation.

Ford believed Africa's future rested on the strength of its own institutions and ideas. To confront the shared challenges of globalization, continent-wide partnerships were essential. Across the region, innovative local solutions already existed, but there was a shortage of opportunities to share, adapt, and scale them. To sustain such solutions, Ford argued, Africa needed philanthropic resources under African control—ensuring that priorities were defined by Africans themselves.

That's why, in 1999, the Ford Foundation set aside a major new financial allocation for Africa and asked

> "The founding principle was radical for its time—you could trust Africa to lead its own development."

Conversation with Dr. Abdelkader Haïdara (SAVAMA-DCI, Timbuktu)

For readers who may not know you, could you introduce yourself and the work of SAVAMA-DCI?

Haïdara: I'm Dr. Abdelkader Haïdara, executive president of SAVAMA-DCI in Timbuktu. We began in 1996 as an association of manuscript-holding families to safeguard and value Timbuktu's ancient manuscripts—which later became an NGO. Before that I had worked as a investigator with the state-run Ahmed Baba Institute, entering homes and discovering large, little-known private holdings. Many owners would not hand manuscripts to the state, yet they were badly stored—stacked in trunks or abandoned rooms, exposed to rain, termites, dust and insects.

What scale are we talking about?

Haïdara: Within SAVAMA-DCI's network, we are responsible for roughly 377,000 manuscripts; the Ahmed Baba Institute holds about 39,800 more. And there are additional private libraries beyond those figures.

How did Ford Foundation enter the picture?

Haïdara: Ford first visited us in 2003. They listened, returned, and decided to help. They opened our eyes to professional standards, sent experts to train us in conservation, cataloguing and administration, and created opportunities for us to learn abroad. With early Ford support, we built or rehabilitated family libraries, equipped spaces, and trained teams to inventory and handle the manuscripts. Just as important, they helped us win the trust of custodial families—through patient outreach and even vacation courses for their children on why and how to preserve their heritage.

You also began to show the manuscripts to the world.

Haïdara: Yes. With Ford's backing we mounted exhibitions in the United States—including at Ford's headquarters—and then in Africa: a major show at Nigeria's National Museum in Lagos, training exchanges at Arewa House in Kaduna, and a high-profile conference and exhibition in Addis Ababa. That visibility brought new partners and gave our work international legitimacy.

The 2012 occupation of Timbuktu was a turning point. What happened?

Haïdara: Overnight, everything stopped. We feared for the manuscripts. With Ford's immediate approval, I repurposed a $12,000 scholarship they had given me to buy hundreds of metal trunks. Banks were shut, so a trader carried our cheque 300 km to Mopti to withdraw cash and transport the trunks back. We dispersed collections from public libraries into private homes across the city—the first rescue. As threats escalated, we organized a second, clandestine operation to move the manuscripts out of Timbuktu in small, discreet loads to Bamako—ultimately evacuating about 95 percent. Ford was the first call and the first to respond; later they sent a delegation to check conditions and then covered ongoing storage costs for years. Their support was swift, flexible, and sustained.

Beyond religion, what knowledge do these manuscripts hold?

Haïdara: They range from Qur'ans, hadith and jurisprudence to astronomy, medicine, mathematics, optics, literature and poetry; they treat conflict resolution, human rights, commerce, agriculture, climate, and legal acts and contracts—records of daily life across centuries. Our oldest items date to the 11th century. It is, truly, a written civilization.

Looking back, how would you summarize Ford's role?

Haïdara: Two decades of accompaniment—quiet, constant, and respectful. They strengthened the state institute as well as private libraries; they trained people, built places, created networks, and—when danger came—helped us save the collections and keep them safe. Thanks to that partnership we moved from isolated families with fragile trunks to a field with skills, institutions, and global recognition.

Dr. Abdelkader Haïdara is the executive president of SAVAMA-DCI, the association of Timbuktu manuscript custodians. A former investigator for the Ahmed Baba Institute, he has led conservation, cataloguing, public outreach and international collaborations that protected and relocated hundreds of thousands of manuscripts during Mali's 2012 crisis.

its own regional representatives of that time—Akwasi Aidoo in West Africa among them—to recommend how best to use it. The proposition was bold: a pan-African foundation designed and governed by Africans themselves. After a consultation process across the continent, three themes consistently emerged: peace and conflict resolution, regional integration, and questions of citizenship and identity. These ideas were tested in a pilot phase called the Special Initiative for Africa (SIA). It funded collaborative projects and, in a deliberate break from standard donor practice, required joint proposals from African partners.

With the pilot's success, plans for a permanent institution quickly solidified. In one of the final planning sessions, the phrase "Trust Africa—TrustAfrica" emerged and stuck, capturing both the belief that Africans must lead their own development and the ambition to build a culture of trust across the continent. "The founding principle was radical for its time—you could trust Africa to lead its own development," stresses Briggs Bomba, Director of Programs at TrustAfrica. With a ten-year, $30 million[28] commitment, Ford helped establish an African-led institution, rooted on the continent and connected to the actors driving change. In June 2006, the new foundation was formally launched in Dakar, Senegal, with a bold mission: to strengthen African agency in tackling the continent's most pressing challenges—from deepening democracy to advancing economic justice and growing African philanthropy.

Bomba describes TrustAfrica's partnership with the Ford Foundation as very different from the usual donor–recipient dynamic. "Ford's support came largely unrestricted, which allowed us to experiment, adjust, and grow", he explains. "They weren't prescriptive or heavy-handed, but real thought partners."[29]

TrustAfrica quickly positioned itself as both a convener and a knowledge hub. It has also become a reference point for African philanthropy itself, demonstrating that African wealth—whether from private fortunes or diaspora remittances—can be organized for public purpose. It helped found the African Grantmakers Network, commissioned influential research such as Disabling the Public Sphere on civil-society regulation, and has supported more than 200 organizations in over 30 countries to strengthen democracy and advance equitable development.

With Ford's catalytic support, TrustAfrica helped spark a continent-wide movement against illicit financial flows. The Stop the Bleeding campaign gave Africans a unified voice on how billions were being siphoned from their economies—an issue once dominated by experts in the Global North. "Before, the loudest voices on this issue came from outside Africa," reflects Bomba. "Now, from grassroots unions to the African Union, African actors are leading the fight—and winning back resources that belong to our people."

African Women's Development Fund

The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) embodied that same vision of African-led philanthropy at a continental scale, but through a distinctly feminist lens. It was co-founded in 2000 by Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, a Nigerian feminist and the fund's first executive director; Joana Foster, a Ghanaian lawyer and trailblazer of women's civil and political rights; and Hilda Tadria, a Ugandan scholar and women's rights strategist.

AWDF was born out of deep frustration. Across the continent, the most effective women's groups remained chronically under-resourced, reliant on foreign aid project grants, and too often dismissed when they sought investment in leadership. Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi recalls one donor bluntly rejecting a proposal on the grounds that leadership development was not a priority for African women, insisting that they had "more pressing issues—livelihoods, poverty, survival". "I was furious!", she recalls. "How dare they decide for us what matters? How dare they dismiss the leadership of African women as if it's optional—when in fact it is central to overcoming exactly those challenges?"[30] That indignation became a catalyst. It fueled the creation of an African-led fund that would place women's voices, leadership, and movements at the center of social transformation.

The Ford Foundation became a key partner, providing one of AWDF's first endowment grants— signifying that women's rights deserved permanent institutions, not short-term projects. Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi remembers Ford's investment as an act of trust—in African women's ability to govern their own fund, in feminist leadership, and in the need to resource change for the long haul.

AWDF soon grew into a leading voice in philanthropy, channeling millions to grassroots women's groups in over 40 African countries. Beyond grant-making, it professionalized the women's movement—building capacity, developing leaders, and legitimizing issues long kept in the shadows, from gender-based violence to reproductive rights and women's political participation. By the end of the decade, AWDF stood as a model of African philanthropy: independent, unapologetically feminist, and firmly rooted in African realities.

> **"An African-led fund that would place women's voices, leadership, and movements at the center of social transformation."**

That leadership continues today with the KASA! Initiative (launched in 2021 by AWDF with the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Initiative for West Africa), a $3.75 million multi-country fund focused on Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal. KASA! resources feminist and women's rights groups to provide survivor-centered legal, psychosocial and medical support and to push for justice and reparation—tackling the deep-rooted drivers of sexual violence across West Africa.

Footnotes

[1] Interview conducted on July 10, 2025

[2] Interview conducted on September 3, 2025

[3] Interview conducted on September 3, 2025

[4-5] Interview conducted on September 3, 2025

[6] Interview conducted on July 10, 2025

[7] Interview conducted on July 25, 2025

[8] Interview conducted on July 25, 2025

[9] The Ford Foundation in Nigeria, 1960–2005: A Report on 45 Years of Grant-Making Work, prepared by Ayodele Atsenuwa, Consultant (p. 45)

[10] Interview conducted on August 5, 2025

[11] Interview conducted on July 21, 2025

[12] Interview conducted on July 21, 2025

[13] Interview conducted on July 21, 2025

[14] Interview conducted on July 3, 2025

[15] Interview conducted on July 3, 2025

[16] https://fatefoundation.org/founding-story/

[17] Interview on June 26, 2025

[18] Africa's Outlook on the Future of Social Entrepreneurship" (LEAP Africa, panel report, 2020)

[19] Interview on August 1, 2025

[20] Interview conducted on August 1, 2025

[21] Interview conducted on August 1, 2025

[22] Interview conducted on July 7, 2025

[23] Interview conducted on July 7, 2025

[24] Interview conducted on July 7, 2025

[25] Interview conducted on July 7, 2025

[26] Interview conducted on July 7, 2025

[27] Interview conducted on August 8, 2025

[28] Interview conducted on August 18, 2025

[29] Interview conducted on August 18, 2025

[30] AWDF, Podcast Our Journey So Far, The Idea

Chapter 6

2010 –2019
Growing Institutions, Amplifying Voices

Democratic transitions strained under economic uncertainty, but young people's activism and women's rights campaigns gained momentum. Amid calls for greater accountability, corruption, inequality, and insecurity still cast long shadows. In this contested space, the Ford Foundation supported bold civic actors, pioneering institutions, and grassroots voices—to turn fragile democratic openings into lasting progress in governance, rights, and social justice.

This period in West Africa was marked by sharp contrasts. Early optimism—captured in the "Africa rising" moment—was tempered by jobless growth: economic expansion that was largely dependent on rising commodity prices failed to create enough quality jobs for a fast-growing youth population, leaving poverty and inequality stubbornly high. By mid-decade, slowing growth and rising public debt deepened these pressures.

Politics initially opened further, with civil society remaining energetic, but mounting insecurity—especially jihadist violence across the central Sahel and Boko Haram's devastation in northeast Nigeria—repeatedly tested institutions and the reform momentum, displacing millions, and straining state capacity. Mobile money and smartphones accelerated the earlier impacts of mobile connectivity, reshaping economies, governance, and daily life.

"Africa rising"

The phrase "Africa rising" first appeared prominently in a 1998 Time magazine article celebrating the continent's growing self-reliance. It gained global traction in 2011 when *The Economist* ran a cover story of the same name. The narrative captured a surge of optimism: a decade of robust growth driven by a commodities boom, rising foreign investment, and the rapid spread of mobile phones and internet connectivity.

Building for commitment: The new Office of West Africa, Ford's first owned building in the region, opened in Lagos in 2010.

The mobile phone turned into West Africa's primary tool for inclusion, innovation, and civic participation. Nollywood films and Afrobeats gained global audiences.

Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal all saw progress slowing, as tough years for finances, security, and governance followed earlier improvements in political competition and civic participation.

In Nigeria, the 2011 general election was a dramatic improvement on the deeply flawed 2003 and 2007 polls. But then, the Boko Haram insurgency, escalating in 2009, spread through the north-east and the Lake Chad basin, displacing millions and triggering a long-running humanitarian crisis. Sharply falling oil prices triggered a sharp economic slowdown, leading to a recession in 2016, fueled inflation and eroded public trust. Yet Nigerian democracy proved resilient: the 2015 elections saw the first peaceful transfer of presidential power to an opposition party. Meanwhile, urban young people organized against government corruption, wasteful spending, and unaccountability, foreshadowing #OccupyNigeria in 2012 and the later #EndSARS and Obidient movements.

Ghana's competitive elections in 2012 and 2016, and a peaceful transfer of power, boosted confidence in the rule of law, the relative integrity of the Electoral Commission, and an energetic independent media. But widening inequality, high youth unemployment,

and a fiscal crisis triggered an International Monetary Fund-backed austerity program. These strains fueled skepticism about democracy's ability to deliver broad-based prosperity. It galvanized civic groups, including women's rights networks and youth advocates, to press more forcefully for accountable governance.

Grand opening: Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan with Babatunde Raji Fasola, Lagos State Governor and Luis A. Ubiñas, Ford Foundation President.

Likewise, Senegal showcased a lively civic culture. The *Y'en a Marre* youth movement, spearheaded by rappers and journalists with the support of the urban youth, mobilized against President Abdoulaye Wade's bid for a third term and helped ensure a peaceful transition to Macky Sall in 2012. Later in the decade, debates over presidential authority and electoral rules sparked further youth-led protests. Economic prospects brightened with large infrastructure projects and the discovery in 2014 of offshore oil and gas. Yet high unemployment and inequality kept many young Senegalese restive. Artists and intellectuals harnessed culture for political critique and to pursue social change.

> "In 2015, the Ford Foundation launched FordForward, a global strategy focused on fighting inequality."

From Legacy to Evolution: Ford's Evolving Strategy

After 50 years in West Africa, Ford was known for supporting visionary leaders and nurturing vibrant civil societies. Now, it maintained a central commitment to social justice, while adapting to the regional context and its changing global strategy.

Ford's 50 Year Anniversary

In October 2010, coinciding with Nigeria's Independence Day, the Ford Foundation marked 50 years of work in Nigeria and West Africa by inaugurating a new office building in Lagos to house its regional operations.

The ceremony was attended by Luis A. Ubiñas, the President of the Ford Foundation, who hosted Nigerian President Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, Lagos State Governor Babatunde Raji Fasola, and other dignitaries. The facility was designed to be "a place where our partners come together, where ideas are shared, relationships are formed, and trust is built," according to Adhiambo Odaga, then the Ford Foundation representative for West Africa.

The opening carried deep symbolism: Ford had operated in Nigeria from 1960 but did not have its own permanent address until then. Ford also announced $1 million in "Jubilee Transparency Awards" to honor civil society organizations promoting governance, integrity, and citizen accountability in Nigeria.

In 2015, the Ford Foundation launched FordForward, a global strategy focused on fighting inequality. This emphasized shifting resources into building stronger, more durable institutions; putting racial, gender, and economic justice at the center; increasing flexible, long-term funding; and investing in creativity, free expression, and civic participation.

West Africa exemplified many of the issues that Ford was confronting: vast natural resource wealth alongside deep poverty, entrenched gender inequities, and fragile democratic institutions struggling to meet citizens' expectations.

The West Africa office sharpened its priorities, which over the previous decade had been focused on a country-driven portfolio that involved strengthening democratic governance and human rights, advancing gender equality and sexual and reproductive health rights, leveraging media, arts and culture to foster social change, as well as capacity-building for civil society organizations.

Protecting the 2011 elections: A citizen movement, Reclaim Naija, monitored intimidation and violence, during voter registration and election day.

Guided by FordForward, the West Africa office pivoted to invest in movements demanding transparency and accountability in natural resource governance, where oil and mineral revenues too often bypassed local communities. It expanded support for feminist organizations advancing gender and reproductive justice, ensuring women's voices could not be sidelined in struggles over land, livelihoods, and political representation. And the foundation deepened its support for arts and culture as catalysts for social change. Civil society groups advancing civic participation, gender and economic justice received long-term, flexible funding to strengthen their roles as watchdogs.

> "For the first time, Nigeria produced a credible voter register, which was critical for the integrity of the elections."

Civic Engagement, Elections, and Anti-corruption

As the decade unfolded, the demand for accountable government became a powerful current in Nigeria and across the region. Guided by the priorities of civil society, the Ford Foundation supported organizations that strengthened the credibility of elections and the rule of law. This became central to sustaining democratic gains and addressing public frustration at persistent corruption and multiple inefficiencies in the delivery of critical public services such as electricity, water, housing, and primary health.

"After years of decline in elections following the return to civil rule, the 2011 polls marked a turn toward stronger democratic practice," says Ngozi Iwere, Executive Director of Community Life Project. "Ford helped tip the balance." It strengthened the capacity of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), while also equipping key civil-society groups to press for credible and transparent elections. Its multi-year engagement supported voter education, staff training, and improved electoral processes—efforts that complemented the INEC's own reforms, under Chairman Attahiru Jega, such as biometric voter registration, the introduction of Permanent Voter Cards, and the use of Smart Card Readers.

In 2011, for the first time, Nigeria produced a credible voter register, which was critical for the integrity of the elections. "We worked with Professor Jega to set up an electoral center in Abuja," recalls Joseph Gitari, then senior program officer. "We provided computers to establish a hub, and young Nigerians developed software that linked voter identification to polling locations, making the process far more efficient."[1]

At last, Nigeria's voter register could be verified. Ford also supported the INEC to design a public information strategy, crucial for building confidence in electoral integrity. This proved essential when, in April 2011, the INEC needed to communicate openly and credibly after logistical challenges forced it to postpone the polls by a few days.

Disability rights: Campaigns urged Nigeria's Electoral Commission to facilitate voting by people with disabilities.

Technology and official reforms can only go so far; citizens themselves had to be active participants and watchdogs if democracy was to take root. Ford supported Reclaim Naija, a citizen movement born in the run-up to the 2011 elections to strengthen participation, accountability, and electoral integrity.

"We adapted Ushahidi—a crowd-sourcing platform developed in Kenya—and combined it with SMS and voice telephony to enable citizens to report incidents," explains Ngozi Iwere. Through this system, Nigerians reported intimidation, violence, or irregularities during both voter registration and election day. The reports were verified, mapped, and shared in real time, producing, for the first time, a citizen-driven picture of election integrity that complemented official oversight. But Reclaim Naija was more than a reporting tool. By urging Nigerians to "reclaim" ownership of their democracy, it underscored how credible elections depended on public vigilance.

However, this democratic opening risked being hollowed out if a deeper problem—impunity—went unchallenged. The "Stop Impunity Now!" campaign was launched in 2013 by longstanding Ford partners. Each brought its own strengths: Media Rights Agenda specialized in media campaigns, Community Life Project championed grassroot mobilization, Human Development Initiatives worked on research, while the Center for Social Justice focused on public finance management. The campaign also drew in the National Orientation Agency, the Christian Association of Nigeria, and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, broadening its reach across faith-based constituencies.

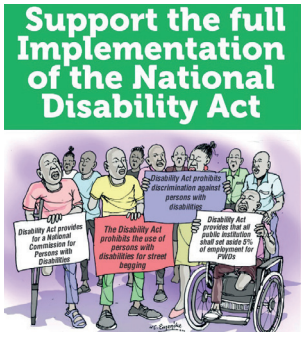
"The campaign exposed how impunity was eating away at governance and development—from politicians who abused power to ordinary citizens who ignored laws and dodged taxes,"[2] says Edetaen Ojo, executive director at Media Rights Agenda. By naming the entrenched culture of impunity and insisting on accountability, the campaign gave Nigerians fresh language and tools to demand change. It galvanized vigilance around the polls and generated the civic energy that helped secure the credibility of the 2015 elections, contributing to Nigeria's democratic breakthrough.

Ford's work was guided by citizens' belief that democracy must work for all citizens, including those historically excluded from the process—such as people with disabilities. Ford's work was guided by citizens' belief that democracy must work for all, including those historically excluded from the process—such as people with disabilities. It supported the Center for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD) to press the INEC for better planning, ahead of the 2019 general elections, to facilitate the participation of people with disabilities. The CCD's monitoring revealed minimal preparation steps had been taken, and its findings—presented directly to INEC leadership—led to the CCD being invited to help train election staff on disability-inclusive processes. "In subsequent elections," notes David Anyele, CCD founder and executive director, "we began to see improved provision and real efforts being made."

> "Nigeria's democratic gains remained fragile as long as corruption and weak justice institutions persisted."

With Ford's support in 2014, CCD conducted Nigeria's first-ever accessibility audit of public infrastructure. Anyele notes: "That document went all the way to the Senate President. For the first time, people with disabilities were leading a process to secure an inclusive society."[3] The findings—that more than 99% of public buildings were inaccessible—shocked policymakers. They directly informed the drafting and eventual passage of Nigeria's landmark Disability Rights Act (2019).

However, Nigeria's democratic gains remained fragile as long as corruption, impunity, and weak justice institutions persisted. In 2016, the foundation joined with other donors to establish the Nigeria Anti-Corruption and Criminal Justice Reform Fund, managed by TrustAfrica in partnership with the Presidential Advisory Committee Against Corruption. The fund channeled resources to government agencies, civil society groups and media organizations to modernize criminal justice laws, strengthen anti-corruption agencies and build public pressure for reform. It helped advance the Administration of Criminal Justice Act in several Nigerian states and backed the monitoring of corruption trials to reduce delays. It was supported by the Presidency through the active engagement of Vice President Yemi Osinbajo.



Legislative victory: Nigeria's National Disability Act was passed in 2019, after vigorous campaigning.

Meanwhile, watchdog journalism emerged as an important tool for reform to endure by exposing abuses and maintaining accountability. The foundation funded the International Center for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) in Abuja: it trained journalists and produced hundreds of in-depth stories exposing contract fraud and misuse of public funds. "Before we started," explains Dayo Aiyetan, the ICIR's Executive Director, "journalists knew little about the laws, processes and requirements for awarding and executing contracts, and could therefore not hold anyone accountable."[4] The ICIR's fact-checking and open-contract reporting projects reinforced transparency. It gave citizens the evidence they could use to hold leaders accountable.

Building a Resilient Civic Sector across West Africa

Building institutions that outlast individuals was Ford's most important legacy for strengthening civil society throughout this decade.

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) had been founded in 2005 in Ghana to bolster the capacity of civil society across the region. WACSI invested in the nuts and bolts of strong organizations—good governance, financial sustainability, and adaptive leadership. Ford began supporting WACSI in 2013, initially helping to launch its Civil Society Leadership Institute. It trained a new generation of middle management staff for the heavy responsibilities of executive leadership.

Later, as a BUILD grantee, WACSI deepened its institutional independence by diversifying its funding streams, launching a social enterprise arm, and planning a self-financed conference center. Nana Asantewa Afadzinu, WACSI's Executive Director, explains: "The unrestricted institutional support has really enabled us to look beyond grants and become more resilient even after BUILD has ended."[5]

Ford's commitment to strengthening civil society included supporting organizational leadership transitions, a key element in ensuring the sector's long-term vitality. With the foundation's support, the Association for Research on Civil Society in Africa (AROCSA)—founded in 2016 in Ghana—partnered with Indiana University to create the NGO Leadership Transition Fellowship Program (NLTFP). This initiative gave senior civil society leaders from across Africa the time and mentoring to hand over to younger successors while documenting the lessons they had learned in leadership and preparing solid succession plans.

"Founders' syndrome can quietly weaken organizations,"[6] observed Innocent Chukwuma, Ford's West Africa regional director at the time. "Helping leaders to step aside with dignity is as important as helping young people step up." Alongside this fellowship, AROCSA connected African researchers and practitioners so that evidence from the continent could guide how civil society grows and learns, ensuring that both the next generation of leaders and the knowledge they need to succeed remain firmly rooted in African experience.

What is BUILD?

Ford's BUILD program (Building Institutions and Networks) represented a major shift in global philanthropy. It recognized that many civil society groups, despite vital work, were constrained by precarious short-term funding which undermined long-term impact. Instead of one-off project grants, BUILD offered five-year, flexible funding—covering core costs, leadership development, and strategic planning—so that organizations could strengthen their governance, plan for succession and diversify income.

In West Africa, the first phase of BUILD (2016–2021) awarded a total of $22.36 million to 18 grantees, with a median grant size of $1.45 million. It allowed partners such as the African Women's Development Fund, LEAP Africa, and the CLEEN Foundation to professionalize their management, invest in revenue-generating activities and weather political or financial shocks. This "trust-based" model, as Ford staff and grantees repeatedly underline, gave civil society the breathing space to grow stronger and to chart its own path beyond donor cycles. Building on the successes and lessons of the first phase, Ford launched a second phase (2022–2027) with a budget of $24 million for West Africa.

Regional Voice in Policy and Governance

Ford worked also closely with the West Africa Civil Society Forum (WACSOF) in Abuja to help pave pathways for citizens to have a stronger voice in regional decision-making. Created in 2003 and endorsed by ECOWAS, WACSOF convenes civil society groups from all 15 member states and provides a regular channel to engage ECOWAS institutions on policies that affect people's lives.

With Ford's support, WACSOF became a central civil society driver of the harmonized ECOWAS mining code. It mobilized experts and community groups across the region and—when official funds ran out—stepped in to enable the decisive ECOWAS experts' meeting that kept the process on track.

"We financed the ECOWAS experts' meeting so the harmonized mining code could be adopted—without that, the momentum would have been lost,"[7] recalls Komlan Messie, WACSOF's executive director. The code, endorsed by West African heads of state, helped end "the practice of companies playing one country against another to get lower royalties,"[8] creating a fairer baseline for all. Messie sums up the collaboration that delivered the mining code: "It took an open-minded ECOWAS commissioner who valued civil society's input—and a funder willing to trust us—to make it happen."[9]

WACSOF also pushed social justice priorities beyond the extractives sector. With Ford funding, it ran community campaigns against child marriages in several countries across the region: "In the areas where we worked," says Messie, "people began reporting early marriages more often because they felt empowered to denounce cases."

School not marriage: People began reporting early marriages because they felt empowered to denounce cases.

WACSOF's advocacy was strengthened by a groundbreaking mapping study on child marriage in West Africa, carried out by Development Research and Project Center (dRPC), a Ford partner. For the first time, advocates had comprehensive evidence to show how widespread and harmful the practice was. This study quickly became one of the most cited resources on the issue worldwide, lending weight to campaigns that reached the United Nations and the African Union. Its findings helped shift international and regional policy and provided the evidence base for the global Girls Not Brides movement, turning local research into a catalyst for global change.

> "Ford doesn't treat grantees as service providers; they respect our autonomy because we know the terrain."
>
> **— Komlan Messie, Executive Director of WACSOF**

Media, Narrative and Public Interest Storytelling

Ford's West Africa office placed media and storytelling at the heart of its social justice work. It made it a crosscutting tool that linked work on democratic governance, transparency, and gender equality. Public interest media projects amplified evidence from Ford-funded research and reform campaigns—such as the "Stop Impunity Now" campaign around the 2015 Nigerian elections.

This strategy went far beyond simply funding journalists: it sought to shift public narratives and strengthen civic voices by mobilizing film, broadcast, and investigative reporting to make evidence and research accessible to both ordinary citizens and decision-makers. This approach reflected a broader Ford philosophy: evidence alone rarely shifts entrenched beliefs; repeated, creative storytelling does. "When you have evidence and you repeat it through cartoons, documentaries, publishing—reinforcing and repeating data—people's brains are permeable," says Paul Nwulu who led this initiative. "Repeating arguments that are grounded in data often helps people to start rethinking."[10]

Ford recognized that Nollywood and other popular culture platforms reached audiences far larger than policy papers ever could. Soon after 2012, Ford launched a new effort that supported filmmakers and other creatives who wove themes such as ending gender-based violence, government transparency, and natural resource accountability—into their stories. Paul Nwulu explains that many civil society organizations were "amazing in conducting research, but when you do research and write reports, the reports sit on a shelf somewhere, so it doesn't really have the impact that [Ford] wanted to have." The program therefore helped grantees become "media-serving"—comfortable giving interviews and translating complex evidence into compelling public narratives.

Ford also supported Cinema4Change, a social impact, filmmaking initiative created in partnership with Afrinolly, the Nigerian digital entertainment platform. The program embedded emerging Nollywood filmmakers within civil society organizations so that the realities of grassroots advocacy could be transformed into storylines for popular films. It paired screenwriters and directors with activists, to develop scripts and produce short films that tackled issues ranging from gender-based violence to government accountability.

Nollywood developing: The developing film industry in West Africa tackled everything from gender-based violence to government accountability.

Among the productions it helped bring to life were Stephanie Linus's award-winning drama Dry, which spotlighted the plight of women living with vesico-vaginal fistula, often caused by obstructed labor during child birth, and a series of powerful shorts produced through the Afrinolly Creative Hub in Lagos. These shorts—distributed on Afrinolly's mobile platform and showcased at major international festivals such as the Durban International Film Festival—carried social justice messages to mass audiences. They demonstrated that entertainment and civic engagement can successfully meet on screen.

This commitment to storytelling extended beyond the screen. The Ford Foundation also supported building the capacity of civic actors who wanted to better tell their own stories. Training programs prepared NGOs to use radio, television, and social media effectively; small grants supported radio programming that elevated historically excluded voices, such as women affected by the West African Ebola crisis.

> "Studies warned of profound social and economic costs, if young people left school without pathways to decent work or civic voice."

The Ford Foundation also provided rapid response grants to civil society groups and media outlets during the 2014–16 Ebola epidemic in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, which ensured that vital public health messages reached communities and that local voices were sustained. It supported *Hirondelle* to help independent radio stations across affected countries produce urgent, factual broadcasts on staying safe—while amplifying women's voices. Stories from mothers and community health workers caring for the sick and confronting stigma helped counter fear with trusted local information.

Youth Transitions, Leadership and Employment: Preparing for Work and Citizenship

A burgeoning young population was an asset and a looming risk. Studies warned of profound social and economic costs, if young people left school without pathways to decent work or civic voice. The Ford Foundation responded with a decade-long effort to link education, livelihoods, and leadership so a rising generation could shape the region's future.

First it supported grantee partner efforts to close the gap between education and employment. Too many young people were acquiring skills informally—training as roadside mechanics or small-scale artisans—only to find their abilities invisible to employers. Grants supported initiatives that recognized and certified these skills and connected young workers to quality jobs.

In Nigeria's oil-rich Delta region, the foundation worked with the International Institute for Petroleum, Energy, Law and Policy (IIPELP) and the Centre for Youth Development and Advocacy (CYDA) to align vocational training with what employers actually needed. "Competency over credentials" was the new mantra promoted by the West Africa Vocational Education (WAVE), founded in Lagos in 2013. "We want employers to hire for skills, not just degrees," explains Ifeanyi Perry, a WAVE leader. "Ford's partnership helped us take that idea from training a few students to changing how the labor market itself thinks."[11]

> "Ford intensified its efforts to cultivate a generation ready to lead in politics and public life."

Creative futures: The creative industries held out a promise of jobs for West Africa's expanding young population.

WAVE, supported by Ford from 2017 built the Ready for Work online platform and a practical toolkit for employers. It trained teachers in modern pedagogy across southwestern Nigeria, and persuaded state technical boards to update vocational curricula. More than 11,000 young people have passed through its academies, but the deeper legacy is a shift in employer practice and government policy. Alumni now contribute a small share of their first salaries to sustain the program. "It's a model built on trust," Perry proudly notes.

In Ghana, Ford supported the Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (COTVET) which reformed national technical and vocational systems by creating new ways to assess skills and plan workforce training. "We learned that the problem wasn't that young people lacked ability," recalls Dabesaki Mac-Ikemenjima, then Ford's program officer, "but that the systems around them failed to value what they already knew."[12] Evidence from these pilots gave governments a practical model to make public spending on youth employment more effective and to move, as Mac-Ikemenjima put it, "from spray-and-pray projects to targeted investments that truly open doors".

Ford also continued its long-standing partnership with LEAP Africa, the youth leadership organization it had first supported in the 2000s, supporting its goal to scale its training and mentoring programs so that a new generation of socially conscious entrepreneurs and civic leaders could gain the skills and confidence to drive change.

Economic opportunity was only half the story. Ford also expanded its support for youth organizations working to cultivate a generation ready to lead in civic and public life, young people that demanded a place in decision making. "We were five students tired of being told to wait our turn," recalls Cynthia Mbamalu, co-founder of Yiaga Africa. "So, we began hosting 'breakfast dialogues' on our campus, asking: 'what does democracy mean to us?'"[13] From those small campus meetings in Jos in 2007 grew a national movement that, by 2018, had persuaded Nigeria's National Assembly and two thirds of the country's state legislatures to amend the constitution and lower the age to run for office.

Yiaga Africa's "Not Too Young To Run" campaign built the country's largest citizen election observer network, and it helped to create the Young Parliamentarians Forum, now a formal committee of Nigeria's House of Representatives. Ford staff offered strategic advice and the connections that turned this student idea into a continental reference point for democratic reform, led by young people. "Young people proved they were not just the leaders of tomorrow," says Samson Itodo, Yiaga's executive director, "but leaders for today—if given the chance."[14]

Preparing young people for public life was at the heart of an initiative led by the African Centre for Leadership, Strategy and Development (Center LSD). Founded in 2010 by Otive Igbuzor, Center LSD champions strategic leadership and sustainable development by cultivating effective leaders, promoting sound strategies, and advancing inclusive development. With Ford's support, it launched a leadership training program in the Niger Delta to equip young people for civic leadership—building the skills and vision needed to drive social change and foster development in the region.

Building the Field of Impact Investing in Nigeria

The foundation began moving beyond classic grant-making towards a more durable mix of grants, and catalytic capital. Innocent Chukwuma, an early champion within the West Africa office—drawing inspiration from Ford's global move into mission-related investments—saw that an ecosystem of norms, data, intermediaries, and investor confidence had to be built for impact investing to take root locally. That idea set the tone for the decade. The foundation convened unusual coalitions of development financiers, domestic asset owners, regulators, and

Slave museum: *Maison des Esclaves* on Senegal's Gorée Island memorializes the transatlantic slave trade.

Keeping Memory Alive at Gorée: Ford's Partnership to Revitalize the House of Slaves

"Trust was the foundation of everything," recalls Sylvia Fernandez, a program director at the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC). "What began as a 3-year project became an 8-year partnership because Ford believed in the process and let the community lead."[15]

On Senegal's Gorée Island, the *Maison des Esclaves* (House of Slaves) is one of the world's most powerful memorials to the transatlantic slave trade. By the mid-2010s, time and the Atlantic's salt air were eroding the site's fabric—and its ability to teach new generations. In 2015, Ford joined ICSC to launch a bold revitalization.

First came the painstaking physical restoration, protecting fragile buildings and expanding spaces so visitors could move through the story with dignity. Second was reimagining the content, engaging Senegalese historians and a scientific committee to rewrite the exhibitions with the latest scholarship on the slave trade and its West African legacies. Third, the team set out to create a living center for dialogue, where the history of slavery could spark conversations about today's struggles for justice and human rights.

For Sylvia, the heart of the project lay in the method itself. "A Site of Conscience is not a passive museum," she explains. "It must be activated—inviting visitors to connect past atrocities to contemporary human rights issues. Evidence alone rarely shifts entrenched beliefs; repeated, creative storytelling does."

Ford's sustained, flexible support allowed the coalition and Senegalese partners to adapt to unexpected challenges—global shipping delays, a pandemic, even political headwinds—while staying true to a community-driven vision. Tour guides were trained to lead critical conversations; new exhibitions now weave in local voices and contemporary Senegalese scholarship.

Today, the House of Slaves stands as a center of international conscience—a place where the memory of the slave trade fuels dialogue on racism, colonial legacies, and human rights. "This project," Sylvia reflects, "reaffirmed memory and dignity. It proved that when philanthropy trusts local leadership, a site of trauma can become a force for global justice."

entrepreneurs, and supported local leaders who could carry on the work, long after any one grant ended. The intent was practical and political at once: create investable pipelines that advance inclusion and hardwire a gender lens so women could participate as owners, workers, suppliers, and customers—not just as a "beneficiary" line item.

By 2019, this approach crystallized into the creation of the Impact Investors Foundation (IIF) in Nigeria, established with key partners drawn from the finance, media, and advisory sectors. With Ford's early support, IIF conducted the market's first serious assessment since 2015 of Nigeria's impact investing landscape, documenting a sharp increase in active impact investors and assets deployed, but also a stubborn dependence on international financiers and a significant shortage of local private capital.

Those findings formed the basis for a plan of action. IIF created Nigeria's National Advisory Board for Impact Investing as the country's official connection to the global impact-investing community; trained business support groups beyond Lagos and Abuja so promising ventures were not confined to big cities; and prepared women- and youth-led enterprises—including entrepreneurs with disabilities—for investment, ensuring that "bankability" criteria would not quietly exclude the very groups impact investors aim to serve.

On the capital side, IIF backed creation of a wholesale, locally managed investment fund: a planned $1 billion vehicle (starting with a $100 million first phase) designed to attract pension funds and channel investments of $50,000–$250,000 through emerging Nigerian fund managers—precisely where women-led firms, farming cooperatives, and rural processors are most active.

"Ford Foundation has really been a true partner. Flexibility is one of the greatest things I enjoy about this relationship. They give you the bandwidth to make changes and are happy to discuss them. Our success is also hinged on their technical support, from introductions to public and private sector networks to backing our work in the field."

– Etemore Glover, CEO of the Impact Investors Foundation

The gender lens was a practical framework for asking who gets financed, who decides, and who benefits. Early pilots prioritized women-founded agribusinesses that organized networks of smallholder suppliers and introduced packaged staple foods for the domestic retail market; processors that added value to cassava and grains while buying directly from women smallholders; and cooperatives that helped informal producers become investment-ready businesses. The dividends included new jobs in processing and logistics, more reliable purchase orders for hundreds of women suppliers, and locally produced goods appearing on supermarket shelves that previously stocked only imports or lacked such products altogether.

Less visible—but equally important—were changes in governance: more women joining ownership lists and investment committees, and the development of loan products tailored to seasonal cash flows and caregiving responsibilities, which had previously kept many women from qualifying for credit.

In line with the foundation's overall commitment to tackling inequalities worldwide, the Office of West Africa focused new investments on organizations advancing transparency in natural resource governance and challenging deeply entrenched social norms that sustain gender inequality and violence against women. Together, these efforts not only addressed immediate injustices but also transformed the structural conditions that kept communities and groups marginalized.

> **"Ford's commitment to gender justice was not separate from its democracy and governance agenda but integral to it."**

Nowhere was this more urgent than in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta, where pollution, conflict, and exclusion have left women both excluded and carrying disproportionate burdens. The Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre, founded in 2003, has become a leading eco-feminist voice for women's rights and environmental justice.

Participation is key: Applying 'FordForward' principles, the West Africa office sought to deepen democracy and accountability.

"The word 'kebetkache' is drawn from two Indigenous words meaning 'swamp' and 'river'—a nod to the wetlands of the Niger Delta," explains founder Emem Okon.[16] "We registered in 2003 after seeing a huge gap in the agitation for resource control. Women had always been part of the struggle, but, when negotiations began, their voices were sidelined. We wanted to change that narrative."

Kebetkache has since documented the devastating impact of oil pollution on women's livelihoods and mobilized them to demand a place in decision making. Its advocacy would help ensure that the Petroleum Industry Act of 2021 guarantees host communities—and women within them—a share of oil revenues. Ford's partnership, beginning in 2018 and deepened through a BUILD grant in 2022, gave Kebetkache the flexibility to strengthen its governance, expand its network, and respond to urgent challenges such as corporate divestment.

Looking ahead, Okon's motivation is clear: "Women in the Niger Delta are no longer just victims but leaders. They are shaping laws, confronting polluters, and demanding justice. The struggle is far from over, but every time a woman takes her seat on a community development committee, we know progress is being made."

Kebatkache's story sits within Ford's mission to ensure the people most affected by climate injustice are at the center of solutions. In Ghana, the Africa Centre for Energy Policy (ACEP), supported by Ford, has been the counterweight to opaque deals—scrutinizing contracts, modelling financial risks, and pushing decisionmakers and regulators regulators toward greater transparency.

ACEP has made high-stakes interventions – from halting loss-making royalty sales to challenging predatory power and oil agreements. It has also invested in the ecosystem: re-granting to smaller civil society organizations during the COVID shock, convening the Future of Energy Conference to shape policy debate, and training a pipeline of young analysts through its Summer School and Climate Academy. This mix of top-down policy pressure and bottom-up voices has linked continental debates on resource justice to the lived realities of communities on the front lines.

> "Dismantling exclusionary norms, empowering women as equal citizens, and ensuring that institutions uphold the rights and dignity of all."

Under FordForward, the West Africa office moved toward a broader agenda of gender justice—one that sought to transform harmful structures, social norms, and institutions as part of deepening democracy and accountability. This shift was visible in the work of Ford's partners.

In the Niger Delta, the Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre linked women's rights to environmental justice, insisting that women have a voice in decisions about resource governance and community survival. WRAPA (Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative) developed an innovative approach to tackling social issues by engaging influential community figures.

Involving community figures: WRAPA tackles social issues by engaging respected local voices.

"Legal frameworks are important," explains Saudatu Mahdi, WRAPA secretary general. "But they often fail to change deep-seated cultural beliefs and practices that harm women."[17] By cultivating "male champions"—imams, priests, and traditional rulers—WRAPA helped shift influential voices from passive acceptance to active advocacy.

The results were striking: a Catholic priest in Abuja denied communion to an abusive husband until he reformed; Muslim clerics in the North now preach that Islam does not condone violence against women; and a Plateau State chief co-drafted bylaws with WRAPA to prevent widows from being disinherited, ending a century-old injustice.

WRAPA also invested in reclaiming theology for women's rights. Its study, "New Wine in Old Wine Skins," interrogates misused Qur'anic verses that have justified violence, reframing religious authority to produce liberating, community-owned knowledge. This theological grounding has enabled WRAPA to challenge harmful norms from within the moral universe of the communities themselves.

The Women Advocates Research and Documentation Center (WARDC) likewise worked to counter the social norms driving violence against women and girls. It mobilized women and girls alongside moral and ethical leaders in the south-western Nigeria. Thus, WARDC built cross-sectoral alliances and amplified the use of social sanctions to stimulate dialogue and community-level condemnation of abusive practices.

On Nigerian campuses, the Gender Mobile Initiative broke new ground in confronting sexual harassment as a matter of gender justice. Its CampusPal app enabled students to report abuse confidentially, connect with legal and psychosocial support, and trigger institutional or police responses. Beyond technology, Gender Mobile worked with university authorities and the National Universities Commission to adopt stronger policies and redress systems, ensuring complaints were not buried in silence.

"We would not be able to make progress in a highly patriarchal society without the support of men,"[18] stresses founder Omowumi Ogunrotimi, who cultivated male allies and reformers within government. By enlisting champions inside institutions such as the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), she was able to unlock access to other agencies and accelerate reform. By pairing survivor support with institutional change and public campaigns, Gender Mobile shifted campus culture from denial to accountability, challenging the power imbalances that had long allowed harassment to thrive.

Together, these efforts show how Ford's commitment to gender justice was not separate from its democracy and governance agenda but integral to it. Achieving change demanded dismantling exclusionary norms, empowering women as equal citizens, and ensuring that institutions uphold the rights and dignity of all.

Footnotes

[1] Interview conducted on July 25, 2025

[2] Interview conducted on August 6, 2025

[3] Interview conducted on August 1, 2025

[4] Dayo Aiyetan, International Centre for Investigative Reporting, "Nigeria's ICIR Is Training Journalists to Investigate Contracts and Procurement Fraud," IJNet, 27 February 2019

[5] Interview conducted on August 4, 2025

[6] Ford Foundation, Exit Reflection Session with Innocent Chukwuma, December 2, 2020

[7] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025

[8] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025

[9] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025

[10] Interview conducted on July 1, 2025

[11] Interview conducted on August 11, 2025

[12] Interview conducted on July 16, 2025

[13] Interview conducted on August 8, 2025

[14] Samson Itodo, Executive Director, Yiaga Africa, quoted in The State of Youth Participation in Nigeria's 2019 General Elections (Abuja: Yiaga Africa, 2019), ii (Executive Summary/Foreword.

[15] Interview conducted on July 22, 2025

[16] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025

[17] Interview conducted on August 12, 2025

[18] Interview conducted on August 12, 2025

Chapter 7

2020 –2025 Trials and Resilience

West Africa faced COVID-19, global price shocks, mounting debt, climate pressures, chronic poverty, growing inequality, and political turbulence. Institutions were tested. However, civic movements pressed forward, young innovators drove a growing service sector, and determination for change gained momentum. Ford supported local visions for healthy civic spaces and strengthened governance. It advanced gender, youth, and climate justice, ensuring citizens' energy leads to lasting transformation.

In the opening years of the 2020s, West Africa faced multiple crises, as political, economic, social and environmental shocks collided and reinforced one another in what researchers have described as a polycrisis. COVID-19 was the first and most immediate shock: lockdowns and school closures disrupted millions of lives, exposing weak health systems and pushing families into poverty. Alongside the virus came a "shadow pandemic" of gender-based violence, as women and girls faced heightened risks while support services were stretched thin.

The global food- and energy-price surge of 2022 deepened the strain, triggering fresh waves of inflation and debt across the region. Meanwhile, climate change was no longer an abstract threat: catastrophic floods displaced thousands in Nigeria, desertification advanced across the Sahel, and coastal erosion swallowed homes and livelihoods in places like Saint Louis, Senegal. Furthermore, the security crisis in the Sahel continued.

In Nigeria, the youth-led, #EndSARS protests of 2020 became a defining moment for a new generation of young people, whose digitally savvy, mass mobilization signaled an awakening beyond religious, regional, ethnic, and party lines, and a demand for both an end to police brutality and broader government accountability. The demonstrations were met by a harsh state crackdown and ushered in tighter restrictions on civic spaces. However, they also sparked a new political consciousness, motivating unprecedented numbers of first-time voters to register for the 2023 elections in what became known as the Obidient Movement that was a powerful signal of the youth for substantive change.

Girls' safe space center: Supporting gender rights became an important feature of West African civil culture.

Ghana entered its deepest financial crisis in decades: by 2022 inflation topped 40% and a tumbling currency forced the country into a new IMF program. Driven by over-reliance on external borrowing and unprecedented levels of corruption in public finances and administration that were compounded by global economic shocks, public protests followed. Yet Ghana's democratic culture held, with civil society and the media did their utmost to keep government in check. Long celebrated as West Africa's democratic exception, Senegal's image began to unravel in 2021 when, against a backdrop of popular dissatisfaction with the government of Macky Sall, youth-led protests over the prosecution of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko exposed deep tensions around presidential term limits and the rules of political succession.

> "Every regional office would organize around three global themes, each aimed at tackling inequality."

Protecting girls and women: The public campaign against gender violence drew supporters from across different faiths.

Across West Africa a common reality came into focus. In an era of overlapping crises, democratic gains proved fragile, economic resilience uncertain, and the expectations of a vast and restless youth population rose faster than governments could deliver. Yet civic energy remained strong: social movements, feminist groups, and community networks kept demanding accountability and inclusion.

By the turn of the decade, the Ford Foundation's global strategy also entered a new phase. From the 2020s, every regional office would organize its work around three global themes, each aimed at tackling inequality—the defining barrier to social justice.

The first focused on civic engagement, supporting the full participation of underrepresented communities in the political, economic, and cultural systems that shape their lives. Another advanced climate justice, promoting the rights of rural and Indigenous communities whose lives and livelihoods depend on land and natural resources, and ensuring that energy transitions were fair and inclusive. A third worked to address gender-based violence by dismantling the deeply entrenched attitudes and structures that not only perpetuate violence, but allow it to occur in the first place.

The Office of West Africa selected the two themes that spoke most directly to the region's realities—the need to prevent gender-based violence and advance climate justice—and set out to make Ford's long-standing commitment to social justice even more focused. The goal was "to be a big fish in a small pond—finding the catalytic entry points where our support can unlock wider change and then bring others on board,"[1] underscores Catherine ChiChi Aniagolu-Okoye, the Ford Foundation's Regional Director in West Africa.

Gender Justice: from Crisis Response to Prevention

Early global frameworks, such as the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, centered on women's rights as a category. Over time, activists and scholars pushed for a broader, more systemic framing: gender justice. Building on this legacy, the 2010s marked the beginning of a paradigm shift toward gender justice. It saw development of a broader and deeper agenda, shaped by a harsh reality that legal and policy gains too often failed to translate into lived equality, as violence, exclusion, and entrenched patriarchal systems persisted.

> "The heart of Ford's strategy was simple but bold: shift social norms."

When the pandemic exposed both the scale of gender-based violence and the limits of crisis response, Ford and its civil society partners were already tackling its roots in patriarchy, economic exclusion, disability, and other forms discrimination. The crisis nonetheless underscored the need for a decisive shift from addressing the aftermath of gender-based violence to preventing it.

It was "a good moment" [2] for the Ford Foundation's push to shift social norms, recalls Program Officer Dabesaki Mac-Ikemenjima, with national leaders and grassroots voices converging in rare alignment. In Nigeria, Vice-President Yemi Osinbajo publicly called for stronger laws and community action to protect women and girls from abuse. Meanwhile, the country's own #ChurchToo movement—an offshoot of the global #MeToo campaign—was exposing sexual misconduct in powerful Pentecostal churches and demanding that religious leaders be held accountable.

Educating girls: Students receive dRPC-funded, ICT scholarships at a secondary school in Chikakore, Kubwa Abuja in 2025.

The heart of Ford's strategy was simple but bold: shift social norms. Rather than concentrate only on shelters or court cases, Ford worked with the people who shape community attitudes—religious and traditional leaders. These figures, Dabesaki Mac-Ikemenjima notes, are "the custodians of norms, with a track record in advancing polio vaccinations and girls' education."[4] By bringing them in as champions, the fight against gender-based violence (GBV) moved inside churches, mosques, palaces—and onto the airwaves.

The Dorothy Njemanze Foundation (DNF) in Nigeria is a vivid example. This survivor-led group has a stark credo: "The response is nothing without prevention." With Ford's support, DNF engaged the "leaders of faith and culture" whom it calls community "gatekeepers". It equipped them to become "active bystanders" who challenge harmful practices in real time.

DNF's televised town halls put imams, pastors, and chiefs in front of the camera to make concrete commitments—creating, in Dorothy Njemanze's words, "a peer-review system," where councils will sanction any leader "found to be aiding and abetting" abuse .[3] The foundation "humanized data" through a traveling art exhibit, *Human Matter*, and a documentary, *Leadership as It's Supposed To Be*, amplifying survivor voices in Pidgin with sign language interpretation. The effect was visible: "Our hotlines are buzzing more," Dorothy says, as leaders now called for guidance, survivors "see their place in leadership," and communities began to replace silence with action.

> "Ford worked to weave disability awareness into all its work, treating it not as a side project. "

Nothing About Us Without Us

Ford paid particular attention to people who are doubly impacted by inequality—especially women and young people with disabilities—making sure that their voices and leadership shaped the push to change norms and policy. "Persons with disabilities often face a double challenge of being stigmatized for having a disability and facing a heightened risk of gender-based violence," says Dabesaki Mac-Ikemenjima , so inclusion had to be designed in from the start. The foundation worked to weave disability awareness into all its work, treating it not as a side project but as a principle running through every initiative so that efforts to prevent violence and advance equality would be truly for everyone.

The Disability Rights Advocacy Center (DRAC) embodied this approach. It was founded by Irene Patrick-Ogbogu, a polio survivor who, in her words, "grew up experiencing discrimination in every

Dorothy Njemanze – Champion of Gender Justice

Dorothy Njemanze is one of Nigeria's most fearless advocates for gender equality and human rights. Founder and Executive Director of the survivor-led Dorothy Njemanze Foundation (DNF), she combines rapid-response support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence with bold, long-term prevention.

A trained mass communicator and alumna of the U.S. International Visitors Leadership Program, Dorothy built an early career as an actress and filmmaker—skills she now channels into media-driven activism. Her storytelling and investigative journalism give national reach to survivors' voices.

Her advocacy has shaped key reforms, including Nigeria's Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act, the Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill, and the Disability Rights Act. In 2017 she won a landmark case at the ECOWAS Court of Justice, where the judges cited the Maputo Protocol in finding Nigeria negligent in protecting women's rights—setting a regional precedent for SGBV justice.

Through campaigns such as #CallItAsItIs, Dorothy "humanizes data," turning lived experience into powerful advocacy and proving how survivor leadership can drive both policy change and cultural transformation.

aspect of life".[5] DRAC's work operated through a rights-based, systems lens, rather than acting as a charity. With Ford's support, DRAC helped accelerate implementation of Nigeria's Disability Act: drafting practical guidelines for ministries and agencies, training officials, creating a national disability indicator guide to fix data gaps, and pushing the inclusion of assistive technologies in health insurance.

"One big contribution we always make,"[6] Irene explains, "is to translate those policies and laws into usable tools"—easy-to-read, audio, and local-language versions that make rights actionable in communities.

End sexual violence: Male campaigners join the battle for girls and women to be safe.

DRAC also placed gender-based violence prevention and responses for women with disabilities at the center of its work. This group, Irene notes, is "disproportionately" affected. DRAC worked at adapting referral systems, training sexual-assault referral centers, and setting up desk officers and reporting loops that make services work in practice. The partnership model mattered: "Ford actually believes in the work that we're doing,"[7] she says. The foundation's flexible, sustained funding let DRAC plan beyond short cycles and build coalitions that endure. Irene notes: "Short-term funding is okay, but it really limits how much systemic change one can achieve. Ford is doing something different. They stand out in the donor landscape."

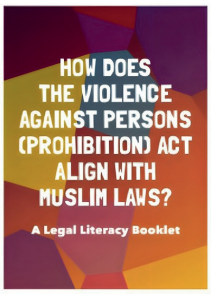
> "Ford's gender justice work also reached Ghana and Senegal, where culture itself became a driver of change."

Ford also provided flexible funding to the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offenses Commission (ICPC) to strengthen its anti-corruption mandate. Under the leadership of Prof. Bolaji Owasanoye, the country's foremost anti-corruption agency expanded its focus to include the abuse of power for sexual favors—often described as "sextortion"—with particular attention given to secondary schools and higher education institutions. Recognizing the need for systemic solutions, the foundation connected ICPC with the Gender Mobile Initiative, which catalyzed the development of a model anti-sexual harassment policy for universities and colleges. Officially endorsed by the Federal Ministry of Education, the policy has since been adopted by all 36 sub-national governments and the Abuja Federal Capital Territory and adapted by more than 250 higher education institutions nationwide.

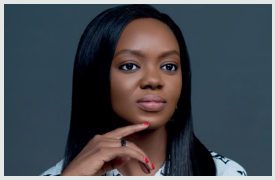
"This systemic change has directly impacted an estimated 500,000 women and girls, providing them with increased safety," affirms Omowumi Ogunrotimi, Gender Mobile's Executive Lead.

Ford's gender justice work also reached Ghana and Senegal, where culture itself became a driver of change. With support from the foundation, Nigeria's iOpenEye Africa Foundation went on tour across West Africa, with its acclaimed stage production "HEAR WORD! Naija Woman Talk True," adapting it for audiences in Accra and Dakar.

The all-women cast tells true stories of sexual violence and everyday sexism. Every performance is followed by an open community dialogue—inviting men, traditional leaders, and young people to move from passive spectators to active critics of harmful norms. By pairing live theatre with digital platforms that carry these voices far beyond the stage, iOpenEye helped spark a conversation in which the custodians of culture themselves begin to challenge the silence around gender-based violence.



Mobilizing culture: Campaigns against gender violence persuaded faith leaders to become active critics of harmful norms.



Interview with Omowumi Ogunrotimi, a Nigerian leader challenging gender-based violence

For readers new to your work—what is Gender Mobile?

Omowumi Ogunrotimi: We're a Nigerian NGO I founded in 2017 to advance intersectional gender equality and eliminate sexual and gender-based violence. We use a systems-change approach—fixing policy and legal frameworks, shifting social norms, and making institutions deliver at scale.

What does "systems change" mean in your work?

For us, it means tackling gender-based violence at the scale of the problem—so that the system itself delivers safety and equality, not just a handful of projects. We look at the whole ecosystem: laws and policies, social norms, and the services that girls and women rely on. That means working with government, universities, and community leaders to make sure protection is not something families must buy privately but a public good available to all.

How do you engage men in a society that is still highly patriarchal?

We could not move an inch without male allies. Men still hold much of the political and institutional power, so we identify reformers—inside government, civil society and universities—who are willing to use their influence for change. For example, we partnered with the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission, whose male leadership helped us open doors across government and advance a national model policy on campus sexual harassment. Some of our strongest advocates today are male students who now call out harassment and even form "male-champion" groups on their campuses.

How did the Ford Foundation support your journey?

Ford believed in us early. In 2018, barely a year after we began, they gave us our first grant—just $5,000, but it felt like five million. That seed money allowed us to start campus-based, awareness campaigns and proved the need for a bigger response. Ford then backed a multi-year effort in 2020 that helped us move from ad hoc awareness to systemic prevention. Together we worked with government agencies to create a model anti-sexual-harassment policy for higher-education institutions, now adopted by all 36 Nigerian states and more than 250 campuses. Ford didn't just fund us; they provided technical guidance and opened doors to government allies, helping us grow from a start-up into a national leader.

What do you see as the lasting legacy of this work?

Today, an estimated 500,000 female students experience greater safety and less vulnerability. Universities have policies and survivor-centered reporting channels; male students are stepping up as champions; and our model is now being adapted beyond Nigeria, including in Sierra Leone. Even though Ford has since shifted its focus, their investment continues to bear fruit and inspires other donors. They didn't just fund a project—they helped build a pathway for long-term change.

Omowumi Ogunrotimi *is the founder and Executive Director of Gender Mobile Initiative, a Nigerian non-profit combating sexual and gender-based violence through policy reform, advocacy and technology. A human rights lawyer and women's rights advocate, she helped drive the passage of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act in her home state of Ekiti. Her leadership has earned international recognition, including the Ford Foundation's inaugural Social Justice Leader Award and the UN-Women Generation Equality Award in 2021.*

The landmark KASA! Initiative brings the fight for gender justice down to the grassroots while linking local struggles into a wider West African movement. It is a $3.75 million collaborative fund by Ford and OSIWA, hosted by a longstanding Ford partner, the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF). Françoise Moudouthe, Chief Executive Officer at AWDF, explains: "We made a deliberate effort to reach beyond capital cities and established civil society organizations and, instead, fund grassroots organizations that would normally never access donor support." She adds: "These grassroot organizations are closest to where social norms and power imbalances have long locked communities into gender injustice."[8]

In northern Ghana, for example, where sexual violence is widespread, but applications rarely came in, AWDF staff traveled to meet local groups and listened to their work. They also provided hands-on guidance in proposal writing. The same approach was used in Casamance, Senegal. This ensured that smaller, overlooked organizations could compete for funding and bring their knowledge of local realities into the struggle for gender justice.

> "In Nigeria, Ford's partners helped communities claim their share of new oil revenues under the 2021 Petroleum Industry Act."

Natural Resources and Climate Justice

Building on the foundation's prior work, Ford had supported community efforts to protect land and water, and helped civil society press for fairer management of natural resources. These experiences established a conviction that environmental and social justice are inseparable. They laid the groundwork for Ford to advance climate justice in the region, where protecting the environment is a question of rights, voice, and power. The goal was to ensure communities feeling the impacts of resource exploitation most closely are central to the construction of a fair and sustainable future.

These efforts came to life through several partnerships across West Africa. In Nigeria, grantee partners supported communities to claim their share of new oil revenues under the 2021 Petroleum Industry Act and pressed companies to clean up long-polluted sites. The Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF) has become a rallying point for communities in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta, determined to break the cycle of pollution and fossil-fuel dependence. HOMEF links climate action to justice and dignity and was founded by Nnimmo Bassey, a veteran environmentalist.

Exposing the human costs of extraction: HOMEF links climate action to justice and dignity.

HOMEF's "Fossil Politics" work exposes the human costs of oil drilling, gas flaring, and corporate impunity, while supporting communities in demanding accountability, cleanup, and fairer energy futures. With the Ford Foundation's support, HOMEF deepened its reach to frontline communities. The support helped expand its ecological monitoring networks, strengthen community-based knowledge platforms like its School of Ecology, and turn the region's issues into national and international campaigns. HOMEF spotlighted oil-polluted zones like Bayelsa, increasing pressure on polluters and amplifying calls for a just transition to clean energy that upholds citizen rights alongside energy reforms.

Ensuring a just transition to greener energy is also a priority for the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. NEITI is a statutory, multi-stakeholder body which interfaces with government, while maintaining independent oversight and reporting on extractive sector transparency. With Ford Foundation support, NEITI advanced deliberate engagement and targeted education campaigns to secure stakeholder buy-in for the energy transition. This agenda is fraught with risks, given Nigeria's heavy reliance on oil. However, the transition is also rich with opportunities to foster economic diversification, revenue resilience, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

Accord for Community Development (ACD) also played a pivotal role in strengthening women's capacity to engage in resource governance. It complemented work by the Kebetkache Women Development Resource Centre and other grantee partners in the Niger Delta. ACD provided training, awareness-raising, and platforms for dialogue that enabled women to enter traditionally male-dominated negotiation spaces with oil and gas companies. As a result, women were better prepared to articulate community priorities, inform decision-making, and secure tangible benefits in the form of development projects. This approach not only ensured that women had a voice in critical processes that shape local livelihoods but it also advanced broader goals of equity, accountability, and community empowerment in the extractive sector.

Civil society in Senegal also actively engaged with the evolving extractive sector in multiple ways — pushing for transparency, accountability, equity, and inclusion. This occurred as the country entered a new phase of extractive development which combined established mining with emergent oil and gas. Enda Energie, a Dakar-based NGO, was important. It was committed to transform "small drops of action into rivers of change,"[9] explains its director Mamadou Seck. Enda worked at the village level—where solar-powered milk-chilling and millet-milling reduced waste and raised incomes. On the national stage, it helped government draft a long-term low-carbon strategy for 2050 and create an Observatory of Just and Sustainable Transitions that links evidence with policy.

Climate justice: In Senegal, CRADESC, heads local campaigns to make the extractive sector accountable.

With Ford's flexible funding, Enda forged pacts with trade unions, youth and women's federations, and parliamentarians so that the energy transition became, in Seck's phrase, "everyone's business," not the preserve of technocrats. It also pressed for the country's new oil and gas wealth to be exploited "rationally and inclusively," protecting fishing grounds and ensuring benefits reached local people.

Citoyens Actifs pour la Justice Sociale (CAJUST) in Senegal exemplifies how to include young people in natural resource management and just energy transition. CAJUST was established first as a youth network and formalized in 2015. It began to work closely with communities directly affected by resource exploitation. With Ford's support, it has strengthened these communities' capacity and influence, while mobilizing young people to stand at the forefront of the fight for their rights and interests.

In 2022, CAJUST led the *Article 25* campaign, named after a clause in Senegal's constitution which proclaims that "natural resources belong to the people". CAJUST's research revealed that local communities were not, however, reaping the benefits of resource exploitation. "The campaign secured state recognition of the need to revise the distribution formula for the equalization fund, so that communities most exposed to extraction receive a fairer share,"[10] explains Demba Seidy, Director of Programs at CAJUST.

"We also achieved a commitment to transparency in the publication of extractive companies' financial results—an essential step for tracking their contributions to community development funds." To amplify the voices of affected communities, CAJUST mobilized celebrities and media associations, transforming the campaign into a national movement for justice and accountability.

The Dakar-based Centre for Research and Action on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CRADESC) complements the efforts of peer organizations by placing human rights at the center of its work. Founded by legal scholar and activist Fatima Diallo, CRADESC was born from her frustration that human rights law in francophone Africa too often lived only on paper. She set out to pair rigorous research with on-the-ground advocacy so that economic, social, and environmental rights could be claimed in practice.

With Ford's support, CRADESC became a bridge between evidence and action. In Senegal's coastal horticultural zone—home to most of the country's agricultural exports—farmers faced the double threat of phosphate mining and large new infrastructure projects. CRADESC helped producer cooperatives

modernize their legal status so they could access credit and defend their land, while documenting pollution and land loss, sending soil samples to international laboratories to prove contamination. Those findings empowered communities to confront mining companies and to challenge the routing of a major highway that would have split villages and cut children off from their schools.

Diallo is blunt about the imbalances of power: governments dependent on resource revenues, companies chasing profit, and local people are seen as "the weak link". "I am called anti-mining," she says, "but only because no sustainable balance yet exists for communities. Until it does, we have to stand with them."[11] Under her leadership, CRADESC has helped villagers move from resignation to action—organizing against a plastics factory, taking evidence to Parliament and, when needed, preparing public interest litigation. "You are creating a civic community," one village leader told her, capturing the essence of a strategy that turns scientific data into collective agency.

Through partners like CRADESC, Ford's work on natural resource and climate justice showed that environmental protection in West Africa is inseparable from economic survival and democratic rights. It was about ensuring that the transition to a low-carbon future does not repeat the old extractive injustices—and that those who live with the consequences have the power to decide how their resources are used, and their environment is safeguarded.

> "A twin ambition—supporting the ecosystem and reshaping the narrative—has run through Ford's West Africa journey."

Ford's Pooled Funds and Support for African Philanthropy

From its earliest days in West Africa, the Ford Foundation learned that lasting change is never just about funding projects—it is about investing in the people and organizations that are building an ecosystem of progress for all. Over decades of partnership with local organizations, Ford invested in networks of activists, journalists, scholars, and grassroots movements whose combined strength keeps civic space alive. But building these connections was only half the work. The other half provided the space and resources for communities to shape the collective stories that define how societies see themselves and imagine their future. Without a more truthful, hopeful story, even the strongest civic institutions can struggle to inspire people or to bridge deepening divides.

Rule of law: A CLEAP-Justice campaign with Ford and ActionAid to support judicial accountability.

This twin ambition—supporting an ecosystem of partners and creating space for new narratives to emerge—has run like a thread through Ford's West Africa journey. Long before 2020, the foundation was laying the groundwork: seed-funding the African Women's Development Fund to enable African feminists to define their own priorities; incubating TrustAfrica as a pan-African platform for democracy and human rights; and supporting the Africa Philanthropy Forum.

The foundation's ambition to support the fabric of civil society found concrete expression in the 2020s as it deepened its role as a convener, working with other donors to create pooled funds around cross-cutting issues such as youth empowerment and democracy. These pooled funds reduced transaction costs for frontline organizations and accelerated support where it was most urgently needed.

Pooled funds acted as civic infrastructure in their own right—shared vehicles that lowered barriers for frontline groups and moved resources at the pace of events. This turn towards pooled funding marked a strategic evolution: assembling larger, shared vehicles that could move quickly and provide the stable, long-term support needed to sustain civic infrastructure.

The Nigeria Youth Futures Fund (NYFF) became a flagship. Launched in 2021 by the Ford Foundation together with the MacArthur Foundation and Luminate, and managed by Ford's longstanding grantee partner LEAP Africa, this five-year collaborative set out to equip young leaders with the tools to contribute solutions to national development issues. LEAP's executive director Kende Ayeni explains the goal as "to touch every community, every local government, every state" and to channel youth energy toward "good governance through citizen-led participation" and "sustaining democracy not just for today, but for the next generation."[12]

By 2025, NYFF had supported more than 800 young leaders and organizations with micro-grants, mentoring, and national "visioning" forums under the banner #TheNigeriaWeWant. Participants debated how to tackle unemployment, strengthen health and education, expand climate action, and ensure gender equality, turning restless energy into a force for democratic renewal and participation in political processes.

"Back then, as the Nigerian government was drafting its national vision for 2025," recalls Dabesaki Mac-Ikemenjimi, "young people across the country were gathering in forums to imagine their own future. Their hopes and ideas came together in the *Nigeria We Want* report— a powerful statement meant to shape policy debates and ensure that the voices of youth were heard." [13]

The fund also supported individuals and organizations—from small grants for young changemakers to development and catalyst grants for grassroots groups and regional hubs—across themes including employment and education, healthcare, ICT and entrepreneurship, climate and environment, civic participation, peace and security, governance, and gender equality and social inclusion.

That same impulse to protect and renew democracy found regional expression in the West Africa Democracy Fund, which was launched in October 2024 by the Ford Foundation together with peer donors including Open Society, MacArthur, and Luminate, and managed by TrustAfrica. Over its three-year $20 million initiative, it has provided support to West African states facing various democratic challenges.

The fund's purpose is to keep democratic ideals alive amid challenges. It helps local coalitions safeguard free expression, counter disinformation, and sustain citizen engagement, while encouraging women and young people to play a larger role in governance and policy debates.

ChiChi Aniagolu-Okoye explains: "The solutions we seek through this fund will be homegrown, rooted in the needs and aspirations of the people of the sub-region and driven by the people themselves."[14]

> **"The Africa Philanthropy Forum is a continental platform where African philanthropists and social investors learn from one another."**

This ambition to create pooled funds to support West African aspirations for vibrant democracy was complemented by the foundation's commitment to strengthen African philanthropy itself. Ford's engagement in the creation of TrustAfrica had already shown that long-term partnership can build trust and civic infrastructure. TrustAfrica—created to strengthen democracy, human rights, and African philanthropy—demonstrated that, when resources and leadership are anchored on the continent, they can mobilize change and claim a seat in global debates.

After attending the Africa Philanthropy Forum in 2025, ChiChi Aniagolu-Okoye reflected on how Africans have a culture of giving. Remittances alone far exceed official aid. These home-grown financial flows, when seen as more than acts of charity, can become strategic capital to fuel inclusive development.

For her, the challenge is to match Africa's deep traditions of mutual solidarity with institutions that can "move from building schools to transforming the education system"[15]. It is also to ensure that African voices help set the terms of the global economic architecture.

Ford has been a steady champion of that vision—continuously supporting the Africa Philanthropy Forum itself and helping it grow as a continental platform where African philanthropists and social

investors learn from one another and coordinate action. In doing so, the foundation's work on pooled funds and its investment in African philanthropy converged: both aimed at building the long-term civic infrastructure and self-reliant leadership that West Africa needs to shape its own democratic and development future.

Building such an ecosystem of collaboration and shaping a shared narrative around African-led development became increasingly central to Ford's approach. Ecosystem and narrative came together again in Ford's response to an emerging reality: polarization. These experiences of field-building and narrative change set the stage for Ford's role in the Global Initiative on Polarization, launched with the Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT). Here, West Africa was not a passive participant but a proving ground: a region whose own history of hard-won democratic gains and stubborn inequalities made it both vulnerable to polarization and rich in lessons for the world.

When the Ford Foundation joined forces with IFIT to launch the Global Initiative on Polarization, the aim was ambitious: to understand and counter the forces that are driving societies apart. It was a worldwide effort—stretching from Latin America to Asia—but West Africa quickly emerged as one of its most vital proving grounds.

> "Africa No Filter challenges the persistent 'single story' of a broken and dependent continent."

For the region, the stakes could not have been higher. Across West Africa, bitterly contested elections and widening social inequalities have sharpened divides. In Ghana, for instance, the Media Foundation for West Africa, a longstanding Ford partner, received support to explore how to prevent polarization from impacting democratic life. Their work focused on safeguarding fair and peaceful elections and ensuring that disagreements—inevitable in a vibrant democracy—did not harden into dangerous rifts.

The initiative was more than a grant-making exercise. It became, in Ford's words, an "ecosystem of learning"—a global exchange of ideas and strategies that invited West African voices to teach and learn. Knowledge from across the world was distilled into a 2023 foundational report, translated into Hausa, making the insights immediately accessible to millions of people in the region. For Ford's West Africa team, the project built on decades of experience: supporting independent media and strengthening civil society.

As tensions rose across the continent, the Polarization Initiative offered a platform to share lessons from West Africa's own struggles—and to draw strength from similar efforts elsewhere. By combining global learning with regional participation, the initiative turned local realities into part of a larger conversation about how to preserve democratic space and prevent the fractures of inequality from becoming permanent. It showed, once again, that West Africa is not just a place where polarization must be managed, but a region offering insights and leadership to the world's search for common ground.

New images for Africa: Transforming the negative global narrative about the continent.

Building on the foundation's work since the 1990s, collaborations with theatre companies, Nollywood filmmakers, and investigative journalists continued. The intention was clear: to support the skills, talent, and creativity of those working to enhance storytelling and drive social change. One of the most powerful expressions of this commitment was the creation of Africa No Filter (ANF)—born as a bold experiment and later evolving into a multi-donor initiative—designed to challenge the persistent global media "single story" of a broken and dependent continent.

ANF grew from a realization inside the foundation that decades of investment had not shifted the dominant narrative. Even as economies grew and civic movements gained strength, coverage still defaulted

to images of crisis. ANF's Executive Director, Moky Makura, explains: "If you want to change the narrative, you have to change the stories that feed it."[16] Launched in 2020, Ford convened partners—Luminate, Bloomberg, Open Society and others—to co-create a platform whose job was not to strengthen the storytellers already working across Africa's creative sector. That collaborative, trust-based stance became part of the message," says Makura. "They gave us room to dream big, not a script to follow."

ANF defines "storytellers" broadly, as journalists and social-media creators, novelists and filmmakers, visual artists, and photographers. It treats the creative sector as Africa's most powerful, yet least-funded, lever for mindset change. Small, flexible grants—often a few thousand dollars—are deliberately light-touch; the only test is whether a project can make people think differently about Africa. Around these grantees, ANF has built a community of more than 500 creatives, opening doors to opportunities, including a partnership with Disney to help ensure authentic African storylines.

To give narrative change real weight, ANF couples grants with research and tools. In five years, it has produced more than 20 studies, including one estimating that negative media stereotypes cost the continent $4.2 billion annually in higher borrowing costs. Another study shows how bias deters consumers from buying African-made technology or health products.

Practical resources follow. These include an AI Bias Buster that flags stereotypes in scripts and articles, handbooks, and self-paced courses for communicators; public campaigns such as "Correct the Map" which challenges the continued use of the centuries-old Mercator projection which visually diminishes Africa's true size. "This isn't a nice-to-have," Makura notes. "There's a real economic penalty when the story is wrong."[17]

Measuring mindset shift is never simple, so ANF tracks progress through research benchmarks and by watching wider cultural currents—the rise of Afrobeats, the global appetite for African content on Netflix, and movements like Black Lives Matter that amplified under-represented voices. "Narrative work is slow," Makura says, "but you can feel the change—and we document it so we can show it."[18]

Ford's role has been more than financial. By providing large, multi-year, unrestricted support, the foundation gave ANF the freedom to experiment and grow from a fiscally sponsored project into an independent African organization. "Philanthropy should take risks governments can't," Makura reflects. "That trust let us build a network that punches far above its weight." In only a few years, ANF's research has been cited by leading universities, and its ideas have reached platforms from *The Guardian* to Davos.

Footnotes

[1] Interview conducted on August 8, 2025
[2] Interview conducted on July 16, 2025
[3] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025
[4] Interview conducted on July 16, 2025
[5] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025
[6] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025
[7] Interview conducted on August 7, 2025
[8] Interview conducted on August 26,2025
[9] Interview conducted on August 26, 2025
[10] Interview conducted on August 27, 2025
[11] Interview conducted on August 26, 2025
[12] Interview conducted on August 14, 2025
[13] Interview conducted on July 16, 2025
[14] Interview conducted on August 14, 2025
[15] Foundations launch new collaborative fund to strengthen democracy in West Africa." (Ford Foundation, October 7, 2025)
[16] Interview conducted on August 13, 2025
[17] Interview conducted on August 13, 2025
[18] Interview conducted on August 13, 2025

Conclusion
A Legacy Forged in Partnership

Ford has helped create vibrant ecosystems of ideas and institutions, where collaboration and exchange have become catalysts for enduring social change.

Across 65 transformative years since independence, the Ford Foundation has found itself woven into the development of West Africa. The relationship began in 1960 as support for nation-building through investments in education and public administration. Soon, it evolved into a multifaceted engagement dedicated to advancing equity, dignity, and social justice, amid rapidly changing societies.

The foundation has been a steadfast partner in some of the region's most transformative intellectual and civic endeavors, championing fairness, and inclusion. It has worked to expand equitable access to rights, opportunities, and resources, while strengthening the agency of individuals and communities—especially those historically marginalized—so they can shape the systems that define their lives and futures.

Learning together: Ford Fellows from Senegal gather, part of a lifelong community.

> "Progress is forged in partnerships that empower talent, wisdom, and vision already present within societies themselves."

Today, we celebrate this endurance of purpose and partnership. The foundation has remained on the ground through political upheavals, economic crises, and profound social transformations, adapting its support to meet changing needs.

Ford has also helped build fields of knowledge and practice—from sexual and reproductive health and rights to culture, arts, and media for social change. It has supported movements that connect key figures across sectors, generations, and geographies. It has nurtured freedom, inclusion, and justice. It has strengthened institutions ranging from universities and research institutes to civil society and community-based organizations. It has fostered a generation of visionary leaders dedicated to advancing social justice.

All those involved in this journey— not the foundation itself — have made the real difference. Their creativity, courage, and commitment have transformed Ford's support into lasting change.

Celebrating 65 years of engagement is, above all, a tribute to the many partners and communities the foundation has been privileged to serve. This reflection reaffirms that enduring progress is forged in partnerships that empower talent, wisdom, and vision which is already present within societies themselves.

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Reflections

Early Trust Supporting Change in Women's Lives Led to Unwavering Backing for a Generation

Thirty years ago, when a Ford representative said, "I believe in you", it opened a transformational era, recalls Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, a Nigerian feminist activist, writer, and philanthropist whose work has shaped women's rights movements across Africa.

It's some time in 1995 at the Ford Foundation offices in New York. I'm in a meeting with a senior Ford Foundation executive. I try to emulate the poised elegance of the older woman I am sitting across from, my heart is pounding, and I clasp my hands together, so I won't fidget. Her name is Mora Maclean. She has been the Ford West Africa representative and has just moved back to New York. I was based in London then, working as the Executive Director of Akina Mama wa Afrika, an international development organization for African women. We want to start an African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI) for young African women.

Mora looks up from the papers she is reading and says to me, "We will support this, but I am doing this because I believe in you. I know you can get it done."

I feel a mix of emotions— excitement, confusion, and trepidation. What does she mean by "I believe in you"?

The African Women's Leadership Institute

Looking back, I realize that those words were not just about one project. They were the beginning of a journey. This support for the AWLI was the beginning of my sustained relationship with Ford Foundation. The AWLI would go on to become one of the most successful feminist movement-building programs on the African continent.

Building on that success, a few years later, we are trying to take another bold step in resourcing African women's movements. On June 12th, 2000, the Carnegie Corporation in New York hosts a donor roundtable to discuss plans for supporting the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) which I have co-founded with Hilda Tadria, a distinguished Ugandan women's rights activist and influential academic, and the late Joana Foster, a trailblazing Ghanaian British lawyer and feminist.

The Ford Foundation is represented by two senior women. As a participant raises a concern about the proposed budget, one of the Ford delegates pushes back and says: "Why don't we focus on the vision and strategy they have in mind? The budget is immaterial at this point." Then, she gives me a nod, encouraging me to continue with our presentation. For a brief moment, my mind returns to Mora Maclean's words five years before: "I believe in you." The Ford Foundation goes on to provide significant seed funding to establish the AWDF. Over the past 25 years, it has consistently provided programmatic grants as well as flexible core support.

> "Through tears, I kept saying 'Thank you', but he gently replied: 'We should be the ones thanking you— you've done marvelous work'."

This partnership deepened further when, in 2005, AWDF was one of the 19 foundations invited to join the Ford International Initiative to Strengthen Philanthropy (FIISP), one of the legacy programs of Susan Berresford, the Ford Foundation President at the time. It was a peer learning and capacity building initiative, meant to enable the scaling up of local philanthropic organizations around the world.

Two other African foundations were convinced alongside AWDF: Trust Africa and Kenya Community Development Foundation. We worked closely with the Ford Foundation's West Africa office, led by Dr. Adhiambo Odaga, and with our Program Officers— Dr. Babatunde Ahonsi in West Africa and Ms. Barbara

Phillips in New York. Throughout the three-year program, they served not only as Program Officers but also as trusted mentors and guides.

When Dr. Ahonsi told me that AWDF had been awarded an endowment grant through FIISP, I screamed with joy. Through tears, I kept saying "Thank you", but he gently replied: "We should be the ones thanking you—you've done marvelous work." At that moment, I remembered Mora Maclean's words, "I believe in you."

Today, AWDF is one of the most successful women's funds in the world, and, in 2009, the three African FIISP foundations came together to form the African Grantmakers Network, which has become the African Philanthropy Network (APN).

My professional journey with Ford has often intersected with my personal life and public service. In 2019, while my husband, Dr. Kayode Fayemi, was Governor of Ekiti State, a conversation with the late Innocent Chukwuma, then Ford's West Africa representative, led to the "Pathways to Addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence" (SGBV) project in Abia, Edo, Ekiti, and Niger States, strengthening SGBV response systems.

> **"Thank you for believing in that young feminist all those years ago. Thank you for telling generations of leaders, scholars, activists and policy makers in the region, 'I believe in you'."**

This work aligned with my role as Chair of the Nigeria Governors' Wives Forum (now the Nigeria Governors' Spouses Forum), which I led from 2020 to 2022. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we successfully pressed the Governors' Forum to declare a State of Emergency on SGBV in June 2020—a critical moment for Nigeria's women's movement. With Ford's unprecedented support, the Forum was able to convene policy dialogues, design referral pathways, advocate for survivor-centered services and funding, establish coordination mechanisms, and deepen community engagement for prevention.

Working with the Ford Foundation

I began a relationship with the Ford Foundation 30 years ago. As an international philanthropic institution, it is the gold standard when it comes to alignment of vision, values and practice. The Ford West Africa office sees no need to hijack agendas. They see their role as amplifying local agency. They believe in genuine partnerships, shared learning and mutual respect. They have quietly helped provide much needed space for civil society organizations and movements to thrive. They have also encouraged the strengthening of public institutions and created opportunities for dialogue and collaborations with different sectors. They have invested in leadership across generations, local philanthropy, knowledge building and creative expression. They believe in the capacity of local leaders to understand their context and craft their own solutions.

As I reflect on these three decades of partnership, one theme shines through: trust. As Ford West Africa celebrates this milestone, I congratulate and thank them. Thank you for believing in that young feminist all those years ago. Thank you for telling generations of leaders, scholars, activists and policy makers in the region, "I believe in you".

Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi *is a co-founder of the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) and a key convener of the African Feminist Forum, initiatives that have supported and connected women's organizations throughout the continent. A former First Lady of Ekiti State, Nigeria, she championed landmark legislation on gender-based violence and women's empowerment. Bisi is the author of influential works including Speaking for Myself, Speaking Above a Whisper, and Loud Whispers, blending personal reflection with powerful advocacy for gender justice.*

Reflections

How We Are Nurturing a New Generation of Ethical, Entrepreneurial Leaders for Africa

Our inclusive, values-based education, supported by Ford, is embedded in our university graduates, says Patrick Gyimah Awuah Jr, a Ghanaian educator, entrepreneur, and visionary leader recognized for transforming higher education in Africa.

When I returned to Ghana after years abroad, I carried a vision many thought too ambitious: to build a university to nurture a new generation of ethical, entrepreneurial leaders for Africa. I believed that the future of our continent hinged not only on technical skills, but on leadership grounded in integrity, empathy, and a commitment to solving problems. This conviction became the seed for Ashesi University, and, over the years, I have seen how values-based education can begin to transform a nation.

We try to empower young people to be the changemakers, setting Africa on a path that benefits everyone. In that journey, the Ford Foundation's support has been invaluable. Ford's long-standing commitment to justice and equity found expression in its support for our community service program at the university.

Promoting Community Responsibility

Here at Ashesi, every student takes a series of leadership seminars that culminate in community service, as a requirement before they graduate. The Ford Foundation supported this community service program by funding grants that enabled students to engage in projects that have improved the lives of the underserved. The foundation's investment in Ashesi has been more than financial — it represents an affirmation that Africa's college students can be greatly empowered by helping them to take up the responsibilities that they have toward society. Most importantly, the hundreds of projects that our students have undertaken with funding from the Ford Foundation have directly improved the lives of thousands of people in communities across Ghana.

This week, as we were welcoming new students to our university, one parent—an alumnus of Ashesi University—shared a story about how Ashesi's community service requirement changed him in profound ways. Tutoring children at a government-run orphanage for his service requirement was, he said, an experience that he carries with him to this day. It has made him a different leader than he might otherwise have been. I found it heartwarming to hear him speak, not about the career success that his education here afforded him, but rather, about the empathy and the confidence that grew from his experiences serving others.

> "Tutoring children at a government-run orphanage has made him a different leader than he might otherwise have been."

Today, as I reflect on how the foundation's work has intersected with individuals, institutions, and ideas across West Africa, I see Ashesi's story as just one small example of the lasting change Ford has long sought to support. We are deeply grateful for the Ford Foundation's unceasing commitment to fostering inclusive and values-based development in Africa.

Patrick Gyimah Awuah Jr. *is a founder and President of Ashesi University, a pioneering liberal arts institution in Ghana, renowned for its emphasis on ethics, innovation, and leadership. A former Microsoft program manager in the United States, Patrick returned to Ghana in the late 1990s with a mission to develop a new generation of ethical, entrepreneurial leaders. Under his guidance, Ashesi has become a model for academic excellence and civic responsibility across the continent.*

Reflections

They Pioneered a Shift from 'Helping' to Working Together

Ngouye Fall, a key figure in West African rural development for over 30 years, explains how Ford's commitment to participatory development in the 1990s influenced a generation, and still inspires contemporary approaches.

The West African Rural Foundation (WARF) enjoyed its golden years—its true "good old days," as they say—when the Ford Foundation stood by our side, equipping WARF with diverse analytical tools, and helping to shape its strategic vision.

This period, spanning two decades, was marked by significant challenges. These included tackling the shortcomings of prevailing development models and engaging with new thinking about rural development policy.

There was, at the time, an urgent need for innovations to address a crisis in production, to strengthen institutional and technical capacities of those involved in rural life, and to create fresh ways for those involved to work together.

> "This shift in thinking—to recognizing beneficiaries as fully fledged participators—remains one of the Ford Foundation's most enduring legacies."

From Assistance to Participation

The Ford Foundation's support was pivotal for the years between 1993 and 2002. A more participatory approach became a cornerstone for WARF's methodological and training activities at this time. This shift contrasted sharply with the prevailing and long-dominant, top-down model. Our aim was no longer to "help" rural populations. We sought, instead, to empower them so they could analyze their own realities, identify their priorities, and take collective action.

Ford supported the design and dissemination of methodological and training tools, including guides on participatory and institutional diagnosis. These were published in several languages to make them accessible to everyone involved in rural development.

The foundation also encouraged regular organization of subregional seminars that brought together farmers' organizations, NGOs, public agricultural services, and research institutions. All this helped to broaden dissemination and ownership of participatory approaches.

Finally, Ford promoted Participatory Technology Development, fostering spaces for dialogue and collaboration among researchers, practitioners, and rural communities to encourage mutual learning and co-creation of change.

This shift in thinking—from viewing producers as beneficiaries to recognizing them as full-fledged participators—remains one of the Ford Foundation's most enduring legacies. A striking example was introduction of rice cultivation among the fishermen of the Bijagós Archipelago in Guinea-Bissau. This move exemplified a genuine appropriation of change by local communities.

> "Farmers are proud to sit alongside government officials. They are determined to take part in decision-making"

Emergence of Committed and Influential Rural Participants

A more participatory approach took deep root, thanks to the Ford Foundation, leading to a dynamic, organized, and influential rural movement that could shape public policy and defend the interests of local communities.

Farmers' organizations established themselves as key stakeholders in West Africa, actively contributing to agricultural program designs. They were involved in revising major policy frameworks, such as pastoral laws that govern farming and woodland.

I have personally witnessed this profound transformation. Producers are more confident in their capacities. They are proud to sit alongside government officials and to be heard. They are determined to take part in decision-making that affects their lives.

These transformations did not occur overnight. They spring from a long-term vision—one of an Africa where development is rooted in autonomy, participation, and shared responsibility.

Building Strong and Sustainable African Institutions

Ford's commitment to building resilient local institutions was particularly remarkable. The foundation invested in organizational development, good governance, and the training of African leaders, rather than simply providing multiple, short-term interventions. The outcome was many, highly able participants, who could manage complex programs and ensure sustainability results.

Numerous African organizations became regional benchmarks, thanks to Ford's mentorship and capacity building. The learning journey proved transformative, in my own experience—mastery of management tools, a culture of transparency, and a commitment to quality have become the hallmarks of institutions which continue to embody a legacy of this partnership ethos.

A Vision of Partnership Based on Trust

Ford's philosophy of partnership was most distinctive. It was grounded in mutual trust, respect for local capacities, and a belief that authentic change cannot be imposed from outside. Partners were allies in a shared mission, never seen just as implementers.

This spirit of trust and respect deeply influenced my own understanding of development. I learned that the success of partnership is measured not by the size of budgets or the number of projects completed. Much more important are quality of dialogue, freedom to innovate, and a sharing of accountability for both successes and failures.

A Living Legacy

Today, the legacy of such partnership remains vibrant, more than three decades after the first collaborations between Ford and those involved with rural development in West Africa. I can see it in the dynamism of farmers' organizations and the strength of institutions born at that time. It is reflected in a new generation of leaders who remain convinced that sustainable change should be built from the ground up.

Ngouye Fall *is Executive Director of the West African Rural Foundation (WARF), which is dedicated to improving the living conditions of rural populations in Africa. His work focuses on capacity building, the dissemination of effective working methods, and the facilitation of dialogue on agricultural and development policies in West Africa.*

Reflections

Ford is a Catalyst for Enduring Social Transformation, Making Its Work Much More Than Charity

The foundation's commitment to building strong, sustainable institutions that promote fairness and inclusion are marks of exceptional philanthropy, explains Gbenga Oyebode, a prominent Nigerian lawyer, entrepreneur, and philanthropist.

I am continually inspired by how Ford Foundation combines vision with action. From my earliest encounters with its work in Nigeria, I have observed it partnering with visionary leaders at the forefront of social change— whether dynamic civil society figures, passionate educators or reform-minded leaders within government. For me, this story is not simply about philanthropy; it is about the lasting transformation of lives and communities. I feel privileged to bear witness to this movement.

A Legacy of Education and Governance

Since Ford Foundation began its work in Nigeria in 1958, it has invested over $500 million across West Africa to advance human rights, democracy, economic opportunity, higher education, and the arts. I have experienced the tangible results of those investments firsthand.

My first encounter with the foundation's impact was in the 1970s while studying at the University of Ife in southwest Nigeria. Many of my professors were Ford Fellows—scholars who had been supported to pursue advanced degrees around the world. Their global exposure and academic rigor deeply enriched their teaching and profoundly influenced my intellectual development. Through them, I witnessed how strategic philanthropic investments could do more than improve institutions—they could shape minds, elevate confidence, and build a generation of transformative leaders.

The foundation's focus on education then, was not simply about access—it was about sustained excellence. It supported universities through infrastructure, grants and scholarships, enabled groundbreaking research in the social sciences and African history, and elevated Nigeria's intellectual voice on the global stage. Most importantly, it planted seeds of leadership that continue to bear fruit in every sector of our society today. For me, this story is not just about philanthropy—it's about the long arc of transformation. It's about how thoughtful, long-term investment in people and knowledge can shape the destiny of a nation.

> **"This model of sustainable philanthropy has influenced many others, reinforcing the idea that transformational change should be community-driven and locally embedded."**

Shared Values of Equity and Justice

I have always appreciated how closely the Ford Foundation's values align with my own beliefs in social justice, equity, and human dignity. Ford's approach to philanthropy goes far beyond simply funding projects—it is about strengthening institutions and building ecosystems that can drive lasting change. I particularly admire the foundation's commitment to encouraging local funding for civil society organizations. By fostering resilience and independence, Ford helps ensure that these organizations are not only effective to continue their work long after the initial grants have ended. This model of sustainable philanthropy has influenced many others, reinforcing the idea that transformational change should be community-driven and locally embedded.

> “It has nurtured a culture of dialogue and evidence-based policy.”

Experiencing the Lasting Impact

Time and again, I have witnessed how the foundation’s engagement creates ripple effects that outlast any single program or leadership cycle. Its early investments in education laid the groundwork for critical reforms and helped establish centers of excellence that continue to thrive today. By supporting local partners, the foundation has strengthened Nigeria’s ability to confront issues of justice, equity, and governance with both confidence and independence. Perhaps most importantly, it has helped cultivate a culture of dialogue and evidence-based policymaking—ensuring that research informs government action and that social change is grounded in the lived experiences of our communities.

A Continuing Source of Inspiration

For me, the Ford Foundation’s presence in Nigeria exemplifies the transformative power of philanthropy and serves as a personal source of inspiration. Its work affirms my belief that meaningful progress is built on strong, sustainable institutions and the tireless efforts of those who champion fairness and inclusion. The foundation’s example reminds me daily that, when rooted in equity and justice, philanthropy transcends charity to become a catalyst for lasting social change.

Gbenga Oyebode *is a founding partner of Aluko & Oyebode, one of Nigeria’s foremost law firms. He has decades of leadership in the public and private sectors, sitting on the boards of leading corporations and global nonprofits. He currently serves on the Ford Foundation Board of Trustees, where he helps guide the Foundation’s mission to advance social justice worldwide.*

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Ford
Foundation

The Ford Foundation is an independent organization working to address inequality and build a future grounded in justice.

For nearly 90 years, it has supported visionaries on the frontlines of social change worldwide, guided by its mission to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement. Today, with an endowment of $16 billion, the foundation has headquarters in New York and 10 regional offices across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Learn more at **www.fordfoundation.org**