

Equipping Rural Youth in Senegal to Be Active Citizens: *The Case of the YouthMap Casamance Program*



In the rural Casamance area of southern Senegal, where more than half of young people lack access to quality education or are unemployed, youth face daunting challenges in realizing their potential and maximizing their contributions to society.

Through the YouthMap Casamance program, 2,408 of the region's out-of-school youth gained access to the life skills, training, and opportunities needed to serve as role models for their peers, families, and communities—sharing their talents and enthusiasm while inspiring others toward a brighter future.

Over five years, YouthMap, an initiative of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), was carried out across multiple African countries. In Casamance, the program was implemented

by IYF's local partner, the Synapse Center, from 2014-2015. Despite its strong economic and agricultural potential, the Casamance area has been hindered by ongoing economic and financial crisis, geographic isolation, environmental degradation, regional tensions, and high school dropout rates due to early marriage, pregnancy, unemployment, and poverty. By building the capacity of hundreds of youth in the region, YouthMap helped lay the foundation to develop a young generation attentive to community development and equipped to make a difference.

Central to the program's approach was training disadvantaged youth, ages 13 to 21, with essential life skills through IYF's Passport to Success® (PTS) curriculum and equipping beneficiaries to carry out 100 community service projects. A notable outcome was the 'ripple effect' created by youth participants who shared what they learned—influencing their family dynamics and the attitudes and behaviors of their peers, while strengthening the fabric of local civil society.

Equipping Youth with Skills for Life

IYF's Passport to Success® curriculum, comprised of 80 modules, was adapted in Senegal to equip out-of-school youth with life skills in five key areas:

- Personal development (e.g., self-confidence, goal setting, leadership development)
- Problem solving and conflict management (e.g., effective listening, standing up for oneself)
- Healthy lifestyle habits (e.g., preventing risky behaviors, reproductive health awareness)
- Preparation for the world of work (e.g., teamwork, time and project management)
- Service learning (e.g., planning and execution of community service projects)

Building Local Capacity

Implemented in the regions of Ziguinchor, Sédhiou, and Kolda, the YouthMap Casamance program developed the capacity of local trainers and youth-serving institutions to deliver quality life skills programming. Youth training activities were carried out through partnerships with the Regional Centers of Technical Training for Women (CRETF), the Departmental Center for Sport and Popular Education (CDEPS) in Ziguinchor, and community-based NGOs in each location. A total of 59 facilitators, 25 coaches, and learners took part in training of trainers workshops to qualify them to lead the PTS youth trainings.

Facilitators, coaches, and learners reported being impressed by the interactive nature of the program, which includes engaging exercises, small group work, role plays, and skits. Said Awa Diop, a facilitator in Ziguinchor, "I found this training to be excellent and very focused on pedagogy in comparison with other trainings used in the school system. It allows someone who has never been to school to understand social life and how to behave."

For many facilitators, the PTS content, approach, and methodology was radically different from trainings they administered previously. In Kolda, Oumar Biteye, a CRETF facilitator, noted that PTS changed his teaching style. "The interactivity in the class activities really made an impression on me. Usually, we would ask closed-ended questions, and sometimes when a student responded, we would automatically tell him that he was wrong. Now, I use terms like 'excellent' and 'super' so that none of the learners feels frustrated."

The facilitators' reports, in addition to coaches' observations, confirm the impact of the training of trainers workshops on the transformation and improvement of their pedagogical approach. Their role as facilitators enabled them to acquire new tools and develop better relationships with their learners.

[Watch this video](#) capturing the experience of facilitators through the program.

Impact on Youth and Parents

Many participating youth commented on the practical nature of the knowledge they gained through the trainings. Fatou Gnabaly, age 17, from Ziguinchor, says that as the lessons went on, she tried out the different strategies she learned with her friends and family, which had a big impact on her ability to foster positive relationships with the people around her. [Watch as Fatou describes her experiences in this video.](#)

The program promoted positive behavior changes among youth by reinforcing life skills such as active listening, better management of strong emotions, improved communication, adoption of healthy behaviors, enhanced participation in family life, and active community involvement.

For many program beneficiaries, their relationships with their parents and friends changed. Said one young man in Ziguinchor, "I used to get into fights with my friends and siblings because I didn't listen and reacted badly to criticism. With the program I learned how to listen, understand other people, speak better, and do good deeds. I have fewer problems at school and at home."

Parents, too, noted considerable behavior change among their children, especially in terms of their communication. Some were surprised to find their children giving them feedback about the best ways to listen and build positive relationships.

When they talk about their future, many of the youth demonstrate greater maturity, communicating a clear vision and confidence about the coming years. They explain that this confidence is grounded in a newfound ability to identify their goals and the means to achieve them. Said Nfally Badji, age 23, "At first, as a young person I had no vision and no goals. I thought everyone just lived day by day. Thanks to this program, I have awoken to possibilities I didn't know existed and have a better vision of my professional future. I want to create a large poultry business to supply the entire hospitality sector in the region. I know that by setting goals I can achieve them."

A portrait of Ndèye Fatou, a young Black woman with curly hair, wearing a red and yellow patterned dress. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a gentle smile. The background is blurred, showing other people in a social setting.

Ndèye Fatou

Gaining the Skills and Inspiration to Serve as a Role Model

Twenty-year-old Ndèye Fatou grew up in the Ziguinchor region, enjoying a comfortable childhood until, in her adolescence, her father passed away, and soon thereafter, so did her older sister. Following these tragic events, Ndèye Fatou grew reserved and anxious. Matters worsened when her mother Adie lost her job as a teacher and found herself suddenly destitute. She used the savings that were meant to finance her daughter's studies in Canada to invest in an agricultural production venture, but the business failed, forcing her to sell her land.

Ndèye Fatou had lost virtually all hope in her future and her family until one day she heard about the YouthMap Casamance program. "Before, I was telling myself that everything was over," she recalls. "The program inspired me to hope and brought back my interest in life."

One thing led to another. She began to conduct herself differently, influencing the lives of her friends, family, and everyone around her. According to Malang Sambou, the facilitator of her YouthMap training, before the training Ndèye Fatou "had been shy, reserved, and stressed... After she became more social and helpful. She could handle criticism."

Now a new energy is brewing in her family. Mother and daughter have rediscovered the bond they used to have. Adie reflects, "After a few days of the training, I noticed that something was beginning to change in her. My daughter had begun to smile and speak up. She was helping around the house without being asked, and talking openly with her friends. The training enabled her to be more mature and face the difficulties that had weighed on her."



Today, Ndèye Fatou has turned a new leaf, devoting herself to a small revenue-generating project in collaboration with one of her friends. She's also joined an association that helps disabled children. And Ndèye Fatou is emerging as a leader and role model for her peers, speaking out about the prevention of early pregnancy, sexually-transmitted disease, poor hygiene, and conflicts, among other issues. Says Siré Badjinka, a childhood friend, "Before, Ndèye Fatou was shy and calm, and today, when I see her speak in public, I am amazed by the quality and maturity of her speech. Every evening we get together with girlfriends and she reminds us to focus on our studies and never drop out. I hope to follow in her footsteps."

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As part of her YouthMap experience, Ndèye Fatou helped to create a community service project designed to support *talibés*, young boys whose parents have sent them away for a Muslim education but who frequently find themselves begging in the streets. In Lyndiane, Ndèye Fatou's neighborhood, she and her friends set out to improve the living conditions of the *talibés* in the Koranic boarding schools known as *daaras* and help them reintegrate into society. Their project seeks to address challenges in their community, including mistreatment of minors, begging by children, and inclusion of the *talibé* children in the formal education system.

The youth report that their neighborhood has a number of *daaras*, each home to approximately thirty children under the supervision of a Koranic teacher. To meet the children's needs, the group provides food and clothing; equips the *daaras* with mats, buckets, wash basins and detergent; and works to improve their living conditions.

Ndèye Fatou and her peers organized a community awareness day to alert local residents to the importance of these children and the role they play in society. Through skits, the young people talked about values and the role of *daaras* in the community. Then they called upon local leaders to change the way they think about how *daaras* function, to renounce begging, and to adopt new practices to allow the children to become future leaders. At the end of the event, the youth distributed the donations contributed by the community and supplies (mosquito nets, mats, soap, etc.) purchased with the 400 dollars of financing allocated to them for their community service project.

To sustain their impact, the youth have laid out a number of innovative strategies to end once and for all the problem of children living in the streets of Lyndiane. These include involving local residents in the management of the project and inviting them to make monthly contributions to the *daaras*, along with petitioning the government to resolve the issue of *talibés* throughout the region

Informed about their role in ensuring that the young people's community service projects become sustainable, families, socio-professional organizations, public agencies, religious and traditional leaders, local political officials, and others have committed to fulfill whatever duties they are assigned. This cooperation is being organized through follow-up committees which were created as part of the program's community mobilization activities.

Community Service Project Impacts

The conceptualization, financing, and monitoring of the community service projects were highlights of the YouthMap Casamance program. In all, 100 community projects were carried out across the three regions, using a variety of strategies according to the needs identified by the youth. Projects focused on a range of community issues, including waste management, livelihood promotion, improving services for the disabled, and children's education, among others. For example:

- In Kolda, participants chose to produce soap. In addition to learning the techniques of soap making, they provided a valuable commodity to the community and created value for local agricultural resources.
- In Sédhiou, a youth group restored a 100-hectare palm grove. The youth and the community replanted part of the land with palms, and dedicated part to planting vegetables and growing rice.
- In Ziguinchor, trainees created an organic garden at their training center, planting 500 square meters of papaya trees that they plan to devote to producing and selling juice.

As they implemented their projects, participants practiced and shared the skills they learned in their training, along with healthy behaviors and responsible attitudes. The youth also benefited from working with their elders, who passed down vital knowledge and skills to them. As a whole, the youth-led projects achieved a significant impact both socially and economically, enabling youth to maximize local raw materials, particularly in the agricultural sector, and providing young people with the skills to identify markets and produce goods to meet local needs.

“When YouthMap Casamance came to our village, it was a breath of fresh air for us. Today, our children have taken charge of their behavior and are working towards change, which is truly beneficial for their families and for other young people. The program gave them the tools they need to lead community projects, which will enable them to be active and earn a living.”

— Souleymane Diallo, 1st Adjunct to the Mayor of Mampatim, Kolda



Sustaining Program Results

Beyond these immediate results, efforts have been put in place to sustain the YouthMap Casamance program's impact.

In Ziguinchor, program participants in Lyndiane formed an association, called "Aarleene Lyndiane," as a support network for entrepreneurs. The association seeks to reduce the school dropout rate by supporting parents to keep their children in school; raise awareness among youth of life skills lessons imparted by the YouthMap program; and organize revenue-generating activities to finance more micro-projects using their community service projects as a model.

In the Kolda region, participants in the village of Salamata have created a special fund to pay the travel expenses for Passport to Success facilitators to continue to offer trainings to youth who did not have the opportunity to participate in the YouthMap program, and to organize debate events for the young people.

Many other sustainable impacts were achieved in the course of the program, including the enhanced skills of trainers and capacity of training institutions to deliver quality life skills education and young people's eagerness to maintain and grow their collective community-building efforts.

