



# Benin

## Reinventing the lagoon shores of Porto-Novo

In Porto-Novo, Benin, a visual artist, an actor, and a choreographer use painting, poetry, and dance to help children from the lagoon neighborhoods express their emotional connection to their environment.

### COUNTRY

Benin

### LOCALISATION

Porto-Novo

### DATES OF THE PROJECT

September 2022 – April 2023

### ARTISTS INVOLVED

Rafiy Okefolahan,  
Zadok-Ange Hounkpatin,  
Maud Chabrol

### PARTICIPANTS

325 children and their families

### FUNDING

Fonds Metis  
Budget 15,000 €

### PARTNERS

La Grande Place,  
Grabe NGO Benin,  
Eight schools in Porto-Novo

### SECTOR AND SDG'S



### THE LAGOON: A COMMON GROUND

Porto-Novo, the administrative capital of Benin, boasts exceptional natural heritage. The lagoon, at the foot of the traditional city, is bordered by fertile wetlands. The lagoon shores—important for flood regulation, biodiversity, climate resilience, and recreational potential—play a crucial role for the ecosystem and the city's inhabitants. However, these fragile ecosystems are under various pressures that threaten their functions. Since 2015, the municipality has been implementing a shore development plan called *"Porto-Novo, Green City"*: creating access roads to the shores, supporting income-generating activities (such as market gardening and fish farming), and improving informal urban areas near the lagoon (through opening up, drainage, and tree planting).

### DANCING, DRAWING, IMAGINING THE LAGOON SHORES

Rafiy Okefolahan is a painter born in 1979 in Porto-Novo, trained at the École Nationale des Arts of Dakar. His work focuses on denouncing the race for modernity: *"I want to highlight the harmful consequences of the reckless pursuit of progress: inequalities, climate change, rising individualism, and the gradual disappearance of African traditions that once formed a unique identity for my people."* Deeply committed to his country's cultural development, Rafiy founded the association Elowa in 2008 to promote artistic creation and facilitate encounters between artists, the public, and cultural operators. Rafiy Okefolahan encourages children to engage with their environment through visual arts, writing, and dance, in collaboration with eight schools from the lagoon shore neighborhoods. The environmental NGO Grabe organizes workshops to introduce the children to the lagoon shores and help them feel the connections they have with this ecosystem.

During the visual arts workshops led by Rafiy Okefolahan, children interact with materials. They move and channel their energy through choreography sessions with French choreographer Maud Chabrol. Beninese actor Zadok-Ange Hounkpatin guides them through writing and speech workshops, promoting expression and orality. After seven months of artistic practice, the children participate in a public eloquence competition based on their own narratives. This event is followed by the opening of an exhibition featuring an installation created by Rafiy Okefolahan from the children's paintings. The exhibition, held at the Grande Place cultural center in Porto-Novo, is heavily attended by the students' parents. The eloquence competition is filmed and shared on social media, ensuring the initiative continues to resonate even after its completion.

Through movement, creativity, and imagination, the 325 children have immersed themselves in the reality of their environment and shared their newfound perceptions with their loved ones.

### THEY SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCE

*"Thanks to this project, we are no longer just spectators. We don't wait for change to come from others, but we contribute to that change, and we do it through art. Working with children moved me deeply. I saw something real; I saw that it was useful for them. The children were able to engage with a subject that affects them, and they shared it back with me with innocent sincerity. I feel immensely proud of what they achieved. People who are not given a voice still have things to say!"*

RAFIY OKEFOLAHAN, PAINTER

*"The children were able to express the talent they have within them."*

FRIDA FASSINOU LANGANFIN, SCHOOLTEACHER

8  
SCHOOLS

7  
MONTHS OF ARTISTIC PRACTICE

200  
PLANT SPECIES, INCLUDING  
ENDANGERED SPECIES, ARE  
HOSTED BY THE LAGOON