

IDEAS & REFLECTIONS

Marrakesh Treaty in Senegal: Beyond Ratification, Turning Twelve Years of Collective Advocacy into Effective Implementation

Awa Diouf Cissé *Director of the Library of Université Amadou Mahtar Mbow, Coordinator of the "Copyright and Libraries" programme of EIFL for the Consortium of Higher Education and Research Libraries of Senegal (COBESS)*

A historic decision... and a still little-known story

On 1 July 2026, Senegal's Council of Ministers adopted the bill authorizing the President of the Republic to ratify the Marrakesh Treaty, an international agreement designed to facilitate access to books and published works for blind, visually impaired, and print-disabled persons.

This decision marks a significant step forward for the rights of persons with disabilities. But behind this official announcement lies a largely unknown story: that of the collective advocacy carried out consistently for more than twelve years by organizations of persons with disabilities, libraries, NGOs, public institutions, universities, publishing professionals, the media, and national and international partners.

This story deserves to be told. It shows that major reform is never born of chance. It is the fruit of a shared vision, patient dialogue, sustained cooperation, and collective commitment in service of the common good.

From a mobilization to a national coalition

Senegal's advocacy effort forms part of an international movement that was under way well before the Treaty's adoption. For several years, the World Blind Union, alongside other organizations representing persons with disabilities and numerous champions of access to knowledge—including library associations—carried advocacy to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) aimed at ending the "book famine," the situation in which only a tiny fraction of published works is accessible to people unable to read printed texts (between 5% and 7% in developed countries, and less than 1% in Africa and other developing countries).

Twelve years of dialogue and mobilization

The strength of Senegal's advocacy lies in its resilience and its capacity to build, over time, dialogue among different actors whose objectives nonetheless converged.

The adoption of the Marrakesh Treaty on 27 June 2013 was a decisive milestone. But States still needed to be accompanied toward ratification, and its implementation had to be prepared.

Accordingly, EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries), an international association working for access to knowledge, mobilized its networks of libraries around the world to carry the advocacy forward, convinced that libraries have an essential role to play in democratizing access to knowledge.

In Senegal, the Consortium of Higher Education and Research Libraries of Senegal (COBESS) answered this call as early as 2014, in partnership with the NGO Sightsavers, which works on the inclusion of blind and visually impaired persons, and the Association of Visually Disabled Persons "Amitié des Aveugles du Sénégal" (AAS). A national awareness and advocacy campaign was launched through the creation of a national Task Force for ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty, aimed at coordinating action and fostering dialogue among the various stakeholders.

For COBESS, this mobilization was a natural fit. A library is not limited to preserving collections: its mission is to guarantee everyone equitable access to knowledge. Defending the Marrakesh Treaty therefore means defending the right of persons with disabilities to learn, to study, to train, to conduct research, to access culture, and to participate fully in the life of society.

The Marrakesh Treaty is not just about copyright. Above all, it is about the right to read, access to knowledge, education, culture, and equal opportunity.

Over time, this Task Force grew, joined by the Senegalese Federation of Associations of Persons with Disabilities (FSAPH), the Senegalese Association of Librarians, Archivists and Documentalists (ASBAD), the National Institute for the Education and Training of Young Blind People (INEFJA), Plan International Senegal, COSYDEP, and many other partners. Over the years, journées de sensibilisation (awareness days), workshops, conferences, technical meetings, media campaigns, radio and television broadcasts, institutional consultations and working sessions followed one another. The goal was not only to publicize the Treaty, but to explain what was at stake, to allay concerns, and to progressively build consensus.

The coalition established dialogue with a wide range of institutions: the Senegalese Copyright Office (BSDA), SODAV, the Directorate of Books and Reading (DLL), the Directorate of Social Action, the Ministry of National Education and several of its subdivisions, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Women and Social Action, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE), the Senegal National Archives, the National Centre for Scientific and Technical Documentation (CNDST), as well as other bodies concerned with education, research, culture, and inclusion policy.

These activities also brought together members of parliament, members of the High Council of Local Authorities (HCCT), advisers to the Presidency of the Republic, academics, researchers, teachers, writers, publishers, traditional communicators, journalists, students, and numerous representatives of civil society.

This diversity constitutes the true strength of the mobilization. Everyone contributed their expertise and experience: organizations of persons with disabilities highlighted the lived realities of beneficiaries; librarians explained the challenges related to access to resources; NGOs mobilized for inclusion; legal experts clarified legislative developments; teachers underscored the educational stakes; the media helped raise public awareness; and public decision-makers gradually helped place the Treaty on the national agenda.

Much more than a treaty

Over time, the Marrakesh Treaty became far more than a legal instrument. It gradually came to be seen as a symbol of inclusion, equal opportunity, and social justice.

Behind the Treaty's provisions lie very concrete realities: a child who will be able to have the same schoolbooks as his classmates, in an adapted format; a student who will be able to pursue higher education with the entire bibliography she needs at her disposal; a researcher who will be able to access scientific publications indispensable to his work; or a citizen who will be able to fully take part in the cultural and intellectual life of her country.

This experience shows that libraries are far more than places of preservation. They can be spaces for dialogue, cooperation, and innovation, capable of bringing together very different actors around a shared ambition.

It also shows that organizations of persons with disabilities are not merely beneficiaries of public policy, but full partners in its design and implementation.

More broadly, this mobilization illustrates that advocacy grounded in trust, consultation, and perseverance can help bring about lasting change in public policy.

A new stage for Senegal: after the success of the advocacy, the practical challenges of successful implementation

The adoption of the bill is a major step, but it is not an end in itself. Ratification must be followed by the adaptation of national legislation, the designation of authorized entities, the development of accessible collections, the strengthening of the capacities of libraries and specialized institutions, and the effective implementation of the Treaty's provisions.

By facilitating access to knowledge for people who are unable to read printed texts, the Marrakesh Treaty directly contributes to enhancing human capital, which the Senegal 2050 Agenda identifies as the nation's foremost wealth and the principal driver of sustainable, inclusive, and sovereign development.

And now?

The story of the advocacy for the Marrakesh Treaty does not therefore end with this historic step forward. A new phase is beginning: that of implementation. It will require the same spirit of cooperation, the same ability to bring stakeholders together, and the same determination that has driven the coalition since 2014.

It rests on the ability to build, over time, a relationship of trust among actors who did not necessarily work together before.

Indeed, the true success of the Marrakesh Treaty will not be measured by ratification alone. It will be measured on the day when every child, every pupil, every student, every teacher, every researcher, and every citizen unable to read printed texts can access knowledge, information, and culture in adapted formats.

Because, at bottom, the right to read is much more than a right of access to books: it is an essential condition for equal opportunity, human dignity, and the enhancement of the human capital on which Senegal intends to build its future.