Sahelian youth: dynamics of exclusion, means of integration

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Executive Summary

For twenty years now, the Sahel region has been marked by rising insecurity, political crises, and poorly controlled flows of people, arms and illegal goods, with a major risk of States becoming destabilized. In the wake of the war in Libya and the Malian crisis, causes, arms, and combatants have been increasingly crossing borders, leading to an expansion of unsafe zones. These different forms of violence, including terrorism, are deployed in very diverse contexts, but nonetheless have common characteristics in that they cause States to lose their legitimacy in the eyes of their populations, who are typically very young and inexperienced and the main targets for recruitment by criminal networks and radical groups.

Sahelian youth have been attracting attention, firstly due to their number in a region that is experiencing one of the highest demographic growth rates in the world, but also due to their role in outbreaks of violence. These young people raise many questions, not least because they have been undergoing change. Influenced by a dual movement of democratisation and liberalisation, and more educated than ever, they are trying to break away from the traditional social and family orders, questioning the ways in which knowledge is transmitted, the choice of profession or place of residence, and religious practices and policies. This loss of bearings, induced by the proliferating and contradictory information that has become increasingly available with the development of new ICTs, has greatly weakened the traditional social mechanisms, which are now being replaced by other forms. Condemned to enter adulthood ever later given the constraints weighing on their empowerment, young Sahelians are also prisoners of a transitional state that is ill-suited to them. This situation creates a feeling of exclusion not only from economic and social life but also political and civic life, in societies marked by strong intergenerational hierarchies. Fuelling a sense of frustration that facilitates their recruitment by criminal and radical groups, social precariousness and popular movements likely to imperil the Sahel’s fragile equilibria, this situation prevents Sahelian youth from actively participating in the development of region’s countries.

Faced with the challenges of integrating young populations into Sahelian societies, technical and financial development partners are called on to provide appropriate and adequate development responses, in line with public policies and citizens’ social demands. Be it in the area of education, employment or civic participation, this implies rethinking intervention methods with respect to youth in order to adapt to the socio-economic and security developments in the Sahel.
DYNAMICS OF THE EXCLUSION OF SAHELIAN YOUTH

The notion of exclusion is multi-dimensional and needs to be analysed on the basis of specific contexts. Exclusion occurs in different spheres: access to public services, to the legal system, to education or to social institutions, such as access to property and employment. Yet, it also occurs at the level of political underrepresentation, and the lack of recognition or respect. The feeling of exclusion also drives not only the dynamics of marginalisation (youth not actively contributing to social cohesion and economic development) and migration, but also to the choice of violence as a means of expression.

The formal education system fails to offer a fundamental skill set for all

Since independence, the Sahel region has experienced a phase of unprecedented growth regarding access to education, accompanied by ambitious reform of the formal education sector, but it still needs to tackle the rapid increase of school enrolment in the decades ahead. Despite this progress, the delivery of education remains insufficient and ill-adapted to some populations, notably pastoral communities. It is thus failing to curb existing social inequalities. Doubts subsist as to the quality of teaching and apprenticeships in the formal education system, as well as its governance. In addition, there is a widening gap between parental expectations and the objectives assigned to schools. Whereas, after independence, public schooling was viewed as a way of accessing administrative jobs, these prospects have dried up. Families now consider that school no longer fulfils its role in guaranteeing employment and is not even able to provide children with the moral education they need. This is notably the role taken on by Arabo-Islamic (Koranic) schools, whose purpose is to educationally shape individuals. With a high diversity in the content and structure of their curricula, these schools all have a different educational model, oriented towards integration into a religious community. While parents are in favour of a dual education, some children are only enrolled in the informal Koranic schools that do not ensure the acquisition of basic skills. Today, the educational situation in the Sahel thus poses two challenges to States and societies: on the one hand, the massification of access to primary schooling has created unsatisfied expectations, leading to frustration among the young. On the other hand, this dual system generates a social divide, and fails to guarantee a set of basic skills and values common to all children.

Employment policies are failing to respond to the need for massive integration of youth

Sahel countries are facing a massive entry of young people onto the labour market, which is still largely informal and unable to provide a livelihood for all of them. Moreover, this is happening in very weak economies. As the major source of employment – or rather of livelihood –, the agricultural sector is struggling to modernise and deal with demographic pressure and climatic variations. On top of this, young people are to a large extent rejecting agricultural occupations as these are associated with dependence on the family and seen as a tough and symbolically undervalued. The formal secondary and tertiary sectors, both public or private, offer very few employment opportunities and mostly hire
young graduates. In this context, a large majority of young people have no job security and suffer from under-employment or even unemployment. This defers their access to economic independence, which then impacts their capacity to marry and be socially recognised as an adult. This state of dependence on the family produces strong intergenerational tensions. While the lack of employment opportunities is a global problem, it does not affect all young people to the same degree, depending on whether they are urban or rural, skilled or unskilled, and on their gender. There is still a huge gap between their aspirations and job market opportunities, even for skilled and professionally integrated youth. Indeed, faced with the challenge of professional integration, public policies are proving poorly adapted to the realities of the Sahel economies. States promote employment policies that target the formal sector even though their economies are largely informal. The low skill levels of youth only exacerbate the crisis of youth employment. The offer of technical and vocational training is proving insufficient to respond to the issue of youth employability, and when this training is accessible, it is poorly suited to the needs of the private sector.

Young people identify strongly with increasingly politicised religious movements

Religion holds a preponderant place in the trajectories integrating young people into societies that are deeply marked by a more or less recent Islamisation, although diverse communities coexist (notably Christians). For young people, affiliation to a religious movement is a factor in the construction of their identity and in their belonging to social and professional networks. Today, young people are attracted to the religious renewal that emerged in the 1990s and which is supported by Salafist movements perceived as reformist – a renewal that they see as a way of freeing themselves from the traditional social and economic orders. This dynamic goes hand in hand with the increasing influence of religion in the public space, as well as the politicisation of religious organisations. These organisations reinforce their social and political role through education, training and local development actions, notably in areas where the State has a minimal presence. They also tend to replace other civil society organisations when it comes to intermediating in political and social contestation, thus monopolising criticism of the established (political and social) orders. Since these organisations now occupy many areas of public action and weigh increasingly on political decisions, the Sahel States today appear to be overpowered. The risk in the Sahel is the increasing clout of movements that publicly advocate religious intolerance or even the recourse to violence, and which are hostile to religious diversity. Their influence is likely to not only widen social and intergenerational divides as these movements mostly attract young people, but also challenge the legitimacy of the State.
The lack of governance and political representation of youth accentuates exclusion

The breakdown of trust in the State and its representatives, at all levels, today is a major hindrance to what youth can contribute to sustainable development in the Sahel, as well as to their socio-economic integration. The Sahel countries are governed by an aging elite, which leaves little room for young people to express their needs. In reaction, youth participate little in the political debate through conventional means. Beyond the lack of political representation, their feeling of not being correctly governed, or even “swindled”, by corrupt institutions, heightens young people’s mistrust of the State and its administrations. This mutual breakdown of trust between the State and Sahelian youth is found across the region: governments see the young as a threat to their stability, while young people are moving away from a State that they view as “predatory”. Their grievances are levelled against the elites’ poor governance, corrupt practices and the State’s inability to curb inequalities and offer economic and employment opportunities to the young generations. This alienation from public authorities, both at the local and national levels, has led to widely diverse expressions of anger, ranging from street demonstrations to armed radical groups contesting the legitimacy of the State. The impression of being neither represented nor supported by the State certainly feeds a powerful feeling of injustice and opens the door for armed or radical groups to mobilise the young.1 These groups have effectively honed a well-rehearsed discourse that is critical of the State and harbours political ambitions.

Exogenous factors that lead to crisis and insecurity, and impair integration pathways

The rise in insecurity and the expansion of areas no longer under state control are driven by exogenous factors: international migration, cross-border trafficking and terrorism. In this context, young people see additional constraints weighing on their integration. The region’s already fragile balance is indeed threatened by the proliferation of trafficking, which is a major factor of destabilisation. Fuelled by criminal networks, which sometimes overlap with extremist groups, in some areas these groups replace lawful economies and authorities. The rise in insecurity destabilises mobility, whether seasonal or sporadic, upsets fragile socio-economic equilibria, and accentuates the marginalisation of vast territories. It also causes numerous flows of displaced people, with harmful effects on social cohesion in the regions hosting them. In this setting, transnational extremist movements feed on the absence of prospects for the young, on the States’ inability to maintain security and offer local development, and on the fertile ground of a reformist religious discourse that is already well-established. The rise of some of these groups such as Boko Haram, whose territorial grip has been constantly growing over the past ten years, imperils the opportunities for economic and social development on vast swathes of territory, and those most affected are young people.

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1 Most researchers agree to define radicalisation as “the recourse to violence to defend religious ideas”, as in the presentation of Elodie Apard (CNRS), ECAS 2015, Paris “Resisting and Adapting to Islamic Reform in Niamey”.
AVENUES FOR ACTION TO PROMOTE YOUTH INTEGRATION

Without questioning the policies in support of the educational, production and governance-enhancing sectors, some public and private initiatives point to a will to adapt to the socio-economic changes and specifically target young people. These responses also stand out in that they attempt to reach the most vulnerable youth who are side-lined by the major public policies (educational, employment, training) that often have difficulty in including them.

Take action for a more inclusive educational system

An insufficiently inclusive educational system creates economic fault lines between those who have access to training and jobs and the others. It also creates social fault lines between those who have had and those who have not had access to the same plinth of basic knowledge. Although it is necessary to continue improving access to the formal education system to support States facing the Sahelian demographic challenge, while enhancing the quality and governance of the sector, these structural responses no longer suffice to reach all students. Various approaches tailored to specific issues and audiences would appear to complement the sweeping reforms that have produced an unprecedented rise in enrolment rates over recent decades.

- Educational projects that seek to more effectively link the training needs promoted by the State and the needs of religious communities during schooling in order to respond to social demand. Some projects offer the State support in managing and reforming informal Arabo-Islamic schools so as to have these integrate secular lessons and make them compatible with the Education For All goals. Other initiatives prefer to reconcile secular and religious learning in the students’ educational pathway but through separate structures, by developing alternating systems in accord with religious actors. The purposed of all these projects is to enable a minority of children who only have access to Koranic teachings to acquire the plinth of basic knowledge necessary for their integration, or even help them to take advantage of bridges into the formal sector and to sit for diplomas.
- Projects aiming to foster access to education for those who drop out and those who are vulnerable, whether this occurs in the wake of conflict or for socio-anthropological (nomadism), gender, economic, or geographical (low population densities) reasons. These remedial measures or bridging classes seek to encourage children who have interrupted their schooling to return to school, and those who have never enrolled to do so. Some more ambitious programmes aim to provide solutions to the issue of adapting school systems to the needs of the most excluded or to children whose schooling is expected to be minimal. These programmes notably involve provision of mobile schools with time frames adapted to the lifestyles of nomadic populations, as well as programmes targeting girls (adaptation of sanitary facilities).
Train, support and insert through integrated approaches

Faced with the issues of integrating young Sahelians professionally and economically and empowering them, the major challenge involves supporting young people with very different educational pathways, levels of qualification and aspirations. An increasing number of mechanisms are thus being developed to help young people transition towards working life. Designed to fill the gaps in the major sectoral policies in favour of job creation, entrepreneurship or training, these mechanisms aim to tackle professional integration bearing in mind inclusive local development. These actions mainly target better coordination of the (formal and informal) actors in the areas of training and employment, but also an adaptation to the economic reality of the territories where they are implemented. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine including young people in the job market, without also tackling the issues of economic revitalisation. In rural areas, some integrated approaches deal with the question of territorial development and break with sectoral approaches.

- **Foster insertion by better linking training curricula with a professional project adapted to the local economy.** These approaches stand out in that they integrate the whole range of difficulties encountered by the young people during their integration process. This concerns multi-service guidance and support measures (e.g., an employment platform for example) that offer individual follow-up and access to numerous services. Other programmes focus on youth employability through training courses suited to their profile and skills, and in interaction with the local economic fabric. This is notably the case of programmes to renovate traditional forms of apprenticeship.

- **Develop solutions addressing the issue of integrating youth living in rural areas.** Some programmes attempt to respond to the dual challenge of integrating rural youth and improving the potential economic attractiveness of rural areas, by modernising agricultural and pastoral value chains and by diversifying activities. These initiatives involve symbolically rehabilitating the agricultural sector, which has a tarnished image in the eyes of young people, who consider rural exodus or seasonal migration as a response to the difficulties they cumulate. Geared to lift the many hurdles (linked with family, finance, land, skills) that impede the integration of the young rural population, these projects are noteworthy for their integrated approach.

Foster the social and political integration of young people, and empower them

Social integration is an overarching and ongoing process that continues even after employment has been found. The trajectories leading to social rupture are also characterised by a rejection of the political class, social orders and generational hierarchies – to sum up, by the obstacles that make it hard for young people to feel that they are active citizens and can make their voice heard. Some public policies for youth have taken this aspect on board and set young people’s engagement with society as an objective. However, these policy orientations are generally followed by few tangible measures and results. At a more local level, civil society organisations (CSOs) are developing actions to encourage youth engagement, to re-establish a harmonious coexistence, and to re-position citizenship at the heart of integration processes. In a Sahelian context characterised by the mushrooming of unsafe areas, these initiatives often take the form of preventive actions...
directed at young people at risk of opting for trajectories of social rupture, or of programmes targeting demobilised combatants, refugees and other victims of violence.

- **Promote civic and political engagement as a means of integration.** The common point of these disparate actions is that they see “empowering” young people as the lever for their socio-economic integration. Some programmes combine civic engagement and integration, on the assumption that finding a job means developing behavioural skills and not just know-how. Other programmes aim to further the emergence of young leaders or emphasise the value of young people’s participation at all political levels in countries where the youngest members of society have disengaged from collective decision-making.

- **Forestall the risks of social rupture, (re)integrate young drop-outs.** This category of projects is geared to young people in areas that are in crisis or highly vulnerable. These projects aim to forestall the risk of crisis by reinforcing social cohesion and raising young people’s awareness in order to limit the trajectories of social rupture. Other initiatives are being developed to reintegrate demobilised combatants or young people who have already embarked on a violent pathway. These projects are often on a small scale with a very individual approach and seek to adapt to the challenge raised by the rising power of radical groups.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATING ACTIONS TARGETING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SAHEL**

1) **Develop multi-sectoral responses:** the issue of youth integration lies at the intersection of numerous factors and calls for multi-sectoral responses in order to de-compartmentalise educational, economic, political, and religious fields and enable intervention on the dimensions of governance and local development.

2) **Have a territorial (landscape) approach:** the responses provided need to be grounded on an analysis and good understanding of the local or regional contexts of inclusion of young people and on adaptation to the opportunities and specific constraints and brakes to their socio-political and economic integration, according to the territories targeted.

3) **Diversify the actors involved:** for an effective response, the actors involved in projects need to be diversified, notably by engaging religious actors, grass-roots community organisations, civil society, the media, the private sector, local authorities and the research community.

4) **Set the acquisition of basic skills as a priority for enhancing education:** priority must be given to opening up access to quality basic education for all, notably by focusing efforts on (urban/rural) territories where the level of access to education is the lowest, and by supporting policies to modernise and manage the informal education system, notably the Arabo-Islamic schools.

5) **Work towards re-engaging young people in society:** the question of re-engaging young people in society and of their capacity for decision-making must be addressed transversally in order to improve the effectiveness of sectoral programmes and to link youth integration with crisis prevention.
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In 2015, AFD earmarked EUR 8.3bn to finance projects in developing countries and for overseas France.

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