REQUEST RESPONSE

Koranic and secular education in the Sahel

REQUEST SUBMISSION

The Sahel faces significant education challenges, exacerbated by rapid population growth and a young demographic, with nearly half of the population under 15. In response, Sahelian governments signed the Nouakchott Declaration in 2021, committing to a coordinated approach to improve education, focusing on government involvement, teacher mobilisation, and community engagement. However, political instability in countries like Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso between 2021 and 2023 has complicated these efforts, creating overlapping crises that affect education policy and provision. Despite these challenges, development agencies, including FCDO, continue to work on strategies to improve educational access and quality in the region.

FCDO Sahel has requested Helpdesk support with technical and contextual quality assurance of a series of three strategy papers addressing issues affecting education in the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger), to inform and support strategic education interventions. The papers cover the topics: 1) Integration of Koranic and secular schools; 2) Mother tongue instruction; and 3) Nomadic pastoral education. This report is part 1 of this series.

1. CONTEXT

Koranic schools have existed for centuries in the Sahel and are an important part of the historical, social, economic, and cultural fabric. This report explains the duality of Islamic and secular education systems in the Sahel and why governments and communities, supported by the UN and NGOs, are currently working to reconcile and integrate the two. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to support and advise the way forward.

Sunni Islam of the Maliki type, characterised as moderate, inclusive, and tolerant, is deeply rooted in Sahelian societies. The spread of Islam in the region is the result of the commercial and human encounters between Arab and Negro-African civilizations through the trade of gold, ivory, salt, and slaves in the Trans-Saharan desert before the 7th century CE. Islam then spread under the influence of powerful sovereigns and leaders of pre-colonial African kingdoms, then of the Qadiriyya and Tidjani Sufi orders (brotherhoods). Teaching centres and universities promoting Islamic scholarship were created in the late Middle Ages in Timbuktu, Djenné, and Gao, in present-day Mali. They contributed to the integration and general acceptance of Islam.

Koranic teaching has played a central role in the construction of a common identity in the central Sahel, providing a shared religious and moral frame of reference. However, family ties, social practices, cultural exchanges, and historical developments have also contributed to shaping the complex and dynamic identities of Sahelian populations. In addition, diverse interpretations of Islam and external influences have also enriched these identities over time. However, well before contact with the Arab world, 'Africans belonged to political groups such as empires or kingdoms controlled by traditional chiefs. These were communities of individuals who spoke the same language and belonged to the same ethnic group, shared most of the same customs and traditions, or at least were under the authority of a single traditional chief whose political power was defined, codified and subject to actions and decisions linked to tradition.'[1]

European trade, bringing new ideas and practices, including Christianity, spread across the continent from the 14th century onwards. With European colonisation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a parallel secular education system was established, centred on mathematics, French, and science. This new educational offering, a tool of colonial domination, aimed to impose Western culture and values, while devaluing local knowledge and educational practices.[a] This competition manifested itself in a struggle for influence over populations and shaped local elites. Koranic education, which predates secular education by several centuries, had to deal with this new model to maintain an important place within Sahelian societies.

The introduction of secular education by the colonists provoked mixed reactions among local populations. While it was seen as a tool for acculturation and domination, it also offered prospects for social advancement to certain elites. Opposition to secular education often manifested itself in a stronger attachment to traditional educational systems, such as Koranic education, which embodied traditional values and knowledge. Resistance to colonisation took multiple forms, ranging from armed revolt to passive resistance, including circumvention strategies. Religious leaders, traditional chiefs, and women played a key role in preserving cultural identities and transmitting knowledge. The imposition of French as the language of instruction marginalised a large part of the population, creating lasting inequalities and weakening the social fabric.

[a] In most African countries that experienced French colonisation, the imported education system called into question all forms of "traditional" schooling (Traoré, K., *et al* . (2022). *Arab-Islamic Education in the Sahel" research program* [Mali research report]. AFD) https://www.ird.fr/sites/ird_fr/files/2022-05/Rapport%20Mali%20sur%20l%E2%80%99%C3%89ducation%20arabo-islamique%20au%20Sahel_0.pdf

The aftermath of colonisation continues to influence postcolonial education systems, which seek to reconcile the demands of modernity with the preservation of national identities. It is important to qualify these analyses by considering the diversity of experiences and the internal dynamics of colonised societies. Secular education was not a homogeneous tool and resistance to colonisation was complex and multifaceted, particularly with traditional leaders such as Samory Touré, Babemba Traoré, Fodé Sylla, and others.

3. KORANIC SCHOOLS TODAY

Koranic education[b] has been neglected and misunderstood by education decision-makers in the Sahel. It has not benefited from the advantages reserved for schools, being perceived as a confessional and not an educational institution. It was not until 1985 that the Malian state issued a general statute for the organisation of private Madrarssas.[c] In Mali, the 1994 law on private education then strengthened the public school in its broad outlines, while leaving aside Koranic schools.

However, Koranic education is highly and widely appreciated by parents, guardians and Muslim communities throughout the region. According to UNESCO (1994), about Mali, 'Islamic education (in its most basic form, that is, the Quranic school) remains one of the most widespread types of school and constitutes, for many individuals, the only provision of training and literacy: for populations who do not yet have access to formal schooling, it remains the only place of instruction. It flourishes in practically all countries with a Muslim majority and is sometimes recognized as complementary to public education. However, whatever form it takes, the Quranic school remains the school of the society that established it, protects it and influences it, just as it is influenced by this society. It is therefore closely linked to its environment, which gives it a capacity for resistance.'[2] In the absence of religious education in public primary schools, many parents enrol their children in Koranic schools, either in parallel or during school holidays, in order to teach them the basics of religion (such as learning to pray or memorizing some Islamic precepts and the shortest Koranic surahs, etc.).[3] Madrassas have developed exclusively on the basis of social demand.[d] Arab-Islamic education is booming socially, as it includes the teaching of Arabic and Islamic studies, which are highly valued by families.[e] For Muslims in the Sahel, the Koranic school is a means of building character and teaching faith, spirituality, belief and behaviour. According to Lozneanu and Humeau (2014) cited by Akkari and Fuentes, 'the Quranic school is the place where children and adolescents traditionally acquire the foundations of their religious and spiritual education, learning to read, write and memorize the Quranic text.'[4] These schools emphasise personal spirituality, adapt to the local culture and are diametrically opposed to extremist and exclusive Islamic ideologies. They vary considerably in terms of content, approach (mobile,

[b] A generic term used to designate traditional Islamic educational institutions in the Sahel region. They are called Makarantas in Niger, Mahadras in Mauritania and Khalawas in Chad and Darfur.

[c] It is important to note that the Arabic term madrassas can have different meanings depending on the context and can refer to both Koranic schools and public educational institutions.

[d] According to Ferdaous , the word "medersa" has two historically distinct meanings in Mali. The first schools to be designated as such were the Franco-Arab schools founded by the French in Djenné, Timbuktu and Saint-Louis. These schools were the result of an educational policy that included the rallying of local and Arabic-speaking actors favorable to the policy of cultural hegemony advocated by colonial agents. The second meaning arose in the 1940s. Other establishments, created on the initiative of African Muslims and part of a movement protesting French colonisation from the start, used the same name to express their desire to differentiate themselves from Koranic schools (Ferdaous B. (2010), les médersas du Mali : réforme, insertion et transnationalisation du savoir islamique, 2010/4, Hiver, pages 819 to 830, ISSN 0032-342X ISBN 9782865927951).

[e] According to Traoré, K. *et al* (*ibid.*), there is no unanimous definition of the term 'Franco-Arab education'. While some see it as the study of Arab civilization through Islam, others see it as bilingual education in Arabic and French.

community, etc.) and learners (including the possibility for girls to attend). They teach Koranic memorisation, Islamic principles, ethics, Arabic language, and social service to varying degrees of quality and understanding. For example, many do not know the meaning of the Arabic words they learned as children. Indeed, 'in traditional and ancient Quranic schools [...] they [children] repeat the verses of the Quran after the Quranic teacher, who they pronounce most of the time without understanding them. Later, they learn the Arabic alphabet transcribed on a wooden board covered with clay. After that, the child transcribes the verses dictated to him by the teacher using a reed pen and natural ink.'[5] Roy and Humeau argue that 'the Quranic school represents tradition, in the face of a modernity that is often poorly experienced and poorly accepted, but also a vehicle for transmitting social codes, qualities and behaviours expected of a good Muslim citizen, as valued by these communities.'[6] Koranic education in the Sahel takes various forms, reflecting the diversity of local contexts and historical developments. There are different types of Koranic schools - informal and formal - managed and regulated by the community, individuals, or the State. Some integrate secular subjects, others do not.[f]

Generally speaking, there are three types of Koranic schools:[g]

Informal family/community schools called Daras or Talibe: These are organised around an Ustaz (teacher) who teaches memorisation of the Koran, the rules of Islam, how to perform ablutions and prayer at a basic level. Informal Koranic schools are often under-resourced, leading to protection issues and risks for children, especially girls.

Formal Islamic schools are integrated into the public education system and offer a wider range of subjects, such as science, literature, theology, Islamic law, etc. Some of these schools are increasingly integrated, producing increasingly well-educated students who, driven by economic necessity, seek employment. According to a recent AFD study in Mali, 'In madrasahs, learners receive both a religious education centred on the Koran and Islamic sciences, as well as an introduction to the Arabic language, which serves as a support for learning religious subjects and general education (mathematics, geography, history, etc.). Unlike Koranic schools, madrasahs issue state-recognised diplomas that allow their holders to teach in primary and secondary schools. They are also eligible for scholarships to study at Islamic universities.'[7] The number of years of study is the same as in public schools.[h]

Semi-formal schools or "spiritual retreats" are residential Arab-Islamic educational centres (boarding schools) developed on the outskirts of urban areas. They often offer functional literacy and numeracy classes and are officially authorised to operate by the government.

Among these different types of schools, informal Koranic schools face challenges such as the quality of teaching, child protection (begging, corporal punishment, etc.)[i] and institutional recognition. Reform

[f] In contrast to sacred (religious) subjects, secular subjects refer to all knowledge and disciplines that are not directly linked to religion. They cover very diverse fields: mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, geography, philosophy, sociology, literature, plastic arts, music, etc.

[g] According to Traoré, K. *et al.* (*op cit.*), there are different types of Koranic schools, which vary according to the political history of countries and the integration of Islam into societies. The forms that the Koranic school can take are so diverse that it would be futile to attempt to establish an exhaustive typology or to analyze the specific roles it plays in the systems of symbolic representation of societies.

[h] In Mali, "The first fundamental cycle of these schools includes the first six years and the second cycle the 7th, 8th and 9th years. The high school includes three years, the 10th, 11th and 12th years" (*ibid.* ., p. 37).

[i] According to Roy, E., Humeau, P. (2018, *op cit.*), 'The itinerant Koranic school (but not exclusively) is [...] often negatively associated with the work and begging of children who must participate in the economic survival of the teacher, his family, and all the students' (p. 21).

movements have played an important role in the evolution of Koranic education, promoting a more modern approach and integrating new disciplines. However, globalisation and urbanisation pose new challenges, particularly in terms of financing and recruiting qualified teachers.

The role of women in Koranic education is also an important issue. While they are traditionally more present in girls' Koranic schools, they are beginning to play an increasingly important role in mixed schools and in teacher training.

Depending on the context, Koranic schooling can replace, complement, or prioritise formal education. Many families send their children to both Koranic and public schools when they can, to balance tradition with better opportunities for employment, income, and livelihoods. Others fall back on or prioritise Koranic education, particularly when demand for formal education exceeds supply or when the quality of formal education is poor. Some families simply send their children to Koranic schools or to an Ustaz during school holidays. The aim is for children to benefit from the advantages of this type of education in addition to those of formal schooling.

Families' educational choices are often influenced by complex factors such as standard of living, geographical access to schools, religious beliefs, and social representations. In rural areas, where public schools are often fewer and less equipped, Koranic schools are often the first option. Moreover, in an environment characterised by existential threats and growing uncertainty, as well as a rise in religious conservatism in some places, families may see religious education as a way to transmit values of resilience and solidarity, and to strengthen social ties.

A study by Roy and Humeau addresses the reasons that push some parents to choose Koranic school for their children in the following terms: 'Bypassing the shortcomings, real or perceived, of the public school system, Quranic schools and modern madrasas position themselves as offering an education that better reflects the needs, expectations and values of the population. Parents seem to have calculated that since education, regardless of the type of school attended, leads to unemployment, it is preferable that their children receive a moral and social education in accordance with local religious and cultural values.'[8] This is a challenge to deliver a fit for purpose curriculum that is relevant and adds value to economic and livelihood opportunities and social and environmental life of communities.

Informal Koranic schools (Madrassas and Daras) are flexible and mobile. They fit into the seasonal cycles of isolated agricultural and pastoral communities where children actively participate in work such as livestock breeding and harvesting. To feed themselves, some children are forced to beg. According to Roy and Humeau, the practices related to begging in the context of Koranic education are diverse. While some abuse this practice, others maintain it in a spirit of respect for tradition and community solidarity.[9]

Parents generally do not monitor their children's progress and their education is in the hands of teachers. Academic results in these informal schools are neither monitored nor recorded. Similar to schools without canteens in a context of food insecurity such as in Mali and Mauritania, it would be legitimate to question the academic results of this type of Koranic school, where children spend the day outside looking for food and money, often returning late in the evening to rest and repeat the same activity the next day. Many of these teachers and their schools are not recognised by the national Islamic councils. Bringing informal Islamic schools closer to public schools or refugee schools and vice versa can strengthen monitoring and improve protection, bringing in experience from the field/what works on the ground.

To ensure quality education for all children, it is necessary to strengthen the links between Koranic schools and formal education systems. Initiatives such as the establishment of training programmes for Koranic teachers, the recognition of prior learning in Koranic learning and the improvement of student reception conditions could help address these challenges.

4. LINKING KORANIC SCHOOLS AND SECULAR SCHOOLS

Secular school and Koranic education are now in demand by the population because they can complement each other in the socialisation of children and in preparing them for their future. Lozneanu and Humeau explain the complementarity of the two types of education and the reasons that lead them to favour them: 'Overall, people are now more in favour of secular school than before, even if some reluctance remains in certain areas, particularly rural ones. At the same time, they remain fundamentally attached to the Islamic education of their children.[j] Religious leaders, as well as the vast majority of Koranic teachers, are also clearly in favour of secular education for children. Classical secular school is considered necessary, in particular because it is seen as the path to social and economic success. It is also seen as complementary to Koranic education, each providing the child with part of the knowledge that will allow him to lead a personal, family and social life.'[10] The articulation of the two systems is therefore necessary in the Sahel countries, given the weight of Islamic education on the population. While Mali illustrates the challenges linked to this integration, particularly due to the denominational and private nature of Koranic schools, other countries, such as Mauritania, have made significant progress. In December 2024, the Mauritanian government adopted a decree aimed at establishing bridges between the Mahadras and primary school, demonstrating a political will to include these establishments in the formal education system.

However, even if promising initiatives exist, the integration of these two systems remains complex and raises many questions. Lozneanu and Humeau point out that both Islamic and secular education face similar challenges, such as the deficit of quality human resources and material resources, as well as the difficulties of managing education systems. These constraints limit the capacities of states to implement ambitious reforms.[11]

It is therefore essential to conduct comparative studies to identify best practices and success factors in different national contexts. In addition, the active participation of local actors, including religious communities and teachers, is essential to ensure the ownership of these reforms and their sustainability. In an article by Hamidou Dia et al, 2016, the complementarity of traditional education in secular schools and Arab-Islamic education in Koranic schools was highlighted as an important factor in the process of achieving universal primary education.[12] They consider that, despite the commitments made by African States and the significant progress made in recent decades, the educational situation in these countries remains problematic in terms of access, quality and equity.

Roy and Humeau argue that in order to link the Koranic school to the traditional education system and achieve a diversified, inclusive, quality and socially accepted education system, discussions within the consultation frameworks must lead to the definition of a legal, administrative, pedagogical and organisational framework.[13] The development of harmonised curricula, programmes and school textbooks for each cycle is a prerequisite for ensuring the coherence of the system and guaranteeing effective links between the sectors of the system.

5. GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND THE INTEGRATION OF KORANIC TEACHING

Most public education policies today seek to bridge the gap between education systems, integrating the values and knowledge imparted by Koranic schools into a broader offering of secular subjects that

[j] According to Gandolfi , 'Islamic education can be defined as a process of social, intellectual, moral and spiritual training and transformation aimed at integrating Africans into the spiritual and temporal principles of Islam' (p. 262) (Gandolfi , S. (2003), L'enseignement islamique en Afrique noire, *Cahiers d'études africaines* , volume 43, n° 169-170, p. 161-177, https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafricaines/199?lang=fr).

improve future livelihoods and reduce marginalisation. It is important that efforts to integrate and regulate Koranic education are informed, measured, and free of bias. Islamic education is not standardised, and there are conceptual tensions and divergent approaches, with some leaning toward integration with secular education and others against. The great diversity of Koranic schools has complicated dialogue and consensus.

Integrated education strategies include improving Koranic curricula to include literacy, numeracy, life skills and employability. It also means integrating Koranic courses into public schools for communities that would otherwise not attend public schools. It can also include renovating and building Koranic schools that integrate formal education and training Koranic teachers. All of these initiatives are limited to date and require a change in mindset.

Innovations include mapping informal itinerant Koranic schools where Ustaz may be involved in seasonal work and travel with Muhadjirine (students). Renovated and non-renovated Koranic schools may result in competition between Ustaz for students. Religious and community leaders should work with Ustaz to ensure that there are viable pathways for students between informal and formal education. Young people, especially girls, who have only studied in Koranic schools may feel voiceless, disempowered, and marginalised in their access to education and economic opportunities.

6. CURRENT INITIATIVES

Lozneanu and Humeau reveal that the Senegalese government is already engaged in a process of major reforms.[14] In Mali, discussions between the religious community and the government resulted in the development of a plan for integrating Koranic schools into the national education system in late 2014. In Niger, a pilot project was rolled out in ten Koranic schools to explore the possibilities of integrating secular education. Some projects are led by religious leaders who are looking for ways to reconcile the two, although they are more interested in coordinating teaching methods than in integrating them, which is the approach favoured by governments. NGOs such as the Environment and Development of the Third World (ENDA) in Mali are also supporting experiments aimed at integrating secular subjects into Koranic schools, while involving teachers and municipalities in monitoring children's schooling. National and international NGOs are supporting Arab-Islamic education in the municipalities of Mopti and Djenné. Their intervention aims to improve the living environment of learners, as well as certain traditional indicators of the State. This support is reflected in awareness-raising actions for Arab-Islamic actors, training of managers and teachers, the construction or renovation of classrooms and latrines, the provision of educational materials, the distribution of hygiene and sanitation kits and the creation of bilingual learning centres. Among the NGOs involved are ENDA-Mali, Eveil, Action Mopti, Secours Islamique France (SIF), with funding from the French Development Agency (AFD), and Al FAROUK.[15]

7. REFORMS AND SUPPORT FOR ORGANISATIONS

According to Dia et al (2016, p. 14), 'in West Africa, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), with the support of other international organisations such as UNESCO, supported the first concrete measures of reform of Arab-Islamic education. In the 2000s, these reforms took the form of a project to support bilingual education (French-Arabic/English-Arabic), as well as initiatives aimed at modernization in Senegal, renovation in Niger and the integration of Quranic schools into the national primary education system in Mali.'[16]

In Mali, in 2008, the Forum on Koranic Schools, organized by the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM), highlighted the need to reform these schools and integrate them into the education system. This forum led to the creation of an interministerial technical commission to examine this integration, with activities including field studies, observation trips to Africa and Asia, and regional consultations. The

recommendations were validated in 2014 at a national workshop, followed by the creation of a technical monitoring committee. Since 2008, Switzerland, through its Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), has supported this integration process, in particular by financing studies and participating in the monitoring committee. In 2018, a meeting organised in Bamako by the Cordoba Foundation in Geneva brought together representatives from Mali and other Sahel countries to discuss the project. Malian officials have affirmed the importance of Koranic schools as part of the national cultural heritage and stressed that their integration into the education system could foster social cohesion and contribute to stability, particularly in areas affected by insecurity.[17] Furthermore, the Malian 2023 General Assembly of Education proposed integrating Koranic schools into the formal school system through:

- an increase in the number of IFM (Teacher Training Institutes) offering training for teachers in madrasas, Franco-Arab schools and Koranic schools;
- accelerating the process of integrating Koranic schools into the country's education system by providing them with an official programme, subsidies and attaching them to the Ministry of Education;
- the creation of an agency for the management of Koranic schools.[18]

8. DEVELOPMENT OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

To act effectively, it is necessary to start by identifying the Koranic schools in West Africa and examining the content of the training they provide. In this regard, Dia et al. believe that it is essential to develop a new generation of empirical research on Arab-Islamic education in Africa.[19] This sector, generally organised and managed by religious figures and private operators, is little known to stakeholders in traditional secular schools and political authorities. A first challenge for governments wishing to encourage a new dynamic of partnerships is quantification, because national administrations do not produce reliable data on the number of children concerned and the non-formal sector still largely escapes public control. Many children considered to be excluded from the education system are in fact enrolled in Koranic schools. An exhaustive census of learners, schools and teachers in these establishments is therefore essential to better manage this sector in most West African countries. A priority should also be to find solutions and ways to move forward with the communities themselves and rebuild from there, through action research.

9. LACK OF DATA AND OFFICIAL RECOGNITION OF KORANIC TEACHING

Two authors (Delval 1980; Lange 1998, 2000), cited by Gandolfi (2003), acknowledge that the study of Arab-Islamic education in sub-Saharan Africa is difficult because of the limited research devoted to these types of schools.[20] Indeed, researchers, planners, and educational specialists have been more interested in traditional African education and educational systems before and after colonisation, while research on Islamic education is still in its infancy, which suggests that this field is largely unexplored. Roy and Humeau take a similar approach, emphasising that 'the lack of statistical data and national censuses of non-formal Koranic schools and formal Islamic schools remains a problem in the development of support for these schools. Governments, as well as technical and financial partners, have cited the lack of statistical knowledge as one of the main obstacles to their involvement in the field of Qur'anic education.' 'The more reliable quantitative data the State, through the ministry in charge of education, has on the number of Koranic or Islamic schools and their students, the greater the chances that it will take them in to account them in its educational policy. The official recognition of the different types of schools by the States of the region, and by the ministries in charge of education, appears to be the main determinant of support for non-formal Islamic education.'[21] Knowing these numbers would allow for them to be mapped, and measure their importance for the

communities, to facilitate the establishment of gateways, interventions by the State and partners, to make decisions.

10. JIHADIST EXTREMISM

Jihadist extremist groups are a foreign introduction inspired by an exclusive ideology that uses ungoverned spaces, poverty, and communal conflict to expand its influence and control. Extremist forms of Islam in the Sahel are new and inspired by global jihad to establish Islamic states (caliphates) governed by an extreme interpretation of Sharia law and practicing puritanical versions of Islam. These trends are reflected in conservative attitudes and restrictive treatment of women and girls. They are inspired and influenced by the exclusive Sunni Arab schools of Wahhabism and jihadist Salafism, which promote an ideologically "pure" Islam that is intolerant of diversity, context, and local traditions.

The emergence and spread of non-state jihadist extremist armed groups in the Sahel have now made Koranic schools the subject of politicised attention. According to a popular and simplistic view, Koranic schools are sometimes suspected of importing extremist ideologies. A more nuanced view and deeper analysis are needed. For example, some perpetrators of large-scale terrorist attacks come from wealthy and privileged backgrounds and have never attended a Koranic school. Contrary to popular belief, Koranic schools are not the main source of radicalisation. It must be recognised that injustice and poor distribution of resources are sources of frustration that can lead some people to violent extremism and not necessarily to attend Koranic schools. Numerous case studies (Sambé et al., Pérouse de Montclos and Noûs) have shown that socio-economic, political, and psychological factors play a much more important role in radicalisation than belonging to a particular religious group.[k]

The Sahel is going through a period of cultural, economic, military, and political upheaval. The recent spread of extremist jihadism has been facilitated by a number of important factors, such as the regional impact of the fall of Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, rapid and secular globalisation on traditional societies that feel threatened by it, the lack of equitable development and service delivery before and since independence, increased ethnic marginalisation, and local grievances over resources. Continued underdevelopment and marginalisation create long-term fragility.

While the jihadist ideology, imported from abroad, has found an echo among a section of the youth in search of reference points, it is essential to emphasise that extremism is a multifactorial phenomenon. National contexts, marked by complex colonial legacies, deep social inequalities, and fragile political systems, play a determining role. In addition, the porosity of borders and the presence of non-state armed groups complicate the fight against jihadist groups.

[k] Indeed, according to a study by the Timbuktu Institute carried out by Sambé *et al.,* the failure of the State to reduce unemployment and poverty and to establish an inclusive education system is often pointed out as a cause of the radicalization of young people and their recruitment by terrorist groups. The precariousness and endemic unemployment faced by young people reinforce this perception. Indeed, 36% of the young people concerned say they are "unemployed", and of the 23% who say they are "self-employed", many are engaged in an economic activity that is difficult to define. These conditions explain why socio-economic factors are often highlighted when analyzing the causes of radicalization (Sambé , B. *et al.* (2016). *Factors of radicalization*: *perception of terrorism among young people in the greater suburbs of Dakar* , Study report, Timbuktu Institute). Similarly, based on quantitative and qualitative data collected in Borno State in Nigeria, a stronghold of Boko Haram, Pérouse de Montclos and Noûs show that there is no correlation between levels of access to Koranic schools and the intensity of violence or recruitment by Boko Haram. The authors call for a nuanced analysis of simplistic analyses that see Koranic schools as the main cause of radicalization and terrorism (Pérouse de Montclos , M.-A., Noûs , C. (2020). Koranic schools, jihad and "terrorist" violence in northern Nigeria, *Cultures & Conflits* , No. 117, pp. 97-114, https://journals.openedition.org/conflits/21572).

11. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Islamic religious education is an integral part of the social and historical fabric of the Sahel. It is essential to the religious, cultural, and economic identity of many populations, most of whom respect the right to religious freedom and diversity. Engagement in Koranic schools is essential to improving the life chances of girls and the development of some of the poorest and most marginalised communities in the Sahel.

2. Economic hardship, lack of employment, diminishing opportunities and frustration are some of the challenges faced by students in informal Koranic schools, especially girls. Girls are highly marginalised and their only access to education is often through informal Koranic schools. In the absence of a more integrated educational offering, this can contribute to their marginalisation and lack of choice. The situation of girls attending informal Koranic schools is closely linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations. Their limited access to quality education, which corresponds to MDG 4, deprives them of opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to develop themselves personally and contribute to the development of their communities.[l] Furthermore, this situation exacerbates gender inequalities, in contradiction with MDG 5[m], and contributes to maintaining socio-economic disparities, thus contravening MDG 10.[n] Furthermore, this situation has direct implications for the achievement of SDG 16, as unequal access to education can lead to social tensions and conflicts.[o] Investing in girls' education not only promotes their individual emancipation, but also the construction of more just and peaceful societies. It is therefore crucial to put in place educational policies that allow these objectives to be achieved and to guarantee all girls, regardless of their origin, equitable access to quality education.

3. Sensitive and respectful integration of religious and secular education is a way to create economies, opportunities, and social cohesion. Communities must be fully involved in defining and designing the way forward. Lessons learned from both education systems must be the subject of dialogue. Education policy and programmes must be inclusive, respect and integrate people's religious identities and increase life chances and options through the integration of more non-religious subjects. Inclusive curriculum development, teacher training and adequate resource mobilization are all keys to the success of this integration.

4. Interest in integrating Koranic and secular education is a diplomatic lever that builds respect and credibility in both directions and provides fertile ground for broader dialogue. Religious and traditional leaders, as opinion leaders, have a crucial role to play in promoting this integration. They have an important role to play in times of crisis and can influence social and individual behaviours in ways that are both practical and beneficial for development, humanitarian response, and peacebuilding. Their engagement is essential to mobilise communities and overcome resistance to change. Capacity building and funding for civil society organisations that can improve conditions in Koranic schools outside the capital is particularly encouraged.

5. It is important to emphasize that the integration of Koranic and secular education must be done on the basis of gender equality. Girls must have the same opportunities as boys to access quality

[l] MDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
[m] MDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
[n] MDG 10: Reduce inequalities within and between countries.
[o] SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

education and fully develop their potential.

6. Finally, it should be recalled that the integration of these two education systems is a complex process that requires a comprehensive approach and the mobilisation of all stakeholders: governments, international organisations, religious communities, civil society, and umbrella organisations such as federations and associations. By working together, it is possible to build fairer, more inclusive, and more resilient societies.

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