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THE INCLUSION OF TALIBÉ CHILDREN IN MALI AND SENEGAL

Challenges and recommendations

SUMMARY

Introduction: What do you know about talibé children?.....	1
Non-formal traditional Koranic schools that sit alongside the formal education system	3
The extremely vulnerable situation of talibé children and young people	4
Why do parents choose non-formal traditional schools?	5
The movement to integrate non-formal traditional Koranic schools	7
Integration challenges	9
SIF's work to support talibé children in Mali and Senegal	10
Testimonies from talibé children	15
Testimonies from Koranic teachers	16
Our advocacy recommendations for the inclusion of talibé children	18
Conclusion	20



**SECOURS
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FRANCE**

Founded in 1991, Secours Islamique France (SIF) is a humanitarian and development Non-Governmental Organisation. SIF is committed to reducing poverty and vulnerability, without proselytising or discriminating, and takes action wherever there are humanitarian and social needs to be met. In France, SIF works to tackle the insecurity and exclusion of the most disadvantaged.

Abroad, SIF focuses on improving access to water, sanitation and hygiene, on improving food security and livelihoods for the most vulnerable and on realising the rights of the child.

In order to increase the impact of our projects, SIF conducts advocacy work to influence public policy so as to ensure that the plight of the most vulnerable people is taken into account and that they are able to realise their rights. We draw on our field programme expertise to develop the content of our advocacy campaigns.

As part of our work to address children's issues, SIF is a member of the Groupe Enfance of Coordination Humanitaire et Développement (CHD) and of Coalition Education, two networks campaigning to ensure the realisation of the rights of the child.



WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT TALIBÉ CHILDREN ?

EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF INCLUSION

Although inclusion is a global priority, reaffirmed with the adoption of Agenda 2030, its implementation continues to be a challenge. Due to climate change, conflicts, the forcible displacement of populations and, most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, inequalities in access to rights are being exacerbated, undermining efforts to construct inclusive and peaceful socie-

ties. We have a responsibility to ensure that the most vulnerable children are able to access their rights by tackling the exclusion they suffer. This is what Secours Islamique France has committed to achieving on behalf of talibé children, students at non-formal traditional Koranic schools in Mali and Senegal, by working alongside local authorities and Koranic teachers.

The educational provision in these schools, the main aim of which is memorisation of the Koran, is deeply rooted in West-African traditions. Talibés are extremely vulnerable. In -the Sahel belt of Africa, there are several hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of these children, who lack access to both basic learning and basic social services and who are vulnerable to abuse. To tackle their educational and social exclusion, SIF is assisting public authorities and Koranic teachers in Mali and Senegal to develop a school integration strategy that includes new standards for the education and protection of talibé children.

This is undoubtedly crucial for peace, as young people in the Sahel are experiencing a sharp deterioration in their socio-economic, environmental and security conditions. Faced with unemployment, poverty and the lack of opportunities for self-expression and recreation, young people in the Sahel find themselves in an increasingly vulnerable position. Consequently, they may turn to violence and soul-searching as a response to the ambivalence of a modernity whose promises seem out of their reach. Young people's frustration and loss of confidence in the future are also born out of the exclusion they have encountered since their childhood.

The plight of talibé children unfortunately reflects that of millions of other girls and boys around the globe. These are the invisible children; those who continue to be ignored. There are still no reliable figures on the number of talibé children living in the area. Many of these children are also 'phantom children' whose births have never been registered, leaving them unable to access their rights as they have no formal identity. There are an estimated 166 million phantom children worldwide¹. How can we ensure universal inclusion if we continue to exclude children?

The aim of this publication is to raise the visibility of talibé children, share our knowledge and solutions for their inclusion and prompt public authorities and development partners to invest in inclusive policies. Secours Islamique France would like to thank the donors who have been supporting us to achieve this objective, namely the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs' Crisis and Support Centre, the French Development Agency, the European Union and the German international development agency (GIZ).

This publication is also a call for action to expand our understanding of inclusion, and to reach and support the most vulnerable people, in order to build more resilient, fairer and more peaceful societies where children and young people can also develop the skills they need to make a difference.

¹ There are 166 million 'phantom' children around the world, i.e. children whose births have never been officially registered. There are also about 237 million other children whose births have been registered but who have no birth certificate. Source: UNICEF, Birth Registration for Every Child by 2030: Are We on Track?, 2019





NON-FORMAL TRADITIONAL KORANIC SCHOOLS THAT SIT ALONGSIDE THE FORMAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

Only 53% of children in Senegal are enrolled in public schools and state-recognised teaching establishments². In Mali, UNICEF estimated that, in 2018, 51% of children, adolescents and young people (between 5 and 17 years old) were outside of the education system and not enrolled in school³ as a result of insecurity, household poverty, child labour and the lack of nearby schools. Of the children identified as not being enrolled in school, some received no education at all, but many attended non-formal traditional Koranic schools, which fall outside of the official education system and are not legally recognised.

FORMAL EDUCATION	NON-FORMAL EDUCATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes place within an organised structure that is recognised by the state; • Its learning objectives are based on the official school curriculum and it leads to a qualification. • It comes under the auspices of the national education system, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Falls outside of the official state structure and is often defined as supplementing or providing an alternative to formal education. • It involves an element of intentional learning on the part of the learner but usually leads to qualifications that are not officially recognised, or to no qualification at all. • It does not cover the skills and knowledge included in the national curriculum.

In West African countries with predominantly Muslim populations, such as Mali and Senegal⁴, non-formal traditional Koranic schools are attended by tens of thousands if not millions of children and young people or ‘talibés’, which comes from the Arabic word for student, ‘talib’. At least 260,000 children attend this type of school in Mali⁵ and, in Senegal, there are 180,000 talibés in Dakar alone⁶ according to the few statistics available⁷.

It is important to properly differentiate between the different types of Koranic school in the Sahel⁸ as the children’s living and learning conditions are not always the same. For example, there are some formal Koranic

schools that are recognised by the state. These are thus integrated into the country’s education system, often as private religious schools; they follow the national curriculum and are inspected.

Sitting alongside these are the non-formal traditional Koranic schools. These are highly prevalent but difficult to identify as they sometimes do not even consist of a physical building (lessons are held under a shelter in the public square or on wasteland, for instance). This type of school can also be mobile, particularly in the Nomadic regions of the Sahel, or located in the Koranic teacher’s house. These schools are not recognised or integrated into the National Education Ministry’s strategies and receive no financial or technical support (no teaching support or support with teacher training or developing the school environment, etc.). These schools’ sole learning objective is reciting and memorising the Koran; nothing else is taught. They do not follow the national curriculum, have no links to the formal school system and award no qualifications to the children. Children can attend both a Koranic school and a formal school but, in many cases, these non-formal Koranic schools generally have between a dozen and a hundred children who are ‘boarders’ and who never go to formal school.

The talibé children that attend non-formal traditional schools to take Koran memorisation lessons come from highly vulnerable social environments, sometimes from regions a long way from the school or even from neighbouring countries⁹. The majority of families place their child with a Koranic teacher from the age of 5 until they become an adult; this practice is known as ‘confrage’ or ‘fostering’. The teacher can have sole custody of around a hundred children. The teacher will not usually refuse a child: it is his ‘vocation’: “it is his mission to teach the Koran to the children that come to him”¹⁰. However, as it is not officially recognised, the Koranic school receives no teaching, organisational or financial support from the state. And in most cases, the parents and the community do not contribute enough or at all to the cost of caring for the children, who are forced to live in unsanitary conditions.

2 Source: IRD/UNICEF/UCAD. “Les enfants hors ou en marge du système scolaire classique au Sénégal”. “Étude ORLECOL”, “Synthèse analytique”, June 2016.

3 Source: Figures from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

4 94% of the population of Senegal and nearly 95% of Mali’s population is Muslim. Source: French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.

5 Source: Figures taken from a study conducted in 2017 by the “Unité de Gestion du Projet d’Appui à l’Éducation Bilingue de Base (UGAP AEBB)”.

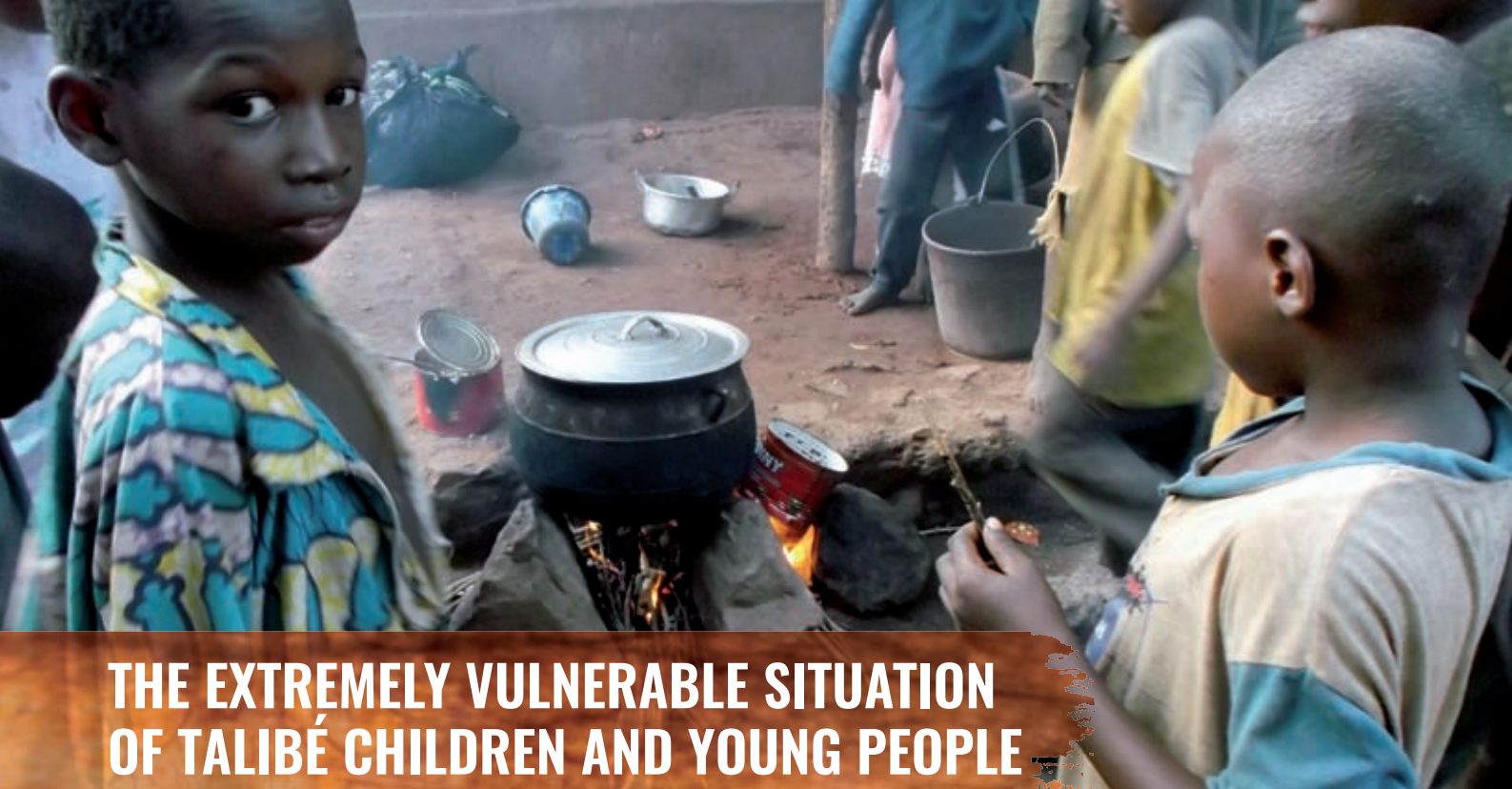
6 Daaras mapping in Dakar, April 2018, Global System Initiative (GSI)

7 In 2014, UNICEF estimated there to be over 9 million talibés in Nigeria. As there are talibés in virtually all Muslim West African countries, even without a comprehensive census, we can estimate that there must be several million.

8 Source: “État des lieux sur l’offre et les mécanismes institutionnels relatifs à l’éducation coranique et à l’enseignement islamique dans les pays d’Afrique de l’Ouest et du centre”, “Analyse régionale”, Quale for UNICEF, 2017.

9 For instance, in Senegal, 59% of talibés in Dakar come from other regions and 9% from other countries in the sub-region (Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, Mali) according to the “Cartographie des écoles coraniques de la région de Dakar” study conducted in 2014 and commissioned by the Senegal Ministry of Justice.

10 Comments made by SIF’s partner Koranic teachers in Senegal and Mali.



THE EXTREMELY VULNERABLE SITUATION OF TALIBÉ CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The children attending traditional schools do not have sufficient access to basic social services (healthcare, healthy diet, water, sanitation, hygiene, etc.).

They live in very precarious conditions; their Koranic teachers sometimes house them in unfinished or abandoned buildings, notably in peri-urban areas. Overcrowding, the lack of hygiene, and lack of a varied diet leave children at the risk of malnutrition, disease and accidents.

They are also exposed to the risk of violence and abuse

As the teacher is unable to meet the needs of all the children in his care, talibé children can be forced to beg. Begging can cover different purposes depending on the school. Begging is sometimes sanctioned as helping “to teach humility” as part of religious education; however, in most cases, the children are sent out begging for financial reasons, for instance to cover the cost of food, or clothes, or to collect a minimum amount of money a day. In the worst cases, begging can be exploited by an ill-meaning teacher for his own gain (begging as a form of exploitation). Thus, talibé children often find themselves out in the streets, exposed to abuse, violence and crime (either as victims or perpetrators). Moreover, in large cities such as Dakar or Bamako, they are often mistaken for ‘street children’ even when they are not begging. As begging is not standard practice everywhere, not all talibés are forced to beg. Yet the children are often not safe from violence within the school itself: corporal punishment, violent assaults perpetrated by the older talibés on the youngest children remain common practice.

Talibé children are particularly vulnerable because many of them were never registered at birth and/or have no birth certificate they can use as their ‘passport for the future’ and legally document their existence and access their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Talibé children have to overcome a range of barriers in order to receive the care and protection that should be available to them from the state.

It should be noted that child protection issues are not specific to Koranic schools. There is also a large number of non-talibé children in Mali and Senegal who were never registered at birth¹¹, who are victims of violent discipline and who are forced to beg in the streets as these practices are linked to numerous different factors, especially economic factors such as poverty.

When it comes to their schooling, talibé children have no access to quality secular education or to opportunities to learn skills that could help them find a decent job in the formal sector

The talibé learns only how to memorise the Koran through recitation and is not taught the basic skills (reading, writing, arithmetic), French, or even Arabic despite this being the language of instruction for the Koran. He also has no access to fun or recreational activities such as sport or culture. As a result, the talibé child is unable to benefit from gateways into the formal education system and subsequent socio-professional opportunities. He has no qualification on which to build and is thus ineligible for vocational training. With no prospects, many young talibé think only of becoming Koranic teachers themselves; however, very few of them will actually achieve this goal.

Faced with the deteriorating socio-economic and security situation in the Sahel, with unemployment, poverty, as well as the lack of opportunities for self-expression and recreation, young talibés find themselves in an increasingly vulnerable position and can lose confidence in their future. They can feel alienated from the promises of modernity they see on social media and may turn to violence, either against others or against themselves.

¹¹ For the period 2010-2018, 13% of births were not registered in Mali and this figure was 27% in Senegal (UNICEF, The State of the World's Children, 2019). Even where children's births have been registered, this does not necessarily mean they have been issued with a birth certificate.



WHY DO PARENTS CHOOSE NON-FORMAL TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS?

A moral education that is consistent with the values of Malian and Senegalese societies

Families consider it extremely important that their children learn their communities' religious and moral values. Educational decisions are based more on extended family or community considerations than on the individual needs and rights of the child¹². Education should above all be useful to the group. According to the parents interviewed in Senegal, their primary motivation for sending their child to the *daaras*¹³ is "the quality of the teaching provided"¹⁴. It is imperative for them that the school provides religious teaching. This is true for parents from all backgrounds, whether underprivileged or not. It is a concern shared by society as a whole, and is virtually a moral obligation.

An educational provision that responds to the shortcomings of the public system and to education policies' lack of inclusion

Public school can sometimes be regarded as a legacy of the colonial era that fails to provide children with the means required to integrate their social and cultural environment. The poor outcomes of the public education system can fuel this perception: inaccessibility, the poor quality of the teaching¹⁵, lack of job opportunities for young graduates who are unable to find work in the formal sector in a Sahel region in crisis. In 2018, in Mali, 26.7% of young people (15-24 years old) were not in education, training or employment; 36.2% of young people were in the same situation in Senegal¹⁶. The public school promoted by the state and its development partners no longer seems to be the only option for achieving high social status. Parents therefore continue to use Koranic schools, where their children will at least receive the teaching required "to cope with life's challenges" as they will have learned the necessary moral values¹⁷.

Koranic schools also remain popular because, despite being free¹⁸, for the most vulnerable households, there is a significant cost involved in sending their children to public school (school supplies, uniforms, etc.); a cost that is not always offset if young people are then unable to find work. By entrusting their child to a Koranic teacher, parents relieve themselves of this financial responsibility.

There are also issues around the inclusion of the most vulnerable children in the formal education system. Governments need to develop a shared educational vision and strengthen the formal system. They must be able to provide children with an identity so that they can attend school. They need to raise parents' awareness of the importance of a good quality education, tackle school dropout and provide access to education to the most vulnerable children (via social safety nets, for example). Another key factor is the lack of public schools in remote rural areas. This inequality in access to schools induces parents in rural regions to send their children to the non-formal traditional Koranic school located in their village. Koranic schools are also a common alternative to public schools in crisis areas: whereas public schools in the north and centre of Mali were forced to close because of the conflict, the Koranic schools have remained open. Verified attacks on public schools in Mali doubled between 2017 and 2018¹⁹; over 900 schools had to close due to increased violence in the country, affecting more than 270,000 children²⁰.

12 Source: "État des lieux sur l'offre et les mécanismes institutionnels relatifs à l'éducation coranique et à l'enseignement islamique dans les pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest et du centre", "Analyse régionale", Quale for UNICEF, 2017.

13 Term used in Senegal for Koranic schools; from the Arabic word 'dar', which means house.

14 Source: "Étude préalable sur le fonctionnement socio-économique des *daaras* en milieu rural et urbain au Sénégal", SIF Senegal, 2018

15 In Mali, between 2010 and 2018, only 12% of children leaving primary school were able to read, and 13% were able to do basic arithmetic; the figures for Senegal were: 61% for reading and 59% for arithmetic (UNESCO Institute for Statistics).

16 Source: Figures from the International Labour Organisation, Key Indicators of the Labour Market.

17 Source: "État des lieux sur l'offre et les mécanismes institutionnels relatifs à l'éducation coranique et à l'enseignement islamique dans les pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest et du centre", "Analyse régionale", Quale for UNICEF, 2017.

18 Source: According to international human rights law, primary education must be compulsory and free to all: General Comment No. 13: The Right to Education, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

19 Source: UNICEF, Regional Office for West and Central Africa, Education Under Threat in West and Central Africa, August 2019.

20 Source: Education Sector Group, June 2019.



THE PLIGHT OF TALIBÉ CHILDREN IS A SOCIAL INCLUSION ISSUE

Long overlooked by public policy and development agency projects, the hundreds of thousands or even millions of talibés suffer from both discrimination and commonly held misconceptions. It is an issue that is poorly understood, and is also sensitive as it touches on religious matters. For governments in the Sahel, it has nonetheless now become a priority for inclusion and for peace.

In both Mali and Senegal, governments are taking the first steps towards integrating these schools into the formal system in order to provide talibé children with a more protective environment and a better quality education. This is also the key aim of the Secours Islamique France talibés inclusion programme.

COMMONLY HELD MISCONCEPTIONS

There are a number of commonly held misconceptions about non-formal traditional Koranic schools and talibé children that need to be disproved.

Misconception #1

It is a recent phenomenon

Koranic teaching first appeared in sub-Saharan Africa in the 11th century following the spread of Islam. It provided the very first type of formalised, collective education. First introduced by Arab traders in West Africa, use of this teaching model became more widespread, helped notably by religious brotherhoods, from the 19th century onwards²¹.

Misconception #2

All koranic schools are alike

There are different types of Koranic school, which can be grouped in accordance with the level of state recognition they enjoy. There are formal Koranic schools, such as the medersa that are similar to religious private schools. These schools follow the national curriculum and are inspected by the state, and can be attended by children from privileged social backgrounds. Then, there are non-formal schools, which are not recognised by the state and thus receive no government technical and financial support.

Misconception #3

There are not many talibés in west africa

From the partial data available, there are estimated to be several tens of thousands or even millions of talibé children in West Africa. The total number of talibés in non-formal Koranic schools is unknown as the majority of West African countries have not collected comprehensive data. Instead, they have focused on the formal establishments that come under Ministry of Education supervision.

Misconception #4

Koranic schools only accept boys

Girls also attend these schools, but boys make up the majority of children entrusted to the care of the Koranic teacher as boarders.

Misconception #5

All talibés are abused and forced to beg

While there are issues around protection, of course not all schools mistreat their children or send them out on the streets to beg. When these practices are employed, as they undoubtedly are, this is mainly a result of poverty and the teacher's inability to cover the cost of looking after all the children in his care. It should also be noted that child protection issues are not specific to Koranic schools. There is also a large number of non-talibé children in Mali and Senegal who were never registered at birth, who are victims of violent discipline and who are forced to beg in the streets, as these practices are essentially linked to poverty.



THE MOVEMENT TO INTEGRATE NON-FORMAL TRADITIONAL KORANIC SCHOOLS

By ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the governments of Mali and Senegal have committed to realising and promoting the rights of the child, including the right to education and to protection, for even the most vulnerable children such as the talibés. This is the first binding international legal instrument that recognises people under 18 years of age as full rights holders with binding fundamental (civil, political, social, economic and cultural) human rights. They have also ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, as well as other international child protection-related legal instruments (ILO Conventions Nos. 138 and 182 on the minimum age and worst forms of child labour, for example).

For a long time, talibé children have been overlooked by public policy in both Senegal and Mali

We do not even have reliable data as to the number of talibés either in these countries or in the Sahel as a whole. The public education system of the 1960s was based on the French colonial model and thus relegated non-formal traditional Koranic schools to the sidelines, outside the system. These schools were not integrated into Ministry of Education strategies and, in the past, came under Ministry of the Interior or Ministry of Local Government ‘control’.

Today, the authorities in Mali and Senegal are working to address this oversight. Attempts to integrate Koranic schools into the formal system have been underway for several years now. This reform movement has been prompted by the international and national commitments made to provide good quality education for all and protection for talibé children. The population explosion in a Sahel region in crisis has also convinced governments of the need to offer a decent future to their young people in order to steer them away from violence. While it is important to remember that the overriding objective is the realisation of talibés’ rights, this situation offers opportunities for change for hundreds of thousands of children.

International cooperation on education has played a key role in helping lay the foundations for the integration of traditional Koranic schools

Prompted by the Education for All (EFA) movement of the 1990s, then by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)²², development partners and NGOs have been placing ever increasing pressure on countries to reform their education systems. The priority given to public education under the EFA movement introduced ‘competition’ between public and traditional Koranic schools, despite Koranic schools being the only type of school available in some rural areas up to the years 2000²³. The governments of Mali and Senegal committed to the EFA movement. It was Senegal that hosted the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, where 164 governments armed the 6 EFA goals. There has, therefore, been a reform movement to integrate talibé children into the formal education system with the aim of increasing school enrolment in Mali and Senegal. Legislation and strategies have been developed for integrating non-formal Koranic schools.

WHAT IS INTEGRATION?

As there is high demand for the provision of traditional Koranic education, the goal is above all to adapt the curricula of Koranic schools to ensure that, in addition to teaching the Koran, they provide children with the basic skills and knowledge required to integrate the formal system via a series of gateways. Some non-formal traditional schools have already updated their curricula to include reading, writing and arithmetic (usually in French as Mali and Senegal are both French-speaking countries). The Koranic teachers recognise the importance of providing an education that can lead to employment alongside their religious teaching. These schools, which are striving for integration, can all be very different and are changing over time at the initiative of the teachers themselves, and they usually receive development partner support. Today, it is important to ensure that the integration process being led by the authorities, in consultation with the teachers, results in a clear and harmonised roadmap for the effective inclusion of all talibé children.

²² Particularly MDG 2: Achieve universal primary education.

²³ Source: “Etats réformateurs et éducation arabo-islamique en Afrique”, “Afrique Contemporaine”, French Agency for Development, 2017.



In Senegal the government has taken steps to create gateways between formal and non-formal schools by encouraging non-formal schools to introduce secular subjects (French, maths) into their curricula in addition to memorisation of the Koran. However, due to social and political reluctance, this daaras 'modernisation'²⁴ programme is still in the experimental stage. Nevertheless, some significant progress has been made, such as the creation of the Ministry of Education's Daara Inspectorate, and the definition of criteria for recognising the daaras as educational establishments, thereby enabling them to benefit from gateways with the formal system. However, some of the criteria can be difficult to apply and involve closely monitoring the schools. Many teachers have rejected them out of fear that their schools will be threatened with closure. Problems can begin when seeking to prove the identity of the Koranic teacher as many of them were never registered at birth. A 'daara modernisation bill' has been drafted to formalise this integration but this has not yet been adopted by the Senegalese parliament.

In Mali the exclusion of talibé children was placed firmly on the agenda by the 2008 forum held in Bamako on the integration of Koranic schools into the national education system. Both this forum and the creation of a 'committee to monitor the progress made on integrating Koranic schools into Mali's education system' in 2010 demonstrated the government's willingness to take ownership of talibés' education.

The government announced that Koranic schools would be transferred out of the Ministry of Regional and Local Government and into the Ministry of Education, and also included talibés in the 10-year educational development programme, the "Programme décennal de Développement de l'Éducation (PRODEC)". However, these political efforts have produced few tangible results: the management unit for the Koranic school renovation and bilingual education support project was only created in 2016; the decree placing Koranic schools under the Ministry of Education's supervision has not yet been signed; and, for the moment, most of the changes made have been instigated by individual Koranic teachers, often with the support of development partners or NGOs such as SIF (to integrate secular subjects into the school curricula, for instance).

Today, with the SDG framework and thus the Global Education 2030 Agenda, inclusion is recognised as the key factor for achieving universal education. The visibility of talibé children therefore needs to be raised, not only at the national level but also among NGOs and donors working in education.

Ensuring the protection of talibé children has also been a factor in integrating schools into the formal system

Abuse scandals and begging by children have been widely covered in international and national media, notably as a result of various reports produced by international NGOs. As with education, legislation has been developed to ensure the protection of talibé children but this has had little effect on the ground. Worse, some government action has breached international child protection standards, such as the brutal removal of street children in Senegal in 2016 by the police, which failed to provide sustainable solutions for the children²⁵.

²⁴ Term used in Senegal.

²⁵ The SIF field office in Senegal was involved in the advocacy campaign run by the Platform of European NGOs in Senegal to integrate child protection measures into this national street children removal plan: "9 propositions pour un retrait effectif des enfants des rues au Sénégal", September 2016, Jokkale, Position Paper. The field office also participated in the 'zero violence against children' initiative developed to support 'street children'.



INTEGRATION CHALLENGES

Talibé children remain insufficiently targeted by international assistance and development stakeholders and donors. There are numerous preconceptions about Koranic schools, such as that they are closed to the public and inaccessible. Stakeholders are loathe to support a system that runs parallel the formal education system and that poses risks to the children. The sensitive topic of religion is also involved. However, integration is a very real problem and SIF arms that there is a need to take action in these schools, in conjunction with all stakeholders, to develop adapted and inclusive public policies. It is essential to increase their visibility in order to make rapid and long-term progress on realising the rights of the child.

Resistance to change is impeding progress. The Koranic schools' 'modernisation' and 'integration' aspect inhibits some stakeholders and communities, who fear that their traditions will be called into question. The Koranic teachers are concerned that their schools will be closed down, and political stakeholders can be reluctant to interfere in religious institutions. Awareness-raising and behaviour change are long-term activities and should take place once trust has been built up between the authorities and the Koranic teachers.

The lack of data and resources for collecting this data makes it impossible to reliably map non-formal Koranic schools and accurately determine the number of talibé children. This data is nonetheless essential for developing coherent nationwide strategies. In Mali, the security crisis is exacerbating this issue as certain regions afflicted by conflict cannot be reached.

The lack of political priority and effective public policy on talibé children is only deferring the problem. Not enough priority is being afforded to integration on the political agenda, and not enough state resources are being deployed to implement concerted integration strategies (support to help schools gain official recognition as educational institutions, Ministry of Education budget allocated to monitoring and follow-up, etc.).

The integration process is complex. Although the basic foundations have been laid, a set of rules still needs to be defined: what criteria do the schools need to meet in order to gain formal recognition? What curriculum will be offered in these schools, and thus what gateways can be created with the formal system? Will children be able to receive a state-recognised qualification? How will the schools be monitored and supported? How can we ensure the children are properly treated? There are numerous technical questions that remain unresolved and which require long-term consultation and a shared educational vision.

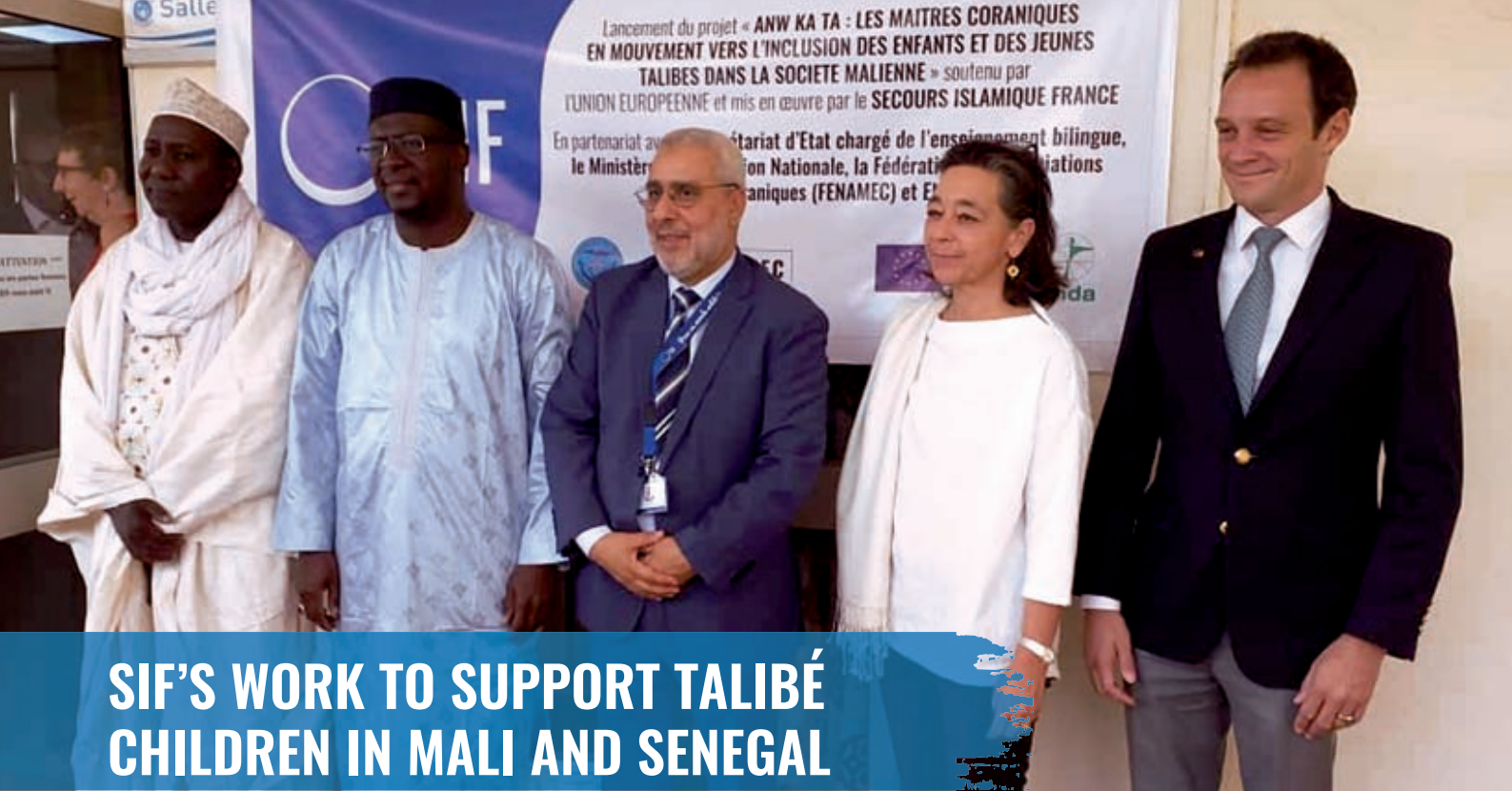
Stakeholders' participation in the decision-making processes needs to be reinforced, specifically the participation of Koranic teachers' organisations, in order to overcome obstacles to defining a roadmap acceptable to all and ensure the effective citizen-led monitoring of public policy.

The shortcomings of the public education system may also jeopardise the success of integration policies. The public systems of both Mali and Senegal are currently unable to take in all children via the gateways and provide them with access to a good quality education or training in compliance with right to education standards, as per the goals of the Global Education 2030 Agenda (SDG4) and the Abidjan Principles²⁶.

Without an inclusive policy that enables the most vulnerable to access the public education system, poverty will continue to drive parents to entrust their children to traditional Koranic school teachers that are outside of the system.

SIF supports integrating non-formal Koranic schools into the formal education system and improving the protection system to help talibé children. As part of our talibés inclusion programme, dialogue and cooperation forums have been created to transcend differences and involve all stakeholders in developing ways of integrating non-formal Koranic schools into the formal education system.

²⁶ The guiding principles on the human rights obligations of States to provide public education and to regulate private involvement in education, recognised by resolution A/HRC/41/L.26 of the United Nations Human Rights Council of 09 July 2019.



SIF'S WORK TO SUPPORT TALIBÉ CHILDREN IN MALI AND SENEGAL



OUR OBJECTIVE

SIF works to foster the inclusion of talibés by improving their living conditions, as well as their access to good quality education and to protection, by supporting the duty-bearers (authorities and Koranic teachers' organisations) to develop new education and protection standards for traditional Koranic schools. These standards, which are tested and assessed within schools supported by SIF, will inform the development of a comprehensive and nationwide school integration strategy to ensure the sustainable inclusion of talibés into society in Mali and Senegal.

Alarmed by the scale of talibé children's needs and unequal access to rights, SIF began working with traditional Koranic schools in 2014, using a child rights based approach. In 2020, programme development is continuing and is being scaled up in both Senegal and Mali. It is being supported by a number of institutional donors: the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs' Crisis and Support Centre, the French Development Agency, the European Union and the German international development agency (GIZ).

At the moment (November 2020), we are working in 65 schools: 15 schools in Senegal (in Pikine and Karfrine), and 50 schools in Mali (in the cercles of Bamako, Mopti, Segou and Tombouktou), in close partnership with the two countries' Ministries of Education and with Koranic teachers' organisations²⁷.



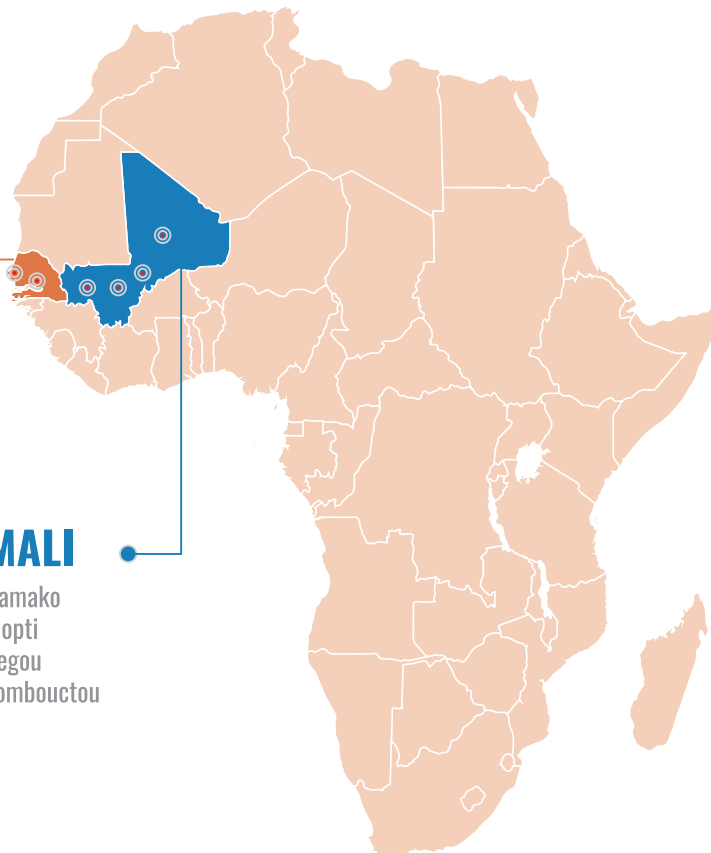
PROGRAM LOCALIZATION

SENEGAL

Pikine
Kaffrine

MALI

Bamako
Mopti
Segou
Tombouktou



PROGRAM INTERVENTION ZONE IN SENEGAL AND MALI



OUR TALIBÉS INCLUSION ACTIVITIES

Improving the children's living conditions and meeting their basic needs

An urgent response to the basic social needs of the children is required. We are rehabilitating the buildings in which the children live, distributing basic necessities (mats, mosquito nets, etc.), and providing access to water, sanitation and hygiene in the schools. We help cover their food needs and ensure they are registered with national public healthcare bodies or insurance companies (CMU/RAMED)²⁸, tasks that can involve first registering the children with the authorities if they have no identity papers.

Promoting a protective environment for the children

To address protection issues, SIF supports traditional practices that foster the rights of the child and child protection, and helps to curb harmful practices. The countries in which SIF works have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and even sometimes have legislation prohibiting the use of corporal punishment in the education system (Mali), as well as provisions to tackle forced begging (Senegal). However, this legislation is rarely enforced. SIF trains and raises the awareness of Koranic teachers on the rights of the child, on registering children with the authorities, on childhood development and psychology, as well as on alternatives to corporal punishment and begging.

SIF works to reduce begging in the short-term by helping to meet the children's basic needs, thus freeing the Koranic teachers from financially having to resort to this practice. Over the long-term, SIF promotes traditional measures that uphold the rights of the child and foster child protection, such as 'marrainage' in Senegal, a type of sponsorship under which female volunteers called 'marraines' provide a form of family support to one or several children, providing them with at least one meal a day and monitoring their hygiene and their health. SIF builds their monitoring and reporting capacities to ensure they inform the local protection committees should they observe any instances of abuse. In exchange for the meal they provide to the talibés they sponsor, SIF helps them improve their livelihoods by financially and technically supporting their income-

generating activities (trade, crafts, food processing, etc.). As a result, our talibés inclusion programme also has an impact on the local community. To ensure child well-being and the children's psycho-social development, fun, sporting and cultural activities are organised outside of the Koran memorisation lessons to 'open up the school' to the local area and enable the talibés to create social bonds with other local children and young people.

Developing access to education and access to vocational training

SIF provides the Koranic teachers with teaching support, puts in place French lessons, maths lessons and lessons in other secular subjects to provide children with access to a good quality basic education and improve their social and job prospects. SIF provides individual support to young talibés to help them build their life and career paths and implement their training or employment projects based on the needs of the labour market (carpentry, metalwork, dye-making, construction work, farming, bricklaying or setting up small businesses, etc.).

Improving the understanding and inclusion of talibés in public policy

Construction of public policy:

SIF works with the national Ministry of Education in each country on integrating Koranic schools into the formal education system. SIF thus provides recommendations to the authorities on the inclusion of talibé children and facilitates the creation of institutional-level inclusive cooperation forums. These forums notably define standards for developing gateways between the formal and non-formal systems, as well as child welfare standards, and alternatives to corporal punishment and begging. The ultimate aim is to develop a national talibés integration strategy. In Senegal, SIF is supporting Koranic teachers to complete the procedures required to ensure their schools are recognised by the Daara Inspectorate.

28 "Couverture Médicale Universelle" / "Régime d'Assistance Médicale".

Research / expertise:

The integration standards will be tested in SIF-supported schools via Participatory Action Research²⁹ in order to develop a true qualitative approach. This is an approach in which the local communities (Koranic teachers, talibés, parents' associations, Koranic school support committees, outreach workers, etc.) will work together to consider, research and debate child-related issues and how to resolve them.

Once assessed and improved, these tested solutions will inform work to develop a national integration strategy that can be replicated by the different Ministries of Education.

Organisation of civil society:

In order to develop new talibés education and protection standards and a national integration strategy, all stakeholders need to be involved to ensure that everyone agrees on and incorporates the decisions made for realising the rights of talibé children. SIF is therefore working to build the capacities of and structure the Koranic teachers' organisations to enable them to present their recommendations at the SIF-organised cooperation forums. The teachers' opinions need to be heard, not only because this issue directly affects them, but also because their buy-in to the formalisation process is vital for ensuring they become agents of change with the children's parents and the communities.



²⁹ Participatory Action Research is a scientific approach that combines both action and research techniques to build understanding and knowledge of a situation to then use this knowledge to change it by carrying out tangible action on the ground. It is 'participatory' because all stakeholders are involved in the approach to come up with and define solutions.



OUR APPROACH

The child rights based approach, the core of our intervention

SIF has honed our strategy to provide a rights of the child response that is as holistic as possible, rather than focusing only on a child's basic needs. We have achieved this by building the capacities of the rights holders (conducting awareness-raising sessions on the rights of the child with talibé children and young people) and of the duty-bearers to ensure they progressively realise talibés' rights (working with teachers, communities and authorities to change policy and practices). This will ensure that the programme has an even greater and more sustainable impact on the children. Under this approach, the projects implemented have to focus on the effective realisation of the rights of the child and apply human rights principles, such as universality, indivisibility and accountability, as well as the four guiding principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely non-discrimination, best interests of the child, right to life, survival and development, and respect for the views of the child³⁰.

Partnership with Koranic teachers

As a result of our adaptable, long-term and transparent strategy, SIF, the Koranic teachers and Koranic teachers' organisations have forged a relationship of trust that is crucial to the success of the project. It was vital that we did not heavy-handedly interfere in their practices. Instead, we first needed to understand why the teachers employed begging and corporal punishment practices in order to find acceptable alternatives for the Koranic teachers to use, and to build a partnership with the teachers supporting our approach and our objectives. Some Koranic teachers asked if we intended to intervene in the content of their religious teaching. We thus needed to prove that this was completely outside our mandate: despite being a faith-based organisation, we are a humanitarian NGO, which neither proselytises nor intervenes in religious teaching.

Partnership with the authorities

As with the Koranic teachers, SIF has built up a relationship of trust with the authorities on the issue of talibé children. SIF acts as a facilitator between the authorities and the teachers in institutional consultations on talibé children. The programme also helps to reinforce the legitimacy of state stakeholders to address talibé issues, which are often considered to be the preserve of religious institutions.

The community-based approach

This approach is strongly assimilated into our programme to integrate talibé children into their local environment. Social inclusion starts through inclusion in the immediate environment, which is the local neighbourhood. This approach helps to overcome commonly held misconceptions about Koranic schools and talibé children. It also highlights talibé exclusion and, in some cases, encourages the local community to help with the children's care.

The sub-regional approach

This programme is being implemented in Mali and Senegal as these two countries suffer from the same child education and protection issues. This approach enables a generally similar response for improving the educational and protective environments of talibé children and young people, yet which can also be adapted to each context. The approach facilitates a prescriptive comparison of the 'good practices' found in each country, as well as sub-regional research. The aim of the project is also to improve knowledge of talibé children and young people at all levels and to ensure that the Ministry of Education's school integration strategy, and the standards tested in the SIF partner schools, can be disseminated throughout the sub-region given that talibés inclusion is a common sub-regional issue.

³⁰ SIF has been working to promote and implement the rights of the child-based approach and, in 2020, was involved in developing a checklist for integrating the rights of the child-based approach in the project cycle (checklist "Pour l'intégration de l'ABDE sur les droits de l'enfant dans le cycle de projet") produced by Groupe Enfanace of which we are a member.

The partnership approach

In addition to the vital close partnership with the authorities and Koranic teachers, the project requires a strong and coordinated partnership approach in order to provide a rights of the child response that is as holistic as possible. SIF is working to set up partnerships with specialised bodies able to meet specific needs, such as medical assistance or vocational training for young people.

The main organisations involved include:

- > The Ministries of National Education, notably the national departments of basic education responsible for the state strategy on talibés inclusion and protection. The Ministries of National Education have participated in and supported the development of the project, demonstrating their involvement and ownership from the outset;
- > The state's local deconcentrated authorities;
- > Koranic teachers' organisations in Mali and Senegal;
- > Neighbourhood child protection committees;
- > Enda Mali (NGO) that has been working on talibé issues for the last 10 years;
- > Save The Children Senegal (NGO), which is providing educational and vocational integration support.





TESTIMONIES FROM TALIBÉ CHILDREN

ABOU, 13 YEARS OLD

“All we did was beg before. But now, the Koranic teacher has banned begging”.

ASSANE, 15 YEARS OLD

“The children learn the Koran and French, the community helps us. There is less violence. I want to become a great football player, a successful businessman or a Koranic teacher”.

PAPE, 19 YEARS OLD

“When I am ill, one of the talibé trained by SIF helps us. There is no more violence between the talibés, and the Koranic teacher is more aware of our situation”.

OUSMANE

A young talibé who helps the koranic teacher with lessons

“I learnt the Koran at the daara. Now, I am continuing to learn and I also teach in the daara. The children are supported by the marraines and we are making progress in our lessons. I think that decisions should not come from above, from the government.

You should always be aware of the origins of the daara in Senegal before making top-level decisions to apply them. Often, the people representing the daaras in decision-making bodies have not attended the daaras”.

SALIF, 22 YEARS OLD

A former talibé, who has benefited from vocational training

“As we could do the job we like, I chose vulcanisation³¹. It is the job that my father did. Unfortunately, he died when I was a child. Everything went as planned. I got my certificate in 2017. And I got the equipment to set up my business. When you are offered an opportunity like that... I still can't believe that this equipment is mine. I have had a house built in my father's plot in the village. I have bought a cow, a hoe and also a cart to use in the village fields. Everything has changed, I am happy; but there are still a lot of talibés out of work”.



“I am at the daara and I want to become a great lawyer to defend children.”



“Health for all children, I would be at the bedside of the talibés.”

³¹ Repairing tyres.



TESTIMONIES FROM KORANIC TEACHERS

KEBA GAYE

Koranic teacher, President of the Regional Federation of Koranic Teachers' Associations in Dakar (FRAMEC)

"I have changed a lot. I have stopped sending my talibés out to beg and yet I currently have more than 100 children in my care. The daara situation in Senegal is complicated. There is the government that has its own philosophy and the Koranic teachers who have their understanding.

Since getting to know Secours Islamique France, not only have I changed more, but I have facilitated changes among a number of other Koranic teachers. I have identified 15 daaras that could be open to change. With SIF's support, real change has been made in the daaras. Many children now learn without violence or begging. Some daaras have definitively abandoned begging and are actively involved in the children's education.

My organisation has supported an inter-daara event on the rights of the child. It is one of the rare occasions where we attended a talibé event that discussed the rights of the child, with support from the Koranic teachers. It was a challenge for us.

We are better today with the authorities and different stakeholders working on child protection to raise the awareness of Koranic teachers and parents on the talibés' situation, which cannot continue. We must absolutely find solutions. Stakeholders must start listening to each other and serious dialogue must be initiated between the public authorities, civil society organisations and Koranic teachers. For the time being, the immediate solution is to involve the community in providing food for the talibés. In addition, the state has the responsibility of supporting the daaras. The state must stand up and look after the talibés. The state, the Koranic teachers, the communities and the NGOs need to sit down and discuss their care".

MAHAMANE NIANTAO

President of the Association of Koranic Teachers in Bamako (AMEC-BA)

"Some young people have been trained. This was previously not an option for a talibé. We want to set up training centres in all the regions of Mali. Then, after having learned the Koran, the talibés can receive training. The qualifications they attain can be used to find work here and elsewhere".

AHMED SYLLA

"I have realised that, for a long time, I did not have the wherewithal to uphold my commitments. It was after the arrival of SIF that we discovered more relevant ways of supporting talibé children. It is due to the organisational support provided by SIF that our school is now recognised and taken into consideration.

Today, we do our best to teach French. I am invited to all the meetings on Koranic schools and I take part in discussions. The local authorities take me into account. That is why my talibés took part in the independence day parade. Before working with SIF, all of my talibés survived by begging. As far as Koranic teachers in general are concerned, it is time to be more open to change".

DAOUDA NDIONE

"Those people who knew my school before can see that real change has been made. The talibé children are better cared for. They have contact with the local community and receive support for food and even health-care. They learn the Koran and French".

SERIGNE PAPE FAYE

“The children are more comfortable in the daara. The children’s suffering has been considerably reduced. After memorising the Koran, young people learn trades in the workshops. Some do carpentry, others do mechanics. The children have access to water, decent dormitories, and I am now a better trained Koranic teacher. All Koranic teachers should make an effort to reduce begging. At my school, the youngest children no longer beg”.

OUSTAZ POUYE

“The daara is continuously changing, both as regards its administration and its consideration of the rights of the child. The talibés now excel in formal education. One of my children is 2nd in his class. I want to help them become more knowledgeable than me. In my daara, the children no longer beg. They benefit from a diverse educational curriculum. I facilitate their return to school while continuing to teach them the Koran”.

OUSMANE DIALLO

“The Koranic school is important given the current situation. It is a legacy. We are following in the footsteps of our ancestors. We are seeking to better educate our children. The talibés here and the other children are almost completely integrated. They meet up, play football and chat together. We must think of the talibés as being just like other children.

A talibé is also somebody’s child. He has just been entrusted to a teacher. This will facilitate social cohesion. Previously, it was very easy to distinguish between a talibé and other children just by their way of being. Now, things have changed. Some practices are no longer used. We have benefited from the support of the association of Koranic teachers in Bamako, for which I would like to thank them.

I would also like to ask the community to take the talibés and their teachers into account. It is not a question of money. Wherever there is a school, the community should take it into consideration. I am very glad to be at peace and in perfect cohesion with the local neighbourhood. We share our social events. There are no barriers between the children”.





OUR ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INCLUSION OF TALIBÉ CHILDREN

Talibé children and young people must no longer be overlooked: their rights must be respected to ensure they are included in their society. Their inclusion must be given political priority by the governments of Mali and Senegal, and talibés should be specifically targeted by development partners working on education and protection in the Sahel region.

➤ **As a first step, it is necessary to respond immediately to the basic needs of talibé children** by providing them with a healthy, safe and suitable learning environment while, more specifically, also ensuring they have access to water, sanitation and hygiene, access to healthcare, a balanced diet and to protection services. Traditional community mechanisms should be used to improve the coverage of basic needs and steps taken to rally communities to the cause of talibé children.

➤ **Measures must be taken to ensure the births of talibé children are registered and that they are issued with a birth certificate** to enable them to access their basic rights, such as their rights to healthcare, education and protection. The governments of Mali and Senegal, with development partner support, need to strengthen their registration services and develop appropriate solutions for parents and communities to access these services (making them free to use, opening up local offices, enabling births to be registered via mobile phone, for example).

➤ **Knowledge and information on talibés' issues should be disseminated to ensure they are properly taken into account** at all levels (local, national and international): tackling their exclusion entails tackling the prejudices against them and against traditional Koranic schools and Koranic teachers. It is vital that research and knowledge is developed to enable the appropriate public policies to be introduced in both Mali and Senegal. This is also required to enable sub-regional lesson learning and replication in other countries in the region also affected by these issues.

➤ **Governments should set up nationwide quantitative and qualitative data collection systems on non-formal traditional Koranic schools and conduct a census of talibé children** – subject to data retention criteria. Data should be collected and assessed, with support from de-

velopment partners. This mapping exercise will enable governments to develop relevant and effective public policies that are appropriate to the context and that enable targeted support to be provided to non-formal traditional Koranic schools.

➤ **Governments must provide long-term support to the non-formal traditional Koranic school integration process** in order to ensure access to good quality education and to improve the protection of talibé children.

➤ Governments need to put standards in place for education, which have been jointly developed with all stakeholders, in particular, standards on the gateways to the formal system (curricula, learning assessments and qualifications, school in 'transition', etc.), and on the protection of talibé children (alternatives to corporal punishment and begging, etc.).

➤ National-level integration strategies, accompanied by a budget programme, should be developed, based on standards that have been tested and assessed in the field.

➤ Civil society should be regularly and effectively involved in institutional discussions on developing the standards and future integration strategy. It is essential to involve the Koranic teachers in this process to ensure that the solutions are both appropriate and sustainable. To this end, it is also necessary to support the organisation of Koranic teachers' associations to ensure their representativeness, their legitimacy and their capacity to take part in discussions.

➤ **The formal public system must be strengthened** so that it is able to ensure all children are included, even the most vulnerable such as talibé children. The government must be able to overcome all the obstacles preventing access to formal education, to raise parents' awareness of the importance of a good quality education for their children and to tackle school dropout.

The training and socio-professional integration of young people should also be a priority in education strategies. Governments must support vocational training programmes, building notably on recruitment pools, and support the teaching of basic skills. The 'older talibés', namely young school leavers from traditional Koranic schools, should be provided with individual career guidance.

➤ **The child protection systems, essential social services, should be reinforced.** Governments, through their technical agencies, should ensure that child protection legislation and minimum care standards are applied in order to guarantee the respect for the rights of the child. It is also important to use mechanisms such as family scholarships or access to universal health cover, as well as community-based organisations providing local services, such as local protection committees. Allocating resources to these organisations and mechanisms will ensure a more effective response to children's issues. Resources also need to be allocated to prevention and to awareness-raising for community stakeholders and families in order to foster changes in practices.



CONCLUSION

THE INCLUSION OF TALIBÉ CHILDREN IS CRUCIAL FOR THE YOUTH OF WEST AFRICA

We will not be able to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals if we leave hundreds of thousands of children on the sidelines.

There is an urgent need to provide them with protection. These children, who are 'outside the system' and mostly live in extreme deprivation, receive no protection and have no rights to health-care, nutrition or hygiene. There is also an urgent need to ensure their integration.

Not only are they affected by socio-economic divides and by geographic divides between urban and rural areas, they are also excluded by the education system.

These children, who are deprived of support, often end up dropping out of school; with all the risks that this entails. The consequences of this are particularly acute in times of crisis and during periods of violent conflict over claims for identity particularism, such as those currently affecting the Sahel region.

Integrating these children is of crucial importance for societies in West Africa, where over 64% of the population is under 24 years old, an age group hit particularly hard by unemployment.

Even if Senegal and Mali take action now to establish 'integrated' Koranic school models with gateways between non-formal Koranic schools and the formal education system, the mapping of integration pathways is a task that can only be completed over the long-term and in conjunction with all stakeholders, specifically with the Koranic teachers.

Today, Koranic teachers are increasingly likely to be settled and living in urban areas, and aware of what is happening around them. The majority realise that the children need a basic education in order to integrate into society and find a job. The challenge lies in bringing these teachers together and training them to jointly construct an open education system that ensures the children are protected.

Plural societies need to be created, with varied educational pathways and with gateways that guarantee child protection and access to both basic and good quality education, as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.





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LABEL



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