



SDGI Mission Report

Talibé Children in Senegal

Sustainable Development Group International
2008



Introduction

This report is written in relation to SDGI mission to Senegal during month of July 2008. All information comes from consultative sessions with international and national organizations, NGOs and other relevant actors active in Senegal as well as SDGI participation in UNICEF and Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Directorate General for Development Co-operation, sponsored regional workshop on children rights relative to the issue of talibé children in the city of Saint Louis.

The report intends to highlight some of the central issues concerning talibés. It is written as a strategy guide for potential partners as well as volunteers who wish to know more about the subject. For more information about SDGI or on how to get involvement please see www.sdg-int.org.

SDGI would like to recognise the following organisations for contributing with valuable information and insight to this report: UNICEF, The International Committee of the Red Cross, ENDA Jeunesse Action and Diapol, SamuSocial, Save the Children, La Maison de la Gare St. Louis and the valuable partnership of Oxford Friends of Senegal.

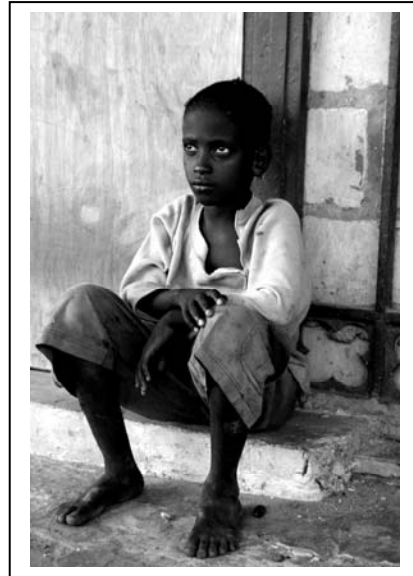
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Summary

The issues related to the situation of talibé children in Senegal are numerous and deserve greater attention than they have received. Although there are many organizations currently active in the region, a viable national strategy is yet to be developed.

Talibés are children, often subjected, to the care and education of local Qur'anic scholars called Marabouts. Many of the children come from rural and often remote areas in Senegal or are brought in from surrounding countries to attend Qur'anic schools, also known as Daaras.

While many of the Talibés enrol in Qur'anic schools by their own will, international and local organizations have also noted that many of them are sent away by parents or often male relatives acting in the capacity of guardians.



As Senegal is, by means of its constitution, a secular state with separation between religion and government, the national education does not incorporate any Qur'anic teaching. Consequently Daaras are not regulated on a national level and the Qur'anic schools have become rather autonomous in how they operate. For many of the children enrolled in Daaras it has resulted in a rather arbitrary system of education. It is not unusual for children to stay for several years at the Daaras without adequate preparation to eventually enter into the national education system.

Another reason for their prolonged stay at the Daaras is the fact that many of them can spend six- 12 hours on the street collecting money which leaves them little or no time for their intended studies- a practice which has been recognised to amount to 'worst form of child labour' as defined by various international conventions.

Many of the children from surrounding countries do not have adequate identification papers and provide obvious difficulties for Senegalese authorities in relation to migration, questions of citizenship, employment etc.

As Talibés are often subjected to a life on the street, where physical abuse and violence is not uncommon, there is a high prevalence of chronic diseases caused by mal nutrition, lack of basic sanitary conditions, and inadequate health care.

To adequately deal with the issue, it is increasingly important to support local and communal initiatives which can serve as guiding strategies and provide for 'good practices' to other communities. Such initiatives must be directed in co-ordination and co-operation with relevant local as well as national authorities. Any sustainable solution must involve all sectors of Senegalese society and encourage a wide inter-institutional and civil dialogue.

Talibé Children in Senegal

The word talibé comes from the Arabic ‘talib’ meaning student, disciple, or apprentice. Although the word has come to acquire different meanings and connotations it generally refers to children who are enrolled in Qur’anic Schools or so called Daaras.

Talibés are almost exclusively boys who can be either permanently living with their Qur’anic teacher, also known as a Marabout, or ‘semi boarded’ at their Daara. The age of the talibés in the Daaras can vary from 4-15 years, although older pupils are also frequent. Most current reports don’t encompass older students as they don’t qualify as ‘children’.¹ Nevertheless, it must be highlighted that in some cases there are talibés as old as 25.



While some children allegedly arrive at the Daaras of their own accord or with the oral permission of their parents, many are often forced to enrol by respective guardian, rarely their mothers or other female members from their families.

A common trait for most talibé children is the fact that they resort to begging in the street where become extremely vulnerable to all types of violence as well as trafficking and sexual abuse. For the purpose of this report a talibé is defined by exhibiting one or several of the below factors (the list is non-exhaustive):

- boy-child in permanent or temporary rupture from his family,²
- displaced child often from villages or neighbouring countries living permanently or partially with a Marabout at a Daara,
- child which has escaped the Daara and is currently living on the street.³

¹ This is based on national labour and education legislation which does not allow for persons under the age of 15 to carry out work unless in relation to their practical education. Education in Senegal is accordingly ‘mandatory and free’ between the ages six and 16.

² Many organizations have chosen to make reference to ‘children in temporary rupture from their families’ or ‘in a difficult situation’ (from French ‘enfants en rupture familiale’ or ‘enfants en situation difficile’) in order to find an more encompassing and broader definition.

³ Please note that the definition of a talibé may differ in other reports. UNICEF makes a distinction between children begging in the street and talibés where the latter must be enrolled in a Daara. We recognise that a small percentage of the children on the street are not, or have never been, students of a Marabout. For the purpose of this report we wish to bring attention to all children that resort to begging for their survival.

Due to the lack of reliable statistical data, it is currently difficult to say exactly how many talibés there are in the country of Senegal. A recent UNICEF study in the capitol region of Dakar estimates that there are about 7 600 children who resort to begging. About 90% of these are talibés.

An IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks) article from 2004 cites a UNICEF estimate of about 100,000 children temporarily or permanently living on the street in Senegal. The number amounts to about 1% of the Senegalese population.

Central Issues and Needs

Central to the issue of the talibés is the question of basic children rights. The talibés lack in rudimentary sanitary conditions, health care, education, vocational training, protection from sexual, physical and psychological abuse, trafficking as well as positive stimuli which can foster and further their personal and social development.

Although there is an existing plethora of institutions which provide basic services for the talibés, the situation is far from satisfactory and a viable national strategy is yet to be developed.

Many talibés are today suffering from visible chronic dermatological diseases, parasites and exhibit illnesses related to nutritional deficiency. Sexually transmitted diseases have also been reported although in rare cases. It is notable that no reliable statistical data has been published on this issue.

Likewise, the lack of data regarding the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among the children must be considered with extreme caution as there are legal and ethical issues related to mandatory testing of children.



Marabouts, Qur'anic Education and the Daara

A Marabout is a Qur'anic teacher/scholar who takes informal custody of children in order to provide religious schooling and knowledge of the Qur'an. Many Marabouts allegedly open Daaras as a source of income for themselves and their families.

Senegal is defined by its constitution as a secular state and religious education is not readily provided on a national level. It is therefore customary to enrol children in Qur'anic schooling at Daaras. For many families the Daara has also come to provide an alternative 'care' for their children. Consequently, a large number of children often come from distant rural areas but also neighbouring countries. How these children are brought into the country and under what premises is yet to be critically investigated.

There are currently no formal national regulatory mechanisms for establishing Daaras and Qur'anic educational facilities. It is therefore theoretically possible for anybody to make claims for opening a

Daara and take informal custody of children. The lack of financial support for Daaras, coupled with the impossibility of many families to pay for their children has, according to most Marabouts, forced the children to resort to begging. According to a comprehensive UNICEF, ILO and World Bank report, up to 90% of the children begging in the street are talibés enrolled and boarded at local Daaras.⁴

In this respect it should be highlighted that the Daaras rarely provide adequate preparation to the talibé for eventually entering or re-entering the national educational system. The prolonged and unregulated schooling at the Daaras must be acknowledged as a contributing factor to illiteracy, lack of professional training, and consequently also high unemployment and underdevelopment.

Custodial Rights and Displacement of Children



On the question of custodial rights it is important to note that many children are sent to the Daaras on the basis of oral informal arrangements between respective parent or guardian and the Marabout. Many children are brought into the country without adequate identification.

Currently many organizations express concerns related to legal constraints on providing immediate relief to talibé children when needed as there is an understanding that the children are in the 'care' of their respective Marabout.

Most venues for extracting a child from a hurtful environment imply prolonged administrative processes and often authorities which are not adequately equipped to provide treatment if necessary. There are currently several legal and practical constraints on the work of local aid organizations.

It is important to adequately investigate the legality of the custodial care and develop a system where immediate relief can be delivered when necessary. It is also important to increase communication between local authorities and organizations in order to facilitate assistance.

Any 'relief system' can not in any way preclude a simultaneous development and amelioration of the conditions in the Daaras or any questions directly related to the welfare of talibé children. Nor can it impede the development of a comprehensive national preventive strategy for the displacement of these children.

⁴ Although the report is only pertinent to the region of Dakar it does provide a good reference in relation to the rest of the country.

Integration into the National Education

Integrating the children into the national education system is central to their developmental and social progress. The current lack of alternatives deprives them of basic opportunities to ameliorate their condition and constructively contribute to Senegalese society. It should be noted that initiatives must take into account preventive strategies as well as seek to fulfil rudimentary needs of all talibé children.

- Language

One of the most important issues of reintegrating talibé children into the national education system is the question of language. As French is the official language it also becomes important to make sure that talibé children are provided with adequate language schooling. Many children are native speakers of other languages and do not have the necessary level of literacy to be able to successfully follow education in French.



- Citizenship

As many talibé children are brought in from neighbouring countries there is a strong prevalence of displaced children which are not citizens of Senegal. Many do not possess adequate identification and in some cases their date of birth and family may be difficult to determine. Local and national authorities, NGOs, and other organisations working with talibé children are provided with obvious difficulties in integrating the children into the national education system as well as issuing necessary identification papers.

- Age

The lack of a well defined educational structure for the Qur'anic schools has contributed to a rather arbitrary approach to the education provided. Today it is possible to identify talibé children which have been with their Marabout for an extended and undetermined period of time. That is also why the age of talibés can range roughly between the ages of four and 15. Older pupils, up to the age of 25, are also common and there have been cases of children as young as the age of two. Many of the older children or young adults are consequently no longer willing to enter the formal educational system but show expressed interest in vocational training.

'Modernisation' of the Daara

Many Marabouts are currently envisaging an integrative approach to the education in the Daaras. Often referred to as the 'Modern Daara' or 'Modernisation of Daaras' the process encompasses educational possibilities in French, Arabic and a third national or regional language in order to facilitate the integration or reintegration of talibé children into the formal educational system.



While many Marabouts are overtly positive and encourage co-operation with organisations in terms of providing a broader context to the Qur'anic education as well as fulfilling rudimentary needs of the children, there is still a need of further engagement of Marabouts in the process of consolidating a viable educational system.

Recommendations

It is notable that several organisations have increasingly focused their attention on preventive strategies as means to a long term approach to the problem. Nevertheless, short term needs are still eminent and need to be met with expedient urgency. It is important to regards these approaches as complimentary.

- Political Will

Critique of the Senegalese government to adequately deal with the issue of the Talibés is often cantered around the assumption that there is an inherent lack of political will.

In this respect it should be noted that reinforcing a political dialogue between NGOs, prominent Marabouts and the Government could prove vital for establishing a national approach to dealing with the issues at hand.

Strengthening networks of inter-institutional co-operation and support between all actors must be at the base of any initiatives, as information sharing of 'best practices' and reproduction, when possible, of successful initiatives will minimize operational costs, consolidate trust and reinforce what today is referred to as 'political will'.

- Local and Regional Co-operation

Reinforcing formal and informal regional networks between local initiatives, NGOs and the private sector should be considered as an important step towards finding local sustainable solutions. It must equally be noted that it would prevent duplication of initiatives while increasing partnerships between all relevant sectors.

Potential local burden sharing would also increase transparency and serve as a quality control for urgent services such as education, vocational training, health care, and additional recreational activities for talibé children.

- National Co-operation

National co-operation between regions is foremost dependant on qualitative local co-operation and the development of tangible solutions.



Sharing of 'best practices' and initiating a national dialogue together with relevant ministries, government officials, local actors, aid agencies as well as international organisations will become of outmost importance as any legitimate process is intricately related to integrating society as a whole.

The legitimacy of any process can only be endangered if regional organisations and solutions are not recognised on a national level. Identified key organizations could in this process act as intermediaries or 'ombuds-organisations' for disseminating and sharing information of best practices as well as foster co-operation.

Role of NGOs and Local Actors

Many national and international organisations are currently active in Senegal. Whilst some have focused on immediate relief for the Talibé children in form of medical care, temporary housing, shelters, as well as providing for other rudimentary needs, others have emphasised on preventive strategies, reintegrating and facilitating the return of children to their families (including children from neighbouring countries).



At present, numerous initiatives tend to operate on an *ad hoc* basis and many organizations find themselves overwhelmed while trying to provide a vast variety of necessary service for the talibés. The lack of adequate funding, coupled with the broad relief programmes of many organisations often compromise the quality of the services and minimizes the possibility to find a viable sustainable solution to the issue.

Hence, the main issue of concern regarding the role of NGOs and local actors is that most approaches lack harmonization and rarely resonate beyond the community. Although local co-operation is strongly encouraged there is still little regional and national co-ordination. International NGOs have a strong role to play as they can aid in pooling knowledge and act as linking mechanisms both on a local as well as national level.

Preventive strategies are yet to be evaluated in terms of efficiency and success. Increasingly, constructive dialogues have been initiated by local NGOs with relevant Marabouts which have lead to growing trust and co-operation.

Working with Daaras

Any durable regional or national strategy on the issue of talibé children must include a viable plan for working with Marabouts and respective Daaras.



Although, Marabouts have shown increased interest in regional centres, shelters, and educational facilities that can provide additional services in the process of reintegrating the children into the national educational system, many have also expressed concerns regarding the following pending issues:

- means of financing Daaras
- improving the conditions for children in Daaras
- national regulation for Qur'anic education
- integrating religious education into the national system
- aid in meeting the needs of the children
- homogenisation of Daaras and education

It is important to envisage a viable regulatory system created by Qur'anic Brotherhoods and prominent Marabouts which should be validated and implemented on a national level.

Such system must take into consideration all needs of the Qur'anic schools and ensure greater transparency in how children are enrolled and graduate from the Daaras.

As the system of Daaras is today not formally part of the national educational system, it should be possible to envisage integration of Qur'anic education by employing Marabouts at national schools or ordinary teachers at Daaras. This would also facilitate an academic transition between the two types of educations.

Marabouts willing to attend and work with local shelters in terms of education should be encouraged to contribute positively to a viable education plan for talibé children. All education should embrace current national guidelines. Such approach will inevitably imply a closer co-operation with relevant national ministries.



International Involvement

International involvement on this issue should not be limited only to financial or institutional support. International actors should also

- promote and aid in the development of programmes which encourage viable local solutions,
- act as impartial brokers for local and national political dialogue,
- identify and promote strategic partnerships for best meeting the needs and expectations of the talibé children but also other relevant parties



- encourage greater involvement from the private sector in providing support and aid for specific locally identified needs, and
- advocate and disseminate greater understanding of local issues related to eminent needs of talibé children as well as other relevant parties.

SDGI initiative in Senegal

SDGI is currently working with La Maison de la Gare (MDG), a local organization based in the city of St. Louis, on developing and consolidating MDGs activities related to talibés.

For more information about our programme and current partners please visit www.sdg-int.org and our project page 'Talibé- Least Favoured Children of Senegal'.