

PRIORITIES, VALUES AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN THE SAHEL

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INTRODUCTION

The resentment among youth in the Sahel is a complex reality resulting from multiple challenges and pressures they face. The alarming security climate, marked by constant threats and armed conflicts, largely contributes to this sentiment. Many young people are on the front lines of defense efforts, exposing an entire generation to conflict-related trauma. This situation not only jeopardizes their psychological well-being but also fuels a profound sense of insecurity and despair. Economic difficulties exacerbate this resentment.

Limited access to education, employment, and decent living conditions creates significant frustrations among youth of the Sahel. Restricted economic opportunities, combined with often insufficient infrastructure, generate feelings of exclusion and injustice. The lack of stable jobs and precarious economic prospects force many young people to consider desperate solutions, including joining armed groups or risking migration.

The disparity between urban and rural youth accentuates these frustrations. The gaps in access to educational, economic, and social opportunities are particularly pronounced, exacerbating inequalities. Youth in villages often have limited access to adequate educational infrastructure and sufficient resources, limiting their advancement opportunities. This disparity underscores the urgent need for inclusive policies aimed at reducing gaps between urban and rural areas to ensure balanced development.

INVITED PANELISTS

Adam Dicko, Executive Director of the Association of Youth for Active Citizenship and Democracy (AJCAD)

Aminetou Bilal, Climate Advocate and President of the NGO Selfie Mbalite

Mamadou Bodian, Researcher at the Fundamental Institute of Black Africa (IFAN), Sahel specialist

Yahiya Hama Dicko, Blogger and activist

Laurent Bossard, Director of the Sahel and West Africa Club (CSAO)

Bah Traoré, Research Officer at WATHI

Gilles Yabi, Executive Director of WATHI

Note : *QUICKs are short documents produced by WATHI's virtual round tables. They present the main findings and courses of action and are intended to fuel public debate, collective action, and decisions by political authorities.*

KEY FINDINGS

- Youth are not a homogeneous group, as significant educational, geographic, and economic disparities exist. Recognizing these differences is essential to avoid generalizing the problems and needs of young people. Nevertheless, common issues such as education, access to basic social services, and economic opportunities affect youth not only in Mali but also across the region. The challenge of representativeness is major, as it calls into question the legitimacy of those who speak on behalf of young people. Elections do not always guarantee this legitimacy. The question of who is truly capable of representing all youth remains complex. Issues of representation and legitimacy affect not only young people but all social layers and regional institutions. This is an alarming observation that requires deep reflection for authentic and equitable representation.
- In terms of security in Mali, the situation has worsened, plunging the country into a crisis, particularly in the central and northern regions. Areas once popular tourist destinations have lost their appeal, marking a disastrous security setback. However, politically and regarding civil liberties, a concerning regression is noted. Mali has experienced several coups over the past decade, leading to restrictions on individual freedoms. Public education has also faced setbacks, with recurring crises and challenges highlighting the insufficiency of infrastructure to accommodate a growing student population.
- In Burkina Faso, the past ten years have been marked by democratic gains followed by two successive coups that challenge these advances. Poor governance persists, exacerbating economic difficulties. Agriculture and mining sectors suffer negative impacts, threatening food security and employment. Socially, community violence and tensions continue, threatening social cohesion. Despite challenges, hope remains, driven by new dynamics. The ten years have been difficult, but youth determination to face obstacles offers prospects for improvement. In Mauritania, the situation is marked by the absence of coups and terrorist attacks during the decade. However, recent prison breaks highlight ongoing challenges. Relative stability contrasts with neighbors' realities, but vigilance remains necessary.
- What we observe today reveals a structural weakness of the states, a divide intensified since Mali's fragmentation in 2012 but already existing before. The states, often vast territories, struggle to project themselves coherently across all regions. This is particularly evident in Niger and Mali, where some areas escape state control. This structural weakness, predating Mali's crisis, partly results from the state's incapacity to provide basic social services such as education and health. Consequently, states fail to maintain a monopoly on legitimate violence. When states lack this monopoly to protect people and property, other service providers may emerge. Currently, this is reflected in security, where forces struggle to protect certain regions. This structural fragility has worsened over time, especially regarding political institutions' functioning. Democratic transitions planned in the early 1980s have proven more complex. Democratic rules, modeled on the French system in Francophone countries, excluded portions of the population not speaking French, creating tensions and exclusions.
- The democratic model was designed as an event rather than a process, leading to negotiations and tensions between actors with divergent agendas. By the 1990s, it became clear that democracy, based on majority rule, excluded some communities, especially non-French speakers. This created a disconnected French-speaking elites from the Arabic-speaking elites, exacerbating divisions. Lack of inclusiveness in institutions caused prolonged exclusion of population categories. Rethinking this situation requires deep reflection on society as a whole and redesigning structures to be more inclusive. This also requires redefining democracy to guarantee participation of all, including women, youth, and minorities.
- The aging of political leaders and persistent corruption show the system's difficulty evolving. Political shifts often just reproduce the same pattern. Corruption has become the norm rather than the exception. A national institutional overhaul is urgently needed to build nations capable of collective population involvement. The current crisis highlights institutional weaknesses, as shown by the actions of praetorian actors. It is imperative to rethink political institutions, making democracy more representative and participatory. Youth express the need not to wait passively for change and call for deep reform of economy and governance to allow full participation of women and minorities.

- It is important to underline that young people in Burkina Faso are currently deeply concerned about security. Many are on the front lines, whether as recurrently recruited defense and security force members or as volunteers trained militarily and deployed. However, even those remaining in cities cannot fully enjoy leisure. In the Sahel, armed groups enforce blockades, turning the area into an open-air prison with severely restricted mobility. Youth in the Dori region face harsh living conditions. Access to drinking water has become a difficult quest, with many forced to devote much time searching. Major challenges like access to fuel and livelihoods are predominant in youth daily life, making the pursuit of these essentials a survival priority. Meanwhile, social media, though present, is not always a positive space. In Burkina Faso, social media sometimes witness verbal violence in posts, reflecting youth concerns over certain online behaviors.
- The crisis stirs renewed hope for military regimes, understandable after the apparent collapse. Unconstitutional regime changes are sometimes perceived as definitive solutions, especially to security problems, as seen in Mali. Defense budgets explain the stagnation of other sectors. However, improvements perceived in large cities may not reflect remote areas, where security remains worrying despite media reports. The paradox between official realities in major cities and distant zones raises questions about connections between official and lived experiences. Popular support stems from hope, but challenges in the Sahel require holistic solutions beyond arms use to achieve peace.
- The transition in Burkina Faso enjoys broad popular support, especially among youth. High mobilization for defense volunteers, exceeding expectations with over 90,000 applications for 50,000 positions, indicates significant engagement with the current regime. This support seems motivated by government backing and patriotism. The assertion of national sovereignty is welcomed, especially following past unfair treatment by some partners. Acquiring modern military equipment is also reassuring, offering a stronger response to security challenges. Numerous support demonstrations across cities show public confidence in the new leadership. Despite this, concerns about freedom of expression persist. Questions about freedom of thought and opinion raise doubts about the political climate. Emphasis on national sovereignty is appreciated, though its implementation sometimes raises questions. Troop engagement on the ground is praised, though operational effectiveness is debatable. Concerns remain about some freedom of expression restrictions, creating a climate where media and individuals hesitate to address certain topics. Considerations about the Burkina-Mali federation proposal and human rights concerns in the current context highlight sensitive points needing deep reflection. In conclusion, popular support for Burkina Faso's transition is tinged with hope, but concerns remain about safeguarding individual freedoms and the country's challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Investing in holistic solutions to address the root causes of insecurity involves developing sustainable economic development programs, strengthening state institutions to improve governance, and promoting community mediation and reconciliation initiatives. It is essential to prioritize an integrated approach that combines physical security with social and economic development, while encouraging regional cooperation for a collective response to cross-border threats.
- Supporting teachers and developing educational programs tailored to local needs, including digital skills and entrepreneurship training, are essential to prepare youth for a rapidly evolving job market.
- Reforming institutions to ensure authentic and equitable representation requires adopting gender quotas and specific measures to include youth and minorities in decision-making processes. Promoting intergenerational dialogue through public consultation forums and digital platforms can enhance the legitimacy and accountability of local and national governments.
- Implementing psychosocial support programs for youth affected by conflict-related trauma must be accompanied by community awareness initiatives on the psychological effects of violence. Encouraging community participation in designing and implementing healing strategies can foster individual and collective resilience.

- Valuing cultural diversity involves supporting inclusive and participatory cultural events celebrating local traditions while fostering mutual understanding among ethnic and religious groups. Promoting intercultural and multilingual education in schools can strengthen respect and cooperation between communities.
- Rethinking institutional structures to make them more inclusive requires significant democratic reforms, such as decentralizing power and empowering local communities. Encouraging youth political participation through advisory councils and political mentoring programs can strengthen democratic representation at all governance levels.
- Increasing access to quality education requires not only building and renovating schools in rural areas but also continuous training. Raising awareness of responsible social media use by promoting positive messages and supporting campaigns against online violence involves collaboration with digital platforms, media, and civil society to foster respectful and constructive online behavior.
- Investing in sustainable economic projects to stimulate employment and reduce economic disparities between urban and rural areas requires balanced territorial development policies, including infrastructure investments and support for local small businesses. Promoting youth entrepreneurship and access to credit can create viable economic opportunities in key sectors such as sustainable agriculture and renewable energy.
- Encouraging close collaboration with the international community to support development efforts in the Sahel involves mobilizing financial and technical resources as well as expertise in security and governance. Strengthening local capacities through strategic partnerships and training programs can enhance the resilience and sustainability of regional development initiatives.

QUOTES OF PANELISTS

“Our generation often feels nostalgia for a time it never experienced. Since childhood, we have constantly been told there was less corruption and fewer challenges during Moussa Traoré’s military regime. Thus, we aspire to live in that period which is spoken of so positively.” Adam Dicko

“The challenges of governance combined with security problems create an environment conducive to the massive recruitment of youth by these unconventional groups.” Aminetou Bilal

“Many young people are forced into domestic chores or work, deprived of the chance to attend school or receive training, compromising their educational and professional development. We should capitalize on our rich cultural diversity, which unfortunately is often the root cause of many conflicts. It is essential to harness this diversity positively to promote harmony and mutual understanding.” Yahiya Hama Dicko

“Burkinabè face food shortages caused by crop fires and livestock theft perpetrated by terrorist armed groups. Where these groups show clemency, they still levy taxes on livestock and crops.” Mamadou Bodian

“A significant number of young people are involved in operations, either as members of defense and security forces or volunteers defending the homeland.” Mamadou Bodian

“Those originally responsible for democratic transitions tried to shape constitutions and institutional architectures after what they knew best—the Western model. However, this led to notable exclusion of significant population segments such as youth, women, and certain religious groups from this architecture.” Dr. Oumarou Hamani

TO GO FURTHER

VIDEO OF THE CONVERSATION



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