CSDG Papers *Summary*

Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) in Niger: Key Research Findings

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The YOVEX Project

In 2006, the Conflict, Security and Development Group (CSDG) at Kings College, London began a study of youth vulnerability and exclusion in seven West African countries, in order to better understand the socio-economic and political plight of young people in West Africa. The large-scale participation of youth in civil wars in the Mano River countries and in political instability (electoral violence and other inter-group clashes) across West Africa informed our interest in knowing more about youth in the region.

Specifically, we were interested in understanding the impact of decades of economic decline, collapsed education, unemployment, poor governance, armed conflict and globalization on the young people of West Africa. Our initial conviction that young people are at the heart of both the region's challenges and its opportunities for sustainable development and security has been reinforced by the interest in young people displayed by international organizations such as ECOWAS, the World Bank and the United Nations. The continued threat of violence in the north of Niger underscores the importance of paying attention to young people in this country.

What we found in Niger

■ Many young people are effectively born into exclusion from the institutions of government and wider society, given the comparatively scarce opportunities available for education, employment, social mobility and advancement.

■ There is a marked trend towards rural exodus and urban poverty, exacerbated by high illiteracy rates. Exit abroad is less marked.

■ There has been a tendency for governments to politicize youth on the basis of progressive-sounding policies that rarely deliver on their promises.

■ The reality of their complete exclusion from the country's political processes is of great concern for many young people.

■ Young people only rarely resort to violence to deal with their difficult situations. The socializing influence of school, mosque/church and family is strong.

■ Many young people report being worried that the conflict in the north of the country may spread.

The nature and needs of youth in Niger

■ Participation by young people in parliament or government is very rare, despite low eligibility ages. Political disenfranchisement is keenly felt by the youth.

■ While those youth that exit the family and school often face falling into low-level crime and anti-social behaviour, those that remain supported by their families often face stagnation.

■ Most young people remain keen to engage with NGO and UN programmes concerned with vocational training, HIV/AIDS, environmental concerns, social work and clean-up activities.

■ Since 1990, positive changes in youth identity have arisen with the creation of youth organizations and district clubs and federations engaged in community activities and public health programmes. These groups are often successful in accessing help and funding from NGOs and UN agencies, but are generally not able to attract funds from national government.

■ Music and media are increasingly utilized by young people as opportunities for expressing their voice and generating income.

What the government is doing to assist youth (and the limitations of these efforts)

■ The Ministries of Youth and Sport, Labour, Professional Training, Promotion of Entrepreneurship, and Public Health are responsible for and committed to the implementation of the National Youth Policy, with particular emphasis on education, health and other basic needs. However, this is proving a difficult task for these ministries.

■ From 2004 to 2007 the national parliament did not feel able to allocate funds for the National Youth Policy.

■ Previous administrations have founded nationwide youth movements as a means of political mobilization, but they offer little real benefit to young people.

What happens to vulnerable and excluded youth?

- Young people often face multidimensional crises characterized by poverty, unemployment, begging, prostitution and illiteracy.
- In urban areas, many young people leave school early and become unemployed or enter the informal economy.
- Youth sub-cultural groups have emerged (known as 'Fada') that are controversial and often perceived as socially disruptive.

What sustains young people?

- Faith remains a sustaining aspect of national life for young people.
- A significant number of young people have found voice, livelihood opportunities and the potential for a new identity through becoming involved in music and popular culture, especially in Niamey and Zinder.
- Self-organization at district, local and national levels into youth organizations is widespread. Sixty per cent of those we spoke to have been involved in such organizations.
- Sports – especially wrestling – offer routes towards status and financial rewards.
- Political consciousness is growing. The history of young people and their awareness of political rhetoric and electioneering has contributed to an understanding among many youth of their critical mass and their potential as political actors if opportunities for representative office can be pursued.
- A growing category of young people support themselves in the informal economy and service industries.
- Some young people become migrant workers in Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana and Libya after migrating from country to city in Niger fails to deliver better opportunities.

What should be done?

National government should:

- carry out a diagnostic revision of youth needs and aspirations across rural and urban areas that actively involves youth themselves;
- develop rural policies specifically targeting illiteracy;
- develop a national youth employment policy;
- establish a youth project fund to support autonomous grassroots activity and creativity;
- depoliticize the National Youth Council and reform it as a democratic federation of youth organizations nationwide to encourage participation in decision-making;
- build infrastructure such as youth centres and sports fields specifically in rural areas;
- work collaboratively with other stakeholders and agencies, including the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) employment project and other regional initiatives; and
- adopt the African Youth Charter.

ECOWAS should:

- champion a participatory, inclusive and collaborative youth policy in Niger;
- provide space and opportunities for peer-to-peer support, dialogue and integration among young people from French- and English-speaking countries;
- involve young people in the management of conflict prevention and peace-building activities; and
- elp facilitate the free circulation of people and goods across the region.

Youth groups and associations should:

- focus on developing their professionalism and efficiency;
- act as bastions of democracy, transparency and good governance;
- bring on board and not marginalize young people from rural areas; and
- work collaboratively with the UNOWA employment project and other regional initiatives.

NGOs and donor agencies should:

- increase financial and technical support to youth, including building youth centres, providing funding, supplying equipment, etc.;
- be more focused and professional, develop their own capacities, and assist in the creation of employment opportunities for youth; and
- link up and work collaboratively with the UNOWA employment project and other regional initiatives.