



This project is co-funded by the European Union

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Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

Mediation for peace

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF DENMARK



# The voice of youth in the Sahel

## A dialogue between youth organisations and state institutions

### Rethinking governance to prevent violent radicalisation

The Sahel region struggles with social injustice and unemployment. Many citizens lament the absence of public services while the traditional authority of elders has increasingly come under question by a rapidly growing population. Religious radicalisation may reflect the aspirations of a minority of youth to transform the established order.

Encouraged by the emergence of foreign religious movements, notably from Gulf countries, radicalisation has begun to challenge local Islamic practices. A growing interaction between religion and politics within mostly secular states has reinforced the influence of radicalised religious movements in the public domain. Violent elements of radicalisation have emerged more recently; the jihadist occupation of northern Mali following the 2012 crisis was a pivotal moment for the establishment of these jihadist movements across the Sahel region.

In 2017, meetings were organised following the establishment of 25 local and national dialogue frameworks across the G5 Sahel countries. These brought together 1,250 youth organisation delegates and representatives from their respective governments to identify possible solutions to prevent violent radicalisation. In 2018, the participants in this dialogue selected initiatives to be launched in each of the G5 Sahel countries in response to the following four priority issues they identified:

#### Towards a new style of governance

*‘Don’t expect anyone to listen to you unless you take a radical stance. We are led by people who only understand the language of violence.’*

Delegates from Sahel youth organisations perceive bad governance as a valid motive for protest, social disruption and ultimately for radicalisation. They understand that people may resort to violence to combat corruption and impunity in the political and social spheres which are dominated by elders, despite the vast majority of citizens being below the age of 30.

Youth organisations believe that redesigning governance models to give youth a voice, especially at the local level, would reduce violent incidences linked to radicalisation. The implementation of practical and



inclusive youth policies could re-establish inter-generational dialogue and contribute to the development of new forms of governance.

### **Radicalisation, empowerment and prejudice**

*'The youth have to be listened to; they must be given the opportunity to express themselves to avoid being manipulated by extremist rhetoric.'*

In a society where hierarchy is strongly determined by age and class, joining radical religious movements is seen as a way for youth to distinguish themselves from their peers and elders. It may also be perceived as a way for them to assert their independence and free themselves from seemingly arbitrary family decisions at a time of growing discontent around models of family governance.

Youth organisation delegates have highlighted the importance of establishing inter- and intra-religious forums for dialogue to ease emergent tensions. Forums would hold a dual objective of encouraging a more peaceful coexistence between different religious movements as well as challenging prejudices that equate Islam with terrorism and jihad with violence. Delegates have also suggested that state authorities should better regulate media content that contributes to increasing tensions and prejudice.

### **Radicalisation and the search for protection**

*'Radical groups spread messages of peace and protection to populations frustrated by the behaviour of their country's security forces.'*

Delegates have stressed the need for states to ensure security. In military intervention zones, alliances between communities and radical groups have become means for communities to protect themselves against security force abuses and the stigmatisation they experience.

Delegates have recommended that security forces be trained to better understand the environments in which they intervene and to engage in dialogue with local citizens. Considering the high degree of suspicion that exists between Sahelian youth and security forces, delegates also recommended that measures be taken to re-establish trust between them.

## **Preventing violent radicalisation through education and employment**

*'As long as youth lack opportunities to lead active and productive lives, they will remain easy prey for jihadist groups.'*

Delegates from youth organisations have highlighted that a lack of opportunities sometimes drives young people to embrace jihadism. Radicalisation may likewise be less the result of conviction and more that of necessity. Marriage in the Sahel region has traditionally required financial independence; joining radical groups can be a way for young men to earn enough money to marry.

To prevent violent radicalisation, delegates have insisted on the need for universal and free primary education, vocational training, and an increase of economic opportunities. Youth associations have underlined the urgent need to rethink and modernise the ways in which natural resources are used, processed, and distributed.

Modernisation would make agriculture, fishing and cattle-breeding more attractive to youth – being three economic sectors with a strong potential for creating employment and self-sufficiency in rural areas. A 'green revolution' of this sort would need to be accompanied by improvements in road infrastructure to make rural zones more accessible and maximise local economic potential.



This project is implemented by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) and co-funded by the European Union and the Kingdom of Denmark. It is managed in close coordination with the national authorities and the G5 Sahel organization.