University of Nottingham
Rights Lab

BEGGING BY CHILD TALIBÉS IN NIGER: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Executive summary

This literature review is undertaken as part of the wider Combatting Forced Child Begging in West Africa and Niger project led by Anti-Slavery International in partnership with the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham, and NGOs *Association Nigérienne pour le Traitement de la Délinquance et la prévention du crime* (ANTD) and *Ecole, parrainage & actions de développement* (EPAD) in Niger. This project aims to research, test, and scale-up approaches that are effective in reducing forced child begging in Qur'anic schools in West Africa. The literature review provides an overview of the academic and grey literature on the issue of child begging in Qur'anic schools in Niger, drawing on sources from Niger and the surrounding region. It seeks to summarise the context of Qur'anic education in which many boys are forced to beg, to identify the main drivers of begging and interventions that have been suggested or implemented. It uses a multiscalar analysis to consider risk and resilience factors affecting a child's vulnerability to this form of exploitation, and identifies questions to be addressed by qualitative research planned in the wider project.

Context

While there are nuances in national contexts, begging by young students – known as *talibés* – in traditional Qur'anic schools is commonplace across many areas of West Africa with significant Muslim populations. Qur'anic education has a long history in the region, but became more widespread during the period of colonialism. In countries that were colonised by the French, such as Niger, religious education was excluded from national education systems, a situation which has in most cases continued after independence. Niger differs from other countries in that public Islamic education does exist, in the form of Franco-Arabe schools which combine religious and secular teaching, but this is not available on the scale required to meet the demand for religious education.

Approximately 98% of the Nigerien population is Muslim, divided into reformist Sunnism, Sufism and a much smaller Shiite strand. The state remains secular and has relatively strong control over religious movements. Nevertheless, in recent years, there has been an increase in violence linked to extremist Islamist movements. There is disagreement in the literature over to the extent to which this violence is motivated by religious beliefs as opposed to conflict over scarce resources. Niger has one of the highest poverty rates in the world.

In July 2023, the fifth successful coup in Niger's post-independence history took place. It remains to be seen how the transitional military government will approach the questions related to Qur'anic schools, education, and begging by talibés.

Islamic education in Niger

There are various types of Islamic education available in Niger, and begging is only a part of some of the residential, traditional Qur'anic schools. There are many traditional Qur'anic schools where students study the Qur'an while living at home, often alongside other forms of education. Begging is not a feature of these schools.

The focus in Qur'anic schools is on memorising the Qur'an without necessarily understanding the words, while reformist Islamic education emphasises the study of Arabic language. Reformist movements have created their own Qur'anic schools with this different focus. There are also a small number of 'renovated' or 'modernised' Qur'anic schools supported by the state or NGOs, which unite Qur'anic and secular education. There are also public and private Franco-Arabe schools, which normally follow reformist branches of Islam, and teach both religious and secular subjects taught in French and Arabic.

Main drivers of begging

Begging and harsh living conditions have always been part of traditional Qur'anic schools in West Africa, but the numbers of children begging in urban centres has increased as schools have migrated from rural to urban areas as a result of economic crisis. While forced child begging is outlawed in most countries, including Niger, these laws are not enforced.

Begging in traditional Qur'anic schools cannot be explained by any one factor. Rather, the literature brings to light factors including both economic poverty and social and cultural norms around the benefits that begging can bring, including helping a child learn valued characteristics such as humility and asceticism. Research from other countries suggests hardship and migration can both be valued aspects of Qur'anic education, but it is not clear to what extent these norms are relevant in Niger. Begging also provides a convenient route for urban Muslims to give alms. Only boys beg, while girls may attend Qur'anic school without leaving home.

There are many reasons why parents may choose a Qur'anic school where begging takes place for their sons. Often, they diversify educational pathways for their children in order to maximise benefits for the family group. Literature from outside Niger suggests there are perceived benefits to both memorising the Qur'an and the experience of hardship itself. The context of structural poverty from which many talibés who beg originate should not be ignored. Many rural Nigerien families are faced with extreme poverty, exacerbated by climate change and conflict which causes displacement and disrupts both livelihoods and education.

Interventions

The interventions found in the literature can be categorised as those targeting the Qur'anic schools, Qur'anic teachers and talibés on one hand, and those targeting the families and communities from which talibés originate on the other. One of the predominate approaches across the region, including in Niger, has been state-led attempts to modernise or renovate Qur'anic schools, building a hybrid form of education including traditional Qur'anic memorisation and secular subjects present in the primary curriculum, and bringing Qur'anic schools into the national education system for the first time. Other interventions include supporting Qur'anic teachers and/or talibés to diversify their incomes to reduce reliance on begging, supporting Qur'anic schools in communities so that children do not have to migrate, awareness raising about child rights in Islam, and more general initiatives to help parents and families cope with poverty and climate change.

1. Introduction

Traditional Qur'anic schools exist across many areas of West and Central Africa with substantial Muslim populations, including Niger. The stated intention of these schools is to enable students to master the Qur'an while "learning certain values such as obedience, respect, submission, a sense of social hierarchy" (Gandolfi, 2003, p. 265. Translated from French). Across many of these schools, however, for many young students (known as *talibés)*, the experience of Qur'anic education also includes the requirement to beg for food and money (Thorsen, 2012).

There are no official figures for how many Qur'anic schools there are in Niger, nor how many practice begging. The total number was estimated at 50,000 in 2003 (Dia, 2022). This figure appears to be based on the assumption that each village has at least one Qur'anic school (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Even if this figure is taken as a reasonable estimate, it is unclear which forms of Qur'anic school are or are not included. A recent survey estimates suggest that as many as 160,000 children across Niger are enrolled in 2,500 traditional Qur'anic schools - those where begging is often practiced (ANTD, 2020).

There are a variety of options for religious education in Niger today, and a spectrum of religious experiences and educational experiences are provided (ANTD, 2020). Some of these schools provide quality education and care to children, but it has become increasingly common for children to be required to beg (Thorsen, 2012), as Qur'anic schools, which were traditionally rurally-based, have moved into urban areas since the economic crisis of the 1980s (Rossetti, 2022). Begging has replaced other forms of income for the Qur'anic teacher—like farming—and, it is claimed, in some cases is done almost entirely for the financial benefit and upkeep of the teacher (ANTD, 2020)

To enable maximum income, some abusive Qur'anic teachers use physical punishment and allow the children to live in squalor to encourage donations driven by their destitute condition (ANTD, 2020; Ben Azouz, 2020). Children are also abused in other ways including punishments for not meeting quotas. These punishments include deprivation of food, denial of access to leisure activities like TV, corporal punishment, and verbal abuse (Thorsen, 2012).

Some students are also denied positive rights. A recent survey conducted by NGO ANTD found that 41% of surveyed talibés were 'loaned out' for work, in addition to begging, and their wages paid directly to the Qur'anic teachers (ANTD, 2020). Only a quarter of the talibés' time was spent learning (ANTD, 2020). Over 90% of those who beg had experienced assault or abuse in public spaces by other perpetrators (ANTD, 2020).

Social and cultural norms in Niger, however, show high levels of acceptance of the practice. Families and communities do not necessarily perceive talibé begging as exploitation or trafficking (Rossetti, 2022). Due to the history of colonialism and the emphasis on secular education inherited from the French, these schools are neither integrated into the formal education system nor regulated by the state (Gandolfi, 2003). Reforms of the education sector are underway – including the introduction of a small number of renovated (or modernised) Qur'anic schools - but have yet to have any substantial impact on traditional Qur'anic schools (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012; Dia, 2022). NGOs and the wider population have also become increasingly interested in addressing the situation as begging has become more commonplace (ANTD, 2020). It is as yet unclear to what extent the new government, which seized power in July 2023 following a coup largely motivated by anti-French sentiments (Engels, 2023) will make this issue a priority.

In this context, now is an essential time to conduct a study of prevalence to inform and shape targeted interventions, and to encourage the government to strive for positive change. Greater understanding of this issue is required to shape this study. The intention of this literature review is to understand and evaluate the existing state of knowledge related to the practice of forced child begging. The focus is particularly on identification of the factors which shape resilience or risk to forced child begging within the Nigerien context and their interrelationships.

We employ a multi-scalar approach within this review to understand how factors coalesce to produce risk and harm, and where we evidence what we call tipping factors. We first provide an overview of the context and background of traditional Qur'anic schooling, focusing first on the region and then on Niger itself. The next part of the literature review is structured by scale, pulling what is known about protective and risk factors from the extant literature and clustering them by: (1) individual, (2) family and household, (3) community and locality, (4) legal and regulatory, and (5) structural levels (see Figure 1). We are explicit in our intersectional approach which is to say that we identify the interrelationship between factors across time and space, recognising that the relevance of push factors varies in relation to other factors, based on stage of lifecourse and location. Finally, we bring together the literature with a view to assess interventions that have been suggested or tried in Niger and in other countries.

2. The Literature

This study pulled literature from French and English sources primarily focusing on Niger and to a lesser extent elsewhere in West Africa. There is very scant academic literature available remotely that specifically discusses forced begging in Niger (in English or French), with a slightly wider pool of literature focusing on Qur'anic or Islamic education more widely. It is often unclear in the literature which form of Qur'anic school is being referred to, as distinctions are not always made between those that offer traditional Qur'anic education on a part-time basis to the local population, those that offer a reformist style education, and the traditional, residential Qur'anic schools where begging is present. We have also included a considerable body of grey literature from Nigerien NGOs, international NGOs, and institutions. Due to language barriers, we have not reviewed literature in languages other than English and French.

There is a more substantial body of literature on child forced begging and Qur'anic schools from other countries in West Africa, especially Senegal and Nigeria, some of which is relevant to the Nigerien context. However, without further primary research, it is not always clear to what extent some of the factors discussed in this wider literature hold true in Niger, for example in reference to particular social norms or parental motivations.

Considered together, the literature suggests that Qur'anic schools and forced child begging is a multifaceted, multi-scalar problem rooted in socio-economic deprivation, customs, and norms.

3. Context

3.1 History and background of Qur'anic schools in West Africa

While people have studied the Qur'an in the West African region since Islam arrived around the 8th century, Qur'anic schools became more widespread during the period of colonisation (Ware, 2014). Since the 1980s, in the context of economic decline and drought, traditional Qur'anic schools have

clustered in urban areas and the practice of begging by their students has become a common sight in many West African cities (Diouf, 2013).

Students who attend Qur'anic school are known as talibés, from the French derivation of the Arabic word *talib* which translates as someone seeking knowledge. The term is sometimes assumed to refer only to those who beg (Macleod, 2023b), but actually refers to all students of the Qur'an. In Hausa, they are also known as almajirai. Talibés are usually boys, usually (though not always) over age 3 and their study can persist until adulthood (Thorsen, 2012). Boys are entrusted to Qur'anic schools, where they are taught by a Qur'anic teacher or *marabout,* also known as a *malam* (plural: *malamai*) in Hausa.[1] To become a malam, one needs to be able to recite and write out the entire Qur'an from memory – no other qualification is required (Souley, 1998).

In traditional Qur'anic schools the focus is on memorising, and thus embodying, the Qur'an (Launay and Ware, 2016). The schools are known under different names including *makaranta* or *makaranta allo* (in Hausa, where *allo* refers to the wooden boards used to write out verses), *duɗal* (in Songhay/Fulfulde), or, elsewhere in the region, *daara* (in Wolof as spoken in Senegambia). They differ from médersas/madrasas and madāris or Islamiyya schools, which all to varying degrees combine Qur'anic teaching with exposure to other subjects and Islamic modernism. These other forms of Islamic education tend to share a different epistemology, based on the belief that the first step should be learning Arabic to understand the meaning of the Qur'an, rather than memorising it without understanding the language (Launay and Ware, 2016). While these reformist types of Islamic education, where students do not rely on begging, have become more prominent in the region, they have not replaced the traditional Qur'anic schools (Brenner, 2010).

Within the category of Qur'anic schools, there is a wide spectrum of institutions. Some Qur'anic schools are well-established with strong roots in the local community, while others are itinerant and seasonal in alignment with the farming calendar (Sani, 2017). The first type tend to welcome children from the local neighbourhood (both boys and girls), while the itinerant type bring boys from rural areas, many of whom ultimately find themselves begging (Sani, 2017). However, in many urban areas, these schools no longer return seasonally to rural areas as the Qur'anic teachers no longer make an income from farming (Diouf, 2013; Gueye, 2014).

Traditional Qur'anic schools are not selective and are open to all. Girls may attend a Qur'anic school, but tend to do so in their local area, staying with their family rather than migrating (Thorsen, 2012; Goensch, 2016). In some places, traditional Qur'anic schools are the only form of education locally available (Gandolfi, 2003; Einarsdóttir and Boiro, 2016). When new formal schools open in a rural area, it has been shown that the number of years spent in Qur'anic school declines (André and Demonsant, 2013). Children can be enrolled in Qur'anic school before or alongside other forms of education, or it can be their only form of schooling (Gandolfi, 2003). For others, particularly in Niger, lack of trust in the quality of public education may also dissuade parents from sending children to traditional public schools (Barreteau and Tiné, 1999). It is estimated that, across the Sahel, 20% of children officially considered as being out-of-school are enrolled in non-formal Qur'anic school (Banque Mondiale, 2021).

Across the region, only Mauritania, Nigeria and the Gambia recognise traditional Qur'anic schools within the national education system, and provide some form of support (not necessarily financial)

[1] Not all marabouts are Qur'anic teachers; the term may also refer to spiritual healers and, in the past, warrior marabouts (Ndiaye, 1985). Some consider the term marabout to be pejorative due to its connection with animist practices (Souley, 1998). In this paper we use the terms malam and Qur'anic teacher interchangeably.

(Roy and Humeau, 2018). This exclusion from national education systems is the result of colonial policies. Most countries where Qur'anic schools remain prominent were at one time colonised by the French. These former French colonies inherited the French attachment to secularism of the state and of public education. While French colonial policy evolved from attempting to restrict, to co-opt, and ultimately to ignore the Qur'anic schools (Behrman, 1970; Bouche, 1974), British colonial administrations "adopted a policy of neither engaging nor openly opposing Qur'anic schools" throughout their rule (Baba, 2012, p. 102). The legitimacy of Qur'anic schools thus comes from their religious character (Gandolfi, 2003), as well as their history as sites of resistance to colonial powers, which has been noted regarding former French, British, and Portuguese colonies (Baba, 2012; Villalón and Bodian, 2012; Machaqueiro, 2013). Where parents are able to choose between state school and Islamic education, choosing the latter may sometimes be a rejection of the secular character of the former, but more often is reflective of the benefits that religious education is seen to bring (Newman, 2016). These benefits, discussed further below, include fulfilling parents' duty to educate their children in Islam, cultivating cultural and moral values that prepare the child for both their future and the afterlife, and securing rewards from God (Einarsdóttir and Boiro, 2016; Sani, 2017; Murugaiah, 2023).

In an attempt to respond to an increasing demand for education that combines the benefits of religious and secular teaching (Dia, 2022), many of the countries in West Africa have seen reforms in Islamic education since the 1990s. These reforms have taken a different shape in each country depending on the national context and priorities, where they share common objectives of providing hybrid education that better fits the realities of largely Muslim societies and strives to meet global goals for education, initially the Millennium Development Goals, by bringing more children into formal education (Villalón and Tidjani-Alou, 2012; Boyle, 2014). Through the framework of these reforms, several countries have experimented with modernising Qur'anic schools (Dia, 2022). Some have made it possible for unrecognised Islamic schools to be brought into the official system. In Nigeria, for example, Islamiyya schools can achieve official recognition if they teach the approved curriculum, covering Islamic and secular subjects equally (Bano, 2022). Qur'anic teachers can be suspicious of the state's motivations in these reforms, fearing that states are promoting ideas from outside (Dia, 2022). As a result, they have organised themselves in order to have a political voice when it comes to issues of education (Dia, 2022). Along with national actors, international actors, including international institutions such as UNICEF, donors and NGOs from both Western countries and the Middle East, also play a role in shaping these reforms through providing funding and lobbying states to uphold international rights instruments (Dia, 2022). Critics note that in some cases, modernisation efforts that ostensibly attempt to blend secular and religious education can in practice lead to the "adoption of a Western model where the traditional Islamic subjects are effectively relegated to a less prominent place" (Iddrisu, 2002, p. 348).

These reforms have also in part been motivated by a portrayal of unregulated Islamic education as a breeding ground for radicalism (Boyle, 2014). In some contexts, particularly Northern Nigeria, traditional Qur'anic education has been portrayed as providing an avenue for recruitment to Islamist extremist movements, such as Boko Haram (Hansen, 2016). It has been claimed that a considerable number of Boko Haram militants came from Niger, and there are pockets of support for their ideas particularly in the regions of Maradi, Zinder and Diffa (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). However, assumptions that Qur'anic schools pose a security concern are rarely based on long-term research with Qur'anic schools, their teachers, or students (Abu-Nimer, Nasser and Ouboulahcen, 2016) and those taking an anthropological approach refute these assumptions (Hoechner, 2014; Abdulrahman, 2018).

3.1.1 Begging in Qur'anic schools

In many traditional residential Qur'anic schools across West Africa, young *talibés* are expected to beg for money and food. In rural areas, even when parent do send some money to the Qur'anic teacher, children may be expected to go from house to house begging for food as alms, while begging for money is more common in urban areas (Higazi, 2020). The practice of begging and enrolment in these Qur'anic schools is sometimes seasonal, meaning that some boys may be sent for several months in a year and return home when their labour is needed for farming (Gandolfi, 2003). The reasons for begging fall into the following categories: (1) economic vulnerability, (2) the function of begging in Islam, and (3) a belief that begging will inculcate children with values seen as desirable in society.

- **Economic vulnerability:** Parents do not typically pay a Qur'anic teacher for their child's tuition in a traditional Qur'anic school. Traditionally, schools were linked to a Qur'anic teacher's place of residence in a rural area—typically a farm. Pupils worked on the farm during the day and studied the Qur'an in the morning and evening. Begging was perhaps not the primary activity, but has been a part of the economic functioning of the Qur'anic schools since at least the early 20th century (Ware, 2004, 2009). Today, income from children's begging is used to support the school and the students' wellbeing, but it is often claimed that much of the money earned through begging in urban areas goes to the upkeep – or even enrichment - of the marabout while children are kept in destitution (Zoumanigui, 2016).
- **Societal function of alms:** Begging by *talibés* has a functional role in majority Muslim societies in West Africa, related to different forms of charity in Islam. There is a lack of consensus of whether giving to a begging *talibé* should be understood as a means to pay *zakat* (obligatory alms) (Bass, 2004; Baldé, 2010) or non-mandatory *sadaqa* (voluntary alms or charity) (Mommersteeg and Webb, 2012; Ware, 2014), and indeed, it may be both (Chehami, 2013). Alms are given not out of charity but as an act of sacrifice intended to protect the alms-giver from misfortune (Hoechner, 2015, p. 275).
- **Instilling desired values:** It is recognised that begging has been seen as having benefits for the child *talibés* who practice it, as well alongside its economic function. Begging instils values such as humility, ascetism and resourcefulness, and prepares children for a difficult life in the future (Perry, 2004; Ware, 2004; Einarsdóttir and Boiro, 2016). *Talibés* themselves, as well as their parents and teachers see frugality and ascetism for the sake of learning as positive values (Hoechner, 2015). Although the traditional form of begging is often differentiated from the practice of begging for long hours that occurs in many urban Qur'anic schools today, historical accounts challenge the extent of these differences (Ware, 2004; Macleod, 2023b).

Since the 1990s, child rights activists increasingly see the practice of begging as a form of exploitation, connected to dire living conditions in the Qur'anic schools, and to physical, emotional and sexual abuse (Perry, 2004). Physical and often harsh punishments are common in traditional Qur'anic schools, with laws designed to protect children very rarely enforced (Souley, 1998; Seibert, 2019). The youngest boys are at risk of being taken advantage of by older *talibés* (Hoechner, 2015; Seibert, 2019). Differing narratives are employed to explain the persistence of *talibé* begging: one which focuses on structural factors of poverty and exclusion, portraying the traditional Qur'anic schools as vulnerable and in need of support; and another which lays blame for the practice at the feet of Qur'anic teachers, painting them as child traffickers (Thiam, 2014). It is often suggested that begging was at one time a legitimate practice, but today has become corrupted by capitalism (Perry, 2004).

Begging is illegal in most countries in the region, with the exception of Mauritania, which allows certain forms of begging by people with disabilities, and Senegal which exempts begging for religious

purposes within certain parameters. Laws targeting forced child begging specifically often come under the banner of anti-trafficking (United States Department of State, 2023). With the exception of The Gambia (Thorsen, 2012), these laws are enforced against Qur'anic teachers only on extremely rare occasions (Seibert, 2019; United States Department of State, 2023). Previous attempts to enforce the law have led to backlash from the population under the direction of religious leaders in Senegal (Dieng, 2009; Anti-Slavery International, 2011). The rhetoric of states often does not match their interactions with Qur'anic teachers in practice (Macleod, 2022). In Senegal, for example, attempts to remove children from the streets have been conducted without implementing the penalties enshrined in the law, despite such actions being framed as anti-trafficking initiatives (Macleod, 2023a). This approach was expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic (University of Nottingham Rights Lab and Free the Slaves, 2021) and did not face the political backlash seen when the law was briefly enforced.

Although the challenges faced by *talibés* who beg are likely similar across the region, the specific contexts that shape policies towards the Qur'anic schools differ in each country. We turn now to the Nigerien context.

3.2 The Nigerien context

As mentioned above, the body of literature available remotely that refers to Niger specifically is far smaller than that related to some of the other countries where traditional Qur'anic schools are prominent. In this section, based on the limited research that was accessible, we consider the Nigerien context specifically. Before focusing on the educational landscape in Niger, we briefly consider the socioreligious and political context.

3.2.1 Religion and politics in Niger

Approximately 98% of the Nigerien population is Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2022). Islam arrived in the region shortly after the birth of the religion. Over the following centuries, Islam spread unevenly, through a combination of commercial trade, holy wars led by Sufi brotherhoods (Souley, 1998; Touati, 2011), and the impact of colonialism on the region. In the colonial period, Islam spread rapidly with the initial support of the French, who saw Sufi Islam (as opposed to more fundamentalist forms) as a pacifying force facilitating their administration (Meunier, 1995; Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). While the French colonial government "weakened or even wiped out local systems of resistance to Islam" (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012, p. 8. Translated from French)that had previously limited its spread in parts of Niger, the movement of men recruited as soldiers, and businessmen (especially peanut merchants), helped to bring in ideas from elsewhere in the region (Meunier, 1995; Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Some societies living in the territory that is now Niger were largely resistant to the spread of Islam until the 20th century (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). For example, Meunier (1995) cites Nicolas (1975) in noting that there were few Muslims in Maradi in 1945, even if the first Qur'anic schools in the area had opened in the later 1800s by members of Sufi brotherhoods (Meunier, 1998). Before then, the Qur'an had been transmitted within families (Meunier, 1995). By 1985, it was estimated there were 10,000 children enrolled in Qur'anic schools in the same town of Maradi, compared to 7,000 in primary school (Grégoire, 1991 cited in Meunier (1995)), and by 1992, more than 30,000 children in Qur'anic schools (compared to 12,000 in primary schools) (Meunier, 1995). This shows the rapid expansion of Islamisation, as well as the booming population.

Multiple forms of Islam are practiced in Niger today. According to a survey of 946 Muslims conducted across seven of the eight regions in Niger in 2011, 59% identify as Sunni, 7% as Shia, 20% as 'just a Muslim' (non-denominational), and 11% as 'something else' (Pew Research Center, 2012). Those

identifying as Sunni are divided between those who follow Sufi brotherhoods or Maliki maraboutic families unaffiliated to the brotherhoods, and those who have adopted 'reformist' forms of Islam. Many people consider themselves Muslims without any denomination. For example, Hagizi's (2020) work with Fulɓe pastoralists finds it is only recently that some of the youth have begun to align themselves with Izala principles, in one research location, and with the Tijaniyya, in another, with previous generations not belonging to any Muslim organisation or brotherhood.

Among the Sufi brotherhoods, today only the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya retain significant followings. The Tijaniyya still continues to grow (at least in 2011), while the Qadiriyya's influence has decreased in Hausa parts of the country, even if it still has many followers in the North (Touati, 2011). 34% of the Muslims surveyed by the Pew Research Center identified as following the Tijaniyya brotherhood (Pew Research Center, 2012) but given the swift spread of reformist movements, this proportion may have reduced since 2011 – the survey measured switching between Shia and Sunni denominations, but not between different forms of Sunni Islam. The brotherhoods have less influence than the network of maraboutic families who adhere to Maliki versions of Sunni Islam, but who are not linked to brotherhoods (Touati, 2011).

In addition, as with other countries in the region, to various extents, since the 1990s there has been an increasing influence of reformist Islam (of which Izala[2] is the strongest orientation) in Niger, originating from scholars trained in middle eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia (Gwadabe, 2020). Such movements have gained popular support, including the urban youth who saw brotherhoods as restricting their ambitions through structured social networks and intellectuals who believe understanding the Qur'an literally (requiring the study of Arabic) is necessary (Meunier, 1995; Touati, 2011). Growing access to digital technologies – starting with cassettes and CDs and later mobile phones and the internet – has accelerated the diversification of Islam in Niger, by allowing preachers whose voices would not have been shared on radio and television to spread their messages and unite their followers (Alzouma, 2017; Ibrahim, 2021)

However, Masquelier (2010) cautions against dividing Muslims in Niger strictly along the lines of reformist and Sufi, pointing to the contradictory and informal ways that Nigeriens themselves identify, with alliances changing over time. Instead, Villalón et al (2012) discuss different strands of Islam prominent in Niger in two main orientations: (1) the 'ambivalent' orientation that is promoted by the state through franco-arabe schools that combine secular and religious teaching; and (2) a denominational orientation. The latter is further divided into orthodox Sunnism (reformism) which contains both radical and moderate stands, Sufism, and a much smaller Shiite strand (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012).

Generally, Islam has been a unifying factor bringing together population groups in Niger across ethnic and land-based lines (Miles, 2003). For the most part, conservative interests, while they at times have conflicted with the state, have been expressed through peaceful rather than violent means (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). For example, the additional protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa was voted down in the national assembly after lobbying by Islamic associations (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Still, the growing popularity of the Izala movement led in the early 1990s to violent conflict with supporters of the Tijaniyya, particularly as a result of competition over the control of mosques (Touati, 2011).

[2] The Izala movement – a shortened form of Izalat al Bida'a wa maqamat al Sunna, or Suppression of innovation and restoration of the prophetic tradition, was established in Nigeria in the 1970s (Dia, 2022).

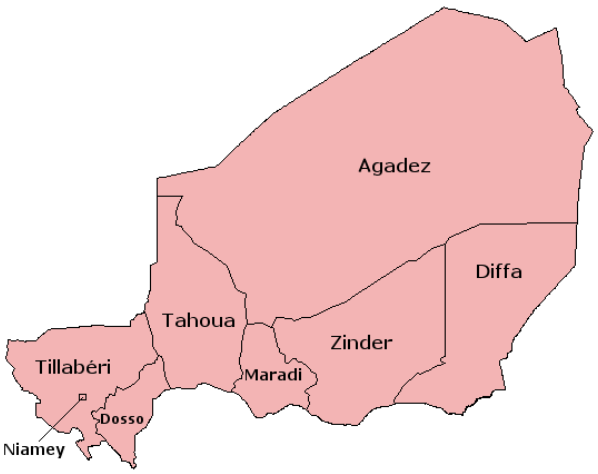

FIGURE 1 REGIONS OF NIGER

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Despite earlier violence in the first decades of the 2000s, Muslim youths of all persuasions in Niger more peacefully co-existed, seeing the infighting as 'petty' in comparison to the tensions between the wider Muslim community and the non-Muslim West (Masquelier, 2010). These tensions boiled over in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo murders in France in January 2015 – which also sparked riots elsewhere in the region, including in Senegal (Gifford, 2015), after several Muslim West African presidents expressed solidarity with the victims in Paris – with protests turning violent in Zinder, Maradi and Gouré and 10 people ultimately being killed (Schritt, 2015; Mueller, 2016). Such incidents should not be simply labelled as fundamentalism, but instead considered within the socioeconomic and political context (Schritt, 2015; Mueller, 2016). Schritt (2015) links such events to what Masquelier (2013) refers to as a "culture of masculine waiting"[3] – in which high numbers of men, even those who are highly educated, remain un- or underemployed and are thus trapped and frustrated, unable to marry or be truly counted as adults.

The same socioeconomic factors should be taken into account when considering the rise of violent fundamental Islamist movements in the region, and particularly the appeal to disillusioned youth (Laanani *et al.*, 2023). This is not to diminish the impact of such violence. Boko Haram – now known as Islamic State in the West African Province (or ISWAP) having rebranded in 2022 (Laanani *et al.*, 2023) – and its sympathisers, who believe Western style education to be haram (forbidden), have been active in Niger since 2014, while al-Qaida affiliated groups and the Islamist Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa had been active, with little support, for slightly longer (van Walraven, 2019). Boko Haram's activities have led to the closure of schools as well as deaths and injuries. In the eastern region of Diffa, for example, more than 150 schools were closed in a nine month period in 2015 (Murugaiah, 2023). The region has also seen an influx of refugees fleeing the same conflict in Niger, creating a crisis of increase in numbers of children and a decrease in provision of education (Murugaiah, 2023). The western region of Tillabéri has been even more greatly affected – by 2022, of the 890 schools in Niger that remained closed due to conflict, 817 were in Tillabéri (Murugaiah, 2023). In some parts of Tillabéri, parents have been threatened by the al-Qaida-affiliated group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) (Amnesty International, 2021). These conflicts have led to increased security and development interventions by the West, and, given the foreign origins of the conflicts, some argue they have been instrumentalised by the Nigerien government as a way to build national identity (Elischer and Mueller, 2019). There is some evidence that children are recruited into these violent jihadist movements – particularly in parts of Tillabéri where "school closures, limited economic prospects, food shortages, and an absence of local authorities" put youth at risk (Amnesty International, 2021, p. 37) – but, as in Nigeria, it is unclear whether children attending Qur'anic schools are particularly vulnerable.

Despite the recent violence, most attempts by religious movements to influence the Nigerien state have been peaceful. Having inherited the concept of *laïcité* (secularism) from the French, since independence the government in Niger has largely resisted the involvement of religion in politics

[3] A concept borrowed from Jeffrey (2010)

(Gwadabe, 2020), with the exception of succumbing to religious lobbying on some specific policies (Charlick, 2004). Until the 1990s, the state retained more control over religious affairs in Niger than in other countries where Sufi brotherhoods (Senegal) or maraboutic families (Mali) have more authority (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). One avenue to do this has been through the Association Islamique du Niger (AIN, Islamic Association of Niger). The AIN was created in 1974 after Seyni Kountché took power following a coup that overthrew President Diori who had been in power since independence. The AIN included both religious scholars who had trained in Arab countries and representatives of maraboutic families (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). The aim of creating this association was to control religious expression "through the AIN's monopoly on the management of large mosques, Islamic courts, religious ceremonies and regular preaching" (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012, p. 18). In the 1980s, any marabout wanting to preach had to pass a morality test, and permission could be revoked (Moulaye, 2006). The AIN broadcast weekly sermons instructing Nigeriens how to incorporate Muslim values in their daily lives (Alzouma, 2017). Its influence was predominantly over religious affairs in Niamey, while traditional chiefs were tasked with overseeing religious activities, and promoting religious tolerance, in rural areas (Ibrahim, 2021). The AIN continues to oversee traditional (religious) courts (Moulaye, 2006).

The state's control over religious movements changed significantly following the shift to democratisation in 1991. With less restriction on freedom of association, many Islamic associations were created, of which many followed orthodox Sunni principles rather than Sufism (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Unlike the Sufi associations, these Orthodox associations have attempted – without success – to harmonise the state with Islam and adopt sharia law, following the example of northern Nigeria but most can still be considered moderate as they seek to achieve this goal through lobbying (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). In 2019, according to media reports, there were 105 Islamic associations registered in Niger (RFI, 2019). Some of these represent specific doctrines, while others represent particular groups in society, such as university students or schoolchildren (Favier, 2022). There are also many associations of Qur'anic teachers at the local level, but not all are operational (Moulaye, 2006).

Despite this pluralism, a level of control is maintained. In 1996, the *Collectif des associations islamiques du Niger* (CASIN or Collective of Islamic Associations in Niger) was created with authority from the state under General Maïnassara, with the aim of acting as an intermediary between the state and the many Islamic associations that now exist (Touati, 2011). Nine associations were dissolved – including from both reformist and Sufi backgrounds – following the violence that erupted around a fashion festival in 2000 (Touati, 2011). Today, traditional chiefs, the Islamic Council of Niger, and the Ministry of the Interior's *Direction Générale du Culte (*General directorate of religion) oversee religious affairs. The council maintains close links with the AIN (Moulaye, 2006).

In recent years, religious leaders have increasingly been involved in politics, but the role of these Muslim elites remains limited to lobbying and influencing (Ibrahim, 2021). The state continues to interpret secularism as a way to limit this interference (Ibrahim, 2021). Arrests have been made of religious leaders who try to meddle too much, for example following violent protests organised in 2019 in response to a law guaranteeing freedom of religion while regulating religious practice (Ibrahim, 2021). The power of religious leaders therefore lies in inspiring cultural change from below, rather than direct involvement in central politics (Ibrahim, 2021)

Thus far, those calling for the state to abandon its secular nature have been largely unsuccessful. This includes in their calls for the state to extend the public school curriculum to include Qur'anic studies, seen as reflecting the values of the society (Sounaye, 2007). In the next section we turn to the educational landscape and education policy.

3.2.2 Education in Niger

Qur'anic schools are one of four types of school in Niger, along with *médersas* (sometimes known as madrasas), Franco-Arabe schools, and Western-style schools (which are known as 'traditional schools' in Niger) (Barreteau and Tiné, 1999; Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Some schools do not fit easily into any one category, suggesting the typology should rather be considered as a spectrum from informal, traditional Qur'anic school to Western-style, formal school (Butler, 2016). Distinctions can also be made between public and private, and between formal and non-formal forms of school. Villalón et al (2012, p. 9) consider that the landscape of Islamic education looks different in Niger compared to elsewhere in the region because of "the recent and unstructured character of Nigerien Islam as a hegemonic religion" and the "relatively liberal attitude of the final colonial government". Since 1986, it has been possible for some to complete the full cycle of education – from preschool to university – in Islamic institutions in Niger (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Religious education is thus available in several different forms. Before considering where traditional Qur'anic schools sit within this tapestry today, we first examine how education policy in Niger is intermeshed with the country's political economy and shaped by a history of colonialism and external intervention.

National education

As in other parts of the colonial territory of *Afrique Occidentale Française,* the French administration showed no interest in providing education on a large scale. Colonial power was concentrated in the west of the country, creating inequalities between east and west, and even there provided minimal investment in education (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). No secondary school was opened until 1931, and by 1956 only four adolescents in the entire country passed the baccalaureate exam, which marks the completion of secondary education (Charlick, 1991 cited in Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). In 1960, the year of independence, only 3.6% of school age children were registered in primary school, and the country had only two high schools until 1969 (Inné, 1988; cited in Chekaraou and Goza, 2015). In terms of the economy, the colonial government had attempted to build a 'peanut basin' similar to that in Senegal in the region of Maradi, and otherwise had not invested in building the economy at all (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Thus, after independence in 1960, groundnut production initially fuelled the export-oriented economy, until 1968 when this stream of revenue collapsed (Schritt, 2019). This, coupled with the drought in 1973, which led to famine in rural areas, disintegrated the clientelist networks of the first Nigerien president, leading to the first military coup (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012; Schritt, 2019). When uranium mining began in the 1970s, agreements were designed to prioritise French interests rather than Nigerien economic development (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012).

Nevertheless, the initial surge in revenue from uranium did bring investment in education in the early 1980s – but only on a temporary basis, and never at a level to keep up with the growing population (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). During this boom, the state created 'experimental schools,' which taught in children's local language and gradually introduced French, and which provided pupils with food for their families as an incentive for parents to enrol their children (Meunier, 1995). However, uranium prices fell later in the 1980s, and Niger's ability to pay its national debt (in USD) was further hindered by the devaluation of the French franc, bringing the value of CFA – and thus Niger's education budget - down with it (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012).

World Bank policies in the 1980s also significantly contributed to the decline in education. Decentralisation and reduction in the education budget led to parents being required to pay for supplies and maintain schools, rather than the state, and the introduction of untrained teachers (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). The outcome of this was ultimately to tie Nigerien education policy

to foreign aid and the neoliberal regime of donors, and to decrease the quality of education in Niger (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). In the 1990s, teachers' strikes as a result of unpaid salaries further limited access to education in traditional public schools (Barreteau and Tiné, 1999). By the late 1990s, even the World bank recognised that its policy had been a failure (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). In 1999, 44% of the Nigerien state budget was spent on debt; this was reduced to 11% by 2003 as more than half of the country's debt was relieved (Elischer and Mueller, 2019). Unintentionally, World bank policies also led to the unofficial introduction of religion in secular state schools. When the 'double shift' system was imposed in public schools in 1993-1994, meaning children would attend school only for half the day, parents organised themselves to pay marabouts to teach religious education for the rest of the day (Meunier, 1995; Sani, 2017).

While World Bank policy at this time focused on public, Western-style schools (which are known as 'traditional schools' in Niger (Barreteau and Tiné, 1999; Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012)), in the 1990s the *médersa* sector pressured the presidency of Baré Maïnassara to subscribe to a project led by the Islamic Development Bank to support Franco-Arabe teaching (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). While the secular public sector suffered from underinvestment, and became less attractive to society, the private religious sector expanded (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012).

Since 2001, formal education in Niger has been supported by donors, especially the European Union, who were more interested in rapidly increasing enrolment rates with a one-size-fits-all approach rather than adapting policies to the specific problems of the Nigerien context (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). There have been significant increases in primary school enrolment rates until 2017, when net enrolment peaked at 66.5% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). However, since then, rates have fallen every year, reaching 57.7% in 2021, eradicating the progress made in the preceding decade even if rates remain much higher than at the turn of the century (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023).[4] Literacy rates have also substantially increased, from 19.7% of 15-24 year olds in 2001 to 47.2% in 2021, yet the completion rate for lower secondary school was only 16.2% in 2021 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023).

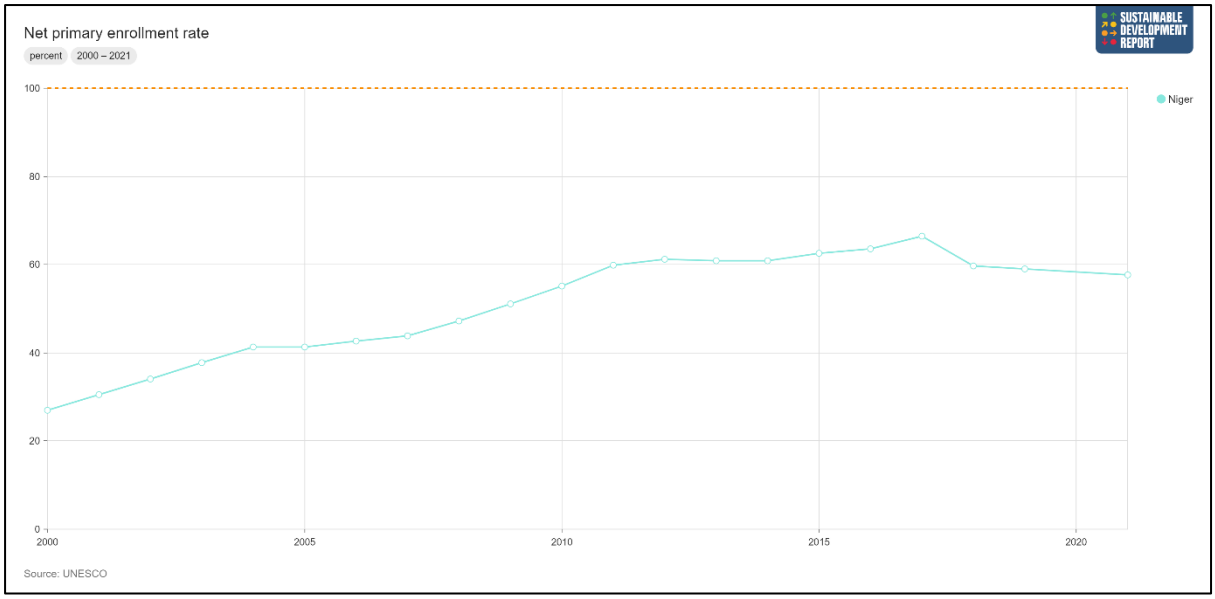


FIGURE 2 NET PRIMARY ENROLMENT RATE

[4] It is unclear from the metadata provided whether these rates include children enrolled in public Franco-Arabe schools as well as those in traditional primary school.

Survey data shows that enrolment in formal education overtook rates of those enrolled only in Qur'anic school (discounting those who attended Qur'anic school before or as well as formal education) in the 1980s, but that these gains in formal education were mostly from among the population with no schooling at all (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021). As the aid organisations that have influenced Nigerien education policy focused on increasing the 'supply' of secular schools, they have neglected the 'demand' side, resulting in a sector that does not fit the "expectations and aspirations of the society and of families" (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012, p. 26. Translated from French.). Many families instead seek religious forms of education for their children, to which we now turn.

Islamic education in Niger

With the traditional Western-style schooling system criticised for not fitting the expectations of society, many families instead turn to the various types of Islamic education that are available. For many, this means informal Qur'anic school, but some have access to and prefer other forms.

Médersas and Franco-Arabe schools

Despite the secularism of the state, public religious education has been available in Niger since the 1960s (Murugaiah, 2023), beginning with the primary level and with secondary level added in the 1970s (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Unlike other parts of West Africa, public *médersas*, and later, Franco-Arabe schools have continued to receive state funding (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Some consider the labels of 'médersa' and 'Franco-Arabe' to be interchangeable in the Nigerien context (for example, Sani, 2017), while others consider that *médersas* place more focus on Islamic topics than Franco-Arabe schools (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021). Here, we consider them as one loose category, but draw attention to distinctions between the two forms where appropriate.

Both *médersas* and Franco-Arabe schools are considered formal and modern, using modern pedagogic methods, and exist in both public and private (but regulated) forms (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Teaching is given in class settings, rather than individual tuition (Meunier, 1995). Teachers may be marabouts, or they may have themselves been educated in Franco-Arabe or Islamic médersas (Meunier, 1995). Begging is not a feature of these schools.

The first *médersa* was established by the colonial government In 1957 in Say with the goal for spreading a form of Islam more favourable to the French than the ideas coming from the Middle East (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). *Médersas* are under state surveillance, with staff trained by the state, and their students gain diplomas recognised by the state (Sani, 2017; Gwadabe, 2020). Private *médersas* have been regulated since the 1970s, offering the same curriculum as their public counterparts (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Until recently, private *médersas* tended to be associated with reformist movements, teaching Arabic alongside religious education and often supported by Saudi-funded NGOs (Butler, 2016). However, the links between *médersas* and reform movements are not as strong as they once were (Butler, 2016).

Similarly, Franco-Arabe schools offer a combination of secular and religious teaching,[5] in differing quantities, taught in a combination of French and Arabic (Butler, 2016). They gained popularity in the 1980s-1990s as parents lost trust in the quality of traditional public school (Barreteau and Tiné, 1999; Butler, 2016), and demand has continued to increase (Sani, 2017). Between 2000 and 2017, the number of pupils enrolled in primary level Franco-Arabe schools increased almost eightfold, while those in traditional French school increased by a factor of five (Ibrahim, 2021). 24% of primary schools

[5] Villalón et al (2012) note that the laws that provide the framework for Franco-Arabe schools do not explicitly mention religion.

were of the Franco-Arabe model in 2019 – a far more substantial share of public education than most other countries in the region (Dia, 2022). However, even including the private institutions, médersas and Franco-Arabe schools have never existed in adequate numbers to meet the demand for religious education (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012)

A reform of the Islamic education sector was first announced in 1998, with three goals: improve the quality of education in Franco-Arabe schools ; evolve the Islamiyya schools towards the Franco-Arabe form; formalise Qur'anic schools (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). It was driven by a huge rise in demand for religious education throughout the 1990s (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Because there is already a public religious education option available, reform of the Islamic education sector in Niger has taken a different path than in other countries where all or almost all national education is secular. Franco-Arabe school reform started by aligning the curriculum of secular subjects taught in French to that of traditional schools, but was expanded to include standardisation of some of the teaching of lessons including Arabic language and *ajami* (using Arabic script to write other languages) and Islamic sciences (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Debates around the franco-arabe schools include where the balance should lie between religious subjects (which lure in parents) and secular subjects (preferred by the state and donors) and the logistics of bilingual and hybrid education (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Reforms and investment have been funded by external donors including UNESCO, the Islamic Development Bank, and other international Islamic organisations (Dia, 2022). While the results of the reform are not entirely clear, Villalón et al (2012) note a rapid increase in Franco-Arabe education in the early 2000s. By 2019, Franco-Arabe schools accounted for 13% of educational provision in Niger (Dia, 2022). More girls (52.6% of Franco-Arabe pupils) attend these schools than boys (Dia, 2022).

While Franco-arabe schools are funded by the state, unlike purely religious forms of education, they receive less support than secular schools (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Tuition fees in private *médersas* and Franco-arabe schools is significantly more expensive than modernised Qur'anic schools – two to five times more according to research conducted in the early 1990s (Meunier, 1995).[6] This, combined with insufficient numbers, means that they are inaccessible for large proportions of the population of Niger, where 54% of the population lives on less than $2.15 USD a day, or 84% on less than $3.65 USD a day (World Data Lab, 2023).[7]

Qur'anic schools

As elsewhere in the region, not all Qur'anic schools in Niger can be considered as sites of exploitation. Because almost all Qur'anic schools are excluded from state information systems, it is not known how many Qur'anic schools there are, nor how many children are enrolled in them (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021), not to mention how many practice begging. The World Bank estimates that 26% of out of school children aged 6-15 attend informal Qur'anic schools in Niger (Banque Mondiale, 2021). A previous attempt at counting Qur'anic schools in Niamey highlighted the frequency with which schools open, move, or close down, with researchers having counted schools in a given neighbourhood one day then finding coming back "(after two or three weeks) with two or three schools more or less" than the original number (Souley, 1998, p. 152. Translated from French). The author suggests "more or less prolonged disruptions in the classic school system, availability of school teachers, welcome from the neighbourhood residents etc" as potential reasons for these fluctuations (Souley, 1998, p. 152.

[6] In 1993, *médersas* charged 200-500 franc CFA per month (Meunier, 1995)

[7] These figures relate to 2023 before international sanctions were put in place following the latest coup d'état. These sanctions have raised the cost of living and are pushing more people into extreme poverty (World Bank Group and World Food Programme, 2023).

Translated from French). Combined with traditions of migration, another reason that can be inferred from more recent research elsewhere is that many traditional Qur'anic schools in urban areas are housed in precarious situations including in temporary structures and on building sites owned by someone else (Semin, 2018; Tine, Diallo and Dione, 2020).

Data based on household surveys (*Enquête nationale sur les conditions de vie des ménages et l'agriculture* [ECVM/A] 2011 and 2014] and *Recensement Général de la population et de l'habitat,* [RGP/H] 2012) can roughly tell us what share of the population have *exclusively* attended Qur'anic school, but will miss those who attended more than one type of education because the questions are phrased to only capture the highest level of education individuals have attained (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021). Another major limitation to this data is that no distinction is made between residential and non-residential Qur'anic schools. Even in these sources, data differs substantially. Male et al (2021, p. 232) demonstrate that "between 5.0% and 15.7% of children aged 10-14 appear [to] have a Koranic education [exclusively] as opposed to a formal education. This compares to 31.8%-58.3% of children having some formal education, and 29.4-52.4% of children having no education at all". The data shows that girls are only slightly less likely than boys to have only Qur'anic education (13% of boys and 10% of girls in ECVM/A 2011 data, and 15.7% for each gender in ECVM/A 2014). Challenging the assumption that only the economically poor population makes use of Qur'anic schools, the household survey data shows that differences in Qur'anic school enrolment between economic quintiles are not statistically significant, "with the exception of the top quintile where enrolment in Koranic schools is slightly less likely" (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021, p. 234). The data demonstrate significant differences between regions, but the paper by Male et al (2021) does not fully consider to what extent differing access to formal school explains these differences, given the limitation of the data in only counting those who have extended Qur'anic school exclusively. They do, however, demonstrate using data for children aged 13-18 (and thus unlikely to enrol in formal school if they have not already) that there are vast differences in rates of Qur'anic school enrolment between municipalities (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021).

Traditional Qur'anic schools, or *makaranta* (*allo*), can be residential, or non-residential (or a combination, with some residential and some non-residential students). Some are itinerant while others are permanently located in one place: a survey of 598 Qur'anic schools in Zinder found that 90% were permanent while 10% were itinerant (Sani, 2017). Traditional Qur'anic schools are not funded by the state (Butler, 2016). While the *Ministère de l'Intérieur, de la Sécurité Publique et de l'Administration du Territoire* (Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, and Territorial Administration)[8] does officially have the power to regulate and issue authorisations to Qur'anic schools in Niger, in practice the resources are not available to enforce these rules (ANTD, 2020). In 1993, for example, there was one inspector tasked with regulating every Qur'anic school in the country (Meunier, 1995). It is also relevant to note their position under this ministry, rather than the Ministry of National Education, which resulted from the first independence government's continuation of the French administration's position on religious teaching, and which prevents them from being included in education budgets (Miles, 2003; Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Qur'anic schools vary hugely in size, with some having more than 300 students (Meunier, 1995) and others having just a few (Barreteau and Tiné, 1999). They can be found in temporary shelters or permanent structures, in the shadows of trees or simply in the open street, often on street corners or near to mosques (Souley, 1998). Most malamai will have only Qur'anic education themselves, though a small proportion may

[8] Named *Ministère de l'Intérieur, de la Sécurité Publique, de la Décentralisation et des Affaires Coutumières et Religieuses* (Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, Decentralisation and Religious and Traditional Affairs) before the July 2023 military coup, it is unclear if this Ministry's mandate remains the same.

have attended some other form of Islamic education in addition (Souley, 1998). While the malamai who teach the Qur'an have traditionally been required to be able to recite and write out the entire Qur'an to be considered qualified, it has been noted that some malamai in Niamey, who themselves studied in urban Qur'anic schools, have only memorised parts of the holy book themselves (Souley, 1998)

Non-residential traditional Qur'anic schools are permanently embedded in many communities, where people of all ages and genders can go to learn the Qur'an for a weekly or monthly fee of 250-500 FCFA a month (ANTD, 2020). Classes are gender-segregated, with women taught by female Qur'anic teachers (ANTD, 2020). Classes in these schools are designed to fit around people's other responsibilities, held in the early morning and/or the evening (ANTD, 2020). This means that children can be enrolled in a combination of schooling options, including Qur'anic, Franco-Arabe, and/or formal primary school, at once, attending Qur'anic school outside of formal school hours (Butler, 2016; Sani, 2017; Murugaiah, 2023). Non-residential Qur'anic schools may also provide the function of preschool or kindergarten (Sani, 2017) – though a government study suggests that children who go to Qur'anic preschool perform less well when they go on to primary school than those who did not attend any preschool at all (UNESCO IIEP Dakar, 2020). Others may attend only the Qur'anic school (Souley, 1998). Begging is not typically practiced in non-residential schools, as students live in the surrounding areas.

On the other hand, residential traditional Qur'anic schools are often portrayed as sites of exploitation. Recent estimates suggest there are more than 2,500 of this type of Qur'anic school in Niger (ANTD, 2020). These schools are often itinerant, with boys (exclusively boys) entrusted to a Qur'anic teacher who may then move elsewhere (ANTD, 2020). These *talibés* are often required to beg, as most parents do not pay for their tuition and upkeep in the school. The ANTD study found that 88% of *talibés* in these schools are forced to beg, while 12% receive family support instead, according to the Qur'anic teachers (ANTD, 2020). Begging became seen more frequently in urban centres, particularly Niamey, from the late 1980s, at a time when economic difficulties spawning from a combination of crashing uranium prices, drought, the devaluation of the CFA, political instability and the macroeconomic policies imposed by international financial institutions made it impossible for rural communities to continue their way of life (Gilliard and Pédenon, 1996). Traditionally, students went to beg only at mealtimes (Souley, 1998), but increasingly spend longer periods of time begging – nine hours a day, on average, according to ANTD's (2020) study.

Not all Qur'anic schools follow the traditional model. The reformist movements, particularly Izala, have established modern or modernised Qur'anic schools in Niger, bringing modern pedagogic techniques, and an emphasis on *tawhid* (Islamic science) and Arabic language, that do not generally exist in traditional Qur'anic schools (Sani, 2017). Based on Nigeria's Islamiyya schools model, these schools compete with those offered by the Sufi marabouts and are similar to Franco-Arabe schools, but without the inclusion of secular subjects (Sani, 2017). They began to emerge in the 1990s in the region of Maradi, bordering northern Nigeria (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Public policy targeting these schools has aimed to transform them into Franco-Arabe schools with the introduction of French, bringing them into the regulated education sector (Meunier, 1995).

Finally, the state has taken limited action towards establishing a new form, the *école coranique rénovée* – renovated or modernised Qur'anic schools - on a small scale since 2003, building on earlier programmes run by international organisations (Sani and Rabiou, 2009). As in other countries such as Senegal, the Nigerien state was motivated by pressure from international institutions to raise (formal) school enrolment rates (Sani, 2017). Through the *Projet d'appui aux écoles franco-arabes du Niger* (PAEFAN or Project supporting franco-arabe schools in Niger) 10 Qur'anic schools (from a variety of Islamic traditions) were chosen to test a pilot programme consisting of combining Qur'anic teaching

with first Arabic language, and later, French and numeracy (Sani, 2017). The project aimed to bring Qu'ranic schools into the formal education system by making them resemble the Franco-Arabe schools (Sani, 2017). After six years, and no further roll-out from the 10 pilot schools, the project was stopped by the Minister of National Education (Sani, 2017). According to the report by ANTD (2020), by 2020 none of the 10 modernised Qur'anic schools were functional. The reasons for this failure include competition between Sufi and reformist branches of Islam, inappropriate leadership from people who lacked on the ground experience, and resistance from traditional Qur'anic teachers (Sani, 2017), coupled with insufficient political will (ANTD, 2020). Some marabouts "denounced political interference and suspected a plan to destroy Qur'anic education" (Dia, 2022. Translated from French). However, a World Bank report states that "several hundred modern Qur'anic schools benefit from a form of monetary support from the government, but they represent only a miniscule proportion of all Qur'anic schools in the country" (Banque Mondiale, 2021, p. 53. Translated from French.). These schools are not mentioned in any other literature, and it is not clear if this report is in fact referring to the Franco-Arabe schools here.

TABLE 1 BASIC TYPOLOGY OF EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS IN NIGER

	Type	Public/private	Curriculum
Secular education	Traditional (French) school	Public or private	Standardised primary curriculum
	Experimental school	Public	Primary curriculum + agriculture
Hybrid education	Franco-arabe school/médersa	Public or private	Islamic sciences + secular subjects
	Renovated/modernised Qur'anic schools	Public or private	Qur'an + primary curriculum[9]
Islamic education	Islamiyya schools (izalist Qur'anic school)	Private	Qur'an + Arabic language
	Traditional Qur'anic schools	Private	Qur'an[10]

There is little evidence of the outcomes for children of attending Qur'anic school. Male et al (2021) analyse literacy rates amongst 13–18-year-olds with different educational backgrounds, and find that literacy and (to a lesser extent) numeracy rates are higher among those who have exclusively Qur'anic education than those who have no education, but far lower than those who have attended formal school (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021). The data are imperfect, as literacy and numeracy were reported by parents rather being tested (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021). On the other hand, one positive aspect of the survey is that it asks parents to consider literacy in any language (Survey and Census Division, National Institute of Statistics, 2011). Children attending exclusively Qur'anic schools are unlikely to be literate in French but are often able to write in Ajami– the use of Arabic script to transliterate their mother tongue (Alidou, 2003). When it comes to labour earnings, unlike formal education, having exclusively Qur'anic education is not shown to have a statistically significant difference to having no education at all (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021). This confirms findings from Nigeria that suggest that "in terms of skills and future prospects, not much sets the *almajirai* [migrant talibés] apart from other poor undereducated youth from rural households" (Hoechner, 2014). In terms of their futures, research from Nigeria suggests potential careers for former talibés in

[9] For the small number of modern Qur'anic schools supported by the government. Other modernised Qur'anic schools run privately or by NGOs do not have a standardised curriculum.
[10] Some traditional Qur'anic schools include additional subjects such as Arabic, French, or numeracy.

both the formal and informal economies, as well as teaching the Qur'an themselves (Abdulrahman, 2018).

For the *talibés* in the informal, traditional, and residential Qur'anic schools, evidence suggests life is tough. Although there are nuances in the context, *talibés* who beg in Niger face many of the same challenges as their peers in other countries. Many live in unsanitary conditions, lacking basic hygiene facilities and aeration, which exposes them to illness (Sani, 2017; ANTD, 2020), but also to stigmatisation when they are portrayed as the vectors of disease (Hoechner and Salisu, 2022). Physical punishment is frequent (Souley, 1998). According to the 2020 ASI/ANTD study, students are asked to bring 50 francs to 200 francs per day to their *marabout* with the threat of corporal punishment if they fail to do so (ANTD, 2020). Almost all (99%, with the remaining 1% declining to respond) of those who beg have been subject to physical or verbal attacks while begging, in addition to being exposed to other dangers of the street such as traffic accidents (ANTD, 2020). Sometimes students are also 'loaned' out to work for payment in private homes, in businesses, or doing work in the street (ANTD, 2020). As mentioned above, there are fears that *talibés* in unregulated Qur'anic schools may be easy prey for jihadist extremists (Murugaiah, 2023), though the limited evidence from neighbouring Nigeria suggests this fear may be overblown (Hoechner, 2014). Narratives of fraudulent impostors claiming to be Qur'anic teachers (the 'faux marabout') to exploit children, and of other street-connected children posing as *talibés* to legitimise their begging, appear to be employed in Niger as they are elsewhere (Thiam, 2014; Butler, 2016; Macleod, 2023b). The lack of regulation and oversight of traditional Qur'anic schools leaves talibés in Niger, as in other countries, vulnerable to the types of human rights abuses – including physical, sexual, emotional violence as well as deprivation of positive rights - documented extensively by Human Rights Watch in Senegal (Seibert, 2019), although there is no robust evidence of the extent of such abuse in Niger. On the other hand, Qur'anic teachers themselves point to their own poverty and lack of financial support from parents and the state to explain the conditions in which *talibés* live (Souley, 1998).

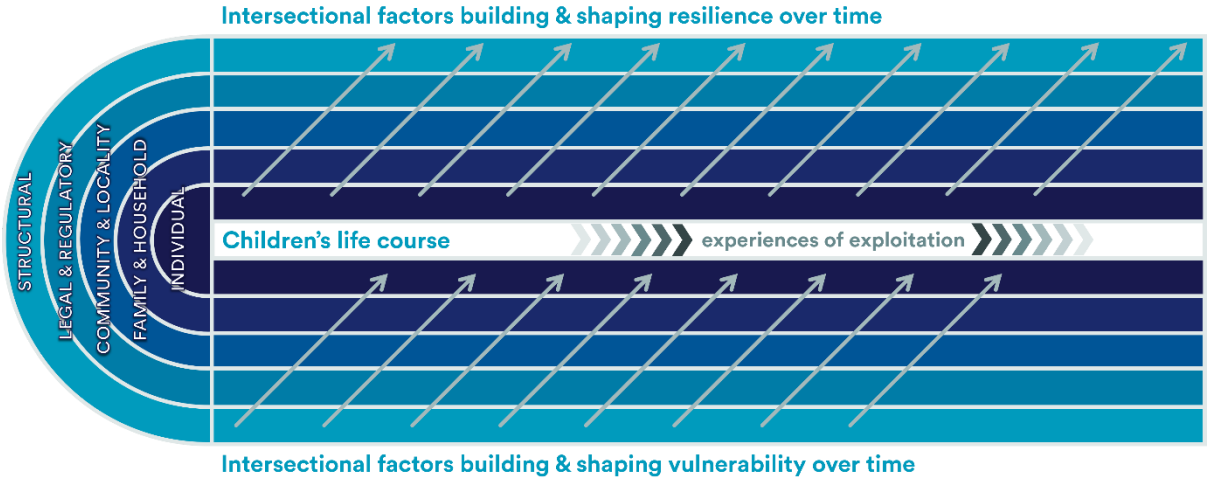
Finally, the July 2023 coup d'état was the fifth successful coup in Niger (with others taking place in 1974, 1996, 1999, and 2010, not including unsuccessful attempts in between). The coup leaders and their supporters have been explicit in sharing their anti-French sentiments, due to the exploitation of the country's natural resources by France and French companies, and quickly ended military cooperation agreements with France (Engels, 2023). In response to this, and the announcement that Nigerien uranium exports on which French electricity supply relies would be stopped, the French government swiftly put a stop to all development aid and budget support (Engels, 2023), with the World Bank and the European Union following suit (Aksar and Balima, 2023). ECOWAS and the Central Bank of West African States imposed trade and financial sanctions (World Bank, 2023). As the World Bank itself notes, these sanctions have raised the cost of living and are pushing more people into extreme poverty (World Bank Group and World Food Programme, 2023). It remains to be seen how the current administration will engage with Qur'anic schools or how backlash to the coup will disrupt potential interventions.

4. Analysis

The following analysis focuses on the classical, residential Qur'anic schools where begging is commonplace.

Analysis is based on the socioecological model as modified below to represent the intersecting risk and resilience factors that influence the experiences of exploitation over a child's life course.

Figure 1.



4.1 Individual

More research is needed into who the *talibés* are in Qur'anic schools where begging is practiced, in contrast to children not enrolled in these schools; the demographics of their families; their birth order; or what particular characteristics they possess. There is minimal existing research in this area, making it difficult to distinguish protective versus risk factors.

The ANTD survey indicates all *talibés* in residential Qur'anic schools in Niger are male (ANTD, 2020). This is in keeping with findings from other countries that demonstrate that girls may attend Qur'anic schools, but tend to do so close to home rather than migrating, and therefore they do not beg (Thorsen, 2012; Goensch, 2016). Of the *talibés* who beg included in the ANTD study, most are from Niger but some were from other countries including Nigeria (5%) and Mali (1%) (ANTD, 2020). Students tend to be from rural areas or regions nearby to the urban centres where they are identified (ANTD, 2020). An earlier survey found that most *talibés* in traditional Qur'anic schools were Hausa (the largest group in the general population), though other ethnic backgrounds were present among *talibés* in Niamey (Mounkaila, 2007). Among Fulbe (Fulani) communities, Higazi (2020) suggests that children of some nomadic groups usually study the Qur'an in rural areas, but some other Fulbé children from different groups may be sent to Qur'anic schools in cities. This suggests diversity of choices within ethnic groups.

Not all children (or all boys) from a family are necessarily sent to a Qur'anic school. Parents make different choices for each of their children to diversify their outcomes so that the family unit as a whole reaps the benefits of each form of education (Barreteau and Tiné, 1999). More recent research confirms that parents are not necessarily opposed to either form of education, and instead seek to diversify livelihoods within the family (Higazi, 2020). Parents, and it is usually the father, chooses which child(ren) to enrol in a traditional Qur'anic school partially based on an assessment of their ability to withstand hardship (Thorsen, 2012).

Little has been written about children's own perspectives on their Qur'anic education, either in Niger or the wider region (Thorsen, 2012). The limited evidence that does exist exhibits complexity in children's views and variations in their experiences. Asked if they would like to return home, half of the talibés interviewed by Semin (2018, p. 14) in Northern Senegal "answered in the affirmative, a quarter replied that they would rather finish their Koranic studies and a quarter answered in the negative". Older children within this group recognised difficult experiences in their childhoods spent

far from home in Qur'anic schools, but ultimately felt their parents (especially fathers) had made the right decision in sending them (Semin, 2018). This is echoed by talibés interviewed in Senegal by Amo (2014), who felt that the hardships they endured – including separation from their mothers as well as harsh living conditions - contributed to forming them into complete men, as a type of initiation. On the other hand, among the West African (country of origin not specified) unaccompanied migrant youths interviewed in France by Bonnet and Delanoë (2019), there are two examples of children who have fled the country with the support of their mothers to avoid being forced by their fathers to attend Qur'anic school. The same paper mentions another youth who appreciated his Qur'anic education, which also allowed him to learn some French (Bonnet and Delanoë, 2019). Abdulrahman's (2018) interviews with former talibés in Northern Nigeria confirms all of these themes: the men talk about suffering various forms of hardship yet ultimately reflect positively upon their experiences, identifying positive moral or spiritual, educational, material, and social effects on their adult lives that defy mainstream narratives of a system reproducing dysfunctional adults.

Several studies contradict the assumptions that children have no agency in the decision of what form of education they will receive and that they necessarily have negative perceptions of residential Qur'anic schools, despite the harsh conditions they withstand (Newman, 2017). Child talibés exhibit agency in the ways they spend time on the street, choosing to work rather than beg, saving money, skilfully taking advantage of opportunities for humanitarian assistance in its various forms, and in some cases, committing crimes (Semin, 2018). Other studies highlight the inability of children to contradict the wishes of an adult, but note that this norm of respecting and obeying elders is widely shared across West African households, not exclusive to talibés (Amo, 2014).

4.2 Family and Household

There are complex reasons for enrolling a child in a residential Qur'anic school where begging is practiced, which are not easily explained by any one factor, including either economics or religion, underscoring the need for an intersectional approach.

Economic poverty appears to be a factor in sending children to a traditional residential Qur'anic school but cannot alone explain the practice. In the ANTD (2020) study, the majority of *talibés* (83%) stated their parents have no fixed income. Only 16% had stable incomes. 46.4% of *talibés* said their parent(s) worked in agriculture, 30.7% stated they were from households headed by a housewife, 12.4% described their parent(s) as traders or vendors, and 5.4% identified only as workers (ANTD, 2020). 3.9% had at least one parent who was a Qur'anic teacher themselves (ANTD, 2020). 44% of *talibés* surveyed by ANTD came from polygamous households (ANTD, 2020).[11] Parents' own education also plays a role. Male et al (2021) show that children of household heads in Niger who themselves have only Qur'anic education are 12.7% more likely to be enrolled exclusively in Qur'anic school than those whose parent has no education at all (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021). Parents with formal education are more likely to enrol their child in formal school either as well as or instead of Qur'anic (Male, Nayihouba and Wodon, 2021).

However, Thorsen (2012, p. 5) points to the fact that "not all" children in Qur'anic schools across the region come from the poorest quintile. The poverty narrative ignores the reality that children are often net producers rather than net consumers, negating the contributions children make to the household, and the resource loss that placing a child in a residential school represents (Perry, 2004; Thorsen, 2012). Although we do not know if their parents would agree, the *talibés* interviewed by ANTD thought the motivations of their parents for enrolling them in a Qur'anic school to be religious (90% of the

[11] 36% of married women in Niger are in polygamous marriages (Institut National de la Statistique, 2013).

time) and rarely, economic (ANTD, 2020). Education of their child was also believed to be a key factor. Thus, as Thorsen (2012) argues, while parents do emphasize poverty as a reason for sending a child to a Qur'anic school, it is not categorically the primary factor for families. Religious education is a duty of parents in Islam (Sani, 2017), and religion is also often emphasised by parents in studies from other countries. For instance in Guinea Bissau, one factor for parents sending their children to Qur'anic schools is their own religiosity: by having their children study the Quran they hope they will be rewarded by God (Einarsdóttir and Boiro, 2016). Elsewhere, parents in Senegal sent their children for religious, educational and moral reasons – they hoped their children would be moulded into good people by the experience as well as made closer to God (Perry, 2004). However, it should be noted that, according to Hoechner's (2015) anthropological research with *almajirai* in Northern Nigeria, religious and cultural reasons that are prioritised when explaining enrolment in a traditional Qur'anic school may sometimes be masking material constraints that research participants are less comfortable talking about.

Parents choosing Qur'anic education for their child also decide between keeping them at home as they attend a local Qur'anic school in the community and sending them to a residential school elsewhere. As children in non-residential schools do not typically beg, this choice requires further examination. Evidence from the wider region suggests that some parents believe distance to be advantageous. For some, distant Qur'anic schools are thought to be better than those available in the local community (Einarsdóttir *et al.*, 2010) while others believe the solitude resulting from distance promotes introspection and dedication to religious studies (Einarsdóttir and Boiro, 2016). This results in children intentionally being sent far enough away that they are deterred from trying to come home (Higazi, 2020). Thorsen (2012) finds evidence that parents seek Qur'anic education that also offers opportunities to learn other skills, and that this decision impacted where they place their children. Finally, placing children outside the family home is not abnormal in many communities in West Africa, as there are other reasons that children may migrate, including to provide labour for extended family members while learning skills or accessing education (Howard, 2011; Badaoui and Mangiavacchi, 2022). In Niger, 21% of families take in at least one child, and about 10% of children do not live with either of their parents (Institut National de la Statistique, 2013; Badaoui and Mangiavacchi, 2022).[12] These practices may be locally understood as child fostering, or even a cultural rite of passage, rather than trafficking (Busza, Castle and Diarra, 2004; Howard, 2011). However, evidence from anthropological studies elsewhere in West Africa suggests that parents are aware of the harsh conditions that boys sent to residential Qur'anic schools will face, and in some cases fathers themselves were sent to these schools (Perry, 2004; Thorsen, 2012; Fiasorgbor *et al.*, 2015; Einarsdóttir and Boiro, 2016). On the other hand, there are claims based on interviews with child former *talibés* that some parents are tricked by unscrupulous marabouts promising better living conditions than they can provide (Kane and Wane, 2021). It is unclear to what extent these findings from other countries apply in Niger.

Parents infrequently enrol all children in residential Qur'anic schools, diversifying choices for the benefit of the family as a whole (Barreteau and Tiné, 1999). Parents are described as carefully considering whether an individual child can endure the harsh living conditions, the reputation of the Qur'anic teacher, and whether attending a particular Qur'anic school can provide a better future for the children (Thorsen, 2012; Higazi, 2020). Formal education is considered a long-term investment requiring financial sacrifices from parents, who may instead opt for education that may lead to the more available informal sector work (Villalón, Idrissa and Bodian, 2012). Public schools and Qur'anic schools are seen as serving different purposes: public school as the route to economic stability, but

[12] Only 2% is accounted for by both parents being deceased (Institut National de la Statistique, 2013).

Qur'anic school for cultivating cultural values and morality to ensure the child's future and afterlife (Murugaiah, 2023). For girls, attending Qur'anic school, even for a short time, may increase a girl's marriageability, as it is believed that an unborn child can hear the prayers and Qur'anic verses recited by their mother (Hassane, 2013). Research from Nigeria suggests that Hausa communities – parents, school teachers and *malamai* alike - expect a holistic education for children, incorporating both skills that equip them for future careers, and development of their moral character (Bano, 2022). As mentioned above, Higazi's (2020) research with nomadic Fulɓe communities in northern Nigeria demonstrated that for the most part they are not against secular school, even if they have become disillusioned by the low quality of state education in rural areas, and that Qur'anic school provides children with religious knowledge as well as "moral framework and some status". No literature could be found to explicitly confirm that these views are held in Niger, it is very possible that this is the case given the strong links between communities on either side of the border.

Analysis of the practice in the wider region suggests that more research is needed into the relationship between a *talibé's* family and his Qur'anic teacher. Thorsen (2012) concludes that about half of the *talibés* are related to their Qur'anic teacher or have siblings or other children from their village of origin who have studied with the same man. Relationships are not necessarily familial and can be based on ties of friendship between families going back for generations (Macleod, 2022). Again, these insights come from analysis in Guinea-Bissau and Senegal, and may or may not reflect norms and prevalence in Niger.

4.3 Community and Locality

Many *talibés* come from rural areas (Thorsen, 2012; ANTD, 2020), where alternative opportunities may be limited and traveling for education is the norm.

The decision to send a child may sometimes be related to the availability and quality of educational alternatives in children's home communities. In some rural areas there are fewer public services and restricted options for primary school (Thorsen, 2012). The Qur'anic school can be the only accessible educational option (Thorsen, 2012). Where alternatives are available, the quality of public education also makes it less attractive to parents. A study by National Institute of Statistics in Niger considered perceived shortcomings in the education system. Levels of satisfaction with the system varied by region, with 81% of households 'somewhat satisfied' or 'satisfied' in Maradi, and just 57% in Tillabéri; and conversely 34.9% 'somewhat dissatisfied' or 'dissatisfied' in Tillabéri compared to 8.4% in Maradi (Institut National de la Statistique, 2016). Among the most common reasons for dissatisfaction were "irregularity of classes" (46%), "a lack of books/supplies" (41%), "frequent absences of teachers" (39%), "lack of teachers" (26%), and "insufficient desks/chairs" (25%). A "lack of Qur'anic or religious schools" was stated as a shortcoming of the education service by 13% of dissatisfied households (Institut National de la Statistique, 2016, p. 131). There is an additional post-colonial critique that the formalized schooling options are linked to colonialism and secularism, given the colonial imposition of this form of education (Sounaye, 2021). While there is some evidence of this sentiment in Niger from the 1990s (Miles, 1994), it is less clear to what extent this remains the case today. As mentioned above, even where primary school is available and accessible, many parents in Niger will send some children to government schools and others to religious schools, making decisions on what is seen as best for the family unit rather than the individual child (Barreteau and Tiné, 1999; Perlman, Adamu and Wodon, 2018), suggesting that the choice is not – or at least not exclusively – ideological.

Moving on from the communities of origin, the differences between destination regions of *talibés* in Niger are less well understood. The ANTD (2020) study which surveyed traditional Qur'anic schools in six Nigerien cities suggests some variation in the prevalence of forced begging among *talibés* in these

different towns, estimating the proportions of *talibé* in forced begging situation as 95% in Niamey and in Zinder, 93% in Arlit, 92% in Maradi, 86% in Tahuoa, and 70% in Agadez.[13] Overall, according to the Qur'anic teachers, 88% were engaged in begging, with 12% supported by their families instead (ANTD, 2020).

It is not unusual for children to cross national borders for Qur'anic education. The ANTD (2020) report suggests that there are significant flows of students moving to or from Nigeria, often through the Nigerien town of Timkin, and to/from Mali (Labzenga) through the Ayerou Haoussa axis and Abalaand Filingue. The vast majority of identified students in the survey reported being Nigerien, but 5% were Nigerian and 1% Malian (ANTD, 2020). Liman et al (2023) demonstrate that it is not unusual among Hausa communities in Niger for children to study at Qur'anic schools in Northern Nigeria. The ANTD study indicates that in some cases, children are destined for the northern states of Nigeria where there are Nigerien communities going back at least three generations (ANTD, 2020), but it is unclear whether this is typical or if the destination is generally urban areas. The phenomenon of crossing borders for education is not new: the concept of migration to seek religious knowledge can be found in the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, and thus the practice long predates the imposition of colonial borders (Magashi, 2015). Today, this practice of crossing national borders for the purposes of education and religious knowledge may not be understood as trafficking locally, as has been shown in other contexts (Einarsdóttir and Boiro, 2016).

4.4 Legal and Regulatory

Laws are in place to protect children from forced begging and uphold their rights, but when it comes to *talibés* these laws are almost never enforced.

The Nigerien government has historically been responsive to adopting international norms and instituting laws and policy that actively promote the protection of children (Bhoola, 2015). The legal code establishes forced child begging as a crime under article 181 of the Criminal Code (Bhoola, 2015). The country also has a National Referral Mechanism for assisting survivors and has established the National Commission for the Coordination for Combating Human Trafficking (CNCLTP) and the National Agency for Combating Human Trafficking (Bhoola, 2015). An additional ruling adopted in 2010 (Ordonnance n° 2010-86 relating to the fight against human trafficking) sets out penalties of 5-10 years imprisonment and fines of 500,000-5,000,000 cfa (762-7,622 EUR) specifically for the exploitation of another person's begging (ANTD, 2020). Yet, in relation to *talibés* there has been a near total lack of enforcement with only a single prosecution to date of a foreign marabout convicted for exploiting a *talibé* in rural work (ANTD, 2020). The Criminal Code was under review before the July 2023 coup and it is expected that the current authorities will continue this process eventually (EPAD, personal communication, August 2023).

International monitoring bodies including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2018) and the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR, 2014) have each expressed specific concerns about the continued exploitation of *talibés* due to government inaction or insufficient action. The issue is consistently raised in US Trafficking in Persons reports (United States Department of State, 2023). It could not be determined from the literature to what extent laws against begging and child trafficking have local legitimacy.

[13] Regions of Diffa, Dosso and Tillabéri were not included for security reasons.

4.5 Structural Issues

While, as explored above, poverty cannot alone explain why the practice of begging by *talibés* persists, the context of structural poverty and inequality cannot be ignored. For one, the literature suggests that the practice of child begging is fairly lucrative in a struggling economy. In Senegal, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated "that child begging generates over US $8 million annually for Quranic teachers in Senegal" (Kane and Wane, 2021, p. 2). Data on revenue is not available for Niger, but the practice does represent an established form of income with few barriers to entry for marabouts or *talibés*. With no evidence available of *talibés'* trajectories after leaving the Qur'anic school, it is not known how many go on to perpetuate child begging as adult *malamai* themselves, given the transferability of their knowledge, as well as the limited other options (ANTD, 2020).

This speaks to the limited human capital and opportunities to accrue economic capital faced by former *talibés* and young people generally. Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 12 million people living in extreme poverty in 2023 (World Bank, 2023). Extreme poverty is growing in 2023 due to rising inflation and sanctions imposed after the latest coup d'état which are significantly affecting growth (World Bank, 2023). The economy is largely dependent on agriculture, accounting for 40% of the country's GDP (World Bank, 2023). Due to its position as the world's fourth largest producer of uranium, and asymmetric agreements with French and, to a lesser extent, Chinese mining companies, that have had limited benefits for the Nigerien people, Niger is often used as an example of the 'resource curse' theory (Volberding and Warner, 2018). Uranium in particular has been shown to be less conducive to economic development than other commodities such as oil and gold (Volberding and Warner, 2018).

Reliance on agriculture puts large numbers of the Nigerien population at great risk from climate change. The Sahel region is experiencing both higher temperatures and more variable rainfall, disrupting water supply and crop development and sometimes leading to acute drought and devastating floods (Tesfaye, 2022). Evidence from Senegal finds a statistical association between drought vulnerability and young boys being sent to Qur'anic schools (Kielland and Kebede, 2020) – it is not known if this is also the case in Niger. In Niger, food insecurity is rife: 3.3 million people, or 13% of the population, are acutely and severely food insecure, and 47% of children under 5 are chronically malnourished (WFP Niger, 2023). These increasing challenges have led to resource-based conflict which feeds into insurgency from transnational jihadi groups (Dimé and Tambandia, 2021; Tesfaye, 2022). Armed attacks on food stories near the Malian border (Tillabéri and Tahoua regions) have further exacerbated food insecurity and affected livelihoods (Amnesty International, 2021). The region of Diffa has been under a state of emergency since 2015, with restrictions on people's mobility and daily life that have repercussions for livelihoods (Hamadou Daouda, 2020; Altiné, 2024). As a result, more than 335k people in Niger were counted as internally displaced as of October 2023 (UNHCR Niger, 2023a). Niger also hosts over 325k refugees and asylum seekers from neighbouring states, mainly Nigeria (UNHCR Niger, 2023a). Caring for both populations, displaced from livelihoods, land and resources, has stretched extremely thin resources: the UNHCR Operation in Niger has a gap of 51% of the $135.7 million needed in 2023 to provide for displaced people on this scale (UNHCR Niger, 2023b). Border closures as part of the sanctions following the 2023 coup d'état are preventing commodities including humanitarian food supplies from entering the country (WFP Niger, 2023).

Within this context, household structures and gender norms shape precarity and in turn the opportunities afforded to children. In relation to legal systems, the then UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery summarized the state's position: "Through Act No. 62-11 of 16 March

1962 (the Courts Act) and Law No. 2004-50 of 22 July 2004, the Government restricted the scope of the civil law by giving precedence to customary law in most personal status matters, for example those concerning marriage, divorce, direct descent, inheritance, settlement of assets and wills, and in relation to property ownership (CEDAW/C/NER/1-2)" (Bhoola, 2015, p. 15). Women are unequal in rights to divorce or marriage, and lack legal autonomy within traditional legal systems, even if Niger has ratified CEDAW and other relevant conventions (Ndiaye, 2021). These realities impact their economic and bodily autonomy and shape the choices available to them. 77% of women aged 20-49 were married before they turned 18 and 30% by age 15, which contributes to a median age of marriage of 15.8 years (Institut National de la Statistique, 2013). As a result, 47.1% of girls have their first child before 18 (Malé and Wodon, 2016). A lack of access to and knowledge of contraception means that families are unable to plan their pregnancies: only 14% of women use any form of contraception (Institut National de la Statistique, 2013). In turn, Niger has the world's highest fertility rate, 6.8 live births per woman, and the youngest population, with 49% of the population aged under 15 (World Bank, 2022). It is not entirely clear if or how these demographic factors and related gender norms relate to Qur'anic school enrolment in Niger. In a comparative study of other African countries, d'Aiglepierre and Bauer (2018) conclude that families with more children in Somalia, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Comoros and Nigeria are more likely to send children to informal Qur'anic school, but there is not similar analysis available for Niger. In Niger, rates of birth registration are also low. A third of children under five in Niger are not officially registered (UNICEF, 2021). Lack of birth certificates makes it difficult to prevent child trafficking across borders (Kane and Wane, 2021), as well as reducing alternatives for unregistered children who are not allowed to sit primary school exams (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2023).

Most youth enter the labour force at an early age or are married off by their parents. In 2021, 42% of children of primary school age and 72% of lower secondary age were out of school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023) – children attending exclusively traditional Qur'anic school will be counted as out of school in these statistics. Adult literacy rates are estimated as 46% for males and 30% for females, remaining among the lowest in the world despite significant increases since the turn of the millennium (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). In an attempt to respond to the demands of a religious population, as discussed above the state offers hybrid models as well as secular school. The previous government also piloted 'renovated Qur'anic schools', but these require funding and support and have not been made sustainable (ANTD, 2020).

Within this context of constrained choice, another body of literature suggests that the securitization and border enforcement practices—more pervasive since the 2015 Valletta Summit—have reduced coping mechanisms of families by limiting their cross-border mobility (International Crisis Group, 2020). Policing the borders and creating illegality by eliminating human smugglers means individuals have fewer routes to use for seasonal migration, agricultural nomadism, or relocation from drought or famine, which have long been among the coping mechanisms used in the region (Tesfaye, 2022). This has conceivably put more strain on families' resources. It has also created a business opportunity leading to the proliferation of trafficking and smuggling by organized criminal networks (International Crisis Group, 2020). This has a dual impact of limiting mobility and increasing risks for those who must move.

Begging by *talibés* in Niger should thus be considered within a context in which large proportions of the population face a daily struggle. Yet, as Perry (2004) cautions based on her research in Senegal, placing too much emphasis on these structural factors of poverty and population growth (to which, in Niger, climate change and conflict may be added) should be avoided. Research from northern Nigeria demonstrates that Fulɓe families may hire workers to replace the labour lost when children go to

Qur'anic school (Higazi, 2020), suggesting motivations are not purely economic. Indeed, these structural socio-economic obstacles are coupled with pervasive norms around migration, humility and exploitation: "socio-cultural and religious factors which continue to positively associate the precarious living conditions in Qur'anic schools and the difficulty of begging with the transition to adulthood, with learning humility and with religious fulfilment" (ANTD, 2020, p. 5. Translated from French). The acceptance of the religious or traditional justification reduces political will to intervene. Furthermore, the lack of alternative solutions for the economic realities facing poorly resourced families may deter a more aggressive response.

However, sociocultural norms may be shifting. Qur'anic teachers interviewed for the ANTD and Anti-Slavery International report suggested that the practice would disappear if financial support was available (ANTD, 2020). This implies the role of begging today is acknowledged to be at least partially financial. Furthermore, surveys with community members suggested that there is a growing lack of tolerance for the expansive version of begging now pervasively practiced. A survey published by the government in 2016 demonstrated that 52.8% of the 3360 household heads surveyed believed begging to be a form of exploitation that takes place in Niger (Institut National de la Statistique (Minstère du Plan) and Secrétariat Général Agence Nationale de Lutte Contre la Traite des Personnes (Ministère de la Justice), 2016). And, finally, surveys with NGO staff indicated that they believed there was no religious justification for the practice (ANTD, 2020). Taken together, there is evidence that appropriate interventions simultaneously targeting resource needs and promoting shifts in attitudes and social norms may have potential to be effective. Conversely, evidence also suggests that attempting to tackle any one aspect of the issue alone is unlikely to have a significant impact.

5. Potential interventions

Potential interventions to reduce or abolish child begging in Qur'anic schools either target the schools or teachers themselves – seeking to improve conditions – or work with families and communities that provide *talibés*. Most of the interventions targeting parents and communities can be situated within a discourse that sees economic poverty as an underlying cause of begging by *talibés*. Some aid agencies and NGOs deliberately avoid providing assistance to urban Qur'anic schools so as to not encourage others from moving to cities (for example, UNICEF in Senegal in the 2000s, as discussed in Wells, 2010). Below we consider suggested interventions as well as those that have been trialled in the wider sub-region, largely in Senegal from where most literature is available. It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive list of interventions, as many projects do not have publicly available documentation. There is barely any literature available on interventions that have been trialled in Niger, and, with the exception of the modernisation approach, only slightly more from elsewhere in the region. No one policy approach or intervention stands out as being a simple solution, suggesting that a holistic approach is required. All of these interventions should be considered in the context of structural poverty, which is worsening as sanctions imposed following the July 2023 coup d'état affect the economy with soaring cost of living prices and suspension of large-scale development investments (World Bank, 2023; World Bank Group and World Food Programme, 2023).

5.1 Interventions targeting Qur'anic schools

- Regulating Qur'anic schools jointly with state and Islamic council and providing funding for those that meet required standards:
    - Several states in West Africa have initiated programmes to modernise or improve the Qur'anic education sector. The projects each have national nuances but share common characteristics. These tend to involve the establishment of a curriculum that includes

aspects of the secular primary curriculum while continuing to centre Qur'anic memorisation (Banque Mondiale, 2021). Most are aiming to make it possible for traditional Qur'anic schools meeting certain criteria to be brought into the national system, and thus regulated and financed (Banque Mondiale, 2021). They intend to create pathways for children attending Qur'anic school to continue education in the formal system, or in vocational training (Traoré *et al.*, 2022). Some are aiming to establish programmes of training and accreditation for Qur'anic teachers (Hugon, 2015). Overall, these projects allow for a middle ground between the type of education promoted by international development institutions and the religious education demanded by parents (Charlier and Panait, 2017).

- In Niger, the state's *Projet d'amélioration de l'apprentissage pour des résultats dans l'éducation* plans to finance Qur'anic schools that include basic health education as well as numeracy and literacy in their curricula (Banque Mondiale, 2021). The status of this project following the July 2023 coup and resulting embargos and suspension of funding is unknown. There are also various types of modernised Qur'anic schools that have resulted from different previous projects. In Niger, Sani and Rabiou (2009) note three types of modernised Qur'anic schools. Firstly, those created through an Islamic Development Bank-funded programme led by the Direction de l'Enseignement Arabe (Arabic Education Directorate) in Tillabéri and Niamey had directors and teachers paid by the state, and a curriculum featuring 75% Qur'anic teaching and 25% French and maths from the 3rd year of study (100% Qur'anic teaching in the first two years). These schools are for primary school age children. Secondly, there are modern Qur'anic schools that are open to people of all ages who want to learn to write using ajami. These schools were initiated by the DGAENF (General Directorate of Literacy and Non-Formal Education). Some also included French and maths classes, as well as health education, but this was not continued beyond the end of the project. Thirdly, a project funded by a Canadian organisation in Zinder modernised Qur'anic schools open to girls and boys aged 9-15, bringing in vocational training. Again, this was short lived with the project only financed for six months (Sani and Rabiou, 2009). Further types of modernised Qur'anic school may have emerged since the publication of this paper in 2009. The outcome of these projects suggests that, as has been recognised in Nigeria (Shittu and Olaofe, 2015), such projects too often fizzle out shortly after inauguration. As well as state-led efforts, there are also modernisation projects led by NGOs and international institutions. The ANTD and Anti-Slavery International study found that 69% of child protection experts consulted see regulation of Qur'anic schools, through a "inclusive process followed methodically and gradually", as a solution to the issue of begging by *talibés* (ANTD, 2020, p. 36. Translated from French)
- Limitations:
    - One of the major hurdles in this approach is the question of funding. The World Bank states that the significant costs involved are the reason that the previous project in Niger was not expanded despite encouraging results (Banque Mondiale, 2021). Given the scale of informal Qur'anic schooling, bringing these institutions into national education systems, and providing funding would incur significant financial commitments. In Senegal, an attempt is being made to render the project sustainable through the construction of a building in downtown Dakar

(jointly funded by the government and the Islamic Development Bank) to be endowed as *waqf*[14] to ensure future income from rental (Macleod, 2022).

    - Objections to the state-led modernisation projects can come in the form of ideological resistance or as concerns over the more practical aspects of the approach (Macleod, 2022). For some, there are fears that integrating Qur'anic schools in national system would threaten the Qur'anic teachers' "existence, their identity, or even their *raison d'être* as promotors and guarantors of an ancestral tradition" (Indigo Côte d'Ivoire and Interpeace, 2019, p. 69. Translated from French). There is debate over whether modernisation should be optional – as it is currently is in Niger, with Qur'anic schools applying for funding under the World Bank project - or imposed (Macleod, 2022). When modernisation is optional, this approach may not tackle the most exploitative institutions directly as they would be unlikely to voluntarily sign up for regulation. However, the underlying logic maintains that eventually, parents may opt for the regulated schools over the traditional Qur'anic schools where begging is present. For this to have potential, any modernisation project would require local community engagement to be successful and sustainable (Anti-Slavery International and The Resource Centre for Human Rights and Civic Education, 2020). On the other hand, there are debates over the specifics of curricula and who gets to make these decisions, and over the content of laws that would allow Qur'anic schools to be regulated. In Senegal, Qur'anic Teachers Associations eventually approved a bill that would, if passed into law, allow for regulation only after negotiating to have a clause about begging removed from the document (Mathewson, 2017; Macleod, 2022).

- Funding or supporting Qur'anic schools in villages so that families are less likely to send their children to residential Qur'anic schools in urban areas:
    - This approach can include supporting Qur'anic schools in urban areas to relocate or return to rural areas where they are trained in agricultural techniques, for example by NGO ENDA in Senegal (ILO, UNICEF, and World Bank, 2007). However, the approach ignores that migration itself has been an attractive element of traditional Qur'anic teaching for parents in some parts of the region (Einarsdóttir *et al.*, 2010) though it is unclear to what extent this is the case in Niger.
- Carrying out a census of Qur'anic schools, categorised by type and presence of begging, their condition and enrolment; using this to target worst practices and consider peer to peer best practices training:
    - As discussed above, there are no official statistics for the numbers of Qur'anic schools in Niger. The ANTD (2020) report is perhaps the best recent attempt at counting traditional Qur'anic schools, but notes that the approaching farming season may have resulted in undercounting. Several attempts have been made to conduct censes of traditional Qur'anic schools in other countries with the same data gap. Some of these attempts have been limited to one or a few cities, such as the counts made in Dakar, Senegal (Cellule Nationale de Lutte contre la Traite des Personnes, 2014; UNODC, 2018). Mali appears to have more comprehensive figures (Dia, 2022).
    - Limitations: Even where partial censes have been conducted and disaggregated by type of Qur'anic school and presence of begging, there is no evidence that these studies have been used to target interventions at particular schools. Furthermore, while a systematic

[14] Waqf (endowed in the name of God) buildings cannot be repurposed, sold, or given away and have funded many welfare and development projects around the Islamic world (Deneulin, 2009)

census would be helpful to understand how many Qur'anic schools and how many talibés there are, and how many of the latter do not attend any other form of schooling (Lozneanu and Humeau, 2014), as itinerant Qur'anic schools where begging is common may move, close, or new ones open frequently (Souley, 1998), a one-off census would be of limited benefit without a system to keep track of schools. On the other hand, the World Bank advocates including Qur'anic schools in statistics published annually, which would "give a more precise picture of trends in school demand and allow governments to track the impact of education policies on these patterns" (Banque Mondiale, 2021, p. 61).

- Supporting non-formal basic education and/or vocational skills programmes for children in residential Qur'anic schools:
    - Kano state in Nigeria has trialled a non-formal education programme specifically designed for students of traditional Qur'anic schools, expanded to 16 local authority areas (Bano, 2018). Contrary to the assumption that *malamai* would resist modern education for their *talibés*, they were happy to allow them to attend as long as the hours complemented their commitments to their religious education (Bano, 2018). Vocational skills training was also incorporated at the request of the *malamai* and students (Bano, 2018). Providing vocational training and income generating activities for *talibés* can also reduce the time that they spend begging (Enda Tiers-Monde Jeunesse Action, 2003).
    - Limitations: such projects will not directly reduce begging, even if they improve the *talibés'* longer term prospects. Vocational training requires small fees for the trainers and materials (Bano, 2018). In the project in Kano, trainee students were often used to run errands rather than receiving training, causing many to ultimately drop out (Bano, 2018). Learning skills is not enough to make a sustainable income, and without a specific intervention, *talibés* do not have access to sources of microcredit that may help them to establish small businesses in the longer term (Usman, 2009).
- Supporting Qur'anic teachers and their *talibés* to build other avenues of income generation to reduce reliance on begging:
    - The NGO ENDA Tiers-Monde Jeunesse Action reported on their programmes in Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso, including support for Qur'anic teachers in various settings to establish income streams that did not rely on *talibé* begging. Their report suggests that while some of the efforts to build the skills of individual *talibés* were well received, Qur'anic teachers were more reluctant about approaches at the level of the Qur'anic school, concerned that the activity – livestock raising – would take up time in the *talibés'* day "considerably reducing time for begging and learning the Qur'an, without guaranteeing immediate returns" (Enda Tiers-Monde Jeunesse Action, 2003, p. 39. Translated from French)
- Work with *talibés* to identify needs and build individualized responses:
    - While no evidence of child-centred responses tailored to individual *talibés'* needs was found, this approach has been promoted in reference to both street-connected children[15] (for example, Coren *et al.*, 2014) and survivors of child trafficking (for example Gearon, 2019) more generally.
- Enforcement of the laws against forced begging
    - As mentioned above, there has been little to no attempt to enforce the Nigerien law (Article 181 of the Criminal Code and Ordonnance n°2010-86) forbidding 'inviting' a minor to beg or profiting from the begging of a minor. Given the different context in which Sufi

[15] Street-connected children encompasses those who live, work, or have another strong connection to the street or public spaces.

brotherhoods have far less authority and political power, it is unclear from the literature whether enforcement of the law against begging in Niger would attract the type of backlash seen in Senegal in 2010 (Anti-Slavery International, 2011).

- Removing *talibés* found begging from the street and/or from their Qur'anic teachers
    - Several states have led campaigns to remove *talibés* who beg from the streets, including Senegal and Burkina Faso (United States Department of State, 2019), and NGOs also lead similar initiatives. No literature could be found that these campaigns have any sustained effect. At least in Senegal, there were no repercussions for Qur'anic teachers found to be making children beg, beyond the removal of individual *talibés* in some cases (Macleod, 2023a). Research in Guinea Bissau found that Bissau-Guinean *talibés* studying and begging in Senegal may use these 'rescue' initiatives as a way of returning home seasonally, and demonstrated the complexities of responses from families and communities to which talibés are returned (Einarsdóttir and Boiro, 2016). In Niger, over 4,000 *talibés* returned to the regions of Maradi and Zinder during the COVID-19 pandemic and received support from UNICEF (UNICEF Niger, 2021). It is not clear if these *talibés* had been in situations of begging.
- Building protective community structures around urban Qur'anic schools:
    - In Dakar, Senegal, a USAID-funded initiative has been trialled to engage municipal-level local governments as well as communities. As well as considerable engagement with the communities and the Qur'anic teachers, this project included the adoption of by-laws allowing the regulation of Qur'anic schools in the area without involving the implementation of the national level law (Macleod, 2022). However, the project was not able to prevent children from being sent to beg in these areas from other suburbs of Dakar, demonstrating the limits of this localised approach (Macleod, 2022).
    - Other NGOs have similarly built protective communities around urban Qur'anic schools, which may be particularly important when the Qur'anic schools have migrated to an area and thus are not entrenched in the local community and the children and their teachers are from other regions or countries (Enda Tiers-Monde Jeunesse Action, 2003). These initiatives often centre the role of local women who commit to playing a gendered motherly role, such as cooking for children, washing their clothes, or providing emotional support (Delap, 2009).

5.2 Interventions targeting families and communities

- Engaging with imams or marabouts or religious councils in public conversations over role of public begging in religious scripture and raising awareness over its perversion:
    - Many NGOs' activities include training Qur'anic teachers on child rights, which can include breaking the link perceived between religious scripture and begging, and then working with supportive Qur'anic teachers to spread these messages to parents and communities (Secours Islamique France, 2020; Macleod, 2022). Awareness-raising campaigns are frequently aired in the media (Thorsen, 2012). The ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations promoted this approach in its reports on Niger's implementation of the convention on the worst forms of child labour between 2006-2013 (CEACR, 2014), as did the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2018 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2018). The ANTD and Anti-Slavery International study found that 9% of the child protection experts consulted recommend training Qur'anic teachers in child protection as a solution (ANTD, 2020).
- Encouraging parents to keep children in their communities to study the Qur'an:

    - Some NGOs have led behaviour change programmes encouraging communities to send children to local, part time Qur'anic schools and pay the Qur'anic teacher for their tuition (such as the World Vision International intervention in Senegal evaluated by Eyber *et al.*, 2021).
- Improving gender equality including promoting access to reproductive services:
    - As the decision to send a child to a far-off Qur'anic school is often assumed to be connected to poverty and high fertility rates,[16] at least in part, women's empowerment and access to reproductive services may be proposed as an intervention. However, as Perry (2004) notes, this approach ignores the other factors that influence parents' decisions, as discussed above, which demonstrate that it is not simply a case of parents having too many mouths to feed.
- Working with communities to improve resilience/mitigate climate effects (including improving crop yield or substituting crops) or providing seasonal income supports to families to supplement weak harvest:
    - As it has been suggested that there is a statistical association between drought vulnerability and a boy being sent to residential Qur'anic school (Kielland and Kebede, 2020), supporting families that rely on agriculture to mitigate climate change effects may be a preventative action. The Nigerien government began in 2021 to issue unconditional cash transfers in areas identified as drought-affected using satellite early warning data, intending to reach more than 100,000 people in four communes (Brunelin *et al.*, 2022). The intervention was set to be evaluated by the University of Oxford and the World Bank in 2023 (Lung *et al.*, 2022), though there is no sign that this would include consideration of any impact on numbers of families sending boys to Qur'anic schools, and it is unclear if the programme continues following the 2023 coup d'état and resulting suspension of most of the World Bank's $5 billion Niger portfolio (Moran, 2023).
- Facilitating birth registration:
    - Low rates of birth registration make it more difficult for vulnerable children to be protected. An emergency campaign to promote birth registration in Guinea Bissau is thought to have made it more difficult for talibés to be brought across the border to Senegal (Kane and Wane, 2021). Given that a third of children under five years of age in Niger are not officially registered (UNICEF, 2021), promoting birth registration there may have a similar effect.
- Gathering information from families related to their goals for children and possible alternatives that would serve the children and their needs at family or individual level:
    - As there is very limited data available from Niger, further research is necessary to better understand the perspectives of parents and communities in order to tailor approaches. Due to nuances in the context, interventions tried in other countries may not have the same effect in Niger.

6. Potential questions for qualitative exploration

Given the limited research on *talibés* and Qur'anic schools in Niger to date, there are a number of outstanding issues which would benefit from further exploration, particularly in relation to information that helps us to measure prevalence of the issue and understanding beneficial and socially acceptable interventions in the Nigerien context. These will need to be prioritised for the initial

[16] No evidence could be found to concretely establish the link to fertility rates

qualitative research. Given the recent political changes in Niger, it is also important to understand the new government's stance on this issue.

Politics and motivation for change:

1. To what extent does the government see education as a priority in Niger (including principal actions, budgets, investments)?
2. What resources does the government have to address the issue of forced begging by talibés?
3. Who are the key influencers in civil society, community and religious sectors? To what extent do their views align and what are key debates? What community structures and local actors are important for influencing sociocultural norms?
4. What will be the different contributions of these community structures and local actors in the fight against forced begging by *talibés*?
5. What role do stakeholders perceive for Qur'anic schools (or other actors) in the education system?
6. What responsibilities does the government see for the state in the functioning of Qur'anic schools?
7. What considerations and debates inform their views on policy and implementation?
8. What are the government's policies and actions concerning the fight against forced begging by *talibés*?
9. What are the social norms that influence the implementation of government policies?
10. Where are *talibé* children moved typically, and what are the routes (Origin and Destination)?
    a. Which children are taken out of the country and who is brought into the country?

Understanding parental choices on education provision:

11. What community structures are important to shaping sociocultural norms on choice of education?
12. What are the sociocultural norms that influence parents' choices about their children's education?
13. How do parents select the schools to which their children are sent?
    a. Why do parents choose distant Qur'anic schools rather than those in their neighbourhood/village?
    b. How do parents screen marabouts?
14. How many children per family are sent and what number of child(ren) is/are sent ?
    a. How do families decide which child/children to send to Qur'anic school?
    b. Do the children who remain do better after the departure of the *talibé*? Does it change resource distribution within the household?
15. What is the religiosity of the households compared to their peers? What denomination of Islam do they belong to?
16. What are characteristics of families who use the schools?
    a. Within communities, what (if anything) distinguishes these families from other families?
    b. How are household demographics or pressures different for families who enrol children from those who don't, within communities?
    c. Where do the children fit in the ethnolinguistic system? Are there children who fit within the historical hereditary enslavement hierarchy?
    d. What regions do *talibés* come from and what is their ethnicity?
17. If given the opportunity, would families prefer an educational alternative?
    a. What goals do parents have for their children? In the school or outside of it?
18. What duration would parents like to see their children attend (Qur'anic) schools?

a. Are students enrolled during particular seasons?

19. Why does begging exist in the Qur'anic school system?

Understanding motivations and perspectives of marabouts:

20. What motivates marabouts to establish schools?
21. What denomination of Islam do they belong to?
22. How do marabouts recruit children and maintain contact with families / source communities?
23. What is the rationale for where traditional Qur'anic schools are located? How many traditional Qur'anic schools can an area support?
24. What role do marabouts see for religious schooling in Nigerien society? How does their school relate to other educational options if they are available?
25. What is good or bad practice from their perspective? What would they like to change?
26. What support do marabouts who create Qur'anic schools expect from the state and its partners?
27. What support do marabouts and their schools receive from the local community?
28. What have been their experiences of working with NGOs, if any?
29. Why does begging exist in the Qur'anic school system?

Movements and daily practices of *talibé*:

30. What is the relationship with the Qur'anic teacher? Do former *talibés* stay in contact with their Qur'anic teacher?
31. What does a typical day, week and year look like for Nigerien *talibés*? What patterns exist? Are there regional differences?
32. At what age do *talibés* stop begging?
33. What is the relationship between younger and older *talibés*?
34. What are the trajectories of former *talibés* since leaving the Qur'anic school?
35. What reflections do former *talibés* have on this education practice? Would they choose this for their own families? What would they want to change?
36. What aspirations do former *talibés* have?

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