

## UNDP - Youth and Radicalization in Mauritania



In terms of security and the fight against radicalization and violent extremism, Mauritania has been able to secure its territory and its borders. No major attacks have been committed in the country for several years.

Terrorist attacks and criminal activities in border areas prevent any development prospect for communities' stability and security. Therefore, the management of borders in a concerted way by ensuring the two important dimensions of security and development as part of an appropriate national border management strategy becomes necessary. That explains the focus on border areas with Mali and Senegal (namely Fassala, Bassikounou, Gougui, Goueye, Kaédi, Rosso, Diama, and Ndiago) to prevent the recruitment of young population by criminal and extremist groups. This border management approach was based on an ordinance by the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization (# 0590/MIDEC of 10 July 2018) to establish a National Commission for Border Management and Regional Border Management Committees to ensure the safety of the communities. Senior officials involved in border management (Prefects, Border Policemen, Gendarmes, Customs, GSR Road Safety, Magistrates, village committee chairmen, women and presidents of women's and Youth associations, and Imams) were trained on integrated border management to support the development and implementation of strategies that would improve exchanges between the responsible authorities and the local population; and subsequently prevent young people's involvement in jihadist groups.

It should be recalled that Mauritania has a predominantly young population, which is going through a period of unprecedented socio-ideological transformation. Youth represents a particular demographic category; its social, economic, political and cultural integration is a guarantee of a stable future and sustainable development. Thus, young people must be considered as key partners in national construction; and commitment to their welfare must be a key component in any collective strategic action of the government.

In that framework, as part of the support to development strategies, the country has developed in 2017 a tourism growth strategy that includes a detailed diagnosis of the tourism sector and appropriate measures to develop sustainable tourism. Six hundred and fifty (650) young people, including 214 women in four Youth Network Committees in the cities of Nouakchott, Aleg, Rosso

and Tidjikdja, were sensitized and taught how to identify the dangers of terrorism and violent extremism. Four (4) youth listening centers have been set up in the above-mentioned cities and registered attendance at 3500 in 2017. This has helped to organize youth associations around listening centers and to occupy them effectively. Seven (7) local security committees are operational in the border areas, which has raised the awareness of a population of 275,000 people about the dangers of the circulation of small arms at border posts along the border with Mali and Senegal.

The 2018-2022 Country Programme Document (CPD) was elaborated in collaboration with regional authorities with the support of sectoral ministries to facilitate youth awareness and mobilization around messages of peace and social cohesion. It also contributed to building the capacity of the leaders who showed greater commitment and took ownership of the project to support the fight against radicalization for social cohesion and the creation of job opportunities.

With the support of UNDP, in partnership with UNOWAS, the Thematic Group “Women Peace and Security” (National NGO) has acquired the necessary skills to participate actively in the fight against terrorism. Thus, the group of trained women participated in awareness caravans about the dangers of terrorism and played an important role in forming local gender-sensitive safety committees.

Financed by Japan as part of UNDP’s regional initiatives, the project for “Peace, Good Governance, Security and Community resilience in the Sahel”, contributed to expanding national and regional networks working in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and management, by encouraging the mobilization and involvement of local authorities, young people and the most vulnerable groups. Outreach activities on citizenship and volunteerism to promote social peace were conducted in areas prone to conflict and the presence of terror groups.

Hence, part of the UNDP Sahel Programme’s interventions in Mauritania was mostly centered around youths to sensitize them about the risks of joining armed militias; the construction of youth community centers, infrastructures for herders such as water points for cattle, and vaccination parks. Activities focused on capacity building of institutions and local authorities in conflict prevention and peacebuilding; advocacy of civil society organizations and coalitions for peace and good governance; prevention of recruitment by terrorist groups by providing immediate support to improve livelihoods of vulnerable groups; including preventing and reducing disaster risks.



Figure 1: Citizenship Day in Kiffa- Mauritania

For example, in Kiffa (South of Mauritania, one hundred kilometres away from the border with Mali), hundreds of youth participated in community services (streets cleaning and garbage collection). Similar activities were organized in the towns of Aleg, Sélibaly and Kaédi, with hundreds of youth and civil society organizations mobilized around the promotion of civic action. The events provided a platform to raise awareness for the promotion of peace and social cohesion, and the threats of violent extremism. Moreover,

youth groups received training and support for professional integration, in collaboration with the National Directorate of Microfinance and professional integration.

Workshops were held on sensitization and the prevention of violent extremism in those border areas, in partnership with the justice department, youth and women's groups, *oulémas*/religious leaders, and local authorities. Additionally, sensitization campaigns were held with local security committees on the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons, (SALW), their dangers and impacts on communities.

In 2017 alone and under one activity, 420 young people, 60% of whom are women and 40% men were sensitized in the border areas about the dangers of terrorism and violent extremism and the proliferation of small arms in the communities of Fassala, Basseknou, Gougui, Goueye, Rosso, Diama and Ndiago; 80 border agents in the border areas along Mali were trained on the issues of countering violent extremism and border security in the access points of the wilayas of Hodh Charghi, Hodh El Gharbi and Assaba; 3 Integrated Border Management Committees were established in Hodh Echarghi and Hodh El Gharbi;

Three years ago, the Sahel Programme commissioned a study on the “**socio-economic factors of terrorism in Mauritania**”. This study (final report attached—French version) highlighted the best ways to prevent and combat terrorism and extremism.

Data from the study show that young people overwhelmingly associate terrorism with ignorance and crime and have a bad image of terrorists. However, few of them have a good knowledge of terrorist organizations. More than two thirds of young people believed that Mauritania is exposed to the risk of terrorism whose main causes are for more than 38% related to living conditions: poverty and unemployment (28%) and search for gain (10%). More than 44 per cent of young people surveyed linked terrorism to religious dimensions, especially a misinterpretation of Islam, to psychological dimensions such as manipulation by extremist groups and to a sense of global injustice and youth.

### **The project to fight the radicalization of young people and the promotion of citizenship**

UNDP, in partnership with the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MJS), has implemented a project to “Fight the Radicalization of Youth and the Promotion of the Citizenship in Mauritania.”

This project was in line with the President's support to the youth who suffered from marginalization and exclusion from public life for several decades. This vision is part of some strategies and action plans aimed at ensuring the integration and participation of youth in all areas of the country's economic and social life, including access to elective positions and important administrative responsibilities. In this framework, a High Youth Council has been set up.

The project was elaborated jointly with the Ministry of Youth and Sports as well as the regional authorities to support the strategy of Youth and Sports in Mauritania. The project reached out to a population of 32,000 young people in the Wilayas of Gorgol, Brakna, Trarza, Guidimakha, Tagant and the three wilayas of Nouakchott and focused mainly on peri-urban areas and poor communities where the effects of radical activities are more likely to take place and where the promotion of citizenship will have a significant positive impact.

Funded by the Government of Japan and carried out by UNDP in partnership with the Ministries of Youth and Sports and Islamic Affairs, the project overall objective was to strengthen and consolidate Mauritania's capacities to respond to the growing challenges of terrorism, the

radicalization of young people through the reinforcement of the efforts of the Mauritanian authorities in the fight against terrorism and the protection and promotion of human rights.

### **The Study for the Development of a National Program and an Action Plan to fight against the Radicalization of the Youth**

The Report of a National Program and an Action Plan to fight against the Radicalization of Youth was launched on 20 December 2016 in Nouakchott with participants, including youth associations (from all the Wilayas involved in the project (Gorgol, Brakna, Trarza, Guidimakha, Tagant, North Nouakchott, West Nouakchott, South Nouakchott), the Ministries of Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the Original Education, and UNDP.

The project elaborated afterwards aimed to address the threats facing the Sahelian countries challenged with radicalization and terrorism. The Mauritanian authorities have adopted a National Strategy for Youth and Sports 2015 – 2020 which aims to promote youth and improve its commitment to national values. As for the Secretary General, he stressed that it is vital to focus action on the prevention of the major scourge of terrorism and he finally thanked the UNDP and the Government of Japan for the implementation of this strategic project and relevant.

There were seven main components of the program and action plan, namely: (i) intensification of targeted prevention efforts to combat the radicalization of young people; (ii) communication for the fight against radicalization; (iii) support for the economic and social integration of vulnerable young people and deradicalized young people; (iv) the development of actions to prevent and control radicalization in schools; (v) the valorization of the resources of the madrasas (traditional Koranic school) to fight against the radicalization of young people; (vi) increase of measures for the prevention and treatment of radicalization in prisons and (vii) strengthening of institutional capacities.

Recommendations include the inclusion of the gender dimension in the fight against extremism as well as all other stakeholders.

While Mauritania has not yet been subject to extremist group attacks, there is wide-spread speculation that, against the will of the government, many armed groups are based around refugee settlements in the Bassikounou area bordering Mali. Conflict prevention and risks associated with illicit trafficking, circulation of arms, the recruitment of young people by extremist groups remain key concerns nationwide.