

# Street children in Senegal

Finding new approaches to an old problem

2012/3/24

Babacar Seck, 120103160209710

**B.A. Social Sciences at Sciences Po**

## **Abstract**

For the past decades, the number of children begging in the streets of Senegal's cities has never stopped rising. Even as the country has enjoyed stable growth over 5% of GDP on an annual basis, the number of children roaming the streets of the bustling cities of the Senegalese coast continues to increase. The Senegalese authorities have tried various approaches, including the banning of begging. Yet, due to poor enforcement and unrealistic targets, this and other policies aimed at improving the lives of poor children in Senegal have produced disappointing results.

This paper seeks to present a new approach to the problem of street children in Senegal, and to propose policies that could be put into place by the Senegalese government. The paper will firstly present an overview of the issue, and analyze it through a multidisciplinary approach, taking into account many economic and cultural factors that were often omitted in government analyses. Such an analysis will help shed more light on the processes at play in Senegal and the wider West African region. Secondly, using the new framework designed in the first part, this paper will present and assess the policies implemented by the Senegalese government over the past decades. This part will also analyze Senegal's public sector, so as to explain the discrepancy between the understanding of the problem by government technocrats and the reality of society. Finally, the paper will present policy proposals to solve this issue, and also the lessons that can be drawn for the development community.

## **Brief Methodology**

This paper will examine the issue of street children in Senegal and propose solutions. The ultimate goal is to draw larger lessons on development policy through a precise analysis of this specific policy issue. The paper relies on existing literature on the subject, as well as personal experience living in Senegal, and also numerous attendance to seminars on education and development policy of Senegal. Various policy reports by national and international bodies that study the question were also used to understand their differing perceptions of the policy question. These are all reported in the bibliography at the end.

## **Preliminary definitions**

Talibe: from the Arabic word “taleb”, designates someone who studies the Qur’an.

Daara: from the Arabic word “dahroune”: a place where people learn the Qur’an.

Marabout: designates someone who possesses an advanced knowledge of Islam. This word is often used in Senegal to designate those who lead the teaching and operations of daaras.

## **Quick facts about Senegal**

Senegal is a rather small country located in West Africa. It has a population of around 13 million inhabitants, with a rising urban population. According to the World Bank, around one third of Senegal’s population lives under the poverty line, and most of the poor live in rural areas. The unemployment rate is over 20%, with a large part of the active population working in the informal sector. Illiteracy in French (the official language) is still predominant in rural world.

## Introduction

Over the past decades, as a result of successive economic downturns and limited response by the government, poverty and inequality have been constantly rising in Senegal. One of the most visible consequences has been the dramatic rise in the number of children who roam the streets of Dakar and other big coastal cities, begging for money, rice and sugar. It is estimated that there are more than 50,000 talibes in the whole country. This essay will seek to explore this question from a public policy perspective, by first presenting a study of the question, followed by a study of the framework of policy-making in the Senegalese context taken. Finally, the paper will propose a strategy of resolution of the talibe question, from the perspective of the Senegalese government.

### Part 1 – Understanding the issue

It is today very common to meet children begging in the streets of Senegal's main cities. These children beggars are a rather new social phenomenon in Senegal, which in turn however originates, in rural traditions.

#### ***Origins of the daara: spiritual education to resist the colonization of minds***

Today, more than 95% of Senegalese people are Muslims, but it has not always been the case. Conversions to Sufi Islam peaked in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century under French colonization, as people sought a leadership to oppose compulsory schooling of their children in French schools, which they found in religious chiefs. The chiefs helped populations to defend their traditions by fighting the colonial administration, especially the French public

schools. In exchange, populations progressively became Muslim, and adopted Koranic education, which had a lot in common with local traditions. Thus, Koranic education has long been perceived as a protection against Senegalese public schools, which are still called “French schools”.

### ***Traditional daaras in Senegal***

Until the late 1970s, most daaras were located in villages. Parents would give their sons to the marabout, who would teach them the Qur’an in exchange for the child’s work on the marabout’s fields. The child would beg only for his food. The rationale for the talibes system is based on Sufi Islam, which defends an ascetic vision of life, and on the traditions of Peuhl, Wolof, Soninke, which give a lot of importance to “learning about life in the hard way”.

### ***Economic shocks and the choice of religious education***

The daaras changed following the shocks suffered by the agricultural world in the 1980s and 1990s. Successive droughts, reduction in social spending and the devaluation of the Senegalese currency drastically reduced the standard of living in Senegal, with the worst consequences in rural areas. As a consequence, there was a weakening of traditional ties of mutual support in rural societies, increasing food insecurity, while the high fertility rate remained stagnant. Thus, an increasing number of parents gave their children to marabouts, to reduce the costs of sustaining the household.

At the same time, parents were discouraged from giving their children to the public schools system, because of the high affiliated costs (transport, furniture), and of what they

perceived as an overly theoretical curriculum, which did not take into account the realities of the rural world (very little technical or professional teaching).

### ***Relocation and evolution of the daaras***

However, marabouts faced the same dire conditions as the parents of the children in their charge. Consequently, many of them started to move to the cities on a seasonal basis. Over the years, as the situation in the countryside did not improve, and as growth restarted in the cities, more daaras located definitively in cities. This triggered many changes in the functioning of daaras.

Today, daaras often have around 50 talibes, and are located in outer suburban areas. The daara relies mainly on the alms collected by the children in order to pay for its functioning costs. Indeed, the talibes generally have a fixed amount of money to bring back every day, under the threat of physical punishment. Talibes also receive beatings during the study periods, if they cannot concentrate properly. The building is often a squatter, and thus the living conditions can be very harsh. There is rarely electricity, running water, mattresses, mosquito nets or even basic medicine in the daara. Consequently, the talibes develop many illnesses, including very visible ones such as gale and other skin problems. Talibes rarely have shoes, and wear the same set of clothes until these are completely unusable, which limits their interactions with the rest of society.

Moreover, talibes spend in average between 5 and 7 hours per day begging in the streets. In addition to the tropical heat, talibes are also exposed many dangers: car accidents, human trafficking, physical abuse... As a consequence, life is very difficult for the talibes in daaras, and the beatings, lack of hygiene and proper care can very negatively affect their

development and future reinsertion in society.

### ***The talibes: who are they?***

Most talibes are very vulnerable: they are generally between 5 and 14 years old, and live away from their family. While two-thirds of the talibes in Dakar are of Senegalese origin, around 30% of talibes hail from neighboring countries, especially Guinea-Bissau. The presence of important numbers of foreign talibes has been very little studied, although it would be essential to understand this issue, which concerns many children.

### ***The issue of life after the daara***

In addition to difficulties that the talibes face during their time at the daara, it is also hard for them to get back into society. Indeed, most daaras only concentrate on the memorization of the verses of the Qur'an. While the most brilliant pupils might have a chance to become marabouts or to study theology in universities of the Arabic world, the mass of the talibes do not have that chance. Many talibes who finish their studies at the daara do not speak French (official language), and have very little skills or previous interaction with society. As a result, many talibes end up in the informal sector and living on the margins of society.

With economic growth back at over 5% in Senegal since 2006, it is now possible and also necessary to tackle this issue, which concerns 50,000 children. For that, we will start by establishing a framework of action.

## **Part 2 – Why did the government's approach fail?**

Senegal has ratified all the conventions and treaties on the rights of children, and included them in national law. Indeed, most of the policies that have been put into place during both the socialist presidency of former president Abdou Diouf and the neoliberal presidency of President Abdoulaye Wade have relied heavily on laws and regulations. This exemplifies the limits of an idealist administration, inherited from the colonial era, and whose perception of society relies simply too much on sociological and political theories and concepts which hardly apply to the Senegalese society. Indeed, when reading documents such as the last National Development Policy Strategy, one realizes that many of the social characteristics of the Senegalese society are omitted, or given too little weight. Important factors such as the importance of traditions in society and the role played by local religious influence seems not to be given any importance by the public administration in charge of finding solutions to the country's problems. In fact, this problem is not limited to the issue of talibes; rather, it is one that spans most issues that concern Senegal.

This problem of overreliance on imported systems of understanding society has amplifying consequences on the problems of Senegal, since they often tend to lead to a wrong policy orientation, which does not address the problem at its root. However, while part of the responsibility for this is to put on the public servants, I would rather argue that it is a direct consequence of the Senegalese education system. Firstly, Senegalese schools rely heavily on textual memorization of lessons, and give little space for personal thinking: the teacher has the knowledge, and the students have to apply it as it is given. Very little initiative is encouraged. Secondly, endogenous research on Senegal and by Senegalese, or foreigners who lived in Senegal has been declining heavily over the past decades, not only because Senegalese researchers have little incentive to stay in a country that does not invest in



research, and also because most French support for research has diminished since the 2000s. Consequently, very little applied research gets done, letting a large part of task of understanding Senegalese society to rest on the shoulders of policymakers pressured by urgency and deadlines. Consequently, policymakers do with what time and means they have, thence close to nothing.

Let us try to understand why the legal approach did not work; for that purpose, we will study the role of religion in Senegal.

### ***Understanding the relation between politics and religion in Senegal***

As Islam spread into Senegal (cf. Part 1), Muslim leaders progressively replaced traditional chiefs. Soon after, the colonial administration stopped fighting them, and started instead to cooperate with them. The social contract that emerged from this alliance goes as follows: France would give economic support to the religious leaders who would, in exchange ensure the application of government policies, especially taxes. The high prestige of religious leaders in local communities allowed them to accomplish this task; from the very beginning, they wielded a much stronger control over the population than the administration.

After the independence of Senegal, this social contract was perpetuated through the *ndiguel*: it is a voting orientation given by the religious leader to his followers. Widely followed, this orientation gives tremendous political clout to religious leaders.

After independence, unhindered, religious brotherhoods expanded to virtually every corner of Senegal, driven by competitions between the two main brotherhoods, Mourides and

Tijanes, who, together, gather 70-80% of Senegal's Muslims.

Brotherhoods are able to keep many followers thanks to the enormous wealth that they have accumulated (land, companies...), and which they distribute to their followers. They offer jobs, houses, and social services, or even infrastructure, replacing the state in many instances. In a country where the state has limited presence in rural communities, religious leaders and local marabouts wield strong power at the local level.

An example of this influence on public life is the backlash from religious leaders in 2010 which caused the government to retract a decree that made begging illegal. Similarly, the implementation of policies related to talibes has been difficult, with threats being made against public servants.

There are two main reasons why the talibe system, in its actual form, is an important asset of the various Muslim brotherhoods in Senegal. The first one is that with the current spread of daaras everywhere in the country, the competing brotherhoods can increase their reach to a very large number of young children. These talibes, once grown up, represent the portion of population that is most likely to follow any advices or directions given by the religious leaders. The second reason is that these talibes are the first contributors to the projects organized by the brotherhoods. Within this context it is essential for each of them to retain the maximum number of followers, in order to remain an important political and social actor. Through the daaras and the local marabouts, religious leaders can also keep control over the local communities both in the cities and in the countryside, and perpetuate the social contract that links them to the state.

### ***Other actors to take into account***

Another important actor is the Senegalese population, both in cities and in the rural world. In cities, it is essential to keep in mind that almsgiving is a key element of Senegalese superstitions. It is therefore essential to keep in mind that every policy should be a compromise between the well-being of the talibes, and what Senegalese people want their society to be. Cheikh Hamidou Kane, talking about talibes, expresses in his novel *The Ambiguous Adventure* that bodily sufferings allow constructing one's mind, an idea which illustrates quite well the idea of the daara for most people in the rural areas.

It has been noted by NGOs who work on the field that many marabouts have expressed discontent at international actors who come with ready-made programs, and criticisms, and who do not include them in any way. They also feel aggrieved when they are described in the media as people who exploit children. While it is recognized in Senegal that there are "true" marabouts and "fake" marabouts, such an approach complicates relations with marabouts. They also complain about the lack of organization of the different actors who approach them, and who often give promises that they do not accomplish. Thus, there is a need for a broader strategy that includes synergy between the different actors, which we will outline in the next part.

## **Part 3 – Policy recommendations**

### **Priorities**

- 1. Reduce the number of daaras in the cities, support their transfer to the countryside**

2. Reduce the time talibes spend in the streets, because it is when they are most vulnerable
3. Improve the living conditions of talibes: hygiene, health, nutrition
4. Improve the studying conditions of talibes: less beatings
5. Ameliorate the reinsertion of talibes into society, including job prospects

In order to achieve these objectives, the following policies should be put into place:

#### Policy strategy

- Fostering a conducive dialogue between the different actors of the issue, in order to create common understandings of the challenges faced. Create a shared strategy out of this dialogue, and set a specific plan of action for the different actors.
- Map of all the daaras in the country. Work with religious authorities to create a certificate of recognition of a "good daara:" which would be granted by the same religious authorities on criteria constructed with all the actors. Publicize this certificate to the greater public especially in rural areas.
- Support daaras in the countryside by helping them to put into place revenue generating activities
  - Reduce the various barriers to education in rural areas by giving scholarships for study in public schools. Make the curriculum more related to agriculture and to potential employment opportunities in a given region.
  - Support the effective insertion of talibes in their local urban communities
    - Develop a program of "one daara, one shower"
    - Revive the "ndeye daara" tradition: where a family near the daara is in

charge of feeding one talibe

- Work with local NGOs to organize activities between talibes and other kids
- Develop an alternative curriculum of daaras that includes French and professional training.

#### Elements to keep in mind when implementing this policy strategy

- Religious leaders should be consulted before any other actor, because they hold the necessary political power that will help to make any policy decision applicable.
- International actors should be informed, but included only once the policy is agreed on, to avoid any accusation of foreign diktat, which could hinder the whole process.
- Make the debate a political and social one, not a religious one, to avoid scaring people from participation.
- Marabouts need to be included in every step, to ensure application of the policies. It is essential to show them that their interests will be safeguarded. Given the limited funds of the government, this strategy relies mostly on voluntary participation.
- Communicate any decisions through popular media

## **Conclusion, lessons from the Senegalese experience**

While the situation of the talibes has been getting worse over the past decades, there are solutions to the issue, as this essay has tried to demonstrate. Developing a strong partnership based on trust with religious institutions, daaras and NGOs is the first element on which to concentrate. Although there remain some questions, for example related to family planning in rural areas, and to the issue of talibes hailing from neighboring countries,

the answers to the main issues are clear, and only waiting to be implemented.

I have chosen this very specific topic, in order to be able to study in a very detailed manner the relationships between actors of a policy, and the potential policy that could solve such an issue. This approach allows me to now draw wider lessons for the general approach that should be taken when attacking a policy issue.

1. Firstly, I would like to underline the importance of understanding very deeply the society in which the policy issue takes place. Many NGOs and international organizations, whose studies on this issue I have myself examined, give much more space in their analysis to the framework of human rights that are being violated than to the mechanisms which have led society to allow such a horror to continue with public neglect. More effort should be done in trying to understand societies and how societies conceive themselves.
2. Secondly, this issue shows us that in trying to fight the problems faced by a certain society, a global and inclusive approach must be taken, one that spans the different areas of government. Indeed, many issues are linked, and rather than trying to solve all of them, or to solve a specific number of them radically, governments in developing countries should try to target the most urgent and fundamental problems first. Rather than spreading their energy on many issues, governments should try and solve these fundamental problems which block many other issues from being solved, even at the cost of temporary scolding by international organizations, the development community and their own peoples.
3. Thirdly, it is essential for every policy process to be inclusive of the different

members of society concerned by the issue, including those who will not benefit from government policy. Communication thus plays an essential role in garnering support, and can eventually lower the risks of blockade of a policy due to misunderstandings.

4. Finally, I cannot but underline one more time the essential role that research and most precisely local and applied research plays on the policy-making process in developing countries. It is essential to develop an indigenous understanding of one's society for policy to be better targeted and to solve problems in a quicker and more efficient fashion. While the World Bank and the IMF might have people with PhDs from Harvard or MIT, no degree can ever replace local and field experience. Not only better understandings of society can be gained in such a way, but it also creates a direct emotional link between the policy-makers and the people. We should never forget why we do something and who will be affected by it. We would not want to repeat the failures of the Structural Adjustment Plans...

**Word Count: 3563 words**

## Bibliography

1. Abdoul, Mohamed. *Situation des enfants dans les écoles coraniques au Sénégal: recherche action participative dans les villes de Diourbel, Guédiawaye, Kaffrine, Kaolack, Kolda, Mbacké, Pikine, Saint-Louis, Tambacounda, Vélingara et Ziguinchor*. Dakar: ENDA TM, Jeunesse Action, 2005.
2. Andre, Pierre, and Jean-Luc Demonsant. "Koranic School in Senegal: a real barrier to formal education?" *Department of Economics and Finance Working Papers, Universidad de Guanajuato, Department of Economics and Statistics*. EM200901 (2010): 1-32.
3. Coulon, Christian. "Sénégal : la démocratie à l'épreuve." *Politique Africaine* , no. 45 (1992): 3-12.
4. Diagne, Mountaga. *Décentralisation et participation politique en Afrique: le rôle des confréries religieuses dans la gouvernance locale au Sénégal*. Gatineau, Québec: Innovation sociale et développement des communautés, Alliance de recherche université-communauté, 2008.
5. *Document de stratégie de réduction de la pauvreté: DSRP..* Dakar: République du Sénégal, 2002.
6. *Document de stratégie pour la croissance et la réduction de la pauvreté 2006-2010*. Dakar: République du Sénégal, 2006.
7. *Enfants mendiants dans la région de Dakar*. Rome: UCW, 2007.
8. Fall, Aminata Sow. *La grève des Bàttu: ou les déchets humains*. Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes, 2001.



9. Flagothier, Catherine. *Soutien aux talibés/garibous: quelques actions d'amélioration du système éducatif des écoles coraniques au Sénégal, au Mali et au Burkina Faso*. Dakar, Sénégal: ENDA TM Jeunesse Action, 2003.
10. "Islam et politique au Sénégal : le pouvoir et les marabouts - Entretien...." Accueil - Soninkara.com - Le portail du peuple Soninké (Sénégal, Mali, Mauritanie, Gambie). <http://www.soninkara.com/societe/religion/islam-et-politique-au-senegal--le-pouvoir-et-les-marabouts.html> (accessed January 18, 2012).
11. *Jeunesse du Sénégal: enjeux et perspectives*. Dakar: USAID, 2011.
12. Kane, Hamidou. *L'aventure ambiguë; récit..* Paris: Julliard, 1961.
13. "La politique maraboutée ." Afrik.com : l'actualité de l'Afrique noire et du Maghreb - Le quotidien panafricain. <http://www.afrik.com/article6509.html> (accessed January 18, 2012).
14. *Le temps du changement: Agissons sans délai pour mettre fin à la mendicité forcée des enfants talibés au Sénégal*. Dakar: Anti Slavery International, 2011.
15. "Les confréries religieuses en politique au Sénégal (1) : de la colonisation à la construction étatique | TerangaWeb." TerangaWeb, l'Afrique des Idées. [http://terangaweb.com/terangaweb\\_new/2011/08/26/les-confreries-religieuses-en-politique-au-senegal-1ere-partie-de-la-colonisation-a-la-construction-etatique/](http://terangaweb.com/terangaweb_new/2011/08/26/les-confreries-religieuses-en-politique-au-senegal-1ere-partie-de-la-colonisation-a-la-construction-etatique/) (accessed January 18, 2012).
16. "Les confréries religieuses en politique au Sénégal (2) : l'ère des marabouts politiques | TerangaWeb." TerangaWeb, l'Afrique des Idées. [http://terangaweb.com/terangaweb\\_new/2011/09/02/les-confreries-religieuses-en-politique-au-senegal-2-lere-des-marabouts-politiques/](http://terangaweb.com/terangaweb_new/2011/09/02/les-confreries-religieuses-en-politique-au-senegal-2-lere-des-marabouts-politiques/) (accessed January 18, 2012).

- 17.** Monjib, Maâti. *Comportement électoral, politique et socialisation confrérique au Sénégal*. Saint Louis, Sénégal: GERCOP, 1998.
- 18.** Nguirane, Djibril, and P. F. Badiane. *Education de base et éducation coranique au Sénégal*. Dakar: Unesco, Dakar Regional Office (BREDA), 1995.
- 19.** *Rapport du Département d'Etat Américain sur la traite des personnes au Sénégal*. Washington DC: US Department of State, 2010.
- 20.** *SGDI Mission report: Talibe children in Senegal*, Dakar: Sustainable development group international, 2008.
- 21.** Sarr, Fatou. *Analyse de la situation des enfants au Sénégal*. Stockholm: Save the Children Sweden, 2001.
- 22.** Thiam, Ibrahim . *Les aspects du mouridisme au Sénégal*. Siegen: Université de Siegen, 2010.
- 23.** Wells, Matthew. *"Off the backs of the children": forced begging and other abuses against Talibés in Senegal.*. New York, N.Y.: Human Rights Watch, 2010.