



Exchange Visit to Niger by Senegal Religious Leaders to Discuss Religious Engagement on Maternal and Child Health

Since 2014, the Cadre des Religieux pour la Santé et le Développement (CRSD, Group of Religious Leaders for Development) has promoted family planning use in accordance with religious teachings. As part of these activities, CRSD visited other countries in the Ouagadougou Partnership in order to hold exchanges about religious engagement in family planning and to discuss best practices. This was the context for the Senegalese delegation's visit to Niger from January 7 to 13, 2018.

Following visits to Mauritania and Guinea in 2016, the visit to Niger was the third in the series. Niger and Senegal are sister countries and share certain social and religious realities. Close relations exist between the two countries. In particular, Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse counts many followers in both countries. His daughter, Saida Oumou Khairi Niasse, founding president of Jamiatou Nassiratou Diin of Kiota, served as the delegation's official host. The visit was coordinated by her nephew, Serigne Mouhamat Hady Niasse of CRSD, in collaboration with Sheikh Elh. Oumarou Mahaman Bachir, the Niger focal point for the Alliance des Religieux de l'Afrique de l'Ouest pour la Santé et le Développement (ARAO/SD, Alliance of Religious Leaders of West Africa for Health and Development). ARAO/SD members accompanied the CRSD delegation for the duration of the visit to Niger. The visit was organized with the support of the World Faiths Development Dialogue and the Hewlett Foundation.

During the visit, the delegation met with various stakeholders, including Muslim and Christian religious leaders, government ministries, and NGOs. The Ambassador of Senegal to Niger received the delegation. At the end of the visit, the delegation also paid a visit to Saida Oumou Khairi Niasse in Kiota, center of the Tijaniyya in Niger, as well as to Sheikh Moussa Aboubacar Hassoumi, the Khalifa of this area. The meetings allowed for rich exchanges on the expected roles of religious leaders in promoting maternal and child health through birth spacing. Discussions revolved around the many challenges encountered by the different actors in the course of their work, notably, difficulties linked to sociocultural barriers. CRSD members explained that in their activities in Senegal, they try to demonstrate that religion is not an obstacle to family planning, but rather it could be a potential solution.

PARTICIPANTS

Reverend Pierre Adama Faye, CRSD Treasurer

Representative of the Lutheran Church of Senegal

Imam Mouhamadou Takhiyou Kane, CRSD Secretary of Information and Culture

Representative of the Léona Kanène community of Kaolack

Serigne Bou Mouhamet Kounta, CRSD Vice-President

Representative of the Qadiri community of Ndiassane

Elhadj Djibril Diop Laye, CRSD Assistant Treasurer

Representative of the Layène community

Madame Ndèye Maguette Diop Ly

Representative of the Directorate for Maternal and Child Health at the Ministry of Health and Social Action

Serigne Saliou Mbacké, CRSD President

Representative of the Mouride community

Imam Mbaye Ndiaye

Representative of the National Association of Imams and Ulama of Senegal

Serigne Hady Niasse

Representative of the Niassène community of Médina Baye

Saida Arame Seck, CRSD Assistant Secretary General

Representative of the High Islamic Council of Senegal

Lauren Herzog

WFDD Program Coordinator

Wilma Mui

WFDD Program Associate

MEETINGS

Lafia Matassa & Equilibres et Populations

Dr. Sabo Maman and Mr. Idi Hassane

The Senegalese delegation was welcomed by the teams of Lafia Matassa (meaning youth health in the Hausa language) and Equilibres et Populations. The two NGOs gave a brief presentation of their areas of intervention, particularly those in which religious leaders are involved. They are particularly active in community-level outreach to raise awareness about family planning and the use of modern contraceptive methods. The Lafia Matassa team remarked that one of the major challenges in Niger is early marriage. Girls who marry early often contribute significantly to increases in the fertility rate because they are able to have children during a long period of time, even if they space their births.

In Niger, there is no structure to engage with religious leaders. However, the country has approximately 20 religious family planning champions, some of who have participated in radio shows. Although everyone asks for religious *argumentaires*, not all know how to read or would have the time to read one. Sermons at the community levels were also recommended. A significant challenge is that if a leader preaches against family planning, the population will listen to the religious leader over an NGO. Lafia Matassa's community approach is beneficial because it creates a space for religious leaders to address the issues. But surveys have revealed that while some are convinced about family planning, some do not understand yet. Religious engagement remains challenging.

The participants noted that they could learn much from Senegal on how to engage religious leaders. However, they hope to see the government create a climate that encourages harmonious cohabitation, as the religious tolerance that exists in Senegal is not a reality in Niger. The approach may be complementary and include diverse actors, but the change cannot be forced.

L'Association Islamique du Niger

(Islamic Association of Niger)

Sheikh Jabre Oumar Ismail, President

The delegation was received by the Islamic Association of Niger. Established in 1975, just five months after the coup d'état, it was the first Islamic association created in Niger. Although its principal objective is to teach Islam, the association also has other activities, namely assisting followers in accordance with Islamic teachings by providing them with counseling on marriage, marital disputes, and health.

During the meeting, there was discussion on the importance of both intra- and interreligious dialogue, as well as the contributions that religious bring for the well-being of the population and for development.

The president of the association expressed his support for any initiative that conforms to Islamic teachings.

L'ONG SOS Femmes et Enfants Victimes de Violence familiale (SOS/FEVVF)
(SOS Women and Children Victims of Family Violence)

Mariama Moussa, President

The delegation met Madame Mariama Moussa, the president of SOS/FEVVF and her team. The organization was established in 1998 and implements prevention programs. This includes work on early marriage and violence against women and children, among other areas. SOS/FEVVF uses a holistic approach and collaborates with Muslim and Christian leaders. Discussions focused on the various challenges that women and children face, as well as the role that religious leaders can play.

Ministère de la Population
(Ministry of Population)

Madame Amadou Aissata, Minister

During the meeting with the Ministry of Population, CRSD presented its work and learned about the family planning situation in Niger. Exchanges on statistics and government approaches in Niger and Senegal followed. One of the principal concerns of the Nigerien Minister is reducing the population growth rate, which stands at 3.9 percent. The contraceptive prevalence rate remains quite low. A major challenge is that many rumors circulate, such as that family planning aims to reduce the number of Muslims and that family planning is against religion. Infant and maternal mortality is linked to these problems. Arab countries can serve as models—if they have implemented successful family planning programs and have high contraceptive prevalence rates, why not Senegal and Niger?

In Senegal, the Ministry of Health was skeptical about raising the question with religious leaders. But as marabouts are references, they were able to break through barriers. Today, there is close collaboration. Two religious approaches in Niger were mentioned. First, the consultative group of religious leaders allows the Ministry to exchange with religious leaders on sensitive questions to develop a prudent approach together. And second, they are in the process of establishing relationships with Qur'anic schools to get to the grassroots level. If this education is integrated from the outset, the future religious leaders will have this information.

Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Protection de l'Enfant
(Ministry of Women's Promotion and Child Protection)

The delegation met with the secretary general of the Ministry of Women's Promotion and Child Protection. This ministry and the Ministry of Population were a single entity before splitting in 2016. On family planning, the secretary general remarked that no religion poses an obstacle to birth spacing. Previously, each time there was a problem, it provoked negative reactions. As such, in 2015, the unified ministry established a consultative group for dialogue with religious leaders. Since then, the Ministry has been able to work with the group on many questions, and even on taboo subjects. The technical advisor expressed his appreciation for the group, saying, "Before, family planning was a taboo subject, but the situation has now changed and the question of family planning is addressed at many levels. This is a recent change that is due to the involvement of religious leaders."

Ministère de l'Intérieur, de la Sécurité publique, de la Décentralisation et des Affaires coutumières et religieuses

(Ministry of the Interior, Public Security, Decentralization, and Customary and Religious Affairs)

The director of Religious Affairs welcomed the exchange visit and raised the question of pregnancies in Niger that are not organized or spaced. He stressed the importance of behavior change on questions of population, notably population growth, family planning, demographic shifts, and the demographic dividend. According to him, unemployment, youth, and girls' education also figure into questions of population.

As Niger has the highest fertility rate in the world, the director explained that there is no other country in the world where birth spacing is more important than in Niger. He told the story of three brothers he knows who have 99 children among them. He deplored the fact that in their ignorance of religious teachings, they put it on Islam's shoulders. He underlined the importance of CRSD's work in raising awareness among communities and clarifying religious teachings on family planning. The director promised to read the Islamic *argumentaire* produced by CRSD and to speak about it to associations.

He added that in Niger, it is not just girls who marry very young, but boys also marry at young ages. Some become fathers before age 17. Schools and health structures are not in a position to accommodate the large number of children. Before, children died from different diseases, but with vaccines and health care, more and more children survive. The problem, he explained, is that the world has changed, but mentalities have remained the same.

L'Alliance des Missions de l'Eglise Evangélique du Niger
(The Alliance of Missions of the Evangelical Church of Niger)

Yacouba Seydu, President

Yacouba Seydu, the president of the Alliance, welcomed the delegation. He expressed his conviction that religion must not separate Muslims and Christians. His dream for Niger is to create a positive living environment, as Muslims and Christians are cousins and there is no conflict between them. He explained that his parents are Muslim, but this does not pose a problem. In Christianity, one of the greatest commandments is to love your neighbor as you love yourself. He strongly believes that the country belongs to everyone and that all are called to develop the country. For him, a population must prosper together.

Le Conseil Islamique du Niger
(The Islamic Council of Niger)

Imam Ag Chai-i, Vice President

During the meeting, the discussions between the Senegalese delegation and members of the Islamic Council centered on the Council's objective, which is to make it known to people, whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim, that Islam is a religion of tolerance and peace, not one of extremism. The Council promotes positive relations with non-Muslims.

The imam representing the Council explained that the concept of jihad is not well understood. He asserted the jihad must be understood as a way to defend oneself against those who attack you, not to attack those who respect you. He insisted on the fact that Boko Haram is against Islam and that it is not the Islamic state, but rather the state against Islam. According to him, among Sufis, 100 percent accept birth spacing. The imam then asked how CRSD treats those who belong to non-Sufi groups in Senegal. CRSD members responded by presenting the composition of the association and highlighting the interfaith character of their work.

Pathfinder

Mr. Sani Aliou, Country Representative

The country representative began by explaining that Pathfinder's work in Niger started in 2013 within the context of the Ouagadougou Partnership. Pathfinder works closely with the Ministry of Health in implementing the family planning strategic plan in Niger. He explained that Pathfinder's work targets young married couples to prepare them to manage questions of health, especially reproductive health. Pathfinder aims to help couples to be more open on these questions. In Niger, the husband schools and couple schools are useful models.

As part of its community engagement, Pathfinder's team collaborates with local organizations and established relationships with imams and local leaders in villages. Dr. Sani Aliou then expressed his desire to work more with religious organizations. Regarding religious engagement, Pathfinder has held training sessions for religious leaders. One of the biggest challenges is that many rumors linked to religion still exist. Greater religious engagement could greatly help to clarify religious perspectives. CRSD's model, especially its interfaith character, could be beneficial in Niger, particularly where there are significant Christian communities. Madame Diop, as the representative of the Ministry of Health and Social Action, explained that in Senegal, the religious leaders represent operational arms in areas where the Ministry cannot go.

Centre Nationale de la Santé de la Reproduction (CNSR)

National Center of Reproductive Health

Dr. Ibrahima Saadatou, Directrice

The CNSR is a division of the Directorate of Maternal and Child Health. In its work, CNSR collaborates with religious champions and offers them training. According to the director, the adoption of family planning is a challenge that all Africans share. She noted that certain rumors persist, making the work difficult. For example, some believe that any woman who dies with an implant will go directly to Hell. Collaboration with religious leaders can change mentalities and combat these rumors. The director believes that this collaboration will be essential for the objectives of CNSR's programs to be successful.

Marie Stopes International (MSI)

Madame Bodou Edwige

In its presentation, the MSI team, led by Madame Bodou Edwige, noted the role of religious leaders in Niger and in their program areas. Having recognized the importance of religious engagement, MSI trained 49 religious leaders on family planning. The team also explained that its research studies have revealed the importance of religion in decision-making on family planning. The results of this research show that 70 percent of men asserted that without the agreement and blessing of their imams, they would never accept the use of family planning. MSI's team and the Senegalese delegation agreed that Islam is not against family planning, but some misunderstand the teachings.

Meeting with the Ambassador of Senegal to Niger

His Excellency Mr. Abdel Kader Agne, the Ambassador of Senegal to Niger, received the CRSD delegation. He praised CRSD's work and was pleased to see a group of religious leaders engaged in a development program alongside the government. He also appreciated CRSD's interfaith character. He then indicated his willingness to work with CRSD on any future activities involving Niger.

Visit to Kiota

The delegation visited Kiota, a religious city created nearly 60 years ago by Sheikh Aboubacar Hassoumi, an imam and scholar who was a great disciple of Sheikh Ibrahim Niassé. His wife, Saida Oumoul Khairy



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Niasse, who is the daughter of Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse, received the delegation along with the current Khalifa of Kiota, Sheikh Moussa Aboubacar Hassoumi. Saida Niasse fights for women's empowerment through education, as well as for peace and tolerance. She leads a movement of more than 2,000 Sufi women and constructed a school in Kiota that houses more than 2,000 young girls.

During the visit to Kiota, the delegation had fruitful discussions with Saida Niasse on several different topics. She emphasized the importance of women's health and noted that some women are marginalized and excluded in Niger. She praised CRSD's initiative, as it promotes women's well-being.

JOINT MEETING WITH PARTNERS AND RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS

At the end of the visit, a joint meeting was presided over by the director of the Directorate for Maternal and Child Health. The participants represented local and international NGOs, as well as Christian and Muslim associations. This allowed the Senegalese and Nigerien delegations to present the religious engagement in family planning that exists in their respective countries. The presentations were followed by questions and debate. The content of the two presentations is as follows:

Presentation of ARAO/SD in Niger

Sheikh Elh. Oumarou Mahaman Bachir, the country coordinator and focal point of ARAO/SD, described the evolution of civil society organizations from the 1970s to today and also emphasized their roles in society, particularly concerning development. He pointed to the contributions that ARAO/SD can make toward sustainable development, notably in the areas of health, demographics, peace, and harmonious intra- and interreligious cohabitation.

Presentation of CRSD

Sheikh Saliou Mbacké delivered CRSD's presentation, highlighting the association's strategic approach to promoting maternal and child health in Senegal. CRSD also showed the ENGAGE video, an advocacy tool produced by Population Reference Bureau in collaboration with CRSD. The video explores Senegal's maternal and child health challenges and highlights the actions religious leaders have taken—and especially CRSD—to promote birth spacing with the goal of reducing the rates of infant and maternal mortality.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

During the exchange visit, many conversations centered on the religious and cultural beliefs held by some Nigeriens that represent a barrier to the use of reproductive health services. Although efforts to collaborate exist between religious leaders, the Nigerien government, and development actors, a strategic approach has the potential to reach communities that remain resistant to the practice of family planning.

The Senegalese delegation encouraged the Nigerien religious leaders to be aware of the importance of questions around population and to work together with the various actors, such as the government, development agencies, and NGOs. For their part, the actors clearly expressed their desire to work with religious leaders but they noted difficulties in finding appropriate intermediaries and mechanisms. CRSD's approach in Senegal could serve as a model, but the approaches must be adapted to the Nigerien context. The Senegalese committed to remaining in contact with their Nigerien counterparts to continue the exchange.