



MASTER THESIS

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A glossary of some key terms used in this thesis

- Talibés (Wolof ethnicity) or Almubbe (Peul ethnicity): children attending *Koranic schools* or *Mahadras* in West Africa. They can learn in a school nearby and sleep home, or they can also be send to distant schools and sleep in the Koranic institution. In the latter case, these are mostly boys, since it is culturally uncommon that families let their daughters travel alone. In this thesis, the term ‘talibé’ is used to refer to boys aged between four and fourteen years old, who attend a Koranic education with a *marabout* in Mauritania. They are either Mauritanian, coming from remote areas, or they come from neighbouring countries, but they all sleep in the religious institution. Some of them are involved in begging and others are not. Some of them follow a proper religious education, others do not. In other words, not all talibés are being exploited and no generalisation is made. This thesis focuses on talibés in general and on exploited talibés in particular.
- Marabout: Islamic scholar teaching children the Koran and leading the *Koranic school* or the *Mahadra*. Marabouts have an extremely important role and a prestigious status in society.
- Koranic schools: young children, mostly boys between four and nine years old, start their religious education with a *marabout* by solely focussing on the recital of the Koran. Many different Koranic schools exist in Nouakchott and it is within these schools that *talibés* risk exploitation, since anyone is entitled to open a Koranic school, without being officially recognised by the state.
- Mahadra: this term is specific to Mauritania and refers to what is commonly known as a ‘Madrassa’ in the Arab world: an institution focussing on the study of Islamic theology and religious law. In Mauritania, this institution dates back to its pre-colonial period and still exists today. *Talibés* come here after they have completed the recital of the Koran. Mahadras have a more official character than *Koranic schools*, since they are supposed to be registered and subsidised by the state, which reduces the risk of child exploitation.
- Important fact with respect to the present thesis: it appeared during the interviews that both terms are confused. Some respondents insisted on the

important distinction between both Koranic institutions, which is why each term is detailed above according to its official definition, but other respondents said mahadras and Koranic schools to be the same. This is important to remind the reader when arriving at the chapter analysing the interviews. Some quotations of the participants mention ‘mahadra’ when officialy, they are talking about Koranic schools.

- Confiage: francized term, which means ‘placement’ in English. It is a common and traditional practice in West Africa, which consists of ‘placing the child’ to the care of a close relative, a friend or someone well regarded in society. Being placed in another family creates familial alliances, the same way as weddings do, and reinforces social and solidarity ties. Most of the time, talibés are ‘placed’ by their parents with a marabout to learn the Koran.
- Sharia: ethical and moral principles considered by Muslims to be the emanation of God’s will, guiding humanity. These principles are interpreted by Islamic scholars and jurists and become Islamic law or ‘fiqh’ in Arabic. In Mauritania, both the religious Islamic law and the secular legal system introduced during the French colonisation, coexist.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background information

The practice of ‘placing’ children in the care of a ‘marabout’ for them to become ‘talibés’ and study the Koran in Koranic schools or ‘mahadras’, is an ancient religious, spiritual and moral practice in West Africa. It is considered by society to possess many virtues and to enhance children’s sense of independence, tolerance, solidarity, humility or respect. Traditionally, talibés have to find food in the neighbourhood in order to cover for the care and education of the marabout, which is free of charge. This enables the community not only to fulfil its religious duty of almsgiving, but also to contribute to the child’s education, which society perceives to be a collective responsibility. The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is considered by its neighbours to offer the most prestigious religious education in the West African region. Therefore, many children travel from Senegal, Mali, Sierra Leone or the Gambia to Mauritania, in order to benefit from the best possible Koranic education.

However, it seems the traditional practice of talibés has degraded in a context of rapid urbanisation, mass migration, globalisation and a general rise of poverty and inequality in the country. In such difficult conditions, the vulnerability of children increases and they become the first target. In this context, talibés appear as an extremely vulnerable group. ‘Fake’ marabouts have perverted the traditional system, by involving talibés in child labour through forced begging. These children are confronted by many dangers and violence on the street as well as within Koranic institutions. In addition, regarding the current terrorist threat in the region of West Africa, talibés can easily be trafficked for the recruitment in armed conflicts or they can become influenced by radical Islamic discourses within unsupervised Koranic schools.

This thesis focuses on the particular case of talibés in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania. The phenomenon of the involvement of certain talibés in child labour has emerged as a visible challenge in Nouakchott, becoming part of the urban landscape. Despite the scale of the issue, only a few academic research studies have addressed this question in Mauritania and no effective political programme aims at the specific protection of talibés in the country. It seems the practice of talibés and the phenomenon of their exploitation has become a societal and religious taboo, representing a barrier to address the protection of talibés in Nouakchott.

1.2 Research area and value of the research topic

The problematic of talibés appears as a topical issue on the international, regional and national scene. Firstly and in a broader context, the topic of children's rights figures as a key aspect on the international political agenda in light of the post-2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG). SDG 8.7¹ insists on the urgency to enhance global efforts to combat child labour and modern forms of slavery, which represent pressing priorities on a global scale. Secondly and at a regional level, the phenomenon of child labour is particularly worrying in West and Central Africa, where its prevalence is at its highest worldwide (32%). In this region, it is considered that approximately one child out of three is forced to work². In Mauritania, the phenomenon represents a rate of 38%³. This means about more than one child out of three is involved in child labour⁴ in the country. Furthermore, the topic of child migration represents an increasing political regional challenge, due to the effects of climate change, conflicts and a rising Islamic terrorist threat⁵. Thirdly and at a national scale, Mauritania possesses an attractive status in the African migratory system, due to its strategic pivotal geographical position connecting West Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb⁶ and due to its renowned prestigious Koranic education in the region. The country's geographical factor and the regional rise of Islamic terrorism directly expose talibés to an increasing risks of human trafficking or worst forms of child labour. Narrowing down the topic, Nouakchott has been confronted to an accelerated urban migration following successive years of droughts in the 70s and 80s, where nomadic people have been forced to settle down in urban zones

¹ International Labour Organisation and Walk Free Foundation, *Global Estimates on Modern Slavery : forced labour and forced marriage*, Geneva, 2017, Available from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575479.pdf, (accessed 14 May 2018).

² United Nations Children's Fund, Unicef Data : Monitoring the Situation of Children and Women, *Child Labour*, Available from <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-labour/>, (accessed 16. January 2018). The % refers to the amount of children between 5-11 years old who were involved in child labor at the moment of the survey.

³ Ibid

⁴ Enquête par Grappes à Indicateurs Multiples 2015, Mauritanie, September 2016, Available from https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS5/West%20and%20Central%20Africa/Mauritania/2015/Key%20findings/Mauritania%202015%20MICS%20KFR_French.PDF, (accessed 20 May 2018).

⁵ B. Nickels, J. Matton, A. Boucher, 'The G5 Sahel Joint Force Gains Traction', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 9 February 2018, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/g5-sahel-joint-force-gains-traction/>, (accessed 30 June 2018).

⁶ C. Stewart, C. Toupet, H. Deschamps et al, 'Mauritania', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Available from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritania>, (accessed 10 May 2018).

in order to survive⁷. These prompt population shifts have resulted in inadequate political responses regarding education, health and social services, leading to a general degradation of life conditions in Nouakchott⁸. In such socio-economic conditions, children - who due to demographic change now make up about a half of the population⁹ - remain the most vulnerable ones to child labour and any other form of violence. In this multidimensional context, the phenomenon of talibés appears as a complex crosscutting issue, which requires to be addressed in a more effective and holistic way.

1.3 Research focus

1.3.1 Aim and research question

Having the importance and topicality of the overall research area in mind and considering the vulnerability of talibés in Nouakchott, the lack of study regarding their situation calls for greater research. First and foremost, the purpose of the present thesis is not to put the very tradition of talibés into question, since it remains a highly valued and prestigious practice in society and their exploitation is not a generalised phenomenon. The aim is rather to provide a comprehensive overview of the actions undertaken or planned to protect talibés in Nouakchott, who today have become a particular vulnerable group in society. Therefore, this thesis is guided by the following research question: which measures of protection have been taken so far with regards to the evolving situation of talibés in Nouakchott?

1.3.2 Theoretical framework and methodology

Two theoretical frameworks approach this research. Firstly, the international legal perspective describes how child rights have become a global priority and that both their right to protection and participation must be promoted. Child labour violates the rights of the child and deeply affects child well being. Secondly, the sociological approach towards childhood also insists on the importance to recognise children as social and active agents in society, but highlights a certain ambiguity towards the normative and universalistic discourse on childhood. Notions of childhood are socially constructed and

⁷ Plateforme numérique multimédia: Eradiquer le travail des enfants en Mauritanie, <http://www.eradiquer-travail-enfants-mauritanie.org/>

⁸ T. Daddah, J. Boit, R. Lanfranchi et al, *Nouakchott, capitale de la Mauritanie. 50 ans de défi*, Mauritanie, Publication du ministère de la Culture, de la Jeunesse et des Sports, Editions Sépia, 2006, p. 9

⁹ Mauritania demographics Profile 2018, Index Mundi, Available from https://www.indexmundi.com/mauritania/demographics_profile.html, (accessed 14 April 2018).

hence proper to each society. Therefore, this thesis studies the particular perceptions of the Mauritanian society towards child well being, education or the place of children in society, in order to avoid any kind of imposition of Western ideals of childhood.

The methodology used to answer the research question is based on the qualitative analysis of data, collected through the means of unstructured interviews conducted in Nouakchott in April 2018. This choice was motivated by the present thesis' sociological perspective of childhood, since analysing such cultural and religious aspects requires being on the ground and talking with as many different stakeholders as possible. The attempt was to have a diverse and representative sample of actors on the ground, who are concerned by the protection of talibés.

1.3.3 Objectives of the research

The overall aim of the research is to find out what is being done with regards to the protection of talibés in Nouakchott. For this aim to be met and to answer the research question, three sub-questions are guiding the analysis of the data. Firstly, it is important to begin by identifying the key aspects and challenges brought forward by the respondents: what are the human rights abuses at stake and how – through which measures - does the government succeed or fail to meet its human rights obligations? After that, a second section must investigate the measures already taken so far by the rest of the actors concerned by child protection. Finally, the third section's objective is to offer new avenues for reflections on how to better accompany talibés in Nouakchott, based on the suggestions of the participants.

1.4 Structure

The present thesis consists of seven main chapters. After the first chapter, which is the introduction, the second chapter introduces the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés in Nouakchott under the notion of 'child labour' and 'worst forms of child labour'. The third chapter approaches the phenomenon through a legal and sociological framework. This leads to the fourth chapter, which focuses on the evolution of the practice of talibés in the 21st century. The fifth chapter explains the methodology used to answer the research question and the sixth chapter highlights the main findings from the analysis of the collected data. The final and seventh chapter concludes the thesis by summarising how the research has answered the three sub-questions or the overall research question.

The structure of the main chapters is as follows. The second chapter introduces the complex phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés in Nouakchott, which can be

recognised as child labour or worst forms of child labour under the international legal perspective. It is divided into four main sections. Firstly, a brief contextualisation describes how the issue of child labour and its worst forms is a topical global challenge and how Mauritania shows a particular worrying rate regarding the issue. Secondly, the meaning of the concept of child labour is shortly introduced. The third section focuses on the human rights obligations that bound the Mauritanian government with regards to child protection. The fourth section adapts these concepts to the Mauritanian context. This requires a multidimensional approach, since many factors can explain why the phenomenon of child labour persists, despite its visibility in society.

The third chapter frames the phenomenon of talibés and their exploitation in Nouakchott in a legal and sociological context. Firstly, the international legal child protection perspective introduces the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child¹⁰, stressing how child protection constitutes a global priority. Secondly, the sociology of childhood insists of the importance to recognise children as social constructions and as active agents in society. In fact, both conceptual frameworks recognise that the participation of children in society is crucial for their well being, but that their particular status in society requires a greater need of protection. However, both the legal and the sociological discourses on child protection risk claiming themselves as normative and universalistic, while the notions of childhood and child well being are extremely complex and widely differ in a cross-cultural and global perspective.

The fourth chapter attempts to describe how the traditional, cultural and religious practice of talibés in Nouakchott is evolving in the current Mauritanian context. The accelerated urbanisation and globalisation seem to increase the socio-economic difficulties in the country, making children more vulnerable to exploitation. The religious aspect of charity risks to transform into forced begging, the Koranic education faces difficulties to adapt to modern society and the concept of mobility entails the danger to facilitate all kinds of child exploitation.

The fifth chapter explains the methodology used in this thesis to answer the research question. It is structured into eight sub-sections: introduction (1), methods of data collection (2), sampling (3), resources (4), access to respondents and organisations (5), ethical considerations (6), methodological challenges (7) and data analysis (8).

¹⁰ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3

The sixth chapter exposes the main findings resulting from the discussions with the respondents on the grounds, with an attempt to answer the three sub-questions: the key issues, the undertaken or planned measures and the suggestions for future measures.

2. The phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés: child labour or worst forms of child labour

This chapter introduces the complex problematic of talibés in Nouakchott. It is divided into four main sections. Firstly, in order to understand why the present thesis is focussing on the case of child labour in Mauritania, a brief contextualisation describes how the question of child labour and its worst forms is a topical global challenge and how Mauritania shows a particular worrying rate regarding this issue. Secondly, the meaning of child labour is shortly introduced. The third section focuses on the human rights obligations that bound the Mauritanian government with regards to child protection. The fourth section adapts the concepts of child labour and worst forms of child labour, to the Mauritanian context. This requires a multidimensional approach, since many factors can explain why the phenomenon of child labour persists, despite its visibility in society.

2.1. Contextualisation

The elaboration of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG's) (2015-2030) constituted a global wake up call to eradicate poverty, to protect the planet and to construct a peaceful world founded on peace, stability and prosperity. Among the UN SDG's principles, figures the need to make good choices today to ameliorate the fate of future generations. Goal 8.7 insists on the necessity to reinforce a global partnership approach to combat child labour, modern slavery and all other forms of forced work.¹¹ This target is closely linked to other commitments of the UN SDG's, since the underlying cause of child labour is mostly characterized by other human right violations. Besides, these violations tend to increase in situations of extreme poverty and children appear to be the most vulnerable ones to exploitation at this level. The following statistics allow us to recognise the scale of the issue of child labour and worst forms of child labour around the world, which remain subjects of global concern. Today, around 152 million children (5-17 years) are working worldwide, of whom 152 million are victims of child labour. 73

¹¹ J. Lu, 'This is how prevalent child labor is around the world today. Can the Sustainable Development Goals totally eradicate it 7 years from now?' ; UN Dispatch, 28 November 2017, Available from <https://www.undispatch.com/prevalent-child-labor-around-world-today-can-sustainable-development-goals-totally-eradicate-7-years-now/> (accessed 18 May 2018.)

million of them are working in hazardous conditions.¹² The phenomenon of child labour is particularly worrying in West and Central Africa (32%). In Mauritania, the phenomenon represents a rate of 38%¹³, or more than one child out of three is considered to be involved in child labour¹⁴. But what is meant by ‘child labour’? Are all economic activities conducted by children considered as exploitation? Before describing the responsibilities of the Mauritanian government towards children, the complex legal concept of ‘child labour’ must first be understood.

2.2 Child labour, light forms of work, hazardous work and worst forms of child labour

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) describes child labour as the following:

*State parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.*¹⁵

The concept of *child labour* refers to all activities considered to prevent children from enjoying their childhood, to deprive them of their potential and their dignity and to harm their education, health and physical and mental development.¹⁶ Child labour is therefore a violation of the rights of the child, since it jeopardises their education, it hinders them from having activities of their age and it can isolate them socially. However, not all economic tasks carried out by children are covered by the term ‘child labour’. Some of these activities are legally accepted, since they are considered to be light forms of work

¹² International Labour Organisation and Walk Free Foundation, *Global Estimates on Modern Slavery : forced labour and forced marriage*, Geneva, 2017, Available from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575479.pdf, (accessed 14 May 2018).

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Enquête par Grappes à Indicateurs Multiples 2015, Mauritanie, September 2016, Available from https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS5/West%20and%20Central%20Africa/Mauritania/2015/Key%20findings/Mauritania%202015%20MICS%20KFR_French.PDF, (accessed 20 May 2018).

¹⁵ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 33.

¹⁶ C. Thiam, F. Cecon, F. Beaumont, *Guide interactif sur la prévention du travail des enfants en Mauritanie, Manuel du formateur contre les pires formes de travail et la traite des enfants*, Organisation Internationale du Travail, 2018, Nouakchott.

Nouakchott, Organisation Internationale du Travail, 2018.

and can sometimes even develop social and practical skills for children,¹⁷ by learning how to help their families for example. In this case, the term *light work* is used. It is therefore fundamental to distinguish which forms of work are accepted from types of work considered to be harmful hence prohibited. This responsibility falls upon State parties, bound to protect the rights of the child. Every government decides which type of work is light or which type of work is considered dangerous or *hazardous*. This is done according to the conditions and the nature of the activity, the age of the child, the amount of hours the child has to work and the social norms of the country.¹⁸ On the other side, all activities that fall within the concept of *worst forms of child labour* are prohibited worldwide. These are considered to be serious human right violations, because of their intrinsically reprehensible nature: slavery or practices similar to slavery (sale, trafficking of children, debt servitude, bondage, forced or compulsory labour, forced or compulsory recruitment of children)¹⁹. Now that the different forms of child labour have been explained, it is clearer why the exploitation of certain talibés through forced begging can be considered as undermining their physical and mental development and as hindering them to have a quality education²⁰. The next section describes how the government has committed itself to protect children and hence talibés, in Mauritania. This represents a first step in answering the first sub-question, by identifying the human rights obligations of the state.

2.4. National legal approach

The government has already shown its political will to protect children. It has ratified international legal dispositions such as the UN CRC or the UN Protocol to Prevent,

¹⁷ I. Isidoro, F. Barroeta, L. Tazi et al, Guide interactif pour la prévention du travail des enfants en Afrique de l'Ouest, Manuel du formateur contre les pires formes de travail des enfants y compris la traite, Nouakchott, Organisation Internationale du Travail, 2013.

¹⁸ International Labour Organisation, Convention n° 132 (1976), Concerning the minimum Age for Admission to Employment, Available from http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C138 (accessed 10. January 2018)

¹⁹ International Labour Organisation Convention n° 182 (1999), Concerning the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, Available from <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc87/com-chic.htm> (accessed 15. January 2018)

²⁰ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 33.

Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children²¹. Furthermore, it has ratified regional instruments such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child²² and both ILO conventions related to child labour - one on the minimum age²³ and one on the elimination of the worst forms of child labour²⁴. The Constitution of Mauritania establishes the principle of the primacy of international law over national law²⁵ and has indeed converted its international engagement towards child protection at the national level, through the establishment of legal texts and political programmes. Some examples can be put forward. The elaboration of a National Strategy Plan on the Protection of the Child²⁶ establishes a typology of vulnerable children at the national level and suggests a clear strategy to protect them. The National Action Plan for the elimination of child labour²⁷, established in cooperation with the local International Labour Office, contributes to the effective elimination of child labour²⁸. In the same year, a law criminalising slavery was passed. Since some forms of child labour are considered to be similar to practices of slavery, this legal disposition also protects children.²⁹ Begging is officially prohibited in the Mauritanian Penal code and many laws and ordinances establish norms of punishment against those who exploit children through

²¹ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Conventions against Transnational Organized Crime (adopted 15 November 2000).

²² The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (adopted 11 July 1990, entered into force 29 November 1999) CAB/LEG/24.9/49.

²³ International Labour Organization, Convention n° 132 (1976), Concerning the minimum Age for Admission to Employment, Available from http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C138 (accessed 10. January 2018)

²⁴ International Labour Organization Convention n° 182 (1999), Concerning the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, Available from <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc87/com-chic.htm> (accessed 15. January 2018)

²⁵ Constitution de la République Islamique de Mauritanie, 20 July 1991, Article 80.

²⁶ Ministère des Affaires sociale de l'Enfance et de la Famille, Direction de l'Enfance, *Stratégie Nationale de Protection des Enfants*, SNPE, Nouakchott, 2014.

²⁷ Ministre de la Fonction Publique, du Travail et de la Modernisation de l'Administration, *Plan d'Action National pour l'élimination du travail des enfants en Mauritanie (PANETE-RIM)*, sur appui du BIT, Nouakchott, 2017.

²⁸ US Embassy Mauritanie, (2016), 'Minimal Advancement – efforts made but continued policy that delayed advancement', 2016, Available from <https://mr.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/204/Mauritania-2016-Child-Labor-Report.pdf>, (accessed 27. February 2018)

²⁹ C. Thiam, F. Cecon, F. Beaumont, *Guide interactif sur la prévention du travail des enfants en Mauritanie, Manuel du formateur contre les pires formes de travail et la traite des enfants*, Organisation Internationale du Travail, 2018, Nouakchott.

begging, as well as they create specific dispositions to combat child begging.³⁰ Several laws have passed concerning the obligation of elementary school, the punishment of human trafficking and the minimum age admission to be employed. In other words, the enumeration of the legal dispositions in place to protect children seems comprehensive, binding the Mauritanian government to many human rights obligations. However, a lack of legal enforcement remains a serious issue in a country where the poverty level ranks high and where intervening for child protection is still too often perceived as a religious or social taboo.³¹ The following quote from (Penelope) Welbourne, illustrates the difficulty to enforce these kind of legal dispositions:

*Countries can enact visionary laws intended to protect children, but they will be ineffective against entrenched social attitudes, especially if only limited resources can be provided to implement and enforce them. This is the ultimate challenge that the world community must address if the vision of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child is to be realised.*³²

The next section frames the phenomenon of talibés in Mauritania in the wider picture of child labour, which must be approached within a multidimensional framework. This finally allows to understand how the phenomenon of talibés in Mauritania has evolved in the current urbanised and globalised context.

2.5 Child labour in Mauritania

The phenomenon of child labour and its worst forms has only recently started to become a serious political concern in Mauritania.³³ The fields of the economic activities are different according to the specificities of each region. The rural areas for instance, are characterized by a high level of children working in the agro-pastoral sector or in the fishing industry. Near the mining areas, other children are digging and searching for gold. Whereas many children in urban zones are working and living in the streets: such as those

³⁰ Ministre de l'Intérieur et de la Décentralisation, Legiteam Consulting avec l'appui d'UNICEF, *Etude sur la mendicité à Nouakchott*, Nouakchott, May 2013, p. 67

³¹ M. Wessels, 'Qu'apprenons-nous sur la protection des enfants dans la communauté ?', Save the Children, 2009, p. 12.

³² P. Wellbourne, J. Dixon, 'Child protection and welfare : cultures, policies and practices', *European Journal of Social Work*, vol. 19, Issue 6, 14 September 20015, p. 827-840, Available from Taylor and Francis Online (accessed 28 May 2018).

³³ C. Thiam, F. Cecon, F. Beaumond, Guide interactif sur la prévention du travail des enfants en Mauritanie, Manuel du formateur contre les pires formes de travail et la traite des enfants, Organisation Internationale du Travail, 2018, Nouakchott.

searching for plastic or pieces of metal in garbages, to resell afterwards.³⁴ Or as the present thesis identifies, some talibés are being forced to beg all day in the street – with all the dangers this entails- at the detriment of their education³⁵.

2.5.1 Worst forms of child labour and the sensitive issue of slavery

The issue of slavery and practices similar to slavery remains a sensitive subject in Mauritania. Having abolished slavery in 1981, Mauritania is the last country in the world to have done so.³⁶ Even though the government has established legal provisions criminalising slavery³⁷, it publically denies its existence. It only recognises the ‘vestiges of slavery’ and rapidly imprisons civil society actors who are openly fighting against slavery.³⁸ With an estimation of 20% of the population still being enslaved today, Mauritania retains the highest score worldwide³⁹. However, the government officially recognises the existence of worst forms of child labour in Mauritania.⁴⁰ Organisations such as the International Labour Office, the United States Department of Labour or the National Committee on Human Rights, assimilate many cases of child labour in the country to worst forms of child labour.⁴¹ These institutions point out to cases such as forced labour in domestic work and camel jockeying as a result of human trafficking, as well as commercial sexual exploitation which can sometimes results from human

³⁴ M. Mint Abdellah, A. Ould Ahmed, M. Ould Sidi Yahya, A. Ould Boukhary, *Etude sur le trafic, la traite et les pires forms du travail des enfants en Mauritanie*, 2010, UNICEF, MASEF, Available from <https://fr.scribd.com/document/173018719/Rapport-etude-travail-traffic-et-PFTE-RIM-juillet-2010>, (accessed 20 January 2018)

³⁵ M. H'Meyada, M. Lafdal, *Etude sur la situation des enfants Talibés mendiants (almoude) en Mauritanie*, MASEF, UNICEF, 2011.

³⁶ Mauritania demographics Profile 2018, Index Mundi, Available from https://www.indexmundi.com/mauritania/demographics_profile.html, (accessed 14 April 2018).

³⁷ International Labour Organization, Loi n° 052/15 du 12 août 2015 abrogeant et remplaçant la loi n° 2007-048 du 3 septembre 2007 portant incrimination de l'esclavage et des pratiques esclavagistes, 2015, Available from http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=fr&p_isn=100117 (accessed 15 January 2018)

³⁸ Amnesty International, ‘Une épée au dessus de nos têtes’, March 2018, Available from https://amnestyfr.cdn.prismic.io/amnestyfr%2Fd4afd5e1-6116-4920-9d69-2815a2bbe6bf_af3878122018french.pdf, (accessed 19 May 2018).

³⁹ Mauritania demographics Profile 2018, Index Mundi, Available from https://www.indexmundi.com/mauritania/demographics_profile.html, (accessed 14 April 2018)

⁴⁰ Ministère de la Fonction Publique, du Travail et de la Modernisation de l'Administration, *Plan d'Action National pour l'Elimination du Travail des Enfants en Mauritanie (PANETE-RIM) 2015-2020*, Bureau Internationale du Travail en Mauritanie, 2017.

⁴¹ International Labour Organisation Convention n° 182 (1999), Concerning the prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, Available from <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc87/com-chic.htm> (accessed 15 January 2018)

trafficking, or use in illicit activities such as the traffic of drugs, indentured and hereditary slavery and forced begging by criminal gangs or Koranic teachers.⁴² -

2.5.2 Multidimensional aspect of child labour in Mauritania

Studying child labour and talibés in Mauritania requires a holistic approach, taking into consideration cultural, geographical, socio-economic, historical, political and educational aspects of the country. All factors are intertwined, adding to the complexity of child protection in Mauritania.

2.5.2.1. Cultural and traditional factors

A. Children are working to perpetuate the familial activity

The fact that children are involved in economic activities is not new in Africa.⁴³ Children have traditionally been formed to the principal activity of production of the family, in order to assure the perpetuation of the social group's existence.⁴⁴ Parents therefore used to teach their children at an early age how to work in specific economic sectors. This society is quite similar to a caste system⁴⁵: the individual social status in each ethnic group depends on each one's economic occupation. Today, child labour is still perceived as an important means of socialisation and education in Mauritania. This raises two issues. Firstly, the traditional perception of child labour overshadows the fact that the urbanisation, the socio-economic difficulties and the poverty the majority of the population faces today, have degraded the nature and the conditions in which children are working. It is not only children helping out their families in the rural sector anymore. Children are present in a variety of economic activities in rural or urban areas and many of them are exploited and are no longer able to combine work and school.⁴⁶ Secondly, the

⁴² Bureau of International Affairs, 'Minimal advancement – efforts made but continued policy that delayed advancement. Mauritania', United states Department of Labor, 2016, Available from <https://www.dol.gov/sites/default/files/images/ilab/child-labor/Mauritania2016.pdf>, (accessed 21 June 2018).

⁴³ M. Cabré, F. Cecon, Etude anthropologique sur les enfants en mobilité en Mauritanie, Résumé exécutif, Save the Children, February 2018, p.6

⁴⁴ UNICEF, 'Quelle protection pour les enfants concernés par la mobilité en Afrique de l'Ouest?', UNICEF, 2010, Available from https://www.unicef.org/wcaro/french/Rapport_FR-web.pdf, (accessed 20 January 2018)

⁴⁵ C. Le Brech, 'L'esclavage et le système des castes perdurent en Mauritanie', FranceInfo, 30 December 2014, Available from <http://geopolis.francetvinfo.fr/lesclavage-et-le-systeme-des-castes-perdurent-en-mauritanie-49901>, (accessed 19 May 2018).

⁴⁶ M. Cabré, F. Cecon, Etude anthropologique sur les enfants en mobilité en Mauritanie, Résumé exécutif, Save the Children, February 2018.

idea that individuals' social status depends on their profession and on their ethnicity is still deeply rooted in mentalities.⁴⁷ This means that a child whose parents, grand parents and great-grand parents used to be slaves will automatically perpetuate the same generational activity with the same social status. This makes the fight against slavery and worst forms of child labour extremely difficult.

B. Migration forms part of the child's education

Moving to another region or country is perceived as something natural for children in West Africa and is encouraged as part of their education. Here, the concept of education is understood as the pursuit of better opportunities. The acquisition of general knowledge by discovering new places will make the child responsible and stronger⁴⁸. Becoming independent is highly valued, since it means developing tools to be able to integrate in society. It also signifies sharing the knowledge or revenues with the community. Education must therefore first be comprehended as a collective interest rather than an individual one.⁴⁹ In this sense, moving abroad to work or to pursue an education – with all the risks these forms of migration can entail for children- is often perceived as more rewarding than going to school near your family in your hometown. This relates to the practice of talibés, since pursuing a Koranic education abroad is rewarding, even though it means being exposed to risks of exploitation and abuse and being separated from the parents during childhood.

Using children for economic purposes is thus a new phenomenon, but is put in the same basket as something traditional and accepted by society.⁵⁰ This cultural consideration of child labour as something trivial renders awareness raising difficult for vulnerable persons. Sometimes, parents or children do not realise the extent to which the nature and conditions of some activities can entail many dangers. While respecting the country's

⁴⁷ E. Blum, 'En Mauritanie, la lutte contre l'esclavage étouffée', Libération, 27 March 2018, Available from http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/03/27/en-mauritanie-la-lutte-contre-l-esclavage-etouffee_1638143 (accessed 18 May 2018).

⁴⁸ UNICEF, *Quelle protection pour les enfants concernés par la mobilité en Afrique de l'Ouest ?*, 2010, p. 37, Available from https://www.unicef.org/wcaro/french/Rapport_FR-web.pdf, (accessed 24 February 2018).

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 27

⁵⁰ Ministère de la Fonction Publique, du Travail et de la Modernisation de l'Administration, *Plan d'Action National pour l'Élimination du Travail des Enfants en Mauritanie (PANETE-RIM) 2015-2020*, Bureau Internationale du Travail en Mauritanie, 2017.

cultural context, it is crucial to distinguish what kind of activities a child is allowed to carry out and what kind of work can harm the child's development.

2.5.2.2 Geographical factors

As seen above, the fact that children migrate is not inherently wrong, it can represent development or education opportunities elsewhere. However, the protection of children in mobility is fundamental, since they can quickly become victims of abuse along their travels.⁵¹ This applies especially in Mauritania, which possesses an attractive status in the African migratory system. Its pivotal geographical position not only connects West Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, but it also represents a point of departure for Europe⁵².

Mauritania's heterogeneous population reflects its geographical position. Three main ethnic groups exist in the country, though divided into large subgroups.⁵³ The first group, called Beidane, are from Arab-Berber origin and form 30% of the population. They are referred to as 'white Moors' and are the most represented in high public functions, considered to be the ethnic elite of the country. The second group, which forms 40% of the population, are Haratines or 'black Moors'. They share the same language as the Beidane, Hassanyia, which is an Arabic dialect. Haratines are descendants of former slaves and today they still face large discrimination and racism due to the deep-rooted legacy of slavery. The third groups, 30% of the population, are referred to, as the 'Afro-Mauritanians' constituted of Wolofs, Soninkés and Peuls. They all speak their own African language⁵⁴. The ethnic diversity and the hierarchy in social status in the country explain the most sensitive human rights issues.

⁵¹ UNICEF, *Quelle protection pour les enfants concernés par la mobilité en Afrique de l'Ouest ?*, 2010, Available from https://www.unicef.org/wcaro/french/Rapport_FR-web.pdf, (accessed 24. February 2018).

⁵² C. Stewart, C. Toupet, H. Deschamps et al, 'Mauritania', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Available from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritania>, (accessed 10 May 2018).

⁵³ T. Gosse, 'Ethnicity, discrimination and other Red lines', 12 February 2018, Human Rights Watch, Available from https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/mauritania0218_web.pdf (accessed 20 February 2018).

⁵⁴ C. Stewart, C. Toupet, H. Deschamps et al, 'Mauritania', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Available from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritania>, (accessed 10 May 2018).

2.5.2.3 Socio-economic factors

Mauritania suffers from a multidimensional poverty⁵⁵, such as difficult access to water wells, food insecurity, weak educational system, limited access to healthcare or racism and social discrimination against certain ethnicities⁵⁶. These are some elements among others, which can lead to exploiting children in economic activities. In addition, this topic remains difficult in a country where the informal sector represents a rate of 80%⁵⁷. Only a small minority of employed people can enjoy certain social protection and children remain particularly vulnerable to risks of abuses and exploitation in this field.

2.5.2.4 Historical factors

Nouakchott, was created not even 60 years ago, after Mauritania gained its independence. Its population increased substantially, from 8 000 inhabitants in the '60s to almost 1 million today.⁵⁸ This is mostly due to the 'rural exodus' or the urban migration following successive years of droughts in the 70s and 80s, where nomadic people have been forced to settle down in urban zones in order to survive.⁵⁹ These prompt population swifts or the rapid urbanisation have resulted in inadequate political responses regarding education, health and social services. This has led to a general degradation of the living conditions in urban areas and to the emergence of extremely poor peripheral neighbourhoods. The nomadic population being mostly illiterate and without qualifications, are often not able to integrate in the economic market and find themselves excluded from society.⁶⁰ In such socio-economic conditions, children - who now make up about a half of the population⁶¹ - are the most vulnerable to all sorts of exploitation.

⁵⁵ Terre des Hommes, 'Mauritanie', May 2018, Available at https://www.tdh.ch/sites/default/files/PDF/pays/mauritanie_fr.pdf, (accessed 17 May 2018).

⁵⁶ United Nations Human Rights Council (2017), Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights on his mission to Mauritania, (A/HCR/35/26/Add.1), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/G1705381.pdf>

⁵⁷ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 'Country Profile : Mauritania', 2016, p. 13, Available from https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/CountryProfiles/2017/mauritania_cp_en.pdf, (accessed 10 May 2018).

⁵⁸ T. Daddah, J. Boit, R. Lanfranchi et al, *Nouakchott, capitale de la Mauritanie. 50 ans de défi*, Mauritanie, Publication du ministère de la Culture, de la Jeunesse et des Sports, Editions Sépia, 2006, p. 9

⁵⁹ Plateforme numérique multimédia: Eradiquer le travail des enfants en Mauritanie, <http://www.eradiquer-travail-enfants-mauritanie.org/>

⁶⁰ T. Daddah, J. Boit, R. Lanfranchi et al, *Nouakchott, capitale de la Mauritanie. 50 ans de défi*, Mauritanie, Publication du ministère de la Culture, de la Jeunesse et des Sports, Editions Sépia, 2006, p. 149

⁶¹ Mauritania demographics Profile 2018, Index Mundi, Available from https://www.indexmundi.com/mauritania/demographics_profile.html, (accessed 14 April 2018).

2.5.2.5 Education system

In Mauritania, two sorts of schools exist. The ‘modern’ school which was established during the French colonisation at the beginning of the 20th century and which introduced classes such as literature, mathematics, history and geography. The ‘traditional’ or religious school concentrates on the recital of the Koran and on the knowledge of the Muslim history, culture, values and tradition⁶². According to (Hasni) Ould Didi, the public sector has difficulties in keeping up with the country’s growing demography and its high demand for education:

*The demands of education [...] are increasing, but the available infrastructure and human resources do not enable to satisfy these. [...] The degradation of the quality of the public services has led to orient those who can afford it to private sectors, while others do not have another choice than to accept the ‘miseries’ offered by the State.*⁶³

The degradation of the education in general – for both the ‘modern’ and ‘religious’ schools – affects child labour⁶⁴. The poor quality of the ‘modern’ education –with a pass rate for the baccalaureate of less than 10%⁶⁵- increases the distrust for parents to send their children to school. Poverty gives the impression that children must work, whereas not going to school poses limits to their development.⁶⁶

2.5.2.6 Political factors

Those who oppose the Mauritanian government and those who dare raise the country’s most sensitive topics, such as slavery, face repression⁶⁷. This makes the advance for human rights issues complex, certainly when it addresses traditional and religious

⁶² B. Hamady, Rapport narratif de l’enquête participative sur la situation des ‘almubbe’ à Nouakchott, AEDM, Save the Children, 2006, p. 2

⁶³ T. Daddah, J. Boit, R. Lanfranchi et al, *Nouakchott, capitale de la Mauritanie. 50 ans de défi*, Mauritanie, Publication du ministère de la Culture, de la Jeunesse et des Sports, Editions Sépia, 2006, p. 152. ‘Les demandes d’éducation [...] sont de plus en plus importants, mais les infrastructures et les ressources humaines disponibles ne permettent pas de les satisfaire. [...] La dégradation de la qualité de ces services publics a conduit ceux qui ont les moyens à s’adresser au secteur privé tandis que les autres n’ont d’autre choix que d’accepter les ‘misères’ qu’offre l’Etat.’ (Free translation).

⁶⁴ D. Thorsen, ‘Les enfants mendiant pour les maîtres des écoles coraniques’, *UNICEF*, 2012, Available from https://www.unicef.org/wcaro/french/4494_7087.html, (accessed 5 February 2018)

⁶⁵ B. Guèye, ‘Faible taux de réussite au bac en Mauritanie’, Cridem, 18. July 2013, Available from http://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=645481, (accessed 14 January 2018)

⁶⁶ C. Thiam, F. Cecon, F. Beaumont, *Guide interactif sur la prévention du travail des enfants en Mauritanie, Manuel du formateur contre les pires formes de travail et la traite des enfants*, Nouakchott, Organisation Internationale du Travail, 2018.

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Ethnicité, discrimination et autres lignes rouges*, 12. February 2018, Available from <https://www.hrw.org/fr/report/2018/02/12/ethnicite-discrimination-et-autres-lignes-rouges/repression-lencontre-de>, (accessed 13. February 2018).

elements, such as the phenomenon of talibés.⁶⁸ However, it must be noted that the issue of child labour has increasingly started to be taken seriously at the political level in the past recent years. The Prime Minister speech about the general governmental policy in January 2018⁶⁹, addressed the issues surrounding child labour, forced labour and the vestiges of slavery for the first time.

2.5.2.7 Conclusion: general dysfunction of society makes children more vulnerable

To conclude this section, in order to understand the challenge of child labour in Mauritania, the cultural-traditional, geographical, socio-economic, historical, educational and political factors must be taken into account. This list of factors, however, does not pretend to be exhaustive, but only highlights some examples to represent how each aspect related to the issue of child labour forms part of a complex and wider societal picture. Poverty and weak governance often result in a general degradation of human rights in which children become one of the first targets. Child labour and its worst forms has only recently started to become a serious political concern in Mauritania. Even though the government had already shown its political commitment to combat the issue after having ratified most international conventions and after having developed national strategic plans in the past few years, there is a lack of effective legal enforcement and exploitation of children in almost all sectors of life remains a key challenge. This guides us to the next chapter, which clarifies why children represent a particular group in society, with specific needs, requiring a specific protection framework.

3. Conceptual framework: child protection in a legal and sociological perspective

This chapter frames the phenomenon of talibés and their exploitation in Nouakchott in a legal and sociological context. Firstly, the introduction of the international legal child protection framework insists on the particular status of children in society, explaining why their protection constitutes a global priority. Secondly, the sociology of childhood highlights the importance to recognise children as active and social agents in society. Both approaches point out the significance of children's participation in society, but

⁶⁸ D. Thorsen, Les enfants mendiant pour les maîtres des écoles coranique, UNICEF, April 2012, p. 15.

⁶⁹ 'Mauritanie : Texte intégral du discours de Mr. Yahya Ould Hademine ce matin devant l'assemblée nationale – Politique générale du Gouvernement et ses perspectives pour 2018', Rimweekly, 27. January 2018, Available from <http://rimweeklynews.com/?p=8247>, (accessed 28 January 2018)

recognise their greater need for protection. However, both discourses on child protection risk claiming themselves as normative and universalistic, while the notions of childhood and child well being are extremely complex and widely differ in a cross-cultural and global perspective. This directly related to the particular case of talibés in Nouakchott: a traditional practice that must be respected, but its evolution in a globalised context can sometimes represent major challenges regarding the international child protection framework.

3.1 International legal perspective: child rights and child protection

The international legal framework focuses on child rights and child protection. It emphasises the importance to recognise children as a group with specific needs, which must be protected. The statistics of child labour around the world shown above have shed light on the amount of commitments that remain unfulfilled concerning the fight against child labour. However, child protection does represent one of the most pressing national priorities worldwide.

3.1.1. Child protection as a global priority

With nearly 196 State Parties⁷⁰ having ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child,⁷¹ this instrument is one of the world's most ratified human rights treaties.⁷² Child protection is considered as a global primary consideration:

*We hereby recommit ourselves to spare no effort in continuing with the creation of a world fit for children, building on the achievements of the past decade and guided by the principles of first call for children. In solidarity with a broad range of partners, we will lead a global movement for children that creates an unstoppable momentum for change. We make this solemn pledge secure in the knowledge that, in giving high priority to the rights of children, to their survival and to their protection and development, we serve the best interests of all humanity and ensure the well-being of all children in all societies.*⁷³

⁷⁰ H. Sax, 'Human Rights of Children and Young People – A Primary Consideration?' in Nowak, M., Januszewski, K., Hofstatter, T., *All Human Rights for all: Vienna manual on human rights*, 2012, p. 422-432

⁷¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3

⁷² M. Pais, '27th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child - UN child rights experts* urge Governments to ensure universal implementation', Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, 20 November 2016, Available from http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/story/2016-11-20_1511 (accessed 19 May 2018).

⁷³ United Nations General Assembly Res S-27/2. A world fit for children, 10 May 2012.

Guaranteeing the protection and promotion of the rights of the child appears to be essential. Firstly, assuring that children's rights are protected is an investment for the society as a whole and for a more equal and fair world in general⁷⁴. Secondly, children have a particular status in society, because they find themselves in a fragile period of life where they grow physically and morally, where mind, body and emotions are still in a process of development and where they are not yet able to protect themselves. Since they are not considered to be mature enough to take responsible decisions, they can easily be left out of decision-makings and are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.⁷⁵ As mentioned earlier, human right violations tend to occur in situations of extreme poverty and children remain the most vulnerable ones at that level. In order to prevent children from becoming part of a vicious intergenerational poverty cycle, which hinders their opportunities, increases inequality and threatens societies, the concern of children's rights must remain a global one. The following section first emphasises the importance to recognise children's rights as human rights.

3.1.2 Child rights are human rights

The exact same quote in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be found in the preamble of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁷⁶

'Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world ...'⁷⁷

Child rights are human rights. Children are human beings who are born with universal, inalienable and indivisible rights. Such as human rights, children's rights engage a direct relationship between the child and the state, which has the responsibility and obligation to respect, protect and fulfil these rights.⁷⁸ Recognising this aspect is essential to consider children not only as a vulnerable group, which must be protected, but also as individuals

⁷⁴ L. Anthony, 'Isn't it time every child had a fair chance?', World Economic Forum, 28 June 2016, Available from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/06/isnt-it-time-every-child-had-a-fair-chance/> (accessed 19 May 2018).

⁷⁵ Child Rights Information Network, 'Child Rights Factsheet', CRIN, Available from <https://www.crin.org/en/docs/factsheet.pdf>, (accessed 18 May 2018).

⁷⁶ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Preamble.

⁷⁷ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted 10 December 1948) 217 A (III), Preamble.

⁷⁸ H. Sax, 'Human Rights of Children and Young People – A Primary Consideration?' in Nowak, M., Januszewski, K., Hofstatter, T., *All Human Rights for all: Vienna manual on human rights*, 2012, p. 422-432

with a proper opinion and voice, who can contribute and participate in society. All these factors contribute to explain why most governments have agreed to be bound by an international child protection framework.

3.1.3 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC)

This international treaty came into force in 1990, becoming a legally binding document for all State Parties. Three optional Protocols followed concerning child soldiers (2002), sexual exploitation and child trafficking (2000) and the individual complaint and enquire mechanism (2001).⁷⁹ The UN CRC defines a child as a person below the age of 18 and as a subject and bearer of specific human rights.⁸⁰ This legal document has offered a new approach to the notion of the ‘child’, establishing a balance between *protection* of children – who are weaker, more vulnerable and not yet mature enough to take responsible decisions - and their *participation* – they hold rights and obligations and must be included in every decision making process.⁸¹ Four General Principles are laid down in the Convention: the prohibition of any form of discrimination⁸², acting in the best interests of the child as a primary consideration⁸³, promoting and protecting the child right to life, survival and development⁸⁴ and assuring the participation of children in matters affecting them⁸⁵. The next section highlights how the establishment of this international instrument creates responsibilities for the state towards children in society.

3.1.4 Child protection framework and Human Rights obligations

According to (Cassie) Landers, ‘the child’s right to be protected from violence, exploitation and abuse is not simply a worthy goal but rather an obligation under

⁷⁹ A. Bisset, *International Human Rights Document*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 95-122.

⁸⁰ H. Sax, ‘Human Rights of Children and Young People – A Primary Consideration?’ in Nowak, M., Januszewski, K., Hofstatter, T., *All Human Rights for all: Vienna manual on human rights*, 2012, p. 422-432

⁸¹ C. Thiam, F. Cecon, F. Beaumont, *Guide interactif sur la prévention du travail des enfants en Mauritanie, Manuel du formateur contre les pires formes de travail et la traite des enfants*, Organisation Internationale du Travail, 2018, Nouakchott

⁸² United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 2.

⁸³ *Ibid*, Article 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, Article 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, Article 12.

international law.⁸⁶ Indeed, Article 19 of the UN CRC affirms the State parties' obligation to protect children from violence. The notion of violence refers to all types of psychological, physical or sexual forms of violence, as well as to every act of neglect, such as not giving access to medical care, food, shelter, clothes or not protecting children against all forms of danger. The article also obliges the governments to take measures to prevent and respond in case the child endangers violence, such as providing support to child caregivers, investigating cases and getting involved at the judicial level.⁸⁷

To conclude this section, the protection and participation of children in society has become a global concern. Children form a vulnerable group in society and must be protected, but their rights are human rights and they must be considered as active actors in society. The UN CRC, which is the most ratified treaty worldwide, establishes a relation between the state and children. The Mauritanian government has agreed to take its responsibilities to protect children under international, regional and national legal dispositions. However, children remain extremely vulnerable in a complex social, cultural and economic context. The following section attempts to link the legal concept of child protection with the sociological theory of childhood.

3.2 Sociology of childhood

The UN CRC emphasises the following in its preamble: 'taking due account of the importance of the *traditions and cultural values* of each people for the protection and harmonious development of the child.'⁸⁸ In other words, considering the specific socio-cultural context of children appears to be crucial for the protection and well-being of children. Taking a sociological approach allows recognising the complex and socially constructed notion of childhood in a cross-cultural perspective. Since this thesis focuses on the degradation of a particular traditional form of education, this perspective is necessary in order to avoid judging the educational practice itself. Here, the specific

⁸⁶ C. Landers, 'Preventing and Responding to Violence, Abuse and Neglect in early Childhood', Doctoral Thesis, Columbia University School of Public Health and Maestral Intenational, UNICEF, New York, 2013, p.2, Available from https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/Report_on_preventing_and_responding_to_violence_in_early_childhood_2013_Cassie_Landers.pdf, (accessed 19 May 2018).

⁸⁷ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 19.

⁸⁸ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Preamble.

Mauritanian socio-cultural context regarding childhood and child well-being must be taken into consideration, with the attempt to conduct neutral and balanced research regarding the evolving phenomenon of talibés in Nouakchott.

The concept of childhood has been a marginalised field in sociology until recently. According to (William) Corsaro⁸⁹, traditional theories of childhood used to view children as passive actors. Children were not considered as social actors, but only as on their way to becoming social agents or adults. The sociological consideration of minority groups, such as feminism, and the rise of constructive theoretical perspectives in sociology in the late 1980s, have led to recognise childhood as a social construction, rather than an obvious and biological concept⁹⁰. Like race, gender or family, childhood is a social product affecting and affected by society. Childhood is understood as a social phenomenon and children as moral and political agents who participate in society.⁹¹ This perspective has affected global discourses on children's rights and many scholars have focused on how to develop children in global societies.⁹² According to (Sophia) Rodriguez, the notion of childhood has become a contested field, where many actors have tried to instil values of freedom, rights and participation. In this context, children are perceived as actors of societal hope in a globalised area.⁹³ This idea of children is closely related to the international legal perception of children, as described earlier. However, many have criticised the concept of childhood in these discourses – and thus of child rights in the UN CRC- to be based on Western values and models. These discourses would take for granted that the ideals of childhood can be transposed anywhere else on the globe, masking the socio-cultural diversity across different countries. In fact, many different notions of childhoods can be understood in a global context and substantial differences in understanding these notions exist between the 'Global North' and the 'Global South'⁹⁴. For instance, where childhood ends and where adulthood stops or what

⁸⁹ W. Corsaro, *The Sociology of childhood*. Fourth Edition, Los Angeles, Sage, 2015 p. 3.

⁹⁰ W. Corsaro, *The Sociology of childhood*. Fourth Edition, Los Angeles, Sage, 2015 p. 7.

⁹¹ S. Rodriguez, 'Productive encounters : Examining and disrupting socio-cultural perspectives on childhood(s) and youth across global societies', *Global studies of Childhood*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2017, p. 237.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ S. Rodriguez, 'Productive encounters : Examining and disrupting socio-cultural perspectives on childhood(s) and youth across global societies', *Global studies of Childhood*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2017, p. 237.

⁹⁴ S. Punch, 'Cross-world and cross-disciplinary dialogue : A more integrated, global approach to childhood studies', *Global studies of Childhood*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2016, p. 353.

is appropriate and what is not at a certain age, is considered differently across countries⁹⁵. In addition, comparing the notion of childhood would be unfair, since the living standards in the West and those in developing countries are extremely unequal. Poverty represents a key contrast between both worlds⁹⁶. This can for example explain the involvement of children in economic activities in developing countries and the general high rate of child labour in Mauritania. According to (Samantha) Punch⁹⁷, it seems the Global North is centered on the child and overprotects children and the normative theory of childhood can be described as individualistic, based on Western values of independence and freedom. The Global South depicts an adult-focused family, where childhood is based on collectivist values, responsibility and inter-and intragenerational interdependencies in contexts of limited welfare. These differences highlight the complexity of the concept of childhood across global contexts, which is crucial with regards to conducting research on talibés in Nouakchott.

This leads to another concept in the sociology of children: the notion of ‘child well-being’. Well-being is described as a ‘fulfilment of desires’ or as creating ‘opportunities for development’⁹⁸ and is a human right. This notion figures in most international and regional legal dispositions relating to child protection, such as in the UN CRC: ‘States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her *well-being*, [...]’⁹⁹. The notion of child ‘welfare’ – which the dictionary defines as ‘well-being’, ‘happiness’ or ‘health’¹⁰⁰ – figures in the African Charter of the Rights and *Welfare* of the Child.¹⁰¹ From a sociological perspective, this notion of well-being is crucial ‘both because it provides an indication of the quality of childhood as a life stage in its own right; and because childhood is the foundation for the individual’s future life as

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 358.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 357.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p/

⁹⁸ A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frones, F. Casas et al, ‘Multifaceted Concept of Child Well-Being’, in A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frones, F. Casas et al, *Handbook of Child Well-Being: Theories, Methods and Policies in Global Perspective*, Springer Netherlands, January 2014, p. 1.

⁹⁹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 3.

¹⁰⁰ Wordreference, Available from <http://www.wordreference.com/enfr/welfare>, (accessed 28 May 2018).

¹⁰¹ The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (adopted 11 July 1990, entered into force 29 November 1999) CAB/LEG/24.9/49.

an adult.’¹⁰² The right to well-being consists of two dimensions: promoting ‘children’s well-being and immediate creative social participation during their childhood’¹⁰³ and preparing children to be happy and productive adults in the future.¹⁰⁴ The overall social environment and the present life conditions of children - health, nutrition, enjoyment of rights and obligations, social relations, education or training, among others - affect their current well-being and impact their future well-being. This means that the child protection framework must create opportunities for well-being in a holistic way. Instead of solely focusing on their ‘right to survival’ or assuring their basic needs, their ‘right to well-being’, their right to be ‘happy’ or the promotion of child development¹⁰⁵ constitutes the primary goal, during all steps of childhood.¹⁰⁶

Many scholars have studied the concept of child well-being, with efforts to define indicators to measure it nationally and internationally. These indicators can be objective, such as the rate of educational participation in a country, or subjective, by integrating the children’s opinion on what they define as contributing to their happiness¹⁰⁷. However, the Western-centric critique also applies to the notion of child well being. Most research on child well-being has been conducted in Western countries ¹⁰⁸, while indicators of child well being vary according to national cultures, traditions and historical periods. According to (Asher) Ben-Arieh¹⁰⁹, four main remarks must be pointed out when considering child well-being in a cross-cultural and global perspective. Firstly, childcare practices vary around the world and a particular practice can function in one society but

¹⁰² G. Rees, *Children’s Views on Their Lives and Well-Being : Findings from the Children’s Worlds Project*, Springer, 30 August 2017, p. 1.

¹⁰³ A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frones, F. Casas et al, ‘Multifaceted Concept of Child Well-Being’, in A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frones, F. Casas et al, *Handbook of Child Well-Being : Theories, Methods and Policies in Global Perspective*, Springer Netherlands, January 2014, p.16

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frones, F. Casas et al, ‘Multifaceted Concept of Child Well-Being’, in A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frones, F. Casas et al, *Handbook of Child Well-Being : Theories, Methods and Policies in Global Perspective*, Springer Netherlands, January 2014, p.15

¹⁰⁶ CNAPE, *Rapport sur le bien-être des enfants de la protection de l’enfance*, November 2017, Available from <https://www.cnape.fr/files/presse/105.pdf>, (accessed 17 February).

¹⁰⁷ G. Rees, *Children’s Views on Their Lives and Well-Being : Findings from the Children’s Worlds Project*, Springer, 30 August 2017.

¹⁰⁸ C. Kabiru, C. Izugbara, D. Beguy, ‘The health and wellbeing of young people in sub-Saharan Africa : an under-researched area ?’, *BMC Int Health Hum Rughts*, vol. 13, 13 Febraury 2013, Available from NCBI, (accessed 28 May 2018).

¹⁰⁹ A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frones, F. Casas et al, ‘Multifaceted Concept of Child Well-Being’, in A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frones, F. Casas et al, *Handbook of Child Well-Being : Theories, Methods and Policies in Global Perspective*, Springer Netherlands, January 2014, p.13

not in other societies. Secondly, no empirical evidence has proven that one cultural practice is better than another one. Thirdly, scientific research on well-being is largely limited to Western Europe or to high-income countries. Fourthly, children's experiences considered to lead to well-being might be different across or within cultures.

This is important when considering the perception of the Mauritanian society towards children and talibés in Nouakchott. In addition, the conceptual framework of child well-being also focuses on children 'vulnerability'.¹¹⁰ The adverse trends or indicators that do not contribute to the overall well-being exposes children to risks and dangers and violates their human rights. Article 36 of the UN CRC declares that 'State parties shall protect the child against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child's welfare.'¹¹¹ These negative factors are crucial to identify in order to constitute a point of departure for improvement and well-being of vulnerable children.

To conclude this section, the sociological concepts of childhood and child well-being are guiding this thesis in order to contextualise and better understand the traditional practice of talibés in the specific cultural context of Mauritania. The place of children in society, their relation towards adults and the values that must be instilled during childhood, are elements proper to each society and widely differ across countries.

First, the concept of childhood stresses the importance to recognise children as active social agents in society and the time period of their childhood as a significant moment where children imbue important values. In order to avoid the imposition of Western ideals of childhood when analysing the specific case of talibés in Nouakchott, it is crucial to be acquainted with what the Mauritanian society perceives as 'childhood'.

Secondly, the notion of child well-being is closely related to childhood, since it means enjoying a happy childhood as a own right, which also contributes to the child's future harmonious development. The perception of what leads to 'a happy childhood' is subjective to each country and must be adapted to cultural and societal particularities across the globe. During the interviews, the sociology of childhood will be taken as conceptual framework, in order to discover how the overall social environment of talibés

¹¹⁰ A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frones, F. Casas et al, 'Multifaceted Concept of Child Well-Being', in A. Ben-Arieh, I. Frones, F. Casas et al, *Handbook of Child Well-Being: Theories, Methods and Policies in Global Perspective*, Springer Netherlands, January 2014, p. 2

¹¹¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 36

affects them and what are the factors that the Mauritanian society considers to help or hinder their well-being. Having this in mind, the following chapter situates talibés in the 21st century. This is a complex context where traditional practices – such as the notions of charity, Koranic education and mobility - remain the same in an evolving globalised world.

4. Situating talibés in the 21st century

This chapter attempts to describe how the traditional, cultural and religious practice of talibés in Nouakchott is evolving in the current Mauritanian context. The accelerated urbanisation and globalisation seem to increase the socio-economic difficulties in the country, making children more vulnerable to exploitation. The religious aspect of charity risks to transform into forced begging, the Koranic education faces difficulties to adapt to modern society and the concept of mobility entails the danger to facilitate all forms of child labour.

4.1 The distinction between charity and begging in Islam

Firstly, it is important to avoid generalisations and to remind ourselves that not all talibés have to beg for their marabout¹¹². The particular focus on talibés who have to beg only provides a partial picture of education in Koranic schools. The blurred distinction between children living in the streets and talibés who spend many hours begging in the streets renders the identification of talibés difficult. This can overshadow the scale and seriousness of the specific issue of talibés in Nouakchott.¹¹³ The reason why certain talibés have to beg today finds its origin in society's deep-embedded traditional habits. Historically, parents placed their children with Koranic teachers in rural areas, in order to be put at the service of religion. However, these marabouts had limited financial means to take care of talibés, who in turn worked in the marabout's fields in order to compensate for the educational care they received.¹¹⁴ Learning the Koran transmitted social values to talibés such as endurance, humility and resourcefulness in order to be able to integrate in

¹¹² UNICEF, *Children Begging for Qu'ranic School Masters*, UNICEF Briefing Paper on Children working in West and Central Africa, February 2012, p.1

¹¹³ B. Hamady, Rapport narratif de l'enquête participative sur la situation des 'almubbe' à Nouakchott, AEDM, Save the Children, 2006,

¹¹⁴ A. Yedan, 'La mendicité des enfants, un défi pour le développement de l'Afrique', l'Afrique des idées, <http://www.lafriqueidesidees.org/mendicite-enfant-defi-developpement-lafrique/>, 10 October 2014, (accessed 10 February 2018).

society. The community was bounded by a sort of ‘moral contract’ to collectively take care of talibés and provide them with food. This traditional practice is not the same act as begging, but is an ancestral and religious tradition.¹¹⁵ It fulfilled a social function by enabling people to carry out their religious duty of almsgiving¹¹⁶ or Sadaka in Islam; acts of charity by giving voluntary donations to those in need¹¹⁷.

However, the rapid urbanisation, the poverty, the political weakness of social protection and the degradation of traditional relations of solidarity in the urban context have perverted this traditional system. The marabout faces too many economic difficulties to take the responsibility over talibés and send them to beg to compensate. Instead of studying, many of them spend most of their day in the streets, often solely enriching the marabout with the money they collect.¹¹⁸ Their act of begging is still perceived as something religious by society, who continues to maintain this perverted system with the belief of fulfilling the traditional social and spiritual function of charity. This duty becomes all the more important in an urban lifestyle context that leaves less time for Muslim rituals¹¹⁹. In addition, marabouts continue to have an extremely influential role in society, with their economic, political or societal opinion sought after¹²⁰.

Charity and begging are two separate things and in the case of some talibés, religion is being misused for exploitative ends. Begging is legally prohibited in Mauritania, but its enforcement clashes with a religious taboo¹²¹. In addition, Islam also forbids the act of begging, except in cases of a critical situation. If someone is not able to feed himself for

¹¹⁵ Legiteam Consulting avec l'appui d'UNICEF, 'Etude sur la mendicité à Nouakchott', Wilaya de Nouakchott, Ministre de l'Intérieur et de la Décentralisation, May 2013, p.45.

¹¹⁶ P. Oumar Ndiaye, 'Aumône et mendicité ; un autre regard sur la question des talibés au Sénégal', *Cahier de la recherche sur l'éducation et les savoirs*, 14 / 2015, p. 295-310.

¹¹⁷ E. Santoni, 'L'Islam', *Alleur, Flash Marabout*, 1990, p. 22

¹¹⁸ Legiteam Consulting avec l'appui d'UNICEF, 'Etude sur la mendicité à Nouakchott', Wilaya de Nouakchott, Ministre de l'Intérieur et de la Décentralisation, May 2013, p.45.

¹¹⁹ P. Oumar Ndiaye, 'Aumône et mendicité ; un autre regard sur la question des talibés au Sénégal', *Cahier de la recherche sur l'éducation et les savoirs*, 14 / 2015, p. 295-310.

¹²⁰ J. Einarsdottir, H. Boiro, 'Becoming somebody : Bissau-Guinean talibés in Senegal', *The international Journal of Human Rights*, 20 :7, p. 857-874, Available from Taylor and Francis Group (accessed 22 May 2018).

¹²¹ Ibid, p.60

example, he can beg and once he has found food, he will have to stop begging immediately. Islam thus strictly forbids begging for economic enrichment.¹²²

Understanding the distinction between begging and almsgiving is fundamental in order to protect talibés who are being exploited through a manipulation of religion. They face many risks and dangers while begging in the street and their lack of education constitutes a barrier to the general socio-economic development of the country¹²³.

Men have stopped being able to manage urban life and the immense urban agglomerations have increasingly become inhumane and impossible to deal with. After a certain point, problems are multiplying faster than the possible actions needed to solve them. The administration separates from the populations it should be dedicated to assist. Street children are the heartbreaking evidence of such a sad reality.¹²⁴

Finally, the phenomenon of child beggars is known all around the world, especially in periods of social and economic changes, where countries recently faced mass urban migration¹²⁵, such as in Mauritania. Their presence is not specific to Islam or it does not symbolise a religious duty, it rather stands out as a symptom of a general dysfunction of society, of which children are the first targets.

4.2 Koranic education

Before the French colonisation of Mauritania in the 1900's, children followed an Islamic type of education. They first went to the elementary school where they learned to recite the Koran by heart. Traditionally, these Koranic schools did not depend on the state, but were organised by the local community or the marabouts. The children then went to secondary school, where they learned Muslim law, Islamic religion and the Arabic language. Afterwards, they could go to Islamic universities, to learn how to interpret scholarly the

¹²² Ibid, p. 72

¹²³ A. Yedan, 'La mendicité des enfants, un défi pour le développement de l'Afrique', l'Afrique des idées, <http://www.lafriquedesidees.org/mendicite-enfant-defi-developpement-lafrique/>, 10 October 2014, (accessed 10 February 2018).

¹²⁴ S. Agnelli, 'Les enfants de la rue- l'autre visage de la ville', Berger-Levrault, Collection ondes en devenir, Rapport à la Commission indépendante sur les questions humanitaires internationales, 1986, p.15, 'La vie urbaine a cessé d'être à la mesure de l'homme et ces immenses agglomérations urbaines sont devenues de plus en plus inhumaines et impossibles à gérer. Au-delà d'un certain point, leurs problèmes se multiplient plus vite que les mesures susceptibles de les résoudre. L'administration s'isole de plus en plus des populations au service desquelles elle devrait se consacrer. Les enfants de la rue sont l'évidence navrante d'une telle réalité.' (Free translation).

¹²⁵ Ibid, p.52

Sharia.¹²⁶ Like in many other Muslim countries, colonisation introduced secular laws and ‘modern’ types of education in Mauritania - mathematics, geography, history, French language, literature and science. Even though modernisation meant increasing political and economic inequalities, secularisation and individualisation, it was accepted since it also meant better standards of living and economic growth.¹²⁷ However, this acceptance of westernisation or modernisation lasted until the 1970’s, when western economic liberalisation initiated an accelerating process of globalisation. This paved the way for more competition between countries, which were not all at the same level, Mauritania was still in the midst of its nation-state construction¹²⁸ for example.

Due to ‘increasing economic competition as well economic marginalisation’,¹²⁹ Mauritania has seen a wave of Islamic revival since the 1960’s till today, as a reaction to the unfulfilled promises of modernisation. The country became an ‘Islamic Republic’ on gaining its independence in the 1960’s, with Islam becoming the official state religion and the Sharia law of the country in the Constitution of 1985.¹³⁰

Since the Western colonisation had introduced a Western type of education, ‘taking for granted the existence of modern states that implement modern institutions and cultures’¹³¹, some groups of Muslims started to reject this Western type of education. The importance of the Islamic type of education - which forms an essential part of the national cultural heritage¹³² - was reaffirmed and the values of the Muslim culture reasserted.¹³³

This explains the revival of the Islamic type of education and the sensitive traditional and religious phenomenon of talibés in Nouakchott.

However, modernisation as such was not rejected, the Islamic revival wave was merely a response to the introduction of the Western culture. The country attempted to modernise,

¹²⁶ H. Daunn G. Walford, Educational strategies among Muslims in the context of Globalisation : some national case studies, BRILL, 1 January 2004, p. 17.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p.8

¹²⁸ Ibid, p.10

¹²⁹ Ibid, p.11

¹³⁰ C. Stewart, C. Toupet, H. Deschamps et al, ‘Mauritania’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Available from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauritania>, (accessed 10 May 2018).

¹³¹ H. Daunn G. Walford, Educational strategies among Muslims in the context of Globalisation : some national case studies, BRILL, 1 January 2004, p.12

¹³² I. Abdel Kader, A. W. Abdellahi Hachem, L’enseignement originel en Mauritanie : contribution de la mahadra à la réalisation des droits des enfants’, UNICEF, June 2016, p.13

¹³³ B. Hamady, Rapport narratif de l’enquete participative sur la situation des ‘almubbe’ à Nouakchott, AEDM, Save the Children, 2006, p.2

but not to westernise. It was therefore ‘in favour of a modern state and secular education system, as long as they do not undermine a deep commitment to Islamic ideas and teachings.’¹³⁴ Therefore, the modern type of education and the Islamic type of education both exist today in Mauritania.

According to (Holger) Daunn and (Geoffrey) Waldorf, the increasing competitiveness of globalisation adds to the challenge of the Mauritanian governments to find a balance between the traditional education systems, which instils religious and communitarian values and the modern type of education, which offers technical skills and knowledge to integrate into the labour market:

*As a result of the globalisation process, schools are now concerned not only with preparing children for adult roles, but education increasingly has to respond to national and local economic and moral requirements as well as the requirements deriving from the globalised world models: (...) such as: religious vs. secular, local vs. national, national vs. international, formation of human capital and merits vs. broad personality and moral development, competition vs. solidarity, focus on tests and performance vs. more holistic considerations, mother tongue vs. international language. Neither the Western nor the Islamic type of education alone seems to be able to handle all of this variety.*¹³⁵

The fact that some talibés only focus on reciting the Koran also raises questions in a globalized competitive economic context. The challenge is then how to conciliate both education systems without denying the traditional culture and values or without breaking with the contemporary world.¹³⁶

4.3 Mobility in West Africa

The phenomenon of ‘mobility’ is as ancient as human history, but due to its increase it has become a subject of political and scientific concern. The concept of ‘mobility’ is understood as the process of someone leaving its region or country (between or across borders) moving towards another area, mostly discovering another society with different practices and habits.¹³⁷ ‘Children in mobility’ or ‘children on the move’ are thus children

¹³⁴ H. Daunn G. Walford, Educational strategies among Muslims in the context of Globalisation : some national case studies, BRILL, 1 January 2004, p. 14

¹³⁵ H. Daunn G. Walford, Educational strategies among Muslims in the context of Globalisation : some national case studies, BRILL, 1 January 2004, p. 16

¹³⁶ I. Abdel Kader, A. W. Abdellahi Hachem, L’enseignement originel en Mauritanie : contribution de la mahadra à la réalisation des droits des enfants’, UNICEF, June 2016, p.33

¹³⁷ M. Cabré, F. Cecon, Etude anthropologique sur les enfants en mobilité en Mauritanie, Résumé exécutif, Save the Children, February 2018, p.5

who are moving for economic, social or environmental reasons. This term can also refer to children who are refugees, asylum seekers or victims of human trafficking.¹³⁸ As mentioned above¹³⁹, mobility is traditionally very high in West Africa and continues to be facilitated due to the permeability of borders in the region.¹⁴⁰ The system of ‘placement’¹⁴¹ is a common and traditional practice in West Africa and consists of ‘placing the child’ to the care of a close relative, a friend or someone well regarded in society. Being placed in another family creates familial alliances, the same way as weddings do, and reinforces social and solidarity ties.¹⁴² The fact of moving is perceived as a ‘social process’, the child’s social age is more important than his or her biological age. If children are able to get an education elsewhere or to find a job, they will be able to support their family. Even if they are younger than 18 years old – which legally defines ‘a child’ under the international legal perspective- they will be considered as a symbolic capital in the family since it means they are invested with a family mission¹⁴³. The concept of mobility therefore is considered as a collective interest for the family and the community as a whole in West Africa.

Talibés in Mauritania are often ‘placed’ by their parents to a marabout or a relative considered to have important social connections with Koranic teachers. Children from Mauritania’s rural areas or from neighbouring countries such as Senegal, the Gambia or Mali come to Nouakchott or other big cities, to follow a Koranic education. Traditionally, parents send their children to a marabout out of moral, spiritual and religious considerations. Children who become a marabout and then return to their village are

¹³⁸ UNICEF, ‘Quelle protection pour les enfants concernés par la mobilité en Afrique de l’Ouest?’, *UNICEF*, 2010, Available from https://www.unicef.org/wcaro/french/Rapport_FR-web.pdf, (accessed 20 January 2018)

¹⁴⁰ M. Cabré, F. Cecon, Etude anthropologique sur les enfants en mobilité en Mauritanie, Résumé exécutif, Save the Children, February 2018, p.5

¹⁴¹ UNICEF, ‘Quelle protection pour les enfants concernés par la mobilité en Afrique de l’Ouest?’, *UNICEF*, 2010, p. 13, Available from https://www.unicef.org/wcaro/french/Rapport_FR-web.pdf, (accessed 20 January 2018). This is called ‘système de confiage’ in the legal jargon of Mauritania.

¹⁴² M. Cabré, F. Cecon, Etude anthropologique sur les enfants en mobilité en Mauritanie, Résumé exécutif, Save the Children, February 2018, p.5

¹⁴³ Center for Migration Studies, University of Ghana, ‘Child and Youth migration in West-Africa : Research Progress and Implications for Policy’, Available from <http://www.migrationdrc.org/> (accessed 17 May 2018).

mostly considered as ‘the most desirable and respectable outcome’ by parents,¹⁴⁴ enhancing the status of the children and the whole family¹⁴⁵.

However, in light of globalisation and urbanisation, traditional communitarian relations have weakened and some parents do not really know the marabout who is taking care of their child, raising the child’s vulnerability to exploitation.¹⁴⁶ Mobility can therefore take two aspects: it has the possibility to provide a wider spectrum of opportunities for children and their community or on the contrary it enhances their vulnerability to all kinds of abuses. Indeed, taking a sociological perspective, mobility for children can on the one hand be described as a quest ‘for material or status well being’¹⁴⁷, or it can on the other hand pose serious challenges to children’s well-being while they cross borders, such as child trafficking’, and when they arrive in an unknown country, such as ‘language and cultural barriers, uprootedness and instability, lack of access to basic services such as education and health, statelessness, discrimination and social exclusion’¹⁴⁸. In other words, mobility is perceived as affecting child well-being in West Africa.

In conclusion, the traditional practice of talibé has been perverted in a context of rapid urbanisation, globalisation and growing poverty. Firstly, ill-intentioned marabouts misuse the community’s religious duty of charity by forcing children to beg. Secondly, the globalised competitive economic context raises questions about the insertion of talibés who only focus on the recital of the Koran. This leads to the challenge of conciliating modern and traditional types of education, without it coming across as an attack against the Islamic culture and values. Finally, even though the notion of ‘mobility’ is perceived as essential by society in terms of the child’s education and its contribution to the

¹⁴⁴ J. Einarsdottir, H. Boiro, ‘Becoming somebody : Bissau-Guinean talibés in Senegal’, *The international Journal of Human Rights*, 20:7, p. 857-874, Available from Taylor and Francis Group (accessed 22 May 2018).

¹⁴⁵ J. Einarsdottir, H. Boiro, ‘Becoming somebody : Bissau-Guinean talibés in Senegal’, *The international Journal of Human Rights*, 20:7, p. 857-874, Available from Taylor and Francis Group (accessed 22 May 2018).

¹⁴⁶ Legiteam Consulting avec l’appui d’UNICEF, ‘Etude sur la mendicité à Nouakchott’, Wilaya de Nouakchott, Ministre de l’Intérieur et de la Décentralisation, May 2013, p. 47

¹⁴⁷ Center for Migration Studies, Univeristy of Ghana, ‘Child and Youth migration in West-Africa : Research Progress and Implications for Policy’, Available from <http://www.migrationdrc.org/> (accessed 17 May 2018).

¹⁴⁸ M. Skivenes, R. Barn, K. Kriz et al, *Child Welfare Systems and Migrant Children : A Cross Country Study of Policies and Practice*, International Policy Exchange, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 2.

community, dangers for children travelling across borders have increased. Therefore, their mobility requires greater attention and protection.

All these elements remind us that the tradition of talibés is not harmful in itself, but that the practice clears the way for all forms of exploitation in a difficult socio-economic context. This leads us to the next chapter, which details the methodology selected in this thesis to discover the undertaken and planned measures to better accompany and protect talibés in the 21st century.

5. Methodological chapter

The qualitative research method has been selected in this research to answer the overall research question and the three sub-questions. ‘Which measures of protection have been taken so far with regards to the evolving situation of talibés in Nouakchott?’, as well as the identification of the key aspects with regards to the experiences of talibés (1), the undertaken or planned measures (2) and the suggestions for future measures (3).

The sociological approach taken in this thesis requires the analysis of the overall social, cultural and religious environment of the phenomenon. Analysing society’s perceptions about concepts such as childhood, children’s rights, child well-being or child-adult relations, calls for discussions in the field with as many different stakeholders as possible, while listening carefully to society’s desires and thoughts, to finally offer an avenue for innovative ideas for a greater protection of talibés.

This chapter is structured into eight sub-sections. The first section first reminds the reader about the research question guiding this thesis and explains the rationale for the object of study in the introduction. The second section details why the qualitative analysis of data has been selected as the method of data collection. The third section describes two types of clusters chosen as the sampling to answer the research question. The fourth section presents the resources needed to carry out the collection of data. The fifth section clarified how the organisations and respondents were accessed. The sixth section sheds light on the ethical considerations, which were taken into account before and during the sociological research. The seventh section raises the main challenges that came up during the fieldwork. Finally, the eight section explains how the data was analysed.

5.1 Introduction

The research question guiding the present thesis is the following: which measures of

protection have been taken so far with regards to the evolving situation of talibés in Nouakchott? The point of departure of this question is the observation of the particular difficult living conditions of some talibés in Nouakchott, which represent an extremely vulnerable group in society. The motivation to study this particular case has multiple origins. Firstly and in a broader context, the topic of children's rights seems to be on the international political agenda in light of the post-2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, the topic of migration represents an increasing political challenge globally – most certainly in Western and Sub-Saharan Africa due to conflicts and effects of climate change. In this context, children are exposed to an increased vulnerability and children's rights across borders represents a serious and topical global challenge.

Secondly and on a personal level, after having conducted an internship on the prevention of child labour in Mauritania at the International Labour Office in Nouakchott (January-March 2018), I developed a true passion for child protection and therefore had the desire to study more in detail a subject, which is dear to my heart. Furthermore, I witnessed daily the miserable and heart-breaking conditions of certain talibés begging on the street. I could not stop raising all kinds of questions in my mind. Where do these children come from? Why are they not going to school? Where will they go tonight? How does the Mauritanian society perceive this problematic? What is the government or the civil society doing to tackle this visible problem? What about their family? What can I do to help them, on an individual level? I quickly realized the complexity of their phenomenon while talking around me. It seemed that the problematic of talibés has become a major and visible challenge in the Mauritanian society, but the practice faces a religious and cultural barrier leading to a lack of investigation or study, a lack of political consideration and action, which risks finally resulting into the perpetuation of the issue. Therefore, without claiming to attempt to grasp the subject in all its complexities, undertaking a review of the current situation of talibés in Nouakchott and what has been done so far to protect them, appeared to be essential and urgent.

Taking a sociological perspective regarding the sensitive and religious feature of the problematic, the challenge is now how to better accompany and protect talibés in Nouakchott. The aim of this research is to gather the viewpoints of the principal actors on the ground concerned by the subject of talibés in Nouakchott, with the attempt to offer new avenues on how to ameliorate their conditions.

5.2 Methods of data of collection

The methodology used to answer the research question or to discover which measures of protection have been taken so far with regards to the evolving situation of talibés in Nouakchott, has been based on the qualitative analysis of data collected through the means of interviews conducted on the ground in April 2018. This choice was motivated by the present thesis' sociological perspective, aimed at understanding how people perceive children and their place in society. Comprehending these kind of values or cultural and religious elements requires being on the ground and talking with as many different stakeholders as possible concerned by the issue. The attempt is to have a diverse and representative sample of active stakeholders in the field working on the protection of children or talibés. Some questions were specific and were meant to guide the discussions, however, the aim was to let the interviewee speak freely in order to remain open to new data and important information about the issue. The interviews were thereby mostly unstructured¹⁴⁹, flexible and hence providing the opportunity to better understand the thoughts of the respondents. The questions guiding the interviews specific to each question, can be found in Annex 2.

5.3 Sampling

Two clusters of persons were interviewed. The first cluster¹⁵⁰ consists of 18 stakeholders who shared their experience and expertise, representing the government, civil society, academia, NGO's and international development organisations. A more detailed description of each respondent can be found in table 1¹⁵¹. The second cluster¹⁵² comprises one former talibé who used to beg, 15 current talibés and one assistant of a marabout who are not involved in begging. All of them came from neighbouring countries and were mostly regrouped by community:¹⁵³Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Senegal and Mali. This is detailed in table 2.¹⁵⁴ Both tables can be found in the Annexes, detailing who each participant is and explaining their relevance for the subject of study.

¹⁴⁹ S. A., McLeod, The interview method, 2014, Available from www.simplypsychology.org/interviews.html, (accessed 30 May 2018).

¹⁵⁰ See Table 1 in Annex 1

¹⁵¹ See Table 1. In Annex 1

¹⁵² See Table 2 in Annex 1.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

The aim to interview the first type of cluster was to understand the current state of the phenomenon of talibés in Mauritania: what do they consider to be the key issues, how do they perceive the evolution of the living conditions of certain talibés today, which actions have they implemented so far to answer these issues and what would they suggest to ameliorate their conditions. The aim to question the second type of cluster was multiple. Firstly, it meant to approach the topic closer to reality and to grasp the general atmosphere of the living conditions of talibés in mahadras or in Koranic schools. Secondly, writing about children's rights and the concept of their participation as one of the general principles of the UN CRC, while excluding the voice of talibés, would not make much sense. Thirdly, since this thesis is guided by a sociological approach, talking with talibés and marabouts is essential to discover their cultural and traditional perceptions about childhood, education and their desires or prospects for the future.

The present thesis does not pretend to be comprehensive for the entirety of Koranic schools in Nouakchott, neither for the total amount of organisations active in the field of child or talibé protection on the ground. The main aim is to carry out a study to evaluate the current situation of talibés in Nouakchott and to provide a general overview of who in all levels of society is active regarding their protection, what are the key issues and the main challenges and what can be suggested to better accompany and protect talibés in Nouakchott.

5.4 Resources

In order to conduct interviews, a voice recorder was needed to enable an accurate retranscription of the discussions. Listening again to the conversations allowed to develop new interpretations with regards to analysing their ideas and relating these to the theoretical other chapters of the thesis. In the Koranic schools, a translator was needed since most children spoke West African languages, which I did not understand. The representative of the NGO who accompanied me to the Koranic schools, directly translated the answers of the children. The other interviews with the second cluster were conducted In French, since French is as one of the country's official languages.

5.5 Access to the respondents and organisations

Regarding the access to the respondents of the first cluster, my internship at the International Labour Office in Nouakchott in January and February 2018 enabled me to already enjoy a well-established network of actors on the ground concerned by child protection. Furthermore, the local ILO staff greatly supported me in the present research, sharing networks and contacts, which alone would have been difficult to access. Regarding the second type of cluster, I was invited on the ground to visit three Koranic schools after I had interviewed a local NGO, which assisted different Koranic schools in Nouakchott's peripheral neighbourhoods. This enabled me to meet current talibés and one assistant of a marabout, who were happy to share their daily experience. I also managed to talk with one former talibé, who I got to know by buying groceries in Nouakchott and who became a friend. Most former talibés do not speak French, explaining why finding other former talibés was not easy.

5.6 Ethical considerations

Undertaking sociological research requires behaving according to certain ethical norms or guidelines, in order to avoid harming the participants physically or psychologically.¹⁵⁵

Firstly, all participants were given informed consent about the research. It was clearly explained what the subject of study was about, with an emphasis on how it did not attempt to generalise the exploitation of talibés or it did certainly not try to put into question the traditional practice of talibés valued by the Mauritanian society. It was detailed that the purpose of the questions was to study more in depth, the evolution of the living conditions of certain talibés in Nouakchott in the current context and find out if and how they were protected. Participants were always asked if it was permitted to record the conversation and they all agreed to, except one respondent of which the conversation was hence not registered.

Secondly, the anonymity of the participants is protected in this thesis, especially when addressing a sensitive issue in a tense political climate. Pointing out taboo subjects in a country where human rights defenders are largely oppressed, is not without risks. This explains why the names of the organisations or individuals were not given but only a short description of each organisation and actor. The international development partners are named as 'International Development Partner 1' and so forth, NGO's are named as

¹⁵⁵ 'Ethics in sociological research', Cliffnotes, 2016, Available from <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/study-guides/sociology/sociological-research-methods/ethics-in-sociological-research>, (accessed 26 June 2018).

‘International NGO 1’ or ‘National NGO 1’. The representatives of the Ministries department is not names, but only the department, such as ‘Ministry of education’ or ‘Ministry of Labour’, etc.

Thirdly, all information of the interviews has been kept confidential. When respondents specifically asked not to write or to mention some parts, it was not written down in the retranscription of the interviews and it was neither evoked during this thesis.

5.7 Methodological challenges

Some challenges came up whilst carrying out the interviews. Firstly, as mentioned above, pointing out sensitive issues in a country where human rights defenders are oppressed is not easy. Discussing with representatives of the government was therefore more challenging than talking with NGO’s for instance. Secondly, the phenomenon of the exploitation of certain talibés in Nouakchott is visible and invisible at the same time. It is visible in the streets, when they spend their time begging without any shoes, with clothes full of holes and with visible marks of wounds on their body. But what happens within Koranic schools is invisible. Even local NGO’s are sometimes not permitted to enter the school to grasp what children are learning and how they are sleeping, eating and living. As a Western woman, freely entering Koranic schools was therefore unthinkable. Interviewing talibés begging in the street was also not an option, since leaders are often observing their group of talibés nearby. The three Koranic schools visited during the interviews were conducted in company of a representative of a local NGO. The marabouts in those schools did not force talibés to beg and talibés seemed to be satisfied by their living conditions. Even though the hygiene in the room seemed poor and some said not always to eat enough, it was difficult to assess if their rights were actually violated or not. This reminds us to avoid generalisations, each Koranic school or mahadra is different, depending on the rules of each marabout. In addition, the poor conditions in Koranic schools might be similar in modern types of schools, meaning these conditions are not proper to Koranic schools and are actually the result of poverty in general. In other words, when referring to the exploitation of talibés in the chapter analysing the interviews, this is not based on the interviews I conducted in the three different schools, but it relates to what the first cluster of respondents told me.

Finally and more generally, analysing specific human rights abuses related to complex notions such as childhood and education in an African context, was particularly

challenging as a Westerner. Analysing the education of children and raising questions about a topic considered to be an ancient social and religious practice in an Islamic Republic, required a highly attentive behaviour and culture-sensitive language, at the risk of appearing intrusive and judging. The following quote from an assistant of a marabout from Mali describes this challenge well: ‘You know, you are lucky, not all marabouts accept to speak with toubabs. There is something with marabouts, when they see white people, they think they are from secret services.’¹⁵⁶

Studying concepts of childhood and education in a cross-cultural perspective remains difficult. It reminds us how these notions are socially constructed and the ideas and ideals of what is good or bad for children are different to each society. During the interviews, the respondents often called the universality of Human Rights into question. Some implied that the notions of childhood in the UN CRC for instance were not always compatible with the local perception of the role of children in society. Who has the role to determine what is best for children and their place in society? This accentuates the complexity, but the need to constantly distance oneself with the subject of study in the attempt to remain neutral and impartial as a researcher. In the end, one must find a balance between what is acceptable for children while respecting local cultures and what is not acceptable for children everywhere in the world.

5.8 Data analysis

The interviews were retranscribed and then analysed manually, by gathering the most recurrent themes that came up during the interviews. These emerging themes attempt to were highlighted in the retranscriptions as the following. Colour blue referred to the legal aspects identified by the respondents, which are the human rights abuses at stake and the human rights obligations of the state with regards to the phenomenon of talibés in Nouakchott. The mauve colour was used to identify the main challenges depicted by the respondents. Colour blue and mauve both were then regrouped as the key issues identified by the respondents in this thesis. In other words, these colors permit to answer the first sub-question guiding this thesis: ‘what are the key aspects identified by the respondents?’

¹⁵⁶ Interview with an assistant of a marabout from the Malian community, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018. ‘Toubab’ refers to a European or a person with white skin, in West and Central Africa. ‘Vous savez, vous avez de la chance, pas tous les marabouts acceptent de parler avec les toubabs. Il y a quelque chose avec les marabouts, quand ils voient des blancs, ils pensent qu’ils sont des services secrets.’ (Free translation)

After that, the khaki colour referred to the sociological perspective or the local perceptions of the notions of childhood, child well-being and education. The yellow colour was used to highlight the measures that have already been taken to protect talibés. Khaki and yellow both were regrouped in the part detailing the measures already taken to better accompany talibés, in accordance to analyse if these respect the traditional perceptions of the practice of talibés. These colours are used to answer the second sub-question of this thesis, highlighting the ‘measures already taken so far to protect talibés in Nouakchott.’

Light green was used to identify the explicit or implicit ideas of the participants to suggest new measures to protect talibés in Nouakchott. Finally, this enables to answer the third sub-question guiding this thesis: ‘what measures can be suggested to better protect talibés in Nouakchott?’

In other words, the structure of the analysis is as follows: the first section represents the key issues identified by the respondents. The legal perspective depicts the relation between talibés and the state: what are the human rights abuses at stake and how – through which measures - does the government meet its human rights obligations? The second section outlines the measures already taken so far by the rest of the actors concerned by child protection, but starts with an overview of the specific notions of childhood and education in the Mauritanian context in order to better understand the measures in place. Finally, the third section attempts to offer new avenues to better accompany and protect talibés in Nouakchott.

6. Analysis of the interviews: main findings

At this stage of the research, the interviews conducted in April 2018 are analysed in the attempt to answer the main research question guiding this thesis: ‘which measures of protection have been taken so far with regards to the evolving situation of talibés in Nouakchott?’ The following chapter is structured in three main sections, which attempt to answer the three sub-questions. The first section represents **1) the key issues** identified by the respondents during the interviews. Framing this in the legal framework detailed above, it first establishes the relationship between the state and children: which human rights violations are at stake and how does the government meet its human rights obligations? Then, the main challenges highlighted during the interviews are described, followed by a general overview of the topic of child protection in Mauritania: how has the consideration of this topic evolved in the last few years? What can be expected regarding the protection of talibés in the near future? The second section attempts to emphasise **2) the measures undertaken or planned** by the rest of society to protect talibés in Nouakchott. It approaches it first from a sociological perspective, aiming to identify how society perceives talibés and children and what elements society considers essential to instil during childhood or what is recognised as leading to the well-being of children in the Mauritanian context. With this approach in mind, the undertaken measures to protect talibés can be understood more easily. The third section aims to offer **3) new directions for reflection** on how to better accompany and protect talibés in Nouakchott, based on the suggestions of the respondents and based on the adaption of the notions of childhood and child well-being to the Mauritanian societal context.

6.1 Sub-question one: key issues

As mentioned in the preceding chapters, the problematic of child labour in general or the problematic of talibés in particular, faces a complex challenge in Nouakchott that must be understood in a wider and multidimensional framework. Through the establishment of a comprehensive legal arsenal and precise national action plans, the government has already shown its political commitment to combat child labour and to protect children. However, despite these efforts, a lack of legal enforcement seems to persist. This is demonstrated by the particular case of talibés in Nouakchott. The vast majority of the participants affirmed that the problematic of talibés represent a true and visible challenge

in society, as the following quote from International NGO 1 demonstrates: ‘the issue of talibés is an important problematic in Mauritania, which is not well addressed.’¹⁵⁷

During the interviews, the representative of the Ministry of primary and secondary education recounted one of his experiences with talibés in Nouakchott. The following introduces quite clearly the different elements that add to the complex challenge of the protection of talibés in Nouakchott:

I saw children begging in the street. I asked to the police officers : ‘don’t you see these kids ?’ and they told me ‘but what can we do for them ? Sir, what do you want ?’. I told them ‘aren’t you aware that it is prohibited ? And you, as the police, you see these children begging don’t you ?’. After talking with them, they accepted to accompany me to the police station. When we arrived there, the officer told me : ‘but this is completely normal, talibés are everywhere in Africa. Aren’t you Mauritanian ?’, then I answered ‘yes I am, why ?’. He told me ‘why are you so strict about this issue, it is normal that children beg.’ I answered ‘Maybe it is normal, but so late in the night .. these are minor children ! And the man that is sending these children to beg must be sanctioned !’. Then he asked : ‘what do you suggest ?’, I said ‘I suggest that you keep these kids, that you find the marabout and that you punish him.’ He says ‘No, Sir, you are being complicated. We are going to keep the children, but after that, security and all, how do we manage ? We do not have any mechanism for this !’. Finally, I just completed the costs that the talibés were meant to bring back to their marabout, I bought them some milk and I told them : ‘Listen, tell your marabout that the police officer said that next time he sees you, he wil come get him and put him in jail.

This illustrates the extent to which the issue of talibés faces both societal and political challenges. The following section takes the UN CRC – which establishes a relation between the state and children - as a point of departure to analyse which human rights violations are at stake and how the government meets its human rights obligations, according to the respondents.

6.1.1 Human rights violations

6.1.1.1 Cluster 2: things left unsaid

As mentioned in the methodological chapter, the statement in this thesis that certain talibés are ‘exploited’ through forced begging, violence and other forms of violations, is not based on what has been observed and discussed with the second cluster¹⁵⁸ (within the three visited Koranic schools and with one former talibé), but it is based on what the first

¹⁵⁷ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘la question des talibés est une grande problématique en Mauritanie et elle n’est pas bien’. (Free translation)

¹⁵⁸ See Table 1.

cluster¹⁵⁹ has shared during the interviews. However, when talking with the second cluster, some sentences implied that talibés struggled to access their basic rights, such as declared by some talibés during the discussions: ‘It’s not easy for us here. The food’¹⁶⁰ or ‘sometimes, I was begging in the street only to collect some money and to buy some clothes and soap.’¹⁶¹ However, interviewed talibés implied they were not being abused or exploited. This points out to some things left unsaid, which sometimes hindered attempts to assess the living conditions of some talibés in Nouakchott. The following quote of International Development Partner 1 states it right:

*When we go there, we will not witness any kind of violence, but we will only see the conditions : the smell, the hygiene, etc. The kids themselves will tell us that they are not being exploited, but that they are hungry and that they are suffering from poverty.*¹⁶²

6.1.1.2 Cluster 1: UN CRC and the phenomenon of the exploitation of certain talibés

From the interviews, it appeared that all levels of society considered that certain talibés were exploited through forced begging for ill-intentioned marabouts and that their rights were violated as a whole¹⁶³. However, regarding the sensitive subject of the issue, discussions with government representatives could sometimes give the impression to be hindered by taboos. The following quote from the Ministry of religious affairs illustrates this idea: ‘I do not have anything to declare. The situation is normal.’¹⁶⁴

Having the legal dimension of the UN CRC in mind, the most recurrent themes that came out from the interviews with cluster 1 concerning talibés and human right violations, are regrouped by specific rights.

6.1.1.2.1 Right to a healthy familial environment

The Preamble of the UN CRC accentuates the need to protect the familial environment as the first responsible to assure child welfare¹⁶⁵. International and national NGO’s recurrently highlighted how many talibés in Nouakchott are migrants and the absence of a

¹⁵⁹ See Table 2.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with talibés from a mahadra, representing a community from Sierra Leone, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018.

¹⁶¹ Interview with a former talibé from Senegal, Nouakchott 27 April 2018.

¹⁶² Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018.

¹⁶³ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘les conséquences immédiates sur les talibés sont la violation de leurs droits (santé, privation de familles, victimes de violence, séquelles, ...).’

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018.

¹⁶⁵ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Preamble.

familial healthy and protective environment in Koranic schools constitutes a violation of their rights, which can seriously affect their well-being¹⁶⁶.

6.1.1.2.2 Right to life, survival and development

International Development Partner 1 implied that the right to life could be violated in certain Koranic schools: ‘Are the parents aware that some kids are beaten to death?’¹⁶⁷ Or the following quote from one former talibé illustrates the negative image society can have of talibés, which can sometimes lead to the violation of their right to development:

*I hate to see talibés being tortured by other people in the street. (...) They tell them ‘leave, you are dirty, don’t touch my car!’. But they are also human beings like everyone else. I hate it.*¹⁶⁸

This gives the impression that talibés feel and are often assimilated to street children or delinquents in society. The minister of education declared that talibés or street children are often considered to be dangerous by society, but reminded that they are in fact the ones to be in danger: ‘society forgets that talibés are children who have the same rights as any other child.’¹⁶⁹ These quotes imply that the difficulties faced by talibés often originate from how society perceives them and a certain trivialisation of the phenomenon of exploited talibés in Nouakchott.

6.1.1.2.3 Right to identity

International and national NGO’s often highlighted that many talibés did not possess identity papers, which hinders them to access basic rights, makes their protection difficult and facilitates their exploitation. ‘They do not have any birth certificate, they do not go to school, they are victims of violence and they work’.¹⁷⁰ They explained that this violation was often due to poverty, ignorance or neglect by the parents. ‘Other parents said to be too poor or the level of neglect here explains why some parents haven’t register their child at birth.’¹⁷¹ Or, the absence of legal documents can result from theft by smugglers, as happened to a talibé from Sierra Leone when coming to Mauritania: ‘His documents

¹⁶⁶ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. In certain mahadras, some serious issues of protection exist. Some children are very vulnerable, far away from their parents, far away from their home in an unsupervised Koranic school.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with a former talibé, Nouakchott 27 April 2018.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018.

¹⁷¹ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

were stolen when he arrived in Mauritania (...) probably to sell them to illegal migrants on their way to Europe.’¹⁷² This accentuates the vulnerability children face when they are travelling alone across borders. Again, the absence of legal documents, which increases children’s vulnerability, was repeatedly mentioned as a societal problem.

6.1.1.2.4 Protection against physical or mental violence, injury or abuse (including sexual abuse), neglect or maltreatment

All levels of society – international development partners, NGO’s and ministers - emphasised the lack of protection against all forms of violence with regards to certain talibés in Nouakchott. Firstly, it came out that spending many hours begging in the street entails many dangers for children¹⁷³. Secondly, in terms of exploitation within the Koranic schools, abuse such as corporal punishment was pointed out both by International Development Partner 1¹⁷⁴ and by the Ministry of Social Affairs¹⁷⁵. However, the Minister of primary and secondary education accentuated that corporal punishment is not proper to Koranic schools, but can happen in formal school as well: ‘Even though corporal punishment is prohibited, many still use it, both in the formal as in the religious schools.’¹⁷⁶ He also highlighted exploitation of talibés in the sense of sexual abuse.¹⁷⁷

6.1.1.2.5 Right to health

International Development Partner 1 implied that some talibés risk suffering from health problems, without being taken care of.

*Some accidents can occur in the street and children can also become sick, but nobody will take care of them. I don’t think they are vaccinated.*¹⁷⁸

¹⁷² Interview with talibés from a mahadra, representing a community from Sierra Leone, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018.

¹⁷³ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘They are vulnerable in the streets : accidents, fights, etc. They are thus in a situation of danger.’ (Free translation)

¹⁷⁴ Interview with International Development Partner 2, 26 April 2018. ‘Corporal punishment existst in this system’. (Free translation)

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. ‘They are overexploited, they are victims of violence, exploitation and all forms of corporal punishment.’ (Free translation).

¹⁷⁶ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. ‘I heard something about Koranic teachers who abused of children sexually’ (Free translation).

¹⁷⁸ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018.

6.1.1.2.6 Right to nutrition, clothes and housing

Both governmental representatives¹⁷⁹ and NGOs¹⁸⁰, pointed out the difficult living conditions of certain talibés, which suffer from malnutrition, do not have proper clothes and sleep in the street. The following quote from the Ministry of primary and secondary education states this idea: ‘it hurts me too see these kids without any shoes on the street’.

6.1.1.2.7 Right to education

Article 28 of the UN CRC enshrines the right to education and prescribes that ignorance and illiteracy must be eliminated through modern teaching methods.¹⁸¹ The fact that the content of some Koranic schools does not enable talibés to acquire proper religious knowledge and would most probably prevent them from integrating into society later on, was implied by the vast majority of the respondents. Discussions with the government suggested that this was an important element to focus on, however, NGO’s were more explicit in emphasising this aspect, such as pointed out by the following quote.

*I consider that 90% of the mahadras do not have a proper education. Children are overexploited and spend their day begging. When you encounter a talibé, you realise he cannot read, while he has been there since years. Actually, he only asks for charity and spends the night outside, underneath a wall or in an abandoned courtyard and the next day, he does the same.*¹⁸²

6.1.1.2.8 Right to rest and leisure

Children have the right to enjoy leisure activities, which will help them to adapt more easily in society, as well as to strengthen their creativity, to manage their emotions and to develop other forms of intelligence.¹⁸³ When asked to talibés what they were doing during their free time some said to play football ‘, while others said to learn ‘the Koran (...) from morning to night.’¹⁸⁴ An assistant of a marabout said that ‘those who don’t have toys, they will sleep’¹⁸⁵. It appears that time left to leisure differs according to the

¹⁷⁹ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

¹⁸⁰ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘They don’t eat enough, don’t live in an adequate house et do not have accesse to health, all their rights are violated.’ (Free translation).

¹⁸¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 28.

¹⁸² Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

¹⁸³ Olivier, L’importance des loisirs chez l’enfant, Humanium, 25 March 2013, available from www.humanium.org/fr/loisirs-enfant/ (accessed 15 June 2018).

¹⁸⁴ Interview with talibés from a mahadra, representing a community from Sierra Leone, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with an assistant from a marabout, representing a community from Mali, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018.

school, but certain talibés do not participate much in sports or arts, even if this is essential for their psychological and physical development.

6.1.1.2.9 Prohibition of child labour

From all interviews, it appeared that the act of begging is effectively considered to be an economic activity or a form of work. The following quote from the Ministry of Social affairs supports this idea: ‘There are physical consequences on talibés who work all day long.’¹⁸⁶ All respondents assimilated the exploitation of talibés as child labour¹⁸⁷.

6.1.1.2.10 Worst forms of child labour as a grave violation of human rights

During the discussions, many NGO’s assimilated the conditions of some talibés as worst forms of child labour. ‘The phenomenon of talibés has become a case of modern slavery in all its forms: worst forms of child labour, begging, sexual exploitation, and drug traffic’¹⁸⁸. The following conversation with an anonymous anthropologist outlines how the exploitation of some talibés can appear as an ordinary phenomenon in Nouakchott:

I have this intuition that a lot of theft, drugs and rape is happening within these schools.

- Who told you about that?

*Children, young girls who were raped there. (...) Some people, parents speak. It happens a lot here.*¹⁸⁹

This implies that society has a pre-established image of talibés in Nouakchott, aware of the grave human right violates of which some of them suffer. In fact, it can give the impression that the exploitation of talibés is perceived as a minor news items in society. Some NGO’s referred to the sensitive topic of slavery in the country, assimilating it to the living conditions of some talibés in Nouakchott. When asked why it was so difficult to combat the exploitation of some talibés, a local NGO answered that ‘the vestiges of slavery are due to extreme poverty and tradition.’¹⁹⁰ This implies that forced begging or slavery of some talibés originates from extreme poverty and embedded traditions in society such as the legacy of slavery. Given the taboo subject of slavery or the legacy of slavery in the country, this aspect was not mentioned by governmental representatives.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. ‘This has become a certain misuse of children, forcing them to work, which has nothing to do with education. Sometimes, people use them in works which are way too difficult for them.’ (Free translation)

¹⁸⁸ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

The following quote from National NGO 1 highlights how most respondents insisted on the increased vulnerability of children in mobility, hence talibés.

*This mobility puts them in danger. (...) Once a child is not under the control of the parents anymore and does not go to school, there is not protection. The child becomes the target for all kinds of abuses, discrimination and violence.*¹⁹¹

The respondents insisted on the risk of human trafficking in a context of rapid urbanisation and unstable socio-economic conditions¹⁹².

To conclude this section, even though it seemed as if some things were left unsaid during the discussions with talibés and with some governmental representatives, the vast majority of the participants from all levels of society recognised the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés in Nouakchott. The most recurrent themes of these discussions were regrouped by specific rights under the UN CRC: the right to a healthy familial environment, the right to life, the right to survival and development, the right to identity, the right to be protected against violence, the right to health, the right to food, shelter and housing, the right to education, the right to leisure and the prohibition of child labour and worst forms of child labour. All respondents affirmed that some talibés are suffering from child labour through forced begging and from other multiple human right violations within Koranic schools and on the street. Sometimes, it seems as if their living conditions can be assimilated to worst forms of child labour or grave violations of human rights. Societal attitudes were often mentioned to be the main cause of the perpetuation of these violations, which sometimes gave the impression that the exploitation of talibés is considered as an ordinary phenomenon in society. The next section sheds light on the respondents's thoughts concerning the governmental human rights obligations to protect children in general and talibés in particular. The first sub-section highlights the lack of measures taken so far by the government to protect talibés in Nouakchott, while the second sub-section highlights the measures it has already taken to this regard.

6.1.2 Human Rights obligations of the state

By signing the UN CRC and by establishing national legal dispositions regarding child protection, the Mauritanian government is bounded by certain obligations to assure

¹⁹¹ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

¹⁹² Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. 'Human trafficking, migrant smuggling and mobility are all intertwined.' (Free translation)

children's rights are protected and promoted. A comparison between the obligations of the state towards child protection and what the participants stated to be the reality on the ground, is described underneath and regrouped under the state's obligations within the UN CRC.

6.1.2.1.2 Absence of appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures of protection

From the interviews appeared that the government does not take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect children, as it is supposed to do according to Article 19 of the UN CRC.¹⁹³ All levels of society mentioned made this clear. International NGO 1 expressed the following: 'there is no data, no law, no strategy, there is nothing'.¹⁹⁴ A religious leader¹⁹⁵ expressly stated that the political programmes to protect talibés were weak. Governmental representatives declared a lack of the state's willingness in this regard¹⁹⁶. Most NGO's declared that the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés did not represent a governmental priority¹⁹⁷, such as the following quote of a local NGO illustrates.

*It is a question of a lack of awareness regarding child protection and the role the government can play. It should know what its responsibilities towards children are, how to answer the problem, what kind of behaviour to transmit, how to do advocacy work, how to use media and raise awareness among society, how to break taboos between the population and children. Children need adults, as well as advice and to be listened to. It doesn't exist to help them today and they are left behind. The government does not have a programme for talibés.*¹⁹⁸

6.1.2.1.3 Lack of coordination within institutional structures

When talking with ministers, it often appeared that the responsibility of the protection of talibés was either put on other ministries¹⁹⁹, or the transversal dimension of the

¹⁹³ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 19.

¹⁹⁴ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018. 'It is weak, there is a programme, but it's weak.' (Free translation)

¹⁹⁶ Interview with the Ministry of Labour, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018. 'The government pronounces by policies usually, but here it is very shy. There are no policies regarding taliés. (...) This can be explained by the governmental priorities.' (Free translation)

¹⁹⁸ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'The decentralised state does not do much.' (Free translation)

phenomenon of talibés seemed to be ignored. The next sentences highlight both aspects. ‘Even though the topic relates to childhood, everything related to ‘mahadras’ involves the Ministry of religious affairs’²⁰⁰ or ‘I work on the right to work and the fight against forced labour. So I am not involved in the problematic around child protection’²⁰¹ or also: ‘we only work on the problematic of children in conflict with the law. So we are not involved concerning the issue of talibés.’²⁰² In fact, some talibés are forced to live in the streets and can easily get trapped in delinquency or come into conflict with the law²⁰³, as frequently highlighted during the interviews. A stronger partnership approach and a coherent strategy to answer the issue of talibés were raised multiple times by NGO’s. The following quote of a NGO exemplifies this idea, stressing the fact that the lack of coordination between ministries prevents to give one coherent answer to talibés in need of protection.

*The direction of judicial protection of the child, the direction of mahadras, the direction of youth and sports, etc., each one of them is working alone. A main challenge is the unification of responses given to these children.*²⁰⁴

6.1.2.1.4 Lack of social programmes

According to Article 19, the government should establish effective procedures to assist social programmes²⁰⁵. However, according to governmental representatives²⁰⁶, NGO’s or international development partners²⁰⁷, the lack of social assistance revealed to be a real challenge with regards to the protection of children in general. ‘Today, we have a government, which has no single social programme: no social assistance, no

²⁰⁰ Interview with the Ministry of Labour, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018.

²⁰¹ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.

²⁰² Interview with the Judicial direction of Child Protection, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018.

²⁰³ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘There is delinquency because there are no other alternatives, so certain talibés become in conflict with the law.’ (Free translation)

²⁰⁴ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018.

²⁰⁵ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 19.

²⁰⁶ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. ‘There are no specialised schools for training social workers and this is a problem, because child protection requires competent people.’ (Free translation)

²⁰⁷ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018. ‘We find ourselves in a difficult political situation and social programmes are lacking, affecting the vulnerability of people.’ (Free translation)

psychologists, and no specialised educators. There are no means. Who will protect children?’²⁰⁸

6.1.2.1.5 Lack of preventive measures

An important issue, which was often raised, both by NGO’s²⁰⁹ and by governmental representatives, was the absence of measures to prevent the exploitation of children. The Ministry of Social affairs said the following: ‘the problem is that as long as nothing bad happens to this children, no measures are taken.’²¹⁰ This appeared to be extremely problematic in protecting vulnerable children, such as talibés in Nouakchott.

6.1.2.1.6 Lack of investigation, study and data

Furthermore, all levels of society - ministries²¹¹, NGO’s and international development partners – gave the impression that the state did not meet its obligation in investigating about the exploitation of talibés, despite the visibility of the phenomenon in society. Firstly, many respondents declared that police turn a blind eye to talibés begging in the street. ‘Today, there is a neglect, the police sees children in the street, but does not do anything.’²¹² This was sometimes explained by society’s perception of begging as having a religious connotation and not being considered as repressive act.²¹³ Secondly, concerning the exploitation occurring within the Koranic schools, the absence of governmental investigation measures was often mentioned by all participants, except the governmental representatives. International Development Partner 1 said the following: ‘the Ministry of Islamic Affairs is responsible, but he is not the one who will question what is happening within these Koranic schools.’²¹⁴ Thirdly, many NGO’s and

²⁰⁸ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

²⁰⁹ Interview with National NGO 4, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018. ‘That is prevention, that is governance. If we say ‘no no, it is not a priority’, this leads us to the jungle.’ (Free translation)

²¹⁰ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.

²¹¹ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘Sometimes there are some campaigns, the police finds some beggars, but after lets them go, there is no real coherence.’ (Free translation)

²¹² Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018.

²¹³ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘The police cannot do anything. Begging is not considered to be a repressive act.’ (Free translation)

²¹⁴ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018.

international development partners²¹⁵ declared a lack of study with regards to the phenomenon. The lack of data was said to hinder the effective protection of those in need. There is no registration of all existent mahadras, or any data about these children. The last study of this kind conducted in Mauritania dates back to 2001, 17 years ago.’²¹⁶

Fourthly, from all the discussions appeared contradictory opinions²¹⁷ about the approximate number of talibés and Koranic schools currently in Nouakchott²¹⁸, as well as opposite views on the evolution of the phenomenon of talibés begging in the capital²¹⁹. This gives the impression that little or no data exists about the phenomenon of human rights abuses inflicted on certain talibés in Nouakchott and that Koranic schools are barely inspected. Moreover, some participants, mostly representing the government, implied that the phenomenon of talibés did not represent a priority, such as highlighted by the Minister of Social Affairs: ‘People have the impression that there are many talibés in Nouakchott, but in reality there are not so many.’²²⁰ Even if there are less talibés in Mauritania than in other countries, such as in Senegal for instance, the fact that some of them are being exploited remains a reality in Nouakchott. Instead of underestimating the the issue by declaring that they are not that many exploited talibés, this should on the contrary motivate the government to tackle it more effectively, as a respondent implied: ‘considering the low number of talibés in Mauritania and the country’s small population in general, this should be feasible for the government.’²²¹

6.1.2.1.7 Neglect and socio-religious taboo

From all interviews appeared a governmental laxity with regards to the protection of talibés in Koranic schools. NGO’s repeatedly declared that this neglect resulted from religious and societal taboos associated with the practice of talibé, such as the following quote emphasised:

²¹⁵ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. ‘Protection is complex, without data about present Koranic schools, there is no real inspection.’ (Free translation)

²¹⁶ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

²¹⁷ Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018. ‘It must be a bit more than 100 or something’ (Free translation)

²¹⁸ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. ‘I think there are less street children than before. In the 90s-2000s, there were more. But, of course, this requires to study this question more in depth.’ (Free translation)

²¹⁹ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. ‘It has increasingly become visible with the years.’ (Free translation)

²²⁰ Interview with the Ministry of Labour, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018.

²²¹ Interview with respondent coming from a maraboutic family, Nouakchott, 24 April 2018.

*There is no follow-up, it is a complete laxity, and it is anarchy in the mahadras: anyone can become a marabout, even if that person is not able to read or write. This is the state's responsibility, but it neglects it. Any topic, which can anger, becomes a taboo subject, so the government simply does not show interest in it.*²²²

The Ministry of religious affairs gave the impression that most Koranic schools were indeed given as much freedom as wanted: 'the cheikhs of the mahadras are free to teach. The Ministry of Islamic and Oriental Affairs only controls from far away.'²²³

6.1.2.1.8 No or little judicial involvement

The respondents were asked if they had already heard about a judicial case involving a marabout and a talibé. All NGO's²²⁴ and international development partners²²⁵ answered they had never heard or were not aware of a case prosecuting a marabout. On the contrary, when the same question was asked to governmental representatives, the responses were that these kinds of judicial cases had already occurred. 'Of course! There is judicial proceeding! We are in a State that is enforcing the rule of law, Madam!'²²⁶ The ambiguity of the answers may imply that the issue touches a sore point and illustrates how some things can be left unsaid.

6.1.2.1.9 Impunity

The last point directly refers to the next one. International development partners²²⁷ and NGO's²²⁸ frequently explained the lack of governmental judicial involvement and the result of impunity as a societal problem²²⁹: the weight of religion and the prestigious role of marabouts in society appeared to be too powerful and addressing the exploitation of

²²² Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

²²³ Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018.

²²⁴ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'Never a marabout has been put in jail or never he had to pay.' (Free translation)

²²⁵ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'I am not aware about a marabout which has been sued.' (Free translation)

²²⁶ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

²²⁷ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'The practices and social norms are too strong to be changed by laws. (...) There is a real problem of enforcement, certainly if there is no single punishment or sanction.' (Free translation)

²²⁸ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'It is a social phenomenon to which the government has no response : nor by laws or police officers cannot stand behind each marabout and prohibit begging.' (Free translation)

²²⁹ Interview with the International Development Partner 4, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. 'It is difficult to control this phenomenon, since we can not come between the action of the marabout which transmit knowledge to children who were placed by their parents.' (Free translation)

talibés by marabouts has the risk of being perceived by society as an attack against traditional values and against Islam. Impunity or the lack of judicial involvement against ill-intentioned marabouts is the result, as stated by International Development Partner 3: ‘from the moment it addresses marabouts, it is complicated since they are kind of protected, so I have not heard of a case and it is extremely sensitive to prosecute a marabout.’²³⁰

6.1.2.1.10 Absence of measures to abolish traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children

The role of marabouts and religion in society, the lack of judicial involvement and the problem of impunity is linked to the absence of governmental measures to abolish traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children, such as enshrined under Article 24 of the UN CRC²³¹. From all discussions with all levels of society appeared that the religious, cultural and societal aspects surrounding the issue of talibés represents a major barrier and challenge for the government to effectively address their protection. Religious government representatives²³² insisted on this key aspect and NGO’s affirmed that this explained why the government does not dare to tackle such a sensitive issue, despite the awareness of the phenomenon. The following quote describes it clearly:

*The government cannot prohibit Koranic education, it is a cultural and religious practice (...). So it tolerates and turns a blind eye, does nothing. No one dares to attack the problem. All studies have demonstrated that there are fake and good marabouts, and that a lot of foreign children who become talibés here.*²³³

6.1.2.1.11 Absence of law enforcement and ambiguous notion of ‘protection’

Finally, from the interviews appeared a gap between the theoretical legislative dispositions and the reality on the ground. Most respondents, on the whole NGO’s,²³⁴ affirmed the lack of law enforcement. In addition, the lack of consideration of the very notion of child protection was highlighted by all levels of society. By international

²³⁰ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018.

²³¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 24.

²³² Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018. ‘No actions have yet been taken regarding the specific observation of education in these schools. It is too delicate, too sensitive.’ (Free translation)

²³³ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

²³⁴ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘La Mauritanie fait partie des pays qui a ratifié énormément de lois, qui a accordé ses lois avec les conventions internationales, mais il n’y a pas d’application.’

development partners²³⁵, by NGO's²³⁶ and by governmental representatives²³⁷. It appeared that the issue of talibés was in fact an issue of child protection in general.

To conclude, from the interviews it appears that the government struggles to meet its human rights obligations to protect children in general and talibés in particular in Nouakchott. All levels of society have implied this, even though some elements seemed sensitive due to ambiguous and contradictory responses of governmental representatives. In overall terms, it was demonstrated that no programme aimed at the specific protection of talibés, no or little data or study existed about their current situation, a lack of ministerial coordination was said to hinder a coherent response for their protection, social programmes to accompany talibés were missing and no measures of prevention were established to protect talibés. Sometimes, it seemed that the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés did not constitute a national political concern. However, not only the lack of willingness of the state was mentioned, but also the lack of societal commitment to effectively protect talibés. The deep-entrenched religious, cultural and social taboos around the practice of talibés and the aura of marabouts in society were collectively declared as representing a main challenge for the government to investigate Koranic schools, to prosecute marabouts and to effectively protect talibés in Nouakchott. Even though the above-mentioned sub-section highlights the lack of measures taken by the government, the latter faces multiple challenges to exert its responsibility towards the protection of talibés. These main challenges will be depicted in more detail afterwards, but before that, it is important to shed light on the measures that the government has already taken to protect talibés, since this legal section is focussing on the relation between the state and children in Mauritania.

6.1.2.2 Measures undertaken by the government

6.1.2.2.1 Legal and institutional framework

All participants agreed that the government enjoys a comprehensive legal²³⁸ and institutional²³⁹ framework to protect children. The majority affirmed how building on the

²³⁵ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018. 'Children are not protected here'. (Free translation)

²³⁶ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'Child protection does not function in the country.' (Free translation)

²³⁷ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'The problem of talibés is a problem of protection.' (Free translation)

already existing legal arsenal can effectively contribute to the protection of talibés, as stated by the Minister of Social Affairs: ‘we already have a judicial arsenal, we have the judicial protection of children and other legal texts that can really lead to an effective protection.’²⁴⁰

6.1.2.2.2 Coordination mechanisms with neighbouring countries

Some governmental representatives mentioned a legal coordination mechanism between the neighbouring countries to combat child trafficking. ‘Our legal arsenal prohibits worst forms of child labour and we work on that with 6 others neighbouring countries, against the human trafficking of children.’²⁴¹

6.1.2.2.3 Social measures

Regarding the development of social programmes, some respondents – NGO’s and governmental representatives - talked about the recent creation of two centres of protection and reinsertion²⁴² in Nouakchott.

6.1.2.2.4 Increasing investigation in Koranic schools

International development partners recurrently implied the government’s increased measures of investigation within Koranic schools. ‘When we were conducting trainings with marabouts, governmental leaders asked us about their religious branch, about the message they were conveying to children and about their ideology.’²⁴³ It seems the government has been focussing more and more on the issue of the risk of religious extremism in Koranic schools: ‘With the rise of terrorism, the Ministry tries to enhance its relations with marabouts and tries for the mahadras to be registered.’²⁴⁴ This aspect represents a major challenge, which will be further detailed underneath.

²³⁸ Interview with the International Development Partner 4, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. ‘It is signatory to all relevant conventions of the United Nations, of the ILO and of all African and Arabic charters on child protection’ (Free translation)

²³⁹ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. ‘As the central direction, children are our first target. We have operational structures, such as the national system of child protection, as well as centers of protection.’ (Free translation)

²⁴⁰ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.

²⁴¹ Interview with the Ministry of Labour, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018.

²⁴² Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘They are fed, we offer them a recreative environment with leisure activities, we give them reading and writing classes as well as a framework for insertion.’ (Free translation)

²⁴³ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018.

²⁴⁴ Interview with International Development Partner 2, 26 April 2018.

6.1.2.2.5 Interpol – prior warning

NGO's and ministers frequently mentioned a governmental initiative that aimed at the specific protection of talibés, which dates back to the end of 2017. They explained that some talibés who were begging in the streets were taken care of by police officers and that the respective marabouts were identified and taken into custody. The next quote from a local NGO describes this event:

*Interpol has tried to limit the exploitation of children and has tried to offer them protection. Interpol and the local police found some children begging in the street and they searched for the respective Koranic teacher. These children stayed in the police station for one week and marabouts were taken into custody. After that, they were released. Actually, it was only to trigger action by spreading the message that the situation is not acceptable anymore.*²⁴⁵

However, the respondents declared that this measure only lasted for a week, marabouts and talibés were liberated afterwards. This leaves questions regarding the efficiency of the measure, but highlights the complexity regarding the imprisonment of marabouts. The Minister of Social Affairs explained that it was a sort of warning for marabouts, for them to follow the right direction.²⁴⁶ Even though marabouts were only warned and were not properly prosecuted, it still represents a first step in recognising the exploitation of some talibés and taking actions to protect them.

To conclude, it appeared from the discussions that the government has already taken some measures to tackle the complex issue of talibés in Nouakchott. However, these seem insufficient regarding the seriousness of the violations inflicted on some talibés in Nouakchott. The government possesses a comprehensive legal and institutional framework, which can constitute the point of departure to effectively offer better protection for talibés. However, as mentioned in the preceding section, the lack of willingness of the state has been highlighted in the interviews, as well as the lack of societal willingness. The social, cultural and traditional aspects of the practice of talibés form barriers - both for society and the government - to effectively address the visible phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés in Nouakchott. The following section regroups

²⁴⁵ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

²⁴⁶ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'In fact, this was mostly done to encourage the marabout to take the right direction. (...) It was very short.' (Free translation)

the main challenges towards the issue of talibés in the capital, most frequently evoked during the discussions.

6.1.3 Main challenges

6.1.3.1 Deep-entrenched social practices

As mentioned above, from the discussions appeared that all levels of society, but NGO's for the most part, repeatedly referred to the problem of the exploitation of talibés as a societal problem. The following quote from a local NGO expands on his thought: 'it is a problem created by the people themselves, from ancient harmful practices.'²⁴⁷. Another local NGO explicitly pointed out how certain traditional Mauritanian practices towards children are directly violating the rights of the child: 'we still have social practices which are unfavourable to human rights: child marriage, child begging, female genital mutilation, slapping children.'²⁴⁸ It was repeatedly mentioned that the phenomenon of talibés formed part of the traditional customs²⁴⁹ and that the customs were stronger than politics or law²⁵⁰. This demonstrates one of the challenges the government faces when attempting to enforce its legal provisions. In fact, a local NGO clearly blamed society and not the government, with regard to the perpetuation of the exploitation of talibés in Nouakchott: 'it is the population, not the government.'²⁵¹

6.1.3.2 Trivialisation of child labour in society

This societal aspect was raised again when respondents from all levels of society, recurrently gave the impression²⁵² that the idea of children working was perceived as something normal. The following sentence of International NGO 1 clearly illustrates that even local actors of child protection do not automatically consider child labour to be a prior concern:

²⁴⁷ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

²⁴⁸ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

²⁴⁹ Interview with National NGO 4, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018. 'The phenomenon of talibés is protection, it is part of the customs.' (Free translation)

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 'Here, the custom is stronger than politics and law.' (Free translation)

²⁵¹ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

²⁵² Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'All children go to Koranic schools (...). After that, some will pursue a modern type of education or others will go to mahadras, or others will work directly.' (Free translation)

*When asked to the different actors of protection what they thought to be the problems of child protection in Mauritania, no one ever spoke about child labour or child begging. Not a single person.*²⁵³

As explained above, forced begging is considered as a form of child labour. Different participants described the trivialised perception of talibés begging in society, which was implied as presenting a major challenge in the protection of talibés in Nouakchott. The next quote of a local NGO stresses this point clearly:

*I have a friend from Senegal, with whom I used to work on the topic of talibés. This friend went to see a mrabout and told him: 'I am going to Dakar' and he then told him 'I have five children who will come with you and collect some money for you.'*²⁵⁴

This also highlights that the issue of the exploitation of talibés is a regional phenomenon.

6.1.3.3 Child labour as an alternative to poor quality education

Actually, some respondents linked the trivialisation of child labour to the idea that the current education system did not offer the opportunity to integrate into society and to get a job. This implies that children, in a socio-economic difficult context, do not have another choice but to work. NGO's and international development partners repeatedly mentioned the issue of the lack of quality education in the country, both in Koranic as in modern types of schools²⁵⁵. Some NGO's declared that only few students managed to complete their diploma²⁵⁶ due to the weak quality of the education system, and that the lack of alternatives finally resulted in exposing children to child labour in order to survive²⁵⁷.

6.1.3.4 Prestigious role of marabouts in society

Directly linked to the societal attitude, is the perception of marabouts in society: an important challenge, which was repeatedly evoked and already pointed out above. When talibés were asked what their future desires were, they all answered they wanted to

²⁵³ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

²⁵⁴ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

²⁵⁵ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'We cannot reject the traditional type of education only, it is the education in general which is not good.' (Free translation)

²⁵⁶ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'They are in extremeley difficult conditions : in classes with 100 students and without any quality. Only 35% of children pass their diploma. At the baccalaureate, only 20 % succeed. There is thus a high school dropout.' (Free translation)

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 'Parents send them their, because they do no thrust school anymore. They want their children to learn to work as fast as possible. (...) even the ones with diplomas don't have access to jobs.' (Free translation)

become marabouts later²⁵⁸. The following quote from a respondent coming from a maraboutic family, clarifies why marabouts occupy an important role in society.

*They are two tribes of high ranks, which describe the whole of the Mauritanian society: warriors, those who defend people, and marabouts, and those who transmit knowledge to people. This explains the important role of maraboutic families in today's society.*²⁵⁹

All respondents emphasised how the status of marabout grants him an influential role in politics and that Koranic schools are managed by powerful people.²⁶⁰ The following quote from an international NGO states this idea:

*If today a marabout is prosecuted, his contacts (director, minister, etc.) will interfere. Since he is affiliated to a community, there are also some political implications. If he is hurt, there will be contestation. Hence, nobody wants to get involved in this field.*²⁶¹

In fact, many respondents have the impression that the role of marabouts in society protected them, which increases talibés' vulnerability²⁶². Another element, which frequently came out, mostly by local NGO's and governmental representatives²⁶³, was the fact that the marabout had no alternative to resorting to exploitation in difficult economic conditions. A local NGO declared for example: 'sometimes, he does not have the choice, it is an obligation, and he only has child exploitation to survive.'²⁶⁴ This implies the extent to which marabouts are respected in society, truly deeply embedded in mentalities, sometimes to the detriment of talibés' protection. However, other respondents – mostly international development partners²⁶⁵, but also local NGO's - affirmed that the exploitation of children was a choice that could never be justified. 'This can never be

²⁵⁸ Interview with talibés from a mahadra, representing a community from Sierra Leone, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018. 'They want to become Koranic teachers.'

²⁵⁹ Interview with respondent coming from a maraboutic family, Nouakchott, 24 April 2018.

²⁶⁰ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'Mahadras are managed by people in power. It is thus a political question. And it is religious.' (Free translation)

²⁶¹ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018.

²⁶² Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'The tradition in itself is not characterised by exploitation, but it is a system that enables exploitation: the child is alone, in the city with the marabout, who has a religious aura rendering him almost impuneable.' (Free translation)

²⁶³ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'Even though they have the good will to offer the necessary education to children, they are sometimes forced to exploit them (...) when they are 40-50 kids, (...) it relates to the economic problem.' (Free translation)

²⁶⁴ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

²⁶⁵ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'The excuse that the marabout uses these kids to beg in order to compensate for their free education does not justify exploitation. The marabout has to take his responsibilities, he can only decide to open a school if he has the means to take care of all children.' (Free translation)

tolerated, if you cannot feed these children, you shouldn't accept to take care of them in the first place.'²⁶⁶ Some NGO's evoked the two-fold legal system of the country, which could also add to explaining the impunity of some ill-intentioned marabouts. The next sentence of a local NGO explains this aspect:

*The magistrate is a two-tier system: judges come from mahadras and others come from the National School of Administration and have learned the modern jurisprudence. The others have learned the Islamic jurisprudence and won't devalue religious aspects. What is more, Sharia is the foundation of Mauritania and they will never, ever they address that.*²⁶⁷

However, this aspect was not asked neither evoked by governmental representatives, since it could figure as a delicate point. This again emphasises the sensitive aspect of the religious dimension of talibés in an Islamic Republic.

6.1.3.5 Ethnic particularity – not a national problem

A recurrent theme throughout all the discussions was the fact that the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés is proper to a specific ethnic community, the Peul ethnicity²⁶⁸. This was perceived as challenge, International Development Partner 1 declared for instance that criticising a particular ethnicity of society could be perceived as a value-based judgment or could also lead to not perceiving the issue as a national problem.²⁶⁹

6.1.3.6 Poverty and perversion of traditional system in globalised and urbanised context

All respondents from all levels of society made it clear that the rapid urbanisation and the process of globalisation in Nouakchott have deeply perverted the traditional practice of talibés. 'Talibés from the '90's, before globalisation, have become something today. (...) It is not like talibés today.'²⁷⁰ NGO's²⁷¹ mentioned at recurrent times that the exploitation of talibés through forced begging has become a business for some people in order to

²⁶⁶ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

²⁶⁷ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018.

²⁶⁸ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'It is a social practice of communities. Mostly within the Peul community, maybe the Wolofs, but never the Maures or Soninkés.' (Free translation)

²⁶⁹ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'Talibés essentially come from the Peul community. Addressing this problem is kind of a value-based judgement, it is embarrassing. (...) And hence it is not seen as a national problem.' (Free translation)

²⁷⁰ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018. 'There is another fringe of society which starts to emerge, women who rent children, because this has started to be a real business.' (Free translation).

²⁷¹ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018.

escape poverty²⁷². Almost all NGO's affirmed that the perversion of this system has taken worrying proportions in Mauritania²⁷³. 'For poor families it is the opportunity to send children for better adapted conditions.'²⁷⁴ Poverty was repeatedly raised by all levels of society as a challenge for families who placed their child with a marabout to be able to offer them an alternative and a prestigious education. The following quote from the Minister of primary and secondary education illustrates this thought.

*Parents send their children to study, since most of the times they do not have the means and count on marabouts. Due to poverty reasons, parents think they don't need to take care of their children anymore and they will learn the Koran instead.*²⁷⁵

In this context, NGOs²⁷⁶ and religious leaders highlighted how the traditional communitarian and familial links have eroded in the context of urban migration. The following quote of a respondent coming from a maraboutic family exemplifies how the degradation of traditional links poses serious problems for the practice of talibés, such as the risk of exploitation and falling into delinquency in the urban landscape of Nouakchott.

*Today, with the rural exodus and after the droughts and urbanisation, marabouts have migrated towards cities, wishing to reproduce the same model of education in urban zones. But the conditions are more difficult. Due to the anonymity of cities and bad influences children can have there, they are more vulnerable to exploitation and tend to be more involved in delinquency. There is a certain loss of traditional values.*²⁷⁷

Two other elements based on the evolution of the practice in a challenging economic and globalised context appeared to be recurrent during the interviews. Firstly, talibés can be confused with street children in Nouakchott and are increasingly exposed and involved in criminal behaviour. Secondly, the traditional system of 'confiage' or placement puts children in danger in the current context. The effects of globalisation enhance their risk of exploitation, linked to the porosity of the borders in West Africa.

²⁷² Interview with National NGO 4, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018. 'It has become a economic activity for some people who do not teach correctly.' (Free translation)

²⁷³ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'It has suffered from a perversion over the years, which today has taken another dimensions.' (Free translation)

²⁷⁴ Interview with National NGO 4, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

²⁷⁵ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

²⁷⁶ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. 'Today, everyone is out for himself, this relation between community and mahadra has dissapeared.' (Free translation)

²⁷⁷ Interview with respondent coming from a maraboutic family, Nouakchott, 24 April 2018.

6.1.3.6.1 Some talibés become street children

From the interviews we see that talibés who were forced to beg in the streets were often confused with street children. The majority of the respondents alluded to this group of children when talking about talibés²⁷⁸. It can also partly explain why identifying talibés can be difficult, while confused²⁷⁹ with other children begging in the street.²⁸⁰ It appeared from the discussions that certain talibés spend most of their time in the street, exposed to many risks of exploitation, such as forced involvement in theft, drugs or prostitution²⁸¹. This was represented to be a major challenge, almost all interviewees affirmed that living in the street enhances the risk of talibés to participate in criminal behaviour²⁸². The next quote from a local NGO supports the idea that not only talibés face difficult living conditions in Nouakchott, but children in general form a particular vulnerable group in society. The presence of street children in the urban landscape stands out as a symptom of a general dysfunction of society, of which children are the first targets. ‘It becomes a real plight, whether in terms of human rights, or in terms of the picture it portrays of society: it is not a good image to see children sleeping in the streets.’²⁸³

6.1.3.6.2 System of ‘confiage’ in a globalised context

The majority of the respondents, representing all levels of society, agreed that the traditional practice of placing children with marabouts²⁸⁴ had become dangerous in the current context. The following sentence from a local NGO illustrates this idea quite clearly:

²⁷⁸ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018 ‘Children in the street (...) come from mosques, little schools, mahadras.’ (Free translation)

²⁷⁹ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. ‘It must be noted that not all children begging in the street are talibés.’ (Free translation)

²⁸⁰ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018. ‘It is difficult to distinguish children in the street and talibés sometimes.’ (Free translation)

²⁸¹ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘The passage from ‘talibés’ to ‘street children’ begins when they start using drugs and when they simply seek to answer their needs through the street (...). Little ones are taken by adolescents, who exploit them for theft, drugs and prostitution.’ (Free translation)

²⁸² Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. ‘They are also exposed to delinquency, since they spend their day in the street meeting all kinds of people.’ (Free translation).

²⁸³ Interview with National NGO 4, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

²⁸⁴ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘The contract with the parents is that they give their children, they must learn the Koran and they must come back when they are 18 years old. Without any contribution of the parents, any follow-up, they simply trust marabouts, because we tend to think that in general, marabouts are serious persons.’ (Free translation)

*It is a worrying phenomenon that starts to develop, certainly with poverty and the appropriation of new technologies by youth, which translates into the development of networks of child trafficking: drug traffic, corporal punishment, juvenile delinquency and lack of child protection.*²⁸⁵

This aspect was systematically raised during the discussions, the notion of ‘children on the move’ or ‘children on mobility’ appeared to be a key aspect focused on by the vast majority of NGO’s and international development partners. In fact, almost all respondents made it clear that the particular focus on this notion was explained by the geographical position of the country, the porosity of the borders in the region and the tense geopolitical security context, which all increased children’s and talibés’ vulnerability²⁸⁶. All respondents – religious leaders²⁸⁷, governmental representatives, NGO’s and international development partners, implied that the rise of religious extremism and terrorism in West Africa represented a major risk for unaccompanied children across countries. The next quote from an international NGO illustrates this issue: ‘across the Sahel region, radicalism can lead to violent extremism. (...) these children are easily recruited and brainwashed’²⁸⁸. The challenge of the rise of radical Islam as a major challenge towards child protection, will be detailed in the next point. The easy access across borders was demonstrated when asked to talibés how they had arrived in the country. Talibés from Sierra Leone answered: ‘it is easy to pass through the countries’.²⁸⁹ However, they also stated that they were confronted to the barrier of language: ‘the problem is that we don’t speak the language, so it’s difficult to live here.’²⁹⁰ International Development Partner 3, which focuses on the migration of children and hence talibés, declared the following:

Migrant children do not have parents or legal tutor here (...) When young children are so dependent, it clears the path for all types of exploitation. (...) Foreign children here do

²⁸⁵ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

²⁸⁶ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. ‘The border is long and porous (...) a small child is not supposed to cross these frontiers alone, he or she is too vulnerable.’ (Free translation)

²⁸⁷ Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018. ‘The current problem, is the risk of terrorisms. The borders are too porous.’ (Free translation)

²⁸⁸ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018.

²⁸⁹ Interview with talibés from a mahadra, representing a community from Sierra Leone, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

*not even speak the language of the country, are completely lost and become vulnerable.*²⁹¹

6.1.3.7 Lack of supervision in Koranic schools – risk of religious extremism

A major issue raised multiple times during the discussions, is the lack of supervision in Koranic schools. Since this forms part of the governmental responsibilities, this aspect could be delicate when discussing with ministers. When asked if all Koranic schools were registered and inspected in Nouakchott, most of the governmental answers seemed ambiguous. The Minister of primary and secondary education for instance, answered that in theory, they were all registered²⁹². The former Minister of Islamic Affairs answered that the Ministry had the responsibility to survey what is happening within these schools, but in reality this supervision is done ‘from afar’²⁹³. These answers gave the impression that some things were left unsaid. The majority of the participants from the rest of society declared that the government officially has the responsibility to inspect Koranic schools²⁹⁴, but that there was a considerable laxity to this regard, representing a major challenge and danger for talibés. Some respondents pointed out to the danger of the poor quality of education due to the lack of supervision, such as illustrated by the following quote of an anonymous anthropologist. ‘It is not supervised. Sometimes we encounter children who write with so many mistakes and with regards to the Koran, they do not have any idea of the sense of what they are leaning.’²⁹⁵

Others identified how the absence of control facilitates ill-intentioned individuals to open their fake Koranic schools and start their business through the exploitation of talibés²⁹⁶. As already mentioned above, almost all respondents evoked the risk of religious extremism due to the absence of state control in Koranic schools. It was recurrently said

²⁹¹ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018.

²⁹² Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘Theoretically, all of them’. (Free translation)

²⁹³ Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018. ‘The Ministry only has the supervisory authority, but in fact koranic schools are free : marabouts are free to teach. The Ministry only conducts a control from far away.’ (Free translation)

²⁹⁴ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. ‘On devrait dire qu’il y a un contrôle, c’est ce ministère qui doit s’en occuper, mais on ne sait pas de quel type d’écoles il s’occupe, s’il y a des inspections, régulières ou non.’ ‘We should say that there is a supervision, it is this Ministry that takes care of it, but we don’t know what kind of schools are inspected and if there are in fact inspected or not, regularly or irregularly.’ (Free translation)

²⁹⁵ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.

²⁹⁶ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘Les écoles coraniques, il y en a beaucoup, c’est comme des boutiques. Ca devient un moyen de survie. (...) Ca devient une mode, c’est une anarchie.’

that children remain vulnerable, can easily be influenced by all sorts of discourses and finally be recruited in armed conflicts in the region²⁹⁷.

*If we tell a child to criticise all non-Muslims, then it is very probable that this child will commit a violent act against non-Muslims. This is how extremism grows. A talibé told me this. What will a child learn while listening to this kind of discourses? He will be violent himself, because he is fragile and easy to be alienated.*²⁹⁸

As mentioned above, the worrying aspect of child recruitment in terrorist activities can, partly explain the recent and increasing focus on ‘child mobility’ and thus on talibés in Nouakchott. When asked why ‘mobility’ seemed to be a developing notion in the field of child protection on the ground, the International Development Partner 3 answered: ‘we are in a difficult regional area, with terrorist and criminal groups and the porosity of frontiers explains this aspect.’²⁹⁹ Governmental representatives³⁰⁰ also implied that they were aware of this increasing matter of concern.

6.1.3.8 Limited space for NGO’s

The limited space granted to NGO’s in society, was another challenge that came up regularly by NGOs and international development partners. When asked why the international NGO Human Rights Watch had published a report on the conditions of talibés in Senegal and not in Mauritania, the majority of the respondents answered that Human Rights Watch most probably was not allowed to raise such sensitive issues in Mauritania³⁰¹. It was even said that publishing this type of report on the international scene could risk having the opposite effect and shut down NGO’s for good.³⁰² Due to the sensitive nature of this question, it was not specifically asked to governmental

²⁹⁷ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. ‘I know many people who send their children to the neighbourhood’s Koranic schools and tomorrow, they come with a discourse that their dad is not a real Muslim, because he didn’t go to the mosque. (...) Children are recruited to go do the Jihad, when they are 14 or 15.’

²⁹⁸ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

²⁹⁹ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018.

³⁰⁰ Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018. ‘The state fears terrorism in the country, through the Koranic education.’ (Free translation)

³⁰¹ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. ‘Est-ce qu’une organisation comme Human Rights Watch a le droit de venir parler de sujets tabous ici ? C’est une autre question.’ ‘Has an organisation such as Human Rights Watch have the autorisation to come talk about taboo subjects here ? That is another issue.’ (Free translation)

³⁰² Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘This can also have the opposite effect, which means the government can isolate more and more, giving less and less space to these kind of publications while enhancing repression.’ (Free translation)

representatives. This aspect in itself highlights how openly discussing about human rights abuses constitutes a major challenge in Mauritania.

6.1.3.9 Intertwined factors – transversal nature of the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés

Finally, the complex cross-cutting nature of the phenomenon of talibés in Nouakchott, was frequently raised by all levels of society to be a major challenge. The following quote from a local NGO emphasises the multidimensional aspect in this regard:

*We are confronted with this demographic problem, as well as with a problem of production. We import more than 70 % of our needs. We also have a problem of rural exodus in the attempt to find better conditions. It destabilises families, as well as child protection. At the level of education, it increases children's demands in terms of survival and healthy environment: appropriate education and parents able to take care of their children. It is a major challenge.*³⁰³

It appeared that both the government and society face difficult socio-economic, cultural³⁰⁴, historical, geographical, geopolitical³⁰⁵, religious factors, among others, which represents important challenges in providing an effective protection to talibés in Nouakchott.

As a conclusion, participants repeatedly referred to specific challenges during the interviews that could represent barriers for the government in meeting all its obligations towards protecting children, and hence talibés in Nouakchott. Firstly, all respondents pointed out how deep-entrenched social practices could sometimes harm children, but that traditional customs remained stronger than politics or laws, directly referring to the perpetuation of the exploitation of some talibés in Nouakchott. After, the same societal problem was identified by most participants when referring to a trivialisation of child labour – or the perception of talibés begging in society. However this aspect was also explained as a result of poverty or a lack of quality education, but this last point seemed to be a sore spot when discussing it with ministers. The protected role of marabouts in society, their political power and their impunity, were explained by the vast majority of

³⁰³ Interview with National NGO 4, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

³⁰⁴ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018, 'It is not only a religious or economic issue, people often think it is only linked to the willingness to exploit children, but it is in reality also linked to a question of familial honour.' (Free translation)

³⁰⁵ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018. 'When we address the issue of talibés, we also anyways address the question of mobility, as well as to the question of governance, politics, security, etc.' (Free translation)

the participants as societal issues. However, some NGO's mentioned the two-fold judicial system, which is partly based on the Sharia, implying how religious issues – such as the practice of talibés - were too sensitive to address. After that, the problematic around talibés was repeatedly raised by all levels of society to be particular to one ethnic community, the Peul community. Participants explained that the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés was therefore not always perceived as a national problem and that addressing this issue entailed the risk of judging other ethnicities – in an already tense heterogeneous cultural context. Following, the vast majority of the participants from all levels of society emphasised how the practice of talibés had degraded in an urbanised and globalised context in two ways. Firstly, talibés are increasingly confused with street children and hence symbolise the general vulnerability of children in a poor urban landscape. Secondly, the system of 'confiage' exposes children to risks of exploitation due to the porosity of the frontiers and due to the rising terrorist Islamic threat in the region of West Africa. This same risk of religious extremism has been pointed out by almost all participants, when referring to a lack of governmental control in Koranic schools – even though the answers of the governmental representatives seemed to be ambiguous, they gave the impression to agree to this aspect. Also, some NGO's implied that the limited space for human rights defenders in the country renders the protection of talibés more difficult. Finally, all respondents made it clear during the interviews that the issue surrounding talibés has a transversal nature, representing challenges from different dimensions.

6.1.4 Prospects for the future?

The participants of cluster 1 were asked to share their impression about the general evolution of the topic of child protection and talibés' protection in the country. The aim was to identify the evolving aspect and to discern the overall dynamic of the present thesis subject. Do the measures and actions in place have a certain impact for instance, or is the government and society truly taking this topic seriously?

From the interviews, four main impressions can be established. Firstly, about half of the respondents affirmed that a certain awareness had risen towards child protection and the complex issue of talibés. They declared that society and the government are showing more commitment in this area³⁰⁶, but that these efforts remain insufficient in comparison

³⁰⁶ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'We have seen a certain awareness raising about the phenomenon, the civil society, all politics, the national programmes of protection put the child

with the scale of the issue³⁰⁷. Secondly, most international development partners declared that a clear positive evolution could be observed, certainly with the current reinforcement of legal and institutional frameworks³⁰⁸ and the increasing deployment of NGO's on the field. Thirdly, different respondents from different levels of society asserted that child protection and talibés protection were becoming prior national concerns, due to the increasing rise of the phenomenon of child vulnerability and exploitation.³⁰⁹ Fourthly and lastly, some NGO's³¹⁰ were much more sceptical, declaring that despite the fact that the topic of child mobility and child protection were increasingly recurrent themes, no actual change could be felt in reality³¹¹.

6.1.5 Conclusion part 1

To conclude the first part of the main findings, this first part of the analysis has attempted to gather the key issues identified by the respondents during the interviews, in order to answer the first sub-question guiding this thesis or to find out which measures have been taken to protect talibés in Nouakchott. Taking a legal human rights approach, the first sections take the UN CRC, which establishes a relation between the state and children, as a point of departure. The human rights violations at stake in relation to the exploitation of talibés in Nouakchott are depicted, and the human rights obligations, or the measures taken by the state, are identified. From the interviews we see that almost all levels of society from cluster 1 agreed with each other, except about certain sensitive aspects, which were explicitly affirmed by NGOs, while it seemed that the government left things unsaid. As a whole, it was implied that the government could do more to address the

beggar in their strategy (...) The government recognises this problematic, but does not yet put forward the sufficient means to combat it.' (Free translation)

³⁰⁷ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'There is a certain progress in the acknowledgement of the problem by some, but it remains limited compared to the reality of exploitation of children and the lack of their protection.' (Free translation)

³⁰⁸ Interview with the International Development Partner 4, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. 'We observe some reassuring tendencies, such as the emerging responsibility taken by the government to address the issue. (...) Also, the actions of international NGO are starting to have results. Finally, national NGO are deployed on the field to raise awareness among the populations and to take actions to finally eradicate child begging.' (Free translation)

³⁰⁹ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'There is a real evolution (...). The emergence of the very phenomenon encourages people to recognise to protect these children.' (Free translation)

³¹⁰ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'We are used to pretend everything is fine, but the situation of child protection is catastrophic.' (Free translation)

³¹¹ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'On en parle beaucoup, mais on ne ressent pas de réel changement.' 'It is a recurrent topic, but we don't really feel any change.' (Free translation)

urgent concerns regarding the serious violations inflicted on some talibés in Nouakchott. However, it was demonstrated that the government has already shown efforts and commitments towards protecting children, through the elaboration of a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for instance. Actually, from the discussions it seems that the government struggles to enforce its legal commitments since it faces multiple challenges, due to the complexity and transversal nature surrounding the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés in Nouakchott. The impressions given by all respondents regarding the general evolution of child protection in the country, demonstrates that the issue is increasingly being taken into account by the government and society, but that still a lot of efforts need to be concentrated to effectively protect children and hence talibés. In a nutshell, the exploitation of some talibés represents a serious and visible human right violation in the Mauritanian society, the government has already taken some measures to address the issue, but these seem insufficient with regards to the seriousness of the problem. The vast majority of the respondents emphasise how deep-entrenched societal attitudes and mentalities seem to hinder the effective enforcement of all legal dispositions in place and hence the effective protection of talibés.

6.2 Sub-question two: measures undertaken or planned to protect talibés in Nouakchott – rest of society

This part of the analysis tries to answer the second sub-question guiding this thesis, by identifying the measures put in place to protect talibés in Nouakchott. Since the first part already described the governmental measures with this regard, this part focuses on the actions taken by the rest of the second cluster: international development partners, international and national NGO's and other actors from civil society (such as academic and religious leaders). Before proceeding further, a sub-section provides an analysis of the interviews with respect to how society perceives talibés and children, what elements it considers essential to instil during childhood or what is recognised as leading to the well being of children in the Mauritanian context. With this sociological approach in mind, the measures already taken so far to protect talibés can more easily be understood. In addition, this conceptual framework allows for new avenues to better accompany and protect talibés, which will be the attempt of this chapter's third part.

6.2.1 The sociology of childhood and child well-being

As mentioned earlier, concepts of childhood and the place children have in society are socially constructed, based on ideas and values proper to each culture. Analysing child rights and practices related to childhood and education on a global scale remains a complex task, at the risk of imposing external models of childhood which would not be effective considering the particular socio-cultural context of each country. With regards to the case of talibés in Nouakchott, it is essential to first understand how society perceives the notions of childhood and child well being in the Mauritanian context, before analysing the measures taken to protect them.

6.2.1.1 Indicators of child well-being

As described earlier, the overall social environment of children and their present life conditions affect their current and future happiness or development. The notion of child well-being does not only aim at assuring the child's right to life or survival, but aspires to consider the happiness of the child as a primary goal. Framing this concept to the Mauritanian context, how is this notion of child well being understood? And what is perceived as leading to the well being of the child? In this section, the views of both clusters are depicted.

6.2.1.1.1 Universality of human rights versus cultural relativism: 'child well-being'

From the interviews a certain ambiguity can be observed when the notion of 'child well-

being' was raised: its universality and relevance was often put into question, but the very idea behind the concept of child well-being was mostly considered as a human right under the UN CRC. This gave the impression that the complexity of the sociology of childhood in a cross-cultural perspective as described in the theoretical chapter, was demonstrated throughout the discussions on the field.

Many respondents, mostly NGO's or international development partners, first highlighted the subjective and relative aspect³¹² of the notion of child well being, emphasising that no global comparisons or generalisation³¹³ could be made. The same respondents also declared that the concept of child well being was in fact not adapted to the Mauritanian context. The following quote from an international NGO illustrates the reconsideration of the universality of human rights: 'the notion of international human rights is not universal. The concept of 'well-being' is not important here, we don't even think about it, we think about surviving'³¹⁴. The respondents made it clear that aiming at a child's happiness is a luxurious priority. Not the child's well being, but the child's survival is said to be the main goal in Mauritania or in other countries where poverty remains a key challenge, as exemplifies by a local NGO:

*The concept of well-being therefore is not important, being with the parents does not matter, being in a safe and clean house is not important, we are all poor so the well-being is not at our disposition and we are still looking for it.*³¹⁵

This supports the idea detailed in the theoretical chapter on the sociology of childhood, that making global comparisons risks masking the wide cultural differences across countries, as well as the aspect of poverty between developed and developing countries. However, from the discussions it appeared that the very idea of child well being was systematically taken into account in the work of all respondents³¹⁶. All levels of society

³¹² Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'The concept of well-being is relative and changes from country to country, from situation to situation. Defining this concept is difficult since different standards exist that always evolve.' (Free translation)

³¹³ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018. 'We cannot generalise. I highly doubt that even in Austria, Germany, etc., in all these big cities, we can talk about it. So, yes and no, like everywhere else.' (Free translation)

³¹⁴ Interview with International NGO 2, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018.

³¹⁵ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

³¹⁶ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'Anyways, it is something that we take into account, certainly regarding children's development. If children are doing well and are healthy, they will develop correctly.' (Free translation)

implied that the notion of child well-being is closely related to the principals enshrined under the UN CRC³¹⁷, and that the indicators leading to child well-being are in fact those defined by ‘child rights’. Indicators such as the right to participation³¹⁸, to quality education, to healthcare, to leisure time and to a healthy familial environment were all stated as enabling children’s well being. On the other hand, when referring to the case of exploited talibés in Nouakchott, respondents often identified opposing trends or negative factors, which could hinder the well-being of talibés, which actually represented violations of the rights of the child. The negative factors often brought up were malnutrition, corporal punishment, risk of human trafficking across borders, child labour through forced begging, risks of living in the streets (drugs, prostitution, theft, criminal behaviour) and no access to juvenile justice, which all respondents affirmed to harm the physical and psychological development of talibés. Nevertheless, the latter factors were thus identified by some to hinder the well being of children, while other respondents made it clear that these same factors were perceived as part of children’s education in the Mauritanian society. This ambiguous relation between the universality of human rights and cultural relativism is extremely complex and requires a constant need to keep its distance with the object of study as a researcher, certainly when relating to highly socially constructed notions such as education and childhood. Who has the role to determine what is best for children and their place in society? This requires the need for a cross-cultural analysis, where eventually, one must find a balance between what is acceptable for children while respecting local cultures – the practice of talibés- and what is not acceptable for children everywhere in the world – the vulnerability of talibés in the 21st century.

6.2.1.2 Cross-cultural perspectives and local perception on childhood

The following points depict the ambiguous relation between child rights as enshrined under the UN CRC and the local and societal perceptions of childhood and the practice of talibés.

6.2.1.2.1 Modern education versus Koranic education

³¹⁷ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. ‘We are working on the UN CRC and its first concept related to the best interest of the child, then its development, then its overall protection and finally its participation. These are the 4 main key aspects on which we base our work.’ (Free translation)

³¹⁸ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘There is a need for the education of human rights. There is a need to reassure children, to give them back their freedom of expression, while taking their opinions into account and creating a cultural environment favorable to their development.’ (Free translation)

Firstly, it was repeatedly mentioned by all levels of society that the courses within Koranic schools risk not providing children with the necessary education to enable their successful integration into society. The violation of Article 28 of the UN CR, which enshrines the right to education and prescribes that ignorance and illiteracy³¹⁹ must be eliminated through modern teaching methods³²⁰, was thus frequently raised as an indicator, which hinders child well being. However, the practice of talibé or only focussing on the recital of the Koran, was then recurrently identified - mostly by local NGO's, governmental representatives³²¹ and talibés or marabouts³²² - as preparing children to learn faster. The following quote from a local NGO states this clearly: 'reciting the Koran means to acquire knowledge and to evolve. Later, what the talibé has acquired, the others have not.'³²³ In addition, the Koranic school is perceived as giving the child the opportunity to become someone.³²⁴ 'Assimilate all religious types of education can result to acquiring very good jobs.'³²⁵

Pursuing a Koranic education seems to be matter of pride and the goal is to teach children how to become a well-respected marabout later. The following quote from International NGO 1 illustrates this idea quite clearly: 'They might become religious teachers, which is prestigious for the family and finally, they receive a kind of education, which a parent would not have been able to offer.'³²⁶

6.2.1.2.2 Familial environment versus developing independence and responsibility

As mentioned earlier, the preamble of the UN CRC insists on the importance for the

³¹⁹ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018. 'Ce qui est mauvais, c'est d'être analphabète, ignorant.'

³²⁰ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 28.

³²¹ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'tout ceux qui ont étudié le Coran deviennent des génies. Ils deviennent brillants en langues à l'étranger.'

³²² Interview with an assistant from a marabout, representing a community from Mali, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018. 'thanks to the mahadra, they will learn very fast, since they are fast to learn now.'

³²³ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

³²⁴ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'Assimilate all religious types of education can result to acquiring very good jobs.'

³²⁵ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

³²⁶ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'ils vont peut-être devenir maître religieux, ce qui est prestigieux pour la famille et finalement ils reçoivent une éducation qu'un parent n'aurait peut-être pas été capable de donner.' (Free translation)

child to enjoy a healthy familial structure for his or her harmonious development.³²⁷ All respondents from the second cluster – international development partners³²⁸, NGO's³²⁹ and governmental representatives³³⁰ - insisted on the importance of the familial framework as it represented the principal actor of child protection. The Minister of Social Affairs declared how the familial protection was a major aspect in this regards, enabling children to access other fundamental rights:

*The education, health, leisure time, participation of children, all these factors must be taken into account. (...) if a child is well treated within the family, this will affect his or her health, schooling and other aspects. All factors are interwined to participate to the child's well-being.*³³¹

On the other side, local NGO's³³² and talibés described the societal perceptions of childhood regarding children's relation with their parents. They implied that society considers it in the best interest of the child to be far away from the parents for a while, since it contributes to shape the child's character and instill essential values such as respect, tolerance, responsibility and independence³³³. The following quote from a former talibé expresses this notion of childhood regarding the practice of talibés:

*Some pursue a military formation and don't see their parents for 2-4 years. Hence, it is only training, a formation, which gives a very good memory and children, learn how to be scared of nothing. We also learn how to better live with people who are older than us, and what kind of respect to have towards them.*³³⁴

³²⁷ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Preamble.

³²⁸ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'It is crucial for the child to be surrounded by the partents family at that age (...) At the individual level, it impacts the moral and physical health of children. The child do not enjoy teir rights to live with their family.' (Free translation)

³²⁹ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'Firstly, they do not have a familial environnement. A child must live with the family.' (Free translation)

³³⁰ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'He is deprived of the emotional aspect with parents, which is important.' (Free translation)

³³¹ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.

³³² Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018. 'If children are next to their father and mother, they will not learn anything.' (Free translation)

³³³ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'this difficult scool is a school of life, forming the child to be ready to confront difficult things later.' (Free translation)

³³⁴ Interview with a former talibé, Nouakchott 27 April 2018.

The time at the Koranic school is perceived as a sort of rigorous training, essential to imbue children with fundamental societal values.

6.2.1.2.3 Child labour through forced begging versus social education

As mentioned before, exploiting children through labour or begging is considered as a violation of the rights of the child and as hindering child well being under the international legal framework. This was repeatedly stated by all respondents of cluster 1, affirming that begging prevented children to enjoy a healthy childhood³³⁵, causing serious risks to their future development. Talibés often became child beggars or street children, who could become delinquents³³⁶ or get involved in other types of criminal behaviour. This idea of the risk of being trapped in criminal behaviour or delinquency in the street was also supported by a former talibé, who declared:

*I almost got trapped in delinquency when I was young, I was hanging out with delinquents. I was playing poker with other talibés and other boys who were not talibés, all were delinquents. Before playing poker, we had to find some money. There was a lot of money there.*³³⁷

On the contrary, it was frequently stated that begging to find some food is perceived by some ethnicities of society as a religious duty³³⁸, but also as a life learning experience. The following quote from a local NGO exemplifies this thought:

*The education of a child must be as hard as possible, begging, looking for food, is a life-learning experience. Thanks to that, he is a grown man now, because he passed through all of this before. All parents went through it and do not regret it. For them, it is a matter of pride. This hard school, is a social education and they think it is a religious duty to send their children in Koranic schools.*³³⁹

The harsh conditions in school are meant to shape the child's own personality and prepare children to address the difficulties of life. When the question was put to a former

³³⁵ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'Que ce soit des enfants talibés ou d'autres, c'est qu'un enfant exploité par la mendicité ou autre, c'est un enfant qui sera exposé à plusieurs problèmes dans la vie.'

³³⁶ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'son développement moral, social ne se passe comme cela devrait se passer. Ce sont des enfants qui passent toute la journée tout seul ou avec d'autres enfants en train de mendier. Après, beaucoup d'enfants fuguent aussi et après il y a la délinquance vu qu'il n'y a pas d'autres alternatives, donc ils deviennent en conflit avec la loi, etc.'

³³⁷ Interview with a former talibé, Nouakchott 27 April 2018.

³³⁸ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'La mendicité (...) donne de la valeur à l'apprentissage religieux'

³³⁹ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

talibé – who used to beg as well- what he thought when seeing talibés begging in the street, he answered: ‘I don’t mind, because as a talibé, you know it will finish one day, you see all kinds of stuff in your life, but after that you will forget.’³⁴⁰ It seems some fringes of society experience childhood in relation to the future, with the idea that the present living conditions must be harsh in order to develop well later. The following quote from International Development Partner 1 illustrates this ambiguous and complex question of who can determine if a specific type of education and a particular notion of childhood are good or bad. ‘People are not aware of the long-term consequences, since children find it normal to beg and to live in these conditions. Many of them want to become marabouts later.’³⁴¹ However, almost all respondents affirmed that the traditional practice of looking for food as a religious act had increasingly been diverted and misused for child exploitation in the current context. The vast majority of the participants declared that the act of charity has degraded in an act of begging, which is not religious³⁴². The following declaration from a respondent coming from a maraboutic family confirms this idea:

*Giving food to children and assisting them was a moral and religious obligation. (...) The term ‘begging’ has a negative connotation that I don’t like, it is not the same as ‘charity’ promoted by Islam.*³⁴³

6.2.1.2.4 Risk of human trafficking across borders versus traditional system of ‘confiage’

The risk³⁴⁴ of human trafficking and worst forms of child labour for talibés³⁴⁵ who come from neighbouring countries and travel alone, was repeatedly mentioned throughout the interviews with the first cluster. From the opposing point of view, placing children with a marabout in Mauritania was recurrently mentioned as a traditional duty³⁴⁶ perceived by society as a prestigious religious form of education. Almost every respondent from both

³⁴⁰ Interview with a former talibé, Nouakchott 27 April 2018.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. ‘Ca n’a rien à voir avec l’Islam, tu peux apprendre le Coran dans de bonnes conditions, ce n’est pas une condition pour apprendre la religion.’ ‘It has nothing to do with Islam, you can learn the Koran in good conditions, this exploitation is not a condition to learn religion.’ (Free translation)

³⁴³ Interview with respondent coming from a maraboutic family, Nouakchott, 24 April 2018.

³⁴⁴ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘Many risks exist in the context of mobility. Human trafficking, which is the case of many talibés, or sexual violence, sexual exploitation, etc.’ (Free translation)

³⁴⁵ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘I think the question of human trafficking is linked to the question of talibés.’ (Free translation)

³⁴⁶ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘Les enfants sont confiés par leurs familles par des marabouts, parce que leur parents ont été confiés à un marabout dans un autre village avant. C’est une forme de tradition et un devoir.’

clusters highlighted that Mauritania was considered to have the most prestigious Islamic studies in the region³⁴⁷, explaining why so many children travelled to Nouakchott³⁴⁸.

6.2.1.2.5 Individual child rights versus collective child obligations

As mentioned in the first section analysing the human rights abuses and the human rights obligations with regards to the phenomenon of talibés in Nouakchott, it seems as if the importance is placed on the protection and promotion of the ‘rights’ of the child. However, at different occasions respondents said that children not only had rights, but also obligations in the Mauritanian society. These obligations can be towards society, family or religion, as illustrated by the international NGO 2:

*There is the notion of ‘rights’ but also of ‘obligations’. Children have rights, which of course must be protected, but they also have moral, religious and other types of obligations towards their family and the community.*³⁴⁹

This idea of obligations was also implied when several respondents – mostly local NGO’s – pointed out the role of children in families and in society in general. It seems children are meant to serve a certain purpose, such as illustrated by the next quote from a local NGO: ‘it is important to take care of children, because they will serve a certain purpose one day. (...) a delinquent child who goes to jail is of no use at all.’³⁵⁰

This perception of a child as having particular obligations must be framed in the importance given to the community spirit. The following quote from a local NGO describes how protecting children is a collective responsibility³⁵¹ of each community in Mauritania: ‘historically, children were taken care of by the community as a whole.’³⁵² This explains why they must give back or contribute to the community as well.³⁵³ The

³⁴⁷ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘C’est le pays connu pour le savoir religieux. Chacun veut envoyer son enfant qu’ait le savoir religieux. Tous les anciens érudits religieux viennent d’ici.’

³⁴⁸ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018. ‘La Mauritanie est vraiment considérée dans la sous-religion comme un fief de la connaissance. C’est pour ça qu’il y a beaucoup de tendances par rapport à la mobilité de l’enfance, du Sénégal, Gambie, Mali et surtout le Sierra Leone qui envoient leurs enfants tout seul ou accompagné.’

³⁴⁹ Interview with International NGO 2, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018.

³⁵⁰ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

³⁵¹ Interview with respondent coming from a maraboutic family, Nouakchott, 24 April 2018.

³⁵² Interview with National NGO 4, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

³⁵³ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. ‘C’est une perte pour le village. Ils vont revenir au village et rien pouvoir apporter.’ ‘Avant, dans les campagnes, c’était considéré que chaque enfant était l’enfant de tout le village, c’était la responsabilité collective dans l’intérêt du groupe

three Koranic schools visited during this research, each represented different communities³⁵⁴. It appears that many foreign communities are living together in Nouakchott and that they form a protection framework for each other, as the next quote from discussions with talibés from Gambia illustrate:

*A friend of them was here, finished learning the Koran, went back to the Gambia and exchanged his place with someone else. There is always this system of replacement, someone leaves and someone replaces him.*³⁵⁵

The communities seem to be well organised and establish a certain guarantee of protection by sending children to marabouts they know.

6.2.1.2.6 Lost generation versus forged personality

Finally, the vast majority of the respondents of cluster 1, at the exception of one governmental representative and one religious leader, declared that the situation of certain talibés could have dramatic effects in the long-term³⁵⁶, hindering their well-being in general³⁵⁷. The term ‘lost generation’³⁵⁸ frequently came up, as highlighted by the next quote from the Minister of Social Affairs:

*Maybe 10 or 15 % of these children will succeed, but not the rest of them. So it means we will have a generation without any future, a lost generation, not trained or neither formed for life.*³⁵⁹

On the other side, all respondents identified the cultural challenge in this regards: the perception of some sections of society who considers this type of education to forge

social de bien veiller à ce que l'enfant ait une bonne éducation et qu'il soit protégé. Et aussi, tout le monde se connaissait.'

³⁵⁴ Interview with an assistant from a marabout, representing a community from Mali, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018. 'We only take in the children if we know their parents, and only children from Mali.'

³⁵⁵ Interview with talibés from a mahadra, representing a community from the Gambia, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018.

³⁵⁶ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'A long-terme, je dirais que le problème principal c'est qu'ils n'ont pas d'avenir en fait.'

³⁵⁷ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'L'enfant grandira dans un milieu qui n'est pas idéal, ayant des répercussions sur son développement, sur sa mentalité, des effets néfastes sur lui.'

³⁵⁸ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'On doit moraliser les maîtres, car c'est un travail très dangereux, car il est responsable de la prochaine génération.'

³⁵⁹ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.

children's responsibility³⁶⁰. The following quote from a former talibé declares how the notion of childhood is understood differently by each society:

*Today, some people tell me it is not possible that I used to be a talibé, because I succeed better in life than others who weren't talibés. Sometimes people tend to think talibés are bad, but it is only a training-period.*³⁶¹

In fact, society seems to perceive this practice not as hindering child well-being and does not refer to the idea of 'a lost generation', but more as helping child well-being or as offering opportunities for the future, as stated by International NGO 1: 'the phenomenon of talibés means, yes, you make your child suffer, but you give him a chance for the future.'³⁶²

To conclude, the Preamble of the UN CRC insists on the importance of taking the traditional and cultural values of the local context into account in order to ensure the protection and the harmonious development of the child.³⁶³ It also points out that the education of a child should respect their cultural identity, as well as the language and national values of the country³⁶⁴. However, out of the interviews appeared a constant ambiguous relation between the universality of the UN CRC – when the participants affirmed that the notion of child well being was a human right – and the cultural relativism – when they declared that the idea of child well-being was not adapted to the Mauritanian context. Some opposing views - mostly between cluster 1 and cluster 2 - about what helps or what hinders child well-being were pointed out during the discussions, highlighting how this concept remains a social construction. Firstly, the idea of modern education versus Koranic education illustrates the challenge to preserve traditional practices while not breaking with modernity. Secondly, the importance of the familial child protection framework versus the priority to develop skills such as independence and sense of responsibility was pointed out. Thirdly, the perception of

³⁶⁰ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'There is this idea that educating children this way is the best way to forge a strong man : this cultural and traditional aspect is a challenge.' (Free translation)

³⁶¹ Interview with a former talibé, Nouakchott 27 April 2018.

³⁶² Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

³⁶³ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 3.

³⁶⁴ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990) 1577 UNTS 3, Article 29

forced begging as child labour or exploitation versus the religious act and the social form of education came up regularly. However, it was admitted by both clusters that the act had lost its religious purpose and that it was often misused, with the risk of leading to delinquency in the current context. Fourthly, mobility as a risk of human trafficking versus as an opportunity for the child to enjoy a prestigious religious education, was also a recurrent discussion. Fifthly, the opposition of a child-centered perspective on the individual rights of the child versus a perception of children with obligations towards their community was a frequent point of debate. Finally and in general, the practice of talibés and its degradation was perceived by the first cluster as hindering the child well being, while the second cluster implied that the practice helped child well being. Finally, the complex task is to find a balance between what is acceptable for children while respecting local cultures and what is not acceptable for children everywhere in the world. This leads us to the next section, which identifies the measures already taken to better accompany talibés.

6.2.2 Past or current measures

This section summarises the measures taken so far by international development partners, international and national NGO's and other actors of civil society (academia and religious leaders), to protect talibés in Nouakchott. How the government meets its human rights obligations in terms of the measures taken to protect this group of society, has already been analysed in the first section of this chapter.

6.2.2.1 International development partners

6.2.2.1.1. Role of 'partners': supporting the government

The international development partners on the ground all declared that their role was to support³⁶⁵ the government in meeting its human rights standards and to protect children. The International Development Partner 4 for instance, supports the government in

³⁶⁵ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'International Development Partner has a role to do advocacy work, to support the government in fulfilling its national and international obligations and to assure that all children in Mauritania enjoy their rights.' (Free translation)

implementing its national strategic plans in the fight against child labour in the country, by conducting training sessions for actors concerned by child protection on the ground³⁶⁶.

6.2.2.1.2 Cooperating with marabouts and working within Koranic schools

From the discussions held with the international development partners it was clear that all of them consider it important to take the valued traditional aspects of the Mauritanian society into account as a point of departure to protect talibés. Every respondent at that level insisted on the need to cooperate directly with marabouts and within Koranic schools, due to their fundamental role in society³⁶⁷.

6.2.2.1.2.1 Training marabouts on child rights and child protection

They all considered the importance to establish a relation of trust with marabouts in order to enable effective trainings on child rights and child protection framework, such as indicated by International Development Partner 3: ‘we have managed to establish a good relation of trust with marabout and succeeded to form them about child rights.’³⁶⁸

6.2.2.1.2.2 The complex establishment of a parallel system of education

As mentioned above, a recurrent issue raised by the respondents was the fact that the content in current Koranic schools makes it difficult for talibés to integrate into modern society later. International Development Partner 1³⁶⁹ has been trying to establish a joined education system, where essential religious values are combined with ‘modern’ classes in order to help the talibés to join society. However, as mentioned before, it appeared from the interviews that addressing this aspect appears to be extremely complex in an Islamic Republic³⁷⁰. International Development Partner 3 points out this issue quite clearly:

³⁶⁶ Interview with the International Development Partner 4, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. ‘International Development Partner 4 supports the enforcement of the PANETE-Rim through the trainings of actors involved in the struggle against child labour and the protection of the child.’ (Free translation)

³⁶⁷ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. ‘We also try to work directly with the mahadras. (...) Because people believe in the importance of Koranic schools.’ (Free translation)

³⁶⁸ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018.

³⁶⁹ Interview with International Development Partner 1, 23 April 2018. ‘We try to discuss with marabouts, so that this modern training is transmitted to talibés so that they can speak a foreign language to insert in society. Finding a parallel system between original and formal education.’ (Free translation)

³⁷⁰ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘It is perceived as a religious issue. It is extremely difficult to attack the question without bringing a value-based judgement.’ (Free translation)

*We cannot address the Islamic education, because firstly it is not our domain and also, who of our colleagues could do this? Nobody. As an international organisation, saying 'this must be modified' or 'no, this is not good' is simply not possible.*³⁷¹

This explains why International Development Partner 2 has been struggling to put the project of a mixed education system in place.

6.2.2.1.2.3 Rehabilitation of Koranic schools

Since 2016, the International Development Partner 3 has been working on a project of rehabilitation of seven Koranic schools, with the aim of making the daily conditions of talibés appropriate to their specific needs, as depicted in the following quote:

*We assisted in terms of food supply, medical assistance and rehabilitation of the location with engineers, workers who rearranged the room and the paint, etc. in order to ensure children have better living conditions.*³⁷²

6.2.2.1.3 Direct assistance to vulnerable talibés

Actions of direct assistance to children were also mentioned, such as the 'voluntary return and integration assistance' of the International Development Partner 3, which offers the opportunity for children in mobility to return to their country of origin³⁷³.

6.2.2.1.3 Recreational activities

In addition, the International Development Partner 3 mentioned its initiative to set up a recreational day where talibés and children who follow the modern type of education can gather and exchange. Mixing two social classes together might break sensitive and religious taboos³⁷⁴.

6.2.2.2 National and International NGO's

This level of society equally made clear that the specific local Mauritanian context and the perceptions of society towards the practice of talibé needed to be taken into account in order to set up effective measures of protection.

³⁷¹ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018.

³⁷² Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018.

³⁷³ Ibid. 'This can also be an option for talibé children, after analysing if it is in the best interest of the child.' (Free translation)

³⁷⁴ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018. 'This really represents two clashing worlds and we hope that by playing games together, a certain exchange between two population can happen.' (Free translation)

6.2.2.2.1 Cooperating with religious leaders

Again, cooperating with marabouts as legitimate actors of society appeared to be crucial, since the practice of talibé was recognised to be a social practice.³⁷⁵ The vast majority of NGOs said that they work directly with marabouts in Koranic schools³⁷⁶.

6.2.2.2.2 Dilemma: short term or long-term child protection?

On the other hand, International NGO 1 raised concerns about directly cooperating with marabouts, since it entailed the risk of supporting a system of exploitation: ‘I don’t think it is sustainable to assist children directly in mahadras. Moreover, this also means risking to continue supporting a model of exploitation.’³⁷⁷ Instead of providing direct assistance to talibés in Koranic schools and helping marabouts, cooperating with religious leaders was suggested as a more sustainable solution³⁷⁸. From this discussion a dilemma appeared between risking inadvertently supporting ill-intentioned marabouts and an exploitative system, but providing direct assistance to the urgent needs of talibés, or training religious leaders to convey messages of child rights which might have a greater effect in the long term, but which does not protect children who are in the immediate need of protection.

6.2.2.2.3 Assure direct assistance

The respondents explained that one of their major responsibilities was to assure talibés their basic rights, such as food, health care or sanitation³⁷⁹.

6.2.2.2.4 Study, identification, data

Conducting studies and identifying victims or vulnerable talibés was also mentioned as one of their important tasks. The international NGO 1 for example, has been conducting a study to research the reasons of child mobility and based on society’s perception, will seek to establish adapted actions of protection³⁸⁰.

³⁷⁵ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘We have tried to comprehensively work with marabouts. Because the phenomenon of talibés remains a social practice.’ (Free translation)

³⁷⁶ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. ‘we collaborate with mahadras to ameliorate the conditions of children there.’ (Free translation)

³⁷⁷ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

³⁷⁸ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘We now aim at long-term projects, through advocacy work with religious leaders who can directly act as conveyers of messages.’ (Free translation)

³⁷⁹ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, ‘We washed them with our own hands.’ (Free translation)

³⁸⁰ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘We want to understand the general attitude of people towards mobility. What are the perceptions of society, of religious leaders and on this

6.2.2.2.5 Regional cooperation

Cooperation with regional actors was also raised as fundamental. National NGO 3 presides the a West African regional network, which aims at building a network between all NGO's in the region concerned by children in mobility. This NGO attempts to protect children on the move before, during and after their travel³⁸¹.

6.2.2.2.6 Awareness raising and its efficiency

In order to decrease the risk of delinquency, many NGO's declared to conduct awareness raising with parents, marabouts³⁸² and children in prison³⁸³. On the other hand, some respondents, such as International NGO 1, showed doubts about the efficiency of raising awareness about the phenomenon of the exploitation of some talibés, claiming that everyone already knew about the perversion of the practice anyways:

*Everyone sees what is happening in the street and everyone talks about it as well. Even if the family lives in a remote rural area, everybody knows everything, so raising awareness is not very effective according to me.*³⁸⁴

6.2.2.2.7 Communitarian protection

The international NGO 3 mentioned its project to support communitarian forms of protection to assist talibés. Working with different communities was states as a way of not imposing external models, but instead promoting capacities and enabling sustainable protection³⁸⁵.

6.2.2.2.8 Reestablishment of familial environment and its efficiency

basis, develop instruments of awareness raising, conduct publications and do advocacy work. In other words, the goal os to understand the issue and adapt it on the basis of this study.' (Free translation)

³⁸¹ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'When we want to return a child to its family, we contact the RAO in the country of origin and then we accompany the child. We first have to conduct research about the parents. After that, RAO follows the family: insert the family if it is poor, integrate the child to school if there is a problem of education.' (Free translation)

³⁸² Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. 'In order to avoid children falling into delinquency, we raise awareness with marabouts and parents.' (Free translation)

³⁸³ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018. 'We raise awareness in prisons, where children are.' (Free translation)

³⁸⁴ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

³⁸⁵ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018. 'This is called 'endogenous practices of protection', within communities. We don't want to impose something, but we wish to depart from communities and value their own actions.' (Free translation)

Seeking to re-establish a healthy familial environment³⁸⁶ was often raised as one of the main objectives of the vast majority of NGO's. This was said to be primordial, in order to assure parents can exercise their responsibility of protecting their children³⁸⁷. However, International Development Partner 1 pointed out that returning to the parents was not always a constructive measure, but instead had the risk of perpetuating the issue.³⁸⁸ This can be linked to the societal aspect of Koranic education or the extreme poverty some families face, who are not able to take care of their children and prefer to place their children with a marabout.

6.2.2.2.9 Assure talibés' insertion in society

Finally, all NGO's aspired to help talibés insert in society. The local NGO AFCF is working on a project, which assists children in conflict with the law, sometimes talibés, to have a quality education, to pass their diploma and to find a job³⁸⁹.

6.2.2.3 Other national civil society actors

6.2.2.3.1 Conducting research and studies on the ground

An anonymous anthropologist was interviewed, who had conducted a research on street children and talibés in the late 1990s³⁹⁰. He stated that his role was to analyse the evolution of the phenomenon in order to give an idea about the seriousness of the issue and about how to address it. However, this was conducted almost 20 years ago and not many studies seem to have followed since.

6.2.2.3.2 Religious leaders as agents of social change

³⁸⁶ Interview with National NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018. 'We always look for the contact of the parents.' (Free translation)

³⁸⁷ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'The goal was to bring the child back in a familial environment. We recreate a familial atmosphere in a center, with a woman cooking and a educator who lives there. This enables children to get used to the familial environment and to find a foster family.' (Free translation)

³⁸⁸ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'They will go back to their home, but their parents will send them again to the same kind of school, perpetuating this problem.' (Free translation)

³⁸⁹ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'We help those who were involved in delinquency to be inserted in the active life. Today, some of them had their diplomas and we are trying to collect some money to support them with little project.' (Free translation)

³⁹⁰ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'As a sociologist and anthropologist, my role is to observe and analyse the situation. I conducted a study on street children of Nouakchott, in 1996.' (Free translation)

Religious actors such as imams, were identified as having an essential role in changing mentalities and raise awareness about the harmfulness of certain social practices. The former Minister of Islamic Affairs declared that more and more religious leaders, such as imams, were preaching in mosques by exposing how forced begging was prohibited by Islam³⁹¹.

6.2.2.3 Cooperation and coordination between all levels of society

Finally, respondents when asked if they were working in partnership with other levels of society to tackle the complex issue of talibés, almost all participants answered positively³⁹².

6.2.3 Conclusion part 2

To conclude this section, international development partners, international and national NGO's and other civil society actors such as religious leaders and academia seem to be increasingly active on the field of child protection in general and talibé protection in particular. The first part described how indicators leading to child well-being can be perceived differently in a cross-cultural context, questioning the universality of the UN CRC. Opposing themes such as education, the familial environment, the act of begging, mobility, rights and obligations were regrouped above, supporting the idea that childhood is a social construction. All respondents implied that having society's perception of childhood in mind was fundamental for the protection of talibés to be effective. With regards to the measures taken so far to protect talibés in Nouakchott, all respondents highlighted the importance to work with religious leaders and gain their trust in order for them to act as legitimate social agents of change. However, two major challenges came up. Firstly, addressing the content of Koranic education as an international development organisation can be highly sensitive and perceived as a value-based judgement in an Islamic Republic. This explains why International Development Partner 1's project to introduce modern courses alongside Koranic courses remains extremely complex. Secondly, directly assisting marabouts in Koranic school can entail the risk of supporting

³⁹¹ Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018. 'At the level of mosques, many religious leaders raise awareness about the negative effects of begging.'³⁹¹

³⁹² Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'The government, International NGO 1 and International Development Partner 1 are reevaluating and readapting the national strategy of protection in order to include child mobility.' (Free translation)

systems of child exploitation, but also gives direct assistance to talibés' in urgent need. The following section focuses on what the participants declared or implied as innovative paths to better accompany and protect talibés in Nouakchott.

6.3 Sub-question three: suggestions to improve the protection of talibés in Nouakchott

After having analysed the measures taken so far to protect talibés in Nouakchott, the next section attempts to offer new avenues for a greater protection of these children, while taking into account the cross-cultural aspects of childhood and child well being. The following points represent the explicit or implicit ideas brought forward by the participants of cluster 1 to suggest new measures of protection.

6.3.1 Starting with religion as the foundation of society: cooperation with marabouts and with religious leaders as legitimate agents of social change

6.3.1.1 Cooperation with marabouts and rehabilitation of Koranic schools

Almost all respondents affirmed the importance of continued cooperation with marabouts and to establish further projects to enhance the living conditions in Koranic schools. They affirmed that due to the prestigious role of marabouts in society and regarding the value given to the Koranic type of education, this system needs to be protected and better accompanied³⁹³. Establishing legal standards and norms in Koranic schools, further training marabouts, attaining the effective implementation of a mixed education system and financially supporting marabouts were four main recommendations made in this framework.

6.3.1.1.1 Norms and standards in Koranic institutions

Firstly, the vast majority of the respondents suggested that the state should establish legal norms to organise the content of Koranic education in order to ensure talibés' rights to a quality education. The following quote from National NGO 3 states this clearly:

*Norms must be fixed in mahadras: the content of the education programme, controlling if children are actually learning and then conducting a follow-up. The relative Ministry must take care of that and it must have a staff which verifies who can and cannot open a mahadra.*³⁹⁴

³⁹³ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'Koranic schools must be valued, since people believe in it.' (Free translation)

³⁹⁴ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

This idea was supported by the Ministry of religious affairs, in order to assure a moderated Islam is taught³⁹⁵, to effectively protect children and enable them to integrate in society.

6.3.1.1.2 Further training marabouts

Secondly, almost all respondents implied that the state should take actions to train marabouts into becoming responsible and respectful teachers³⁹⁶, aware of the importance of the rights of the child.³⁹⁷ Following up on these trainings in order to assess if they are effective and if they contribute to the protection of talibés, also appears crucial³⁹⁸.

6.3.1.1.3 Implementation of a mixed education system

Thirdly, when asking the interviewees what they thought about International Development Partner 1's project to promote a mixed education system, every single respondent declared it was an excellent idea. Acquiring the necessary skills to integrate in a globalised world³⁹⁹, while continuing to learn the essential religious, moral and traditional values to identify with society⁴⁰⁰, appeared to be one of the main recommendations of the respondents. In fact, a former talibé mentioned that he regretted only to have learned the Koran, which has not enabled him to acquire the basic intellectual skills to be included in society's daily life: 'It is a very good idea. I regret not doing that when I was young. For instance, even using the phone can be difficult when you cannot read or write.'⁴⁰¹

6.3.1.1.4 Financial support to marabouts

³⁹⁵ Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018. 'Religious education must be supervised for moderated Islam to be taught. A quality education and modern Islam are essential to participate to childre protection.' (Free translation)

³⁹⁶ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'These teachers must go through a little training session to learn the pedagogy of young children, as well as the relation between children themselves.' (Free translation)

³⁹⁷ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'I think it is very important to work with marabouts for them to understand child rights.' (Free translation)

³⁹⁸ Interview with International Development Partner 2, 26 April 2018. It is crucial to conduct studies to know if these trainings have had positive effects.' (Free translation)

³⁹⁹ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'Our goal is to offer both Koranic and modern education to give the opportunity to insert in society.' (Free translation)

⁴⁰⁰ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'Learning other courses apart from the Koran is very usefel to prepare children, without stopping its Islamic education.' (Free translation)

⁴⁰¹ Interview with a former talibé, Nouakchott 27 April 2018.

Finally, financially supporting marabouts in order to cover the costs of talibés' education⁴⁰² and restoring Koranic schools to render them liveable for the children, were key aspects raised by all respondents - except one - to ameliorate the protection of talibés. This financial aspect came out as a recurrent theme since poverty was often identified as playing a major role in the issue of child labour in the country⁴⁰³. However, as mentioned by International NGO 1 earlier, supporting marabouts can represent a moral dilemma between risking encouraging an exploitative system and between protecting children in urgent need. However, not all marabouts exploit and some levels of society, thus marabouts as well, effectively face extreme poverty. Since the aim is to find solutions, which respect local values and traditions, supporting marabouts seems to form part of it.

6.3.1.2 Cooperation with religious leaders

Given the role of Islam in society, religion was frequently presented by all levels of society as having the potential to contribute to the protection of children. From the interviews appeared that a greater focus should be put on the role of Islam in the prevention of forced begging, in vulgarising child rights and in recognising the need to abolish harmful practices prejudicial to children's health. According to all respondents, religious leaders would be recognised as important religious and social references in communities. Therefore, they can be considered as significant agents of sustainable⁴⁰⁴ by conveying important messages and values and change and transform society's perception of child rights.⁴⁰⁵

6.3.1.1.2 Begging is prohibited by Islam

During the interviews, respondents from all levels of society insisted on the distinction between begging and charity in Islam, as already mentioned above. Alms giving or charity is a religious and moral act and has nothing to do with begging⁴⁰⁶. In reality, most

⁴⁰² Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'Greater ressources are needed to take care of these children through the amelioration of marabouts' lives and the conditions of the mahadras.' (Free translation)

⁴⁰³ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'This asks for material help, because it general, this situation is caused by economic fragility.' (Free translation)

⁴⁰⁴ Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. 'working through religious leaders, with the hope to have a more sustainable and better impact.' (Free translation)

⁴⁰⁵ Interview with Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018. 'The training of trainers, such as imames, marabouts, oulemas, associations of mosques, etc. is fundamental.' (Free translation)

⁴⁰⁶ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'It has nothing to do with Islam, you can learn the Koran in good conditions, exploitation is not a conditions to learn religion.' (Free translation)

respondents pointed out that Islam prohibits the act of begging for economic gain⁴⁰⁷, but it appeared that society confuses charity and begging⁴⁰⁸. This confusion has the danger to perpetuate the system of exploitation. Religious leaders therefore could emphasise the distinction between both notions, based on what Islam promotes and prohibits.

6.3.1.1.3 Child rights in Islam

It was repeatedly mentioned that religion promotes human rights⁴⁰⁹ and that it is an Islamic duty to protect human beings.⁴¹⁰ In this line of thought, the right to quality education was recurrently evoked as an important value in Islam⁴¹¹. The following quote from the Ministry of education illustrates the role of religion and how promoting this idea can contribute to child rights and to protecting the rights of talibés: ‘religion contributes to educate children through good practices: to acquire a tolerant vision of society.’⁴¹²

6.3.1.1.4 Islam forbids practices harmful for human beings

The following quote from a national NGO demonstrates what was mentioned numerous times, that Islam does not permit harmful practices for human beings: ‘anything harmful for the health of human beings is prohibited by religion, even if it is a very profound religious practice.’⁴¹³ Two different respondents, a national NGO and an international development partner, raised the fact that no medical study had even been conducted on the health effects of the living conditions of certain talibés in Nouakchott, unlike the practice of excision for instance, which has medically been proven to have serious health effects⁴¹⁴. The following quote from International Development Partner 1 describes the complexity in conducting medical studies on something ‘invisible’ as child well being:

⁴⁰⁷ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘It is not an activity recommenden by Islam.’ (Free translation)

⁴⁰⁸ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘It is a practice sush as the offer and demand : if the offer is there to give charity, people give it.’ (Free translation)

⁴⁰⁹ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018. ‘religion has always defended the most vulnerable ones, exploitation has nothing to do with religion.’ (Free translation)

⁴¹⁰ Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018. ‘It is a duty to support human beings, it is one of the pillars of Islam.’ (Free translation)

⁴¹¹ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. ‘Islam recommends education, it is a religious obligation for all muslims. Who says education says quality education and no exploitation.’ (Free translation)

⁴¹² Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

⁴¹³ Interview with National NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid. ‘There has neven been a medical study about the phenomenon of talibés in Mauritania’. (Free translation)

*The problem is that 'well-being' is not visible; hence we pretend it is not serious. The practice of excision for instance is visibly affecting the human body and therefore it has been addressed, but never on the mental or psychological level.*⁴¹⁵

These discussions implied that it might be interesting to suggest conducting such a study, in order to realise the extent to which the exploitation of some of these children can seriously affect their mental health and harmonious development. Even though the practice of excision is far from comparable to the practice of talibés, since the abuse some talibés is not a generalised phenomenon. Nevertheless, the issue surrounding talibés continues to face religious, social and cultural taboos, which fails to effectively protect those who are truly exploited. If it was medically proven that forced begging, violence in some schools or on the street negatively affects the healthy development of the child, it could be a first step to demystify the practice. By removing cultural and religious barriers, this could allow us to talk more openly about talibés and clearly distinguish what is accepted for talibés and what is not. Religious leaders could act as agents of social change, as suggested by National NGO 1:

*To demystify the practice of female genital mutilation, doctors and imams greatly contributed to this change. Once it was confirmed that it was dangerous for the health, imams have declared it was prohibited by religion.*⁴¹⁶

In other words, instead of not daring to address the exploitation of some talibés due to religious taboos, religious leaders could accentuate how Islam precisely prohibits harmful practices for the harmonious development of children and why talibés on the contrary must be protected out of religious reasons.

6.3.2 Creating national and regional political programmes and new legal dispositions aiming at the specific protection of talibés

Almost all respondents declared that the country's legal arsenal protected children, but not talibés specifically⁴¹⁷. Creating legal instruments or political programmes, which would aim the protection of talibés,⁴¹⁸ was recurrently suggested by all levels of society.

⁴¹⁵ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'The state has not implement a system of protection specifically for talibés.' (Free translation)

⁴¹⁸ Interview with Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. 'It would be relevant to find a specific political programme for talibés (...) we need a specific framework for these children.' (Free translation)

National NGO 3 declared that developing regional legal frameworks to protect talibés was also essential: ‘we seek a regional resolution regarding the protection of talibés, to assimilate it officially as modern slavery.’⁴¹⁹ Recognising the conditions of some talibés as worst forms of child labour or as grave violations of human rights would enhance efforts to take their case more seriously and strengthen efforts to combat their exploitation.

6.3.3 Enhanced coordination between ministries and between all levels of society

As mentioned earlier, the responsibility for the problematic of talibés was often put on the shoulders of the Ministry of religious affairs. However, as seen above, this problematic concerns various dimensions and therefore requires a strong partnerships approach, as illustrated by the Ministry of Education: ‘it is a crosscutting topic, linking several ministers together: education, Koranic school, labour, etc. Therefore, it requires the contribution of many different departments.’⁴²⁰ The necessary holistic approach to address the complex problematic of talibés in Nouakchott was stressed multiple times by all levels of society.⁴²¹

6.3.4 Valorisation of community frameworks as endogenous mechanisms of child protection

As mentioned in the sociological perspective of childhood in the Mauritanian context, a child has multiple caregivers and the responsibility to protect children is assigned to the community as a whole⁴²². However, even if urbanisation and globalisation have somehow degraded these traditional links of solidarity, some respondents suggested to promote community protection as potentially contributing to the protection of talibés in Nouakchott⁴²³. As seen above, only one interviewed NGO⁴²⁴ confirmed that they were

⁴¹⁹ Interview with National NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.

⁴²⁰ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.

⁴²¹ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. ‘A holistic approach is needed to responded to the problems in a sustainable way. A little project that gives food to certain mahadras, is only partial.’ (Free translation)

⁴²² Interview with respondent coming from a maraboutic family, Nouakchott, 24 April 2018. ‘Before, if the rural areas, it was considered that each child was the child of the whole village. It was a collective responsibility, it was in the interest of the whole social groupe to watch over children, that they have a good education and that they are protected.’ (Free translation)

⁴²³ Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018. ‘Community protection is fundamental. In small villages, the leader of the village is the correspondent of the Ministry of Interior.’ (Free translation)

⁴²⁴ Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018.

working on communitarian forms of protection with regards to talibés. Nevertheless, other participants implied the relevancy of this approach, such as the Ministry of Education who suggested to implement watchdog committees in neighbourhoods⁴²⁵. This highlights the significance of involving communities, neighbourhoods and local actors who are among the first aware of the issues at stake. In that way, departing from already established local forms of protection could enable communities to find the appropriate ways of protecting talibés. Furthermore, International Development Partner 1 suggested to work together with communities from rural areas in order to stop mass migration towards urban cities, where the risk of exploitation is deemed too high. It was repeatedly mentioned that the country's landscape had changed extremely rapidly and that today, almost all children from communities in rural areas had left to urban zones. Due to the degradation of traditional community links, it was often mentioned that parents probably were not aware of the scope of suffering their children faced⁴²⁶. Boosting local development projects for instance could already decrease the discrepancy between rural and urban areas, reduce poverty and hence exploitation and upgrade the traditional communitarian links of child protection.

6.3.5 Conducting in-depth study about the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés

An issue often raised by the vast majority of the respondents, was the fact that no accurate data existed about the number of talibés and Koranic schools in Nouakchott. In order for the issue to become a serious subject of concern, the severity of the problem must be identified and shared with the population, as suggested by National NGO 4:

*The first thing to know is the number of children: is it important or not? How has it evolved? We need to have concrete data, to share these with responsibilities at the level of the whole society to protect a visible group. Alliances need to be searched to lead politicians to truly take care of the problem.*⁴²⁷

⁴²⁵ Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018. 'Maybe organise watch committees in neighbourhoods or parents-students associations which would have the right to supervise what is happening within Koranic schools.' (Free translation)

⁴²⁶ Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018. 'I think it is important to work with communities and village from where talibés come from, so that marabouts settle in these villages and do not migrate towards urban zones. Parents must be told what is happening in cities, without judging them.' (Free translation)

⁴²⁷ Interview with National NGO 4, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.

In addition, when asked if they still had contacts with former talibés, all NGOs answered they had not. Maintaining systematic relations with former exploited talibés could be an idea. This could help to discover how their particular childhood affects their current status, health and living conditions in society today.

6.3.6 Conclusion part 3

To conclude, this last section of the analytical chapter aimed to put forward the different thoughts suggested by the respondents of cluster 1 to better accompany and protect talibés, while taking the particular Mauritanian socio-cultural notions of childhood into account. Firstly, given the weight of religion in society, further cooperating with marabouts – who are well-respected actors in society – appeared to be fundamental to almost all respondents. In this framework, it was said that legal norms should be implemented in Koranic schools in order to assure a quality education, a moderate Islam and abolish the practice of begging. For this, it was implied that the state should organise more training sessions with religious leaders, to emphasise the significance and importance of child rights and child protection. The project of a mixed education system should effectively take place, in order for talibés to continue learning essential religious values, while at the same time acquiring necessary skills required in a globalised world. Material and financial support in Koranic schools are primordial, to enhance the living conditions in these establishments and assure talibés' rights are protected.

In the same line of thought, every single participant affirmed the significance to cooperate with religious leaders, who have the legitimate role to act as agents of social change. They have the ability to convey the message that Islam prohibits forced begging, protects child rights and forbids practices, which are harmful for human beings. In this way, religious leaders have the power to change mentalities towards the deep-embedded practice of talibés. Instead of creating religious taboos around the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés, religious leaders could rather emphasise how Islam prohibits exploitation and promotes child rights, in order to distinguish what is accepted and what is not towards the practice.

Secondly, it was suggested to develop national and regional political programmes and legal instruments aimed at the specific protection of talibés in the country, as well officially recognising their exploitation as worst forms of child labour in order to take the issue more seriously.

Thirdly, coordination within ministries and between all levels of society should be reinforced, regarding the cross-sectional nature of the problematic of talibés.

Fourthly, emphasising the important role of communities as endogenous mechanisms of child protection appears crucial, as well as boosting the development in rural areas in order to create better opportunities for children in a protective environment and reduce their vulnerability which can be caused by mobility.

Finally, conducting in-depth research about the phenomenon of talibés appeared as necessary to raise awareness within society, by demonstrating the scale of the issue.

7. Conclusion

Despite the visibility of the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés in Nouakchott, no or little academic research has studied this issue. In addition, no political or legal framework aims at the specific protection of this particular vulnerable group of children. It seems the religious and societal aspects of the traditional practice makes it difficult to address the problem. Talibés have become a taboo subject, exposing them to an increasing amount of dangers. The present thesis attempts to bridge the academic gap, with the aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the actions undertaken, planned or suggested to protect talibés in Nouakchott. Therefore, the main research question guiding this thesis was: which measures of protection have been taken so far with regards to the evolving situation of talibés in Nouakchott? Three sub-questions have allowed to answer the main question in a more structured and clearer way. The first sub-question aimed to identify what the respondents considered to be the key aspects and main challenges regarding the experience of talibés in Nouakchott. The second sub-question attempted to find out the undertaken or planned measures of protection with regards to talibés in Nouakchott. The third sub-question sought to offer new avenues for reflections on how to better accompany talibés in Nouakchott, based on the discussions with the respondents.

In order to answer the research question and the three sub-questions, interviews with two types of clusters were conducted in Nouakchott in April 2018. Firstly, discussions were held with 18 actors representing international development partners, governmental representatives, international and national NGO's and other actors from civil society, such as religious leaders and academics. They were all concerned by or working on the protection of children in general or talibés in particular. Secondly, some talibés from the Gambia, Mali and Sierra Leone were interviewed during a visit in three different Koranic schools, as well a one Malian assistant from a marabout and one former talibé from Senegal. Before exposing the main findings of the research, a brief summary of the theoretical chapters allows to introduce the research, as well as the conceptual frameworks guiding the study.

The introduction chapter has first contextualised talibés and the phenomenon of their exploitation in Nouakchott at the international, regional and national level. Talibés, who are mostly migrant children who desire to benefit from the prestigious Koranic education

in Mauritania, increasingly seem to be exposed to all kinds of dangers, moreover in a regional context of rising Islamic threat.

The second chapter introduced child labour as a global priority, especially in Mauritania where it is considered that more than one child out of three is involved in a situation of child labour. Sometimes, it can be compared with worst forms of child labour, in a sensitive historical and political context of slavery. Despite the efforts shown by the government to combat the issue, through the establishment of a comprehensive legal arsenal of child protection, the cross-sectional nature of the phenomenon of child labour in the country seems to constitute a major challenge to effectively enforce the country's legal mechanisms.

The third chapter focused on the legal and sociological theoretical frameworks regarding children, which have guided this thesis. Firstly, the international legal perspective described the essential aspects of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, by which the Mauritanian government is bounded. This has demonstrated how child rights have become a global concern and that child labour is a violation of the rights of the child. Secondly, the sociology of childhood has exposed how the elements regarding childhood – such as education or the place given to children in society – are proper to each culture and nation. Childhood is socially constructed, which means the indicators leading to child well-being are perceived differently across the globe. Therefore, the traditional practice of talibés must be considered within the specific Mauritanian context.

The fourth chapter details how the traditional practice of talibé has been perverted in a context of rapid urbanisation, globalisation and growing poverty. Firstly, some ill-intentioned marabouts misuse the community's religious duty of charity by forcing children to beg. Secondly, the globalised competitive economic context raises questions about the insertion of talibés in society, if they only focus on the recital of the Koran. Finally, even though the notion of 'mobility' is perceived as essential by society in terms of the child's education and its contribution to the community, dangers for children travelling across borders have increased. Therefore, their mobility requires greater attention and protection.

Finally, all these chapters have highlighted how the tradition of talibés is not harmful in itself, but that the practice clears the way for all forms of exploitation in a difficult socio-economic context.

The fifth chapter explained that unstructured interviews were used as the methodology to answer the research question. This leads to the sixth chapter, which provides the main findings of the thesis, regrouped by the three sub-question structuring the overall research question.

Concerning the first sub-question, (1) **key aspects** relating to the experience of talibés in Nouakchott, were identified by the respondents during the interviews. (A) Taking the legal perspective of the UN CRC as the point of departure which establishes a relation between talibés and the Mauritanian government, the interviews' most recurrent topics in this regard were regrouped under specific rights and obligations of the UN CRC. (B) Then, the participants highlighted the main challenges with regards to the protection of talibés in Nouakchott. (C) Finally, the respondents shared their impressions with regards to the evolution of the protection of talibés in Nouakchott, offering a general overview of the issue's evolving aspect (C).

(A) Even though it seemed as if some things were left unsaid during the discussions with talibés and during the interviews with some governmental representatives, the vast majority of the participants from all levels of society recognised the gravity of the human rights abuses perpetrated against certain talibés in Nouakchott. Child labour, sexual exploitation, corporal punishment, the violation of their right to identity or the violation of their right to food were some factors among others demonstrating the seriousness of the issue. Some respondents assimilated their living conditions to worst forms of child labour, which are grave violations of human rights. Furthermore, from the interviews it was found that despite the governmental efforts to combat the issue – such as the implementation of a comprehensive legal and institutional arsenal – the measures remain insufficient regarding the seriousness of the violations inflicted on some talibés in Nouakchott. All levels of society have implied this, even though some elements seemed sensitive due to ambiguous and contradictory responses of governmental representatives. A lack of data or study about talibés, a lack of social programmes to accompany talibés or a lack of judicial investigation, were examples among others which depict a general lack of measures taken by the government to protect talibés so far. However, not only the lack of willingness of the state was mentioned, but also the issue was recurrently represented

as a societal problem. It appears that both the government and society face multiple challenges to effectively protect talibés in Nouakchott.

(B) The most frequent challenges brought up by the respondents are the following: deep-embedded social practices are stronger than politics or laws, child labour is trivialised due to its perception as a form of social education or as a result from extreme poverty, the protected role of marabouts leads to their impunity and hence the vulnerability of talibés, the exploitation of talibés only happens within the Peul community and hence becomes a taboo subject, talibés are confused with street children in a difficult urbanised and globalised context, the porosity of the borders and the lack of control in Koranic institutions increases the risk of the regional Islamic threat and finally, the protection of talibés is difficult in a tensed political context where many human rights defenders are oppressed.

(C) It seems most respondents had the impression that the topic of child and talibé protection was slowly gaining more importance and awareness in the country, whether due to the reinforcement of legal and institutional frameworks to this regards or whether due to the rising deployment of NGO's in the field. However, some said this was due to the increasing vulnerability of these children. This enables us to sense the general dynamics of the protection of talibés in Nouakchott and to move forward based on this evolving aspect.

This first part has attempted to clarify the current situation or experience of talibés in Nouakchott, before moving on to understand the undertaken or planned measures to protect them.

Regarding the second sub-question, international development partners, international and national NGO's and other actors from civil society exposed the 2) **undertaken or planned measures** taken so far to protect talibé. In order to better grasp these (B) actions of protection and see if they are in line with the specific cultural Mauritanian context, an (A) analysis on the sociological notion of childhood was first conducted.

(B) From these discussions appeared a constant ambiguity towards the universality of the UN CRC. Even though the vast majority of the participants made clear that the notion of child well-being was an essential human right, it was still recurrently stated that the difficult socio-economic conditions of the country did not enable to perceive this notion

as a priority. The subjectivity and the social construction of the concept was emphasised, with the emergence of opposing views between cluster 1 and 2, regarding what was considered to lead or to hinder child well-being. Firstly, the idea of modern education and inclusion in a global context versus Koranic education and preservation of Islamic tradition and culture, appeared as a clear opposition. Secondly, the importance for children to stay close with their parents to ensure their protection versus the priority to separate from the parents and develop skills such as independence and sense of responsibility, also frequently came out as a point of debate. Thirdly, the perception of forced begging as child labour or exploitation versus the religious duty and the social form of education, depicted an ambiguity regarding the perception of what can be considered good or bad for children. However, both clusters highlighted the perversion of the traditional quest for food, with the risk of leading to delinquency in the current context. Fourthly, mobility as a risk of human trafficking versus as an opportunity for the child to enjoy a prestigious religious education, regularly came out as a complex subject. Fifth, a child-centered perspective on the individual rights of the child versus a perception of children with obligations towards their community, highlighted the subjectivity of the concept of childhood. In the end, it appeared from the first cluster that the practice of talibés and its degradation hinders child well being, while the second cluster implied that the practice helps child well being. The social construction of childhood has been demonstrated by the above-mentioned opposing views on the well being of talibés in Nouakchott. From this analysis came out that the main challenge remains to find a balance between respecting the local culture, while supporting the transformation of practices harmful to children. This leads to analyse what is done on the ground to protect talibés, taking into account the complex diverse perceptions on childhood.

(A) There seems to be an increasing deployment of international development partners, international and national NGO's and other civil society actors such as religious leaders and academia active in the field of child protection in general and talibé protection in particular. Among their main projects includes the direct assistance to talibés in need, the organisation of trainings to form marabouts on child rights and child protection, the conduction of studies on the evolution of the phenomenon and the identification of vulnerable children, contributing to the rehabilitation of Koranic schools or raising awareness and implement advocacy work. All respondents implied that the consideration

of society's perception about childhood and education has to be taken as a starting point for the measures of talibés' protection to be effective in Nouakchott. They declared that they were working with religious leaders to gain their trust in order for them to act as legitimate social agents of change. Nevertheless, one major challenge came up. Firstly, International Development Partner 1 has been struggling to implement a project which aims to introduce modern courses alongside Koranic courses. This was said to be extremely complex, since addressing the content of the Koranic education as an international development organisation, can be highly sensitive and perceived as a value-based judgement.

Finally, this thesis concludes with the third sub-question, which (3) offers **new avenues for reflections** on how to better accompany talibés in Nouakchott. This is based on the implicit and explicit suggestions of the participants of cluster 1, while taking into account how talibés and children in general are perceived by society.

Firstly, reinforcing the cooperation with marabouts and Koranic schools appeared to be fundamental to almost all respondents. The vast majority of the participants insisted on the importance to establish legal norms in Koranic schools, in order to assure the quality of education, the teaching of a moderate Islam and the eradication of the act of begging. Respondents implied that the state should organise more training sessions with religious leaders, to emphasise the significance and importance of child rights and child protection. All respondents encouraged the effective development of a mixed education system, so that talibés can continue learning essential religious values, while at the same time acquiring necessary skills to insert in a globalised society. To enhance the living conditions in these establishments and assure talibés' rights are protected, financial support in Koranic schools appeared to be primordial.

Secondly, every single participant affirmed the significance of cooperating with religious leaders, who have the capacity to change mentalities towards the deep-embedded practice of talibés. They are able to remind people that Islam prohibits forced begging, protects child rights and forbids practices, which are harmful for human beings. Instead of creating religious taboos around the phenomenon of the exploitation of talibés, religious leaders could rather emphasise how Islam prohibits exploitation and promotes child rights, in order to distinguish what is accepted and what is not towards the practice.

Thirdly, almost every respondent recommended the establishment of legal instruments and political programmes aimed at the specific protection of talibés in the country.

Fourthly, regarding the complexity and multidimensional aspect of the problematic of talibés, the vast majority of the respondents made clear that the coordination within ministries and between all levels of society should be reinforced.

Fifthly, only one interviewed NGO confirmed to be working on a project of communitarian protection, while other respondents implied the important role of communities as endogenous mechanisms of child protection. Regarding the traditional communitarian strength in the Mauritanian context, this type of protection could be focused on to a greater extent. In addition, boosting the community's development in rural areas could create better opportunities for children in a more protected environment, while at the same time reducing their vulnerability, which can be caused by mobility to urban areas.

Finally, all respondents insisted on the importance of conducting further research about the phenomenon of talibés. The urgency and seriousness of the issue must be reminded to the Mauritanian society and government. This is directly linked to this thesis primary motivation, which hopes to encourage future in-depth research about the phenomenon. Identifying the issues represents a first step to break the religious and social taboo around the phenomenon of talibés in Nouakchott, in order to enable their effective protection, while respecting the specific Mauritanian cultural context.

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Interviews

Cluster 1

1. Interview with International Development Partner 1, Nouakchott, 23 April 2018.
2. Interview with International Development Partner 2, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.
3. Interview with International Development Partner 3, Nouakchott, 19 April 2018.
4. Interview with International Development Partner 4, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018.
5. Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.
6. Interview with the Ministry of religious affairs, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018.
7. Interview with the Ministry of education, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.
8. Interview with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.
9. Interview with the Ministry of Labour, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018.
10. Interview with national NGO 1, Nouakchott, 18 April 2018.
11. Interview with national NGO 2, Nouakchott, 27 April 2018.
12. Interview with national NGO 3, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.
13. Interview with national NGO 4, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.
14. Interview with International NGO 1, Nouakchott, 17 April 2018.
15. Interview with International NGO 2, Nouakchott, 25 April 2018.
16. Interview with International NGO 3, Nouakchott, 20 April 2018.

17. Interview with an anonymous anthropologist, Nouakchott, 26 April 2018.
18. Interview with respondent coming from a maraboutic family, Nouakchott, 24 April 2018.

Cluster 2

1. Interview with a former talibé from Senegal, Nouakchott 27 April 2018.
2. Interview with talibés from a mahadra, representing a community from Sierra Leone, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018.
3. Interview with talibés from a mahadra, representing a community from the Gambia, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018.
4. Interview with an assistant of a marabout from the Malian community, Nouakchott, 21 April 2018.

Annex 1: The cluster

Table 1. *Cluster 1*: 18 national and international actors concerned by child protection

	International	National
Development Partners	• International Development Partner 1 and 2 ➤ Protection (1): focus on child protection. ➤ Education (2): has a project of ‘mixed education system’: formal and religious. • International Development Partner 3: focuses on the protection of migrant children and currently has a project of a rehabilitation of a mahadra. • International Development Partner 4: focus on child protection and youth development.	
Government representatives		• Ministry of education ➤ Focus on right to education • Ministry of Justice ➤ Focus on children in conflict with the law. • Ministry of Labour ➤ Focus on the prohibition of child labour. • Ministry of Social Affairs ➤ Focus on protection of child • Ministry of religious Affairs: ➤ responsible for the supervision of mahadras and Koranic schools in Nouakchott.
Non-governmental organisations	• International NGO 1 : protection of ‘children on the move’ in Mauritania. • International NGO 2 and 3 ➤ Juvenile justice (2) : focus on protection of children in conflict with the law. ➤ Protection (3): focus on child protection	• National NGO 1: protection of children in the street and conducted a study on talibés in Mauritania in the 2000s. • National NGO 2: child protection. • National NGO 3 : protection of women and children and is involved in the direct assistance of some Koranic schools. • National NGO 4 : promotion of socio-economic development.
Civil society		• Anonymous respondent coming from a ‘maraboutic’ family • Anonymous anthropologist, who conducted a study about talibés in Nouakchott during the 1990s.

Table 2. Cluster 2: three Mahadras organised by communities in Nouakchott and one former talibé.

Community	The Gambia	Sierra Leone	Mali	Senegal
Koranic school 1	talibés			
Koranic school 2		Talibés		
Koranic school			assistant of a marabout	
Former talibé				former talibé and former assistant of marabout

Annex 2. The questions

Cluster 1

1. What is your role and your responsibility in relation to a group such as talibés?
2. Some speak of the ‘exploitation’ of talibés. Who are these talibés most vulnerable to abuse?
 - What forms of abuse are we referring to?
 - How is their well-being impacted in this situation?
 - What could be the long-term consequences of this situation?
 - Is the government bounded by obligations to protect talibés?
 - How to explain the impunity regarding the exploitation of certain talibés in Nouakchott?
3. Are all Koranic schools supervised in Nouakchott?
 - Does the government subsidise Koranic schools? On which conditions?
 - What could be the risks related to a lack of state control of Koranic schools?
 - Who does currently cover for the talibés? (nutrition, health, shelter...) ?
 - What are the conditions of talibés within these schools and how do these help of hinder the child well-being of talibés?
4. The act of begging is prohibited in the country. How to explain the difficulty to combat ‘begging’ in practice?
5. The concept of ‘mobility’ is emerging in the context of child protection at the regional level. How to explain this current ‘trend’?

6. Human Rights Watch has recently published a report about the violation of the rights of talibés in Senegal.

- Do you think this can contribute to their protection?
- How to explain that HRW talks about the phenomenon in Senegal, but not in Mauritania

7. Have you already established programs aiming at the specific protection of talibés?

Do you know of other programs which did so and do you think they were efficient?

8. According to you, what are the biggest challenges regarding the protection of talibés in Mauritania?

9. According to you, what are the key aspects to address today to protect talibés in Mauritania?

- Who has the legitimacy to bring change?

10. How would you evaluate the evolution of the protection of children and talibés in Mauritania?

Cluster 2

A. Talibés

1. Where are you from?

- Why did you come here? How did you come here? Since when are you here and till when do you plan to stay?

2. Were your parents talibés when they were young?

- Do they know the marabout here?
- When was the last time you saw your parents?

3. Can you describe a typical day at the mahadra?

- What are you learning?
- Are the learning conditions strict?
- Have you ever been sick? Who took care of you?
- What do you eat during the day?
- What do you do during your free time?
- How is your relation with the marabout?

4. What would you like to do later?

5. Are you in contact with other talibés? Is their situation the same as yours?

B. Marabouts

1. How do you select talibés in your school?
 - How many children are currently talibés in your mahadra?
 - Do they all sleep here?
 - Are you in regular contact with their parents?
 - How do the children arrive here?
2. How are the children taken care of? (clothes, health, food, etc.).
3. Do they beg? Why/why not ?
4. How would you describe a typical day at the mahadra?

English abstract

The phenomenon of talibés, children placed with a marabout to learn the Koran, is a traditional West-African form of education, still highly valued by society. However, this practice has degraded in a context of rapid urbanisation, growing poverty and a regional Islamic terrorist threat. In Mauritania, many talibés suffer from child labour, forced to beg in the street, instead of receiving a proper education. Nevertheless, no or little academic research has addressed this issue and no political programme aims at their specific protection. This thesis aims to answer this research gap, not by calling the very practice of talibés into question, but rather by providing an overview of the actions undertaken or planned to better protect talibés in Nouakchott. The research question is the following: **‘which measures of protection have been taken so far with regards to the evolving situation of talibés in Nouakchott?’** Three sub-questions allow answering the main question. What are the key aspects regarding the experience of talibés (1)? Which measures have been undertaken for their protection (2)? What measures can be suggested to better protect them (3)?

Interviews were conducted on the ground with actors concerned by child protection and with talibés and marabouts.

It appears that the government has implemented a comprehensive legal arsenal for child protection, but this remains insufficient. Furthermore, society’s entrenched cultural practices represent significant challenges. This thesis hopes to encourage future research to break taboos around talibés in Nouakchott, to enable their protection, while respecting the specific Mauritanian cultural context.

German abstract

Das Phänomen der Talibé, Kinder die bei einem Marabu leben, der ihnen den Koran lehrt, ist eine traditionelle west-afrikanische Form der Bildung, die immer noch hohe gesellschaftliche Wertschätzung erfährt. Allerdings verliert diese Praxis, im Kontext rapider Urbanisierung, der regionalen Bedrohung durch islamischen Terrorismus, an Bedeutung. In Mauretanien, leiden viele Talibé unter Kinderarbeit. Anstatt dass sie Unterricht erhalten, werden sie gezwungen auf der Straße zu betteln.

Bisher wurde diese Thematik weder wissenschaftlich behandelt, noch wurden politischen Programme geschaffen, die Schutz für die Betroffenen bieten.

Diese Masterarbeit versucht die Lücke in der Forschung zu schließen. Dies geschieht nicht durch die Infragestellung des Phänomens der Talibé, sondern indem eine Übersicht geschaffen wird, welche Aktivitäten bereits unternommen wurden, um die Talibé in Nouakchott besser zu schützen. Die Forschungsfrage lautet: **Welche Maßnahmen zum Schutz der Talibé wurden bisher in Nouakchott unternommen, um die Situation zu verbessern?**

Drei Unterfragen strukturieren die Forschungsfrage: Was sind die Hauptaspekte im Bezug auf die Erfahrungen der Talibé (1)? Welche Schutzvorkehrungen wurden bisher unternommen (2)? Welche Maßnahmen können vorgeschlagen werden, um Talibé besser zu beschützen (3)?

Interviews wurden durchgeführt mit Talibé, Marabus und Akteuren, die sich mit dem Kinderschutz auseinandersetzen.

Die Regierung hat ein umfassendes Regelwerk zum Kinderschutz umgesetzt, aber das bleibt unzulänglich. Des Weiteren stellen die, tief in der Gesellschaft eingebetteten, kulturellen Praktiken eine große Herausforderung dar.

Diese Masterarbeit soll Forschung anstoßen, um die Tabus, die das Thema der Talibé in Nouakchott umgibt, aufzubrechen und ihren Schutz zu ermöglichen, ohne dabei den kulturellen Kontext zu vernachlässigen.