Chapter 7
Citizenship Education in Niger: Challenges and Perspectives

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Abstract This chapter proposes a set of reflections about citizenship education, as well as its anchoring in the multi-ethnic and religious context of Niger, a Sahelian country at the southern border of the Sahara Desert. To address these questions, the chapter first presents the theoretical bases and concepts for analyzing citizenship education in the Nigerien educational system. The second part of the chapter deals with the issue of how ethnic groups in Niger evolve and coexist. On this basis, the third part exposes the issues of citizenship and their implications for the teaching of civic and moral education. The final part discusses potentially useful citizen actions towards improving citizenship education, especially in areas where the Islamist terrorist movement, *Boko Haram*, is active.

Keywords Citizenship education · Ethnic groups · Ethnicity · Citizenship · Citizen actions · *Boko Haram*

Introduction

Today, the issues of peace and lasting stability, which constitute real benchmarks for the respect of human rights and equality around the world, are at the center of debates on citizenship education. As many countries are becoming more and more democratic, there is a growing desire to establish a culture of responsible citizenship throughout the world. This chapter discusses the need to reinforce citizenship education in Niger and its potential for building a more peaceful future. After presenting some theoretical considerations, we will highlight the growing concern about the existing ethnic tensions and the challenges for citizenship education in this multi-ethnic Sahelian country. By taking the concrete example of the threats posed

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by the Islamist movement, *Boko Haram*, we will explore how citizenship education can promote useful citizen actions.

In this respect, citizenship education in Niger offers an interesting case study in which the government is striving to provide access to quality education for all as well as reinforcing security and promoting the values of peace and tolerance in an Islamic context.

Citizenship Education in Niger: A Conceptual Framework

The definitional approach to citizenship places individuals in relation to their position or status in society. From this point of view, a citizen is recognized as a member of a society or state. The political approach goes further and defines citizens as legal members of a State who enjoy rights and duties as well as civic privileges. Citizenship is also one of the components of the social bond that is based on values, civility, public spirit and solidarity. These values give citizenship its full meaning by not limiting it to the exercise of the right to vote. Here, the public spirit refers to the devotion and attachment of citizens to the State and their attachment to societal values and national interests (Barao 2018).

In his work, Simonneaux et al. (2012) speaks of citizenship education as "*la formation de l'esprit civique*" that could be translated as the 'building of a civic spirit'. This approach goes far beyond a narrow vision of civic instruction and incudes fundamental values such as freedom and equality as well as the idea of the collective good. He argues that educational initiatives that aim for attitudinal and behavioral change, such as citizenship education, need to break with traditional educational methods and evaluation system which tend to favor the acquisition of formal knowledge (Simonneaux 2006) rather than building competencies, skills and critical thinking. Although the teaching of formal knowledge on political rights, responsibilities and democratic institutions remains crucial, citizenship education must also seek to push citizens to think critically, question social norms and power relations, and act autonomously.

In this perspective, a report published by the '*Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement*' states that:

> In most countries, civic education is part of the school curricula in one way or another. (…) There is strong evidence that active citizenship education is more effective if students do not just read about civic engagement in textbooks, but have the opportunity to experience it themselves (PNUD 2013, p. 25, translated from French).

In order to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world that integrates new dimensions of participatory and collaborative openness, citizenship education also needs to incorporate ethical and social skills.

Citizenship in Niger: A Historical Perspective

Niger is a pivotal country situated between Arab-Berber and Sudano-Sahelian Africa. It was historically the hub of the main trans-Saharan trade route in which the country played a central role. As a result of its geographical location and history, Niger is considered to be a melting pot in which, for thousands of years, people from very diverse origins have coexisted. Over the course of history, the Nigerien population has forged bonds of solidarity that have given birth to a common culture recognizable in various traditional celebrations (Ministère de l'Education Nationale 1990).

Before colonization radically transformed Nigerien society, the country had a culture of unity and national pride (Ministère de l'Education Nationale 1990). The French colonization disturbed this social order and imposed a colonial system until independence in 1960 when President Hamani Diori, was democratically elected. He exercised power until a military coup overthrew him in 1974. President Seyni Kountché then governed the country until 1987 when he was succeeded by President Ali Saibou who imposed a single-party regime that represented a retrograde step for democracy and citizenship rights (Roufai 2018).

Throughout the country, dissenting voices rose up to demand reforms, freedom, social welfare and development. Following many years of political instability, the transition to multi-party democracy began in 1991 (Elischer and Mueller 2018). Unwilling to thwart the course of history, President Ali Saibou, as a pragmatic man, accepted their main demands and dismantled one-party rule. A new democratic era emerged paving the way for citizen participation, taking great strides towards new forms of living and expression (Roufai 2018).

Education has a key role to play in this democratic transition. In this respect, citizenship education must be reinforced in order to bring about the changes that will facilitate this transition towards true democracy that fosters both social cohesion and national unity (Roufai 2018).

Citizenship and Ethnic Groups in Niger

In Niger, the population is divided into eight major groups: Hausa, Djerma, Tuareg, Peulh, Kanuri, Gourmantché, Arab and Tubu. Niger's wealth of culture and tradition is reflected in this range of ethnic groups and the twenty different languages spoken across the country. Today, with the advent of political parties and a degree of individual freedom due to democracy, people are beginning to understand the role of freedom of expression and participation in the development of Niger. However, high illiteracy rates pose impediments to participatory and deliberative democracy.

It is no secret that in Niger political life has, over the last 20 years, been marked by political turmoil and instability, creating anxiety, frustrations and exasperation

among the population. This resulted in several armed rebellions that have further threatened the unity of Niger (Yahaya 2016).

Although historically the cohabitation between ethnic groups was peaceful and social practices related to travel and internal migrations ensured close relationships characterized by humorous exchanges, inter-ethnic tensions are currently rising. These tensions are fueled by the power-lust of the larger ethnic groups who seek to impose their political will on the country or region and by some members of the intellectual class who stir hatred through inflammatory speeches (Tidjani 2000).

Furthermore, environmental pressures negatively affect the activities of these ethnic groups. For example, struggles over scarce water resources and grazing land have resulted in violence and deadly conflicts between nomadic cattle herders and sedentary crop farmers (Roufai 2015).

Reframing Citizenship Education in the Nigerien Context

Over the last decade, Niger has embarked on wide ranging reforms that have created not only a Ministry in charge of primary education, literacy, promotion of national languages and civic education (known under the French acronym MEP/A/PLN/EC), but also a Department of Civic Education and Training for Citizenship (known under the French acronym DEC/FC).

Currently, the approach to citizenship education in Niger can be defined as patriotic, centered around the 'the love of the fatherland' and a shared sense of belonging. This approach places great importance on the respect of rules and regulations. Yahaya (2016) draws attention to the need to both foster political awareness that implies knowledge of one's rights as a citizen and one's duties to the community and the 'civic spirit' based on the principle of respect. Undeniably, the need to teach the principles of democracy and build national unity in the Nigerien context is evident; however, citizenship education should also integrate a human rights approach based on the values of liberty, dignity, solidarity and tolerance.

Throughout the Muslim world, there has been increasing interest in strengthening education through curricular reforms aiming to "promote pluralism, dialogue, citizenship and co-existence as tools to fight extremism" (Abu-Nimer et al. 2017, p. 154). However, many international organizations and NGOs attempting to implement educational programs, which aim to build peace and coexistence in Muslim countries, have failed to create a sense of local ownership (Abu-Nimer et al. 2017).

> In this context, the Islamic peace-building model supports the claim that Islam is not intrinsically incompatible with nonviolence and peace despite the existence of arguments for conditioned uses of violence in the scripture. Still, it also supports the claim that the inherent values of nonviolence, peace and unity of humankind are often downplayed in favor of more radicalized Islamic discursive practices that have thrived especially in the last two decades due to the increased sense that Islamic identity is under attack (Abu-Nimer et al. 2016, p. 540)

Taking the example of Niger, Abu-Nimer et al. (2017) further argue that it is essential to strengthen values of peace and coexistence within religious education and develop context-appropriate programs, acknowledging that it is "necessary to look in even more depth at specific local contexts on a much smaller level than the national one, given that the situation, customs, culture and conditions vary drastically from one region to the next" (p. 155).

Abu-Nimer and Smith (2016) underline that in an increasingly interconnected world, intercultural and interreligious competences are essential life skills. More efforts are therefore needed to support interreligious peace education and to strengthen teachers' pedagogical competence. In this respect, Abu-Nimer et al. (2017) call for education reform with a major focus on a participatory approach involving teachers and students to study and analyze the values of peace in Islamic texts. Within this perspective, education for peace in the Islamic context relies on reinforcing peaceful messages derived from religious scriptures. In addition, this reform may only be effective if teacher training fosters the awareness of issues related to diversity and equality of religions.

In Niger, there has been a concerted effort to find the best way to develop a citizenship education textbook that teaches about democracy, but also covers important issues such as environmental protection, HIV and STDs, adolescent reproductive health and road safety education. The new themes retained contribute to the training of individuals who are conscious of their responsibilities and those of their family and the community to which they belong while being open to sub-regional and regional integration and, beyond, to globalization.

This new approach to citizenship education also covers three dimensions:

- The respect of the rights to individual liberties and free expression;
- The right to participate in the exercise of power and in public and political life;
- The right to equitable access to education, health and housing and the promotion of solidarity, justice, tolerance and peace.

We can see that although the scope of citizenship education in Niger is not limited to the teaching of concepts such as freedom and democracy, it nevertheless does not address the issues of inter-ethnic tensions and religious minorities. These are very sensitive issues that are reminiscent of atrocities committed in the context of the Tuareg rebellion and conflicts between nomadic cattle herders and sedentary crop farmers. Efforts are therefore needed to consolidate citizenship education in curricula and integrate issues related to inclusion in a democratic and plural society, active participation in the life of a changing community and developments at the African and global levels as well as the fundamental right to food.

The primacy of reforming curricula and strengthening educational systems constitute a key aspect of global and national agendas. What is needed today is for contexts such as Niger to conceive a contextually and culturally appropriate approach towards such reform. In an effort towards achieving this goal, we believe the following questions need to be addressed:

- What political orientations should be given to global citizenship education in Niger?
- What approach should be adopted to integrate global dimensions in citizenship education?
- Which relevant model of citizenship education is required to reached the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Developpement (SDG) 4.7 target?

Citizenship Education in Niger: New Textbook and Approach

Before 1990, there was almost a complete absence of citizenship education textbooks in primary, secondary and higher education. This observation was quickly taken up by the National Institute of Documentation Research and Pedagogical Actions, an institution whose mission is to conduct research and develop methods and strategies for the improvement of the Nigerien educational system. As such, the INDRAP[1] actively participated in the elaboration of the 1988 programs, covering the first 6 years of schooling, and has been responsible for drafting textbooks for these programs. It has also provided a large number of courses for teachers on how to use these programs and textbooks (Sagayar 2011).

The current citizenship education textbook focuses on civic knowledge and the history of Niger as well as respect for the country's institutions and domestic development efforts. It also presents, in a few brief and simple pages, the essential democratic principles and institutions (Sagayar 2011). However, it is important to note the textbook does not encourage a reflection on citizenship and the inherent values of citizenship (Baldé 2008).

The notebook has been designed with the following theoretical content:

- the rights of the citizen to individual freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of association, free choice, protection and access to property;
- the obligations of the citizen (civic discipline, love of the homeland, participation in the development of the Nation).

In April 2014, a Ministerial Order (No. 00035/MEP/A/PLN/EC/SG/DL) was passed stipulating that the *Ministère de l'Enseignement Primaire, de l'Alphabétisation, de la Promotion des Langues Nationales et de l'Education Civique* is responsable for:

- the development and implementation of a national civic education and citizenship training policy;
- the development and promotion of civic education and citizenship training programs in collaboration with the relevant administrations;

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[1] L'INDRAP (Institut National de Documentation de Recherche et d'Animation Pédagogique).

- the coordination and monitoring of civic education and citizenship training activities (République du Niger. Ministère de l'Enseignement Primaire, de la Promotion des Langues Nationales et de l'Education Civique 2014).

It is therefore clear that the new orientations focus on generalities but the appropriate content is still to be defined. There is no indication of performance levels nor the skills or competencies to be developed. In other words, we are presented with intentions that lack a real institutional anchor and do not identify the content elements needed to develop a context-appropriate program for the Nigerien context.

Citizenship Education and Peacebuilding in Contexts of Ethnic Tensions

In Africa, ethnic groups are referred to as majority and minority populations to indicate their numerical status. However, derogatory terms are used by the population to stigmatize some groups because they belong to minorities or due to an unequal distribution of wealth or simply because of their lack of political power.

On a global level, majority and minority power dynamics also play a role. Niger, being a 'minority' state, lacking global economic power and influence, has often been subject to strong external interference. In the field of education, many criticized the imposition and transposition of exogenous educational practices that are neither contextually nor culturally appropriate to the local context.

In the border region with Nigeria and Chad, the Islamist terrorist movement *Boko Haram* refuses all Western-style education which they consider to be sinful. Since 2010, the *Boko Haram* movement has intensified attacks against the population. Schools have been specifically targeted and held to ransom through the mass kidnapping of students. Their armed attacks create chaos in a region already suffering from poverty and social deprivation. In view of these events, citizenship is under pressure and the country is experiencing political instability, socio-economic insecurity, population displacements and food insecurity.

Attacks and military operations have led to a complex emergency situation in the region already suffering from high rates of poverty and of vulnerability. In this context, there is an urgent need to implement emergency actions with regard to education as the violence is keeping millions of children out of school and forcing families into exile (UNICEF Niger 2018).

Faced with this situation, NGOs are working with state structures to devise educational strategies to prevent children and young people joining the *Boko Haram* jihadist movement. In this emergency situation, educational alternatives and support for children and young people have also been set up with pedagogical content focusing on situational awareness and integrating security dimensions with issues of moral social values and human rights.

Yahaya (2016) states that, in many respects, the problem in Niger is not related to the religious texts. It is the partisan and reductive reading of political actors that

has frequently led to institutional blockages, exacerbated by a lack of communication, political immaturity and the radicalization of positions, which in the extreme jeopardize the national interest. In this respect, Yahaya (2016) recommends acting on two levels:

1. Political turmoil to avoid
The non-respect of the principles of democratic life; The "democratic deficit" and the petty opportunism that leads political actors to unholy alliances endangering the functioning of the State; The lack of consensus between the different political and social actors; Bankruptcy of the political system, resulting in destruction rather than construction.
2. National interests to prevail
Respect for democratic and republican principles; The ability to promote dialogue; The development and anchoring of citizenship culture in the social, cultural and political environment of Niger; The ability to transcend individual interests.

Supporting Citizen Actions Against *Boko Haram*

For the children living in crises-affected regions, it is important to develop citizenship education approaches to meet the children's educational needs in emergencies and promote a more peaceful future (UNICEF 2019).

For this reason, policy makers, teachers and educators should reflect on:

- How citizenship education can encourage the dynamics between human rights, democracy and civil society.
- How education can effectively promote democratic principles and foster peaceful societies.
- How leaners can lean to prioritize dialogue.

Actions must be taken and framed in the logic of promoting citizenship education. Thus, the following avenues may be explored by empowering learners to become active and responsible citizen, aware of their rights and duties, and committed to building peaceful societies.

On an international level, initiatives have been proposed to face the *Boko Haram* jihadists' threat in the Chad Basin, in particular Nigeria, Benin, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, and initiatives have been announced:

- At the security level: the strengthening of cooperation between the States of the Chad Basin, as part of the exchange of information;
- At the diplomatic level: a request to the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, to submit a report on regional and international efforts against

Boko Haram, the establishment of a regional force to fight against this terrorist movement.

Conclusion

As in the case of Niger, citizenship education is a topical issue around the world. In this chapter, we have explored the issue of citizenship education as a condition of peace and stability in Niger.

The challenges for citizenship education in Niger are both national and global. On the national level, citizenship education programs need to build on the skills and competences, which support participatory democracy. In addition, the only way to promote deliberative democracy in Niger is through quality education and a sustained fight against illiteracy. On the global level, citizenship education must aim to build peace and coexistence in a context of ethnic tensions exacerbated by environmental pressures and climate change. In order to ensure community ownership and legitimacy, citizenship education must adopt a contextually and culturally appropriate approach.

If global citizenship education (GCE) is to be successfully implemented in Niger, it must avoid being perceived as an exogenous concept and an external intrusion, it must involve local stakeholders and Qur'anic schools. Thereby promoting values of peace in citizenship and religious education.

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