



Community Voices for Peace and Pluralism WhatsApp Workshop

Seminar

Series 11

Conversation with Assalama Sidi (Niger)

Overview

The Community Voices for Peace and Pluralism - Africa (CVPP) is a non-profit network of women professionals providing services in preventing, transforming and solving violent conflict, including ethnic and religious conflicts around the world. CVPP also builds capacities through a Peace and Pluralism approach, equipping women to contribute to preventing, transforming and solving violent conflict in decision making roles. We offer highly effective consulting services to advance global peace and security.

The WhatsApp Workshop Seminar Series began in the wake of the Global COVID-19 Pandemic. The Pandemic has hit the world's vulnerable and most marginalized hardest. These are the people members of CVPP work with. Members of CVPP decided to meet this unprecedented challenge by speaking to each other every week. Sharing stories, learning new skills from each other all through the WhatsApp platform, to enable reach to those of our members without access to facilities such as Zoom or Skype. To retain as much originality as possible, the conversations are transcribed without changes in the way they are spoken.

Seminar Series Convener and Rapporteur: Selina M. Kwamini

Presenter: Assalama Sidi, from Niger. Assalama is West and Central Africa Regional Director, Oxfam

Participants: Members of Community Voices for Peace and Pluralism Africa

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This Seminar Series is available through the Community Voices for Peace and Pluralism website, <https://peaceandpluralism.org/>. The publication of this Series was made possible through the voluntary work of members of Community Voices for Peace and Pluralism.

Selina Kwamini: Introduction

Hello family. I hope your weekend is coming on well wherever you are in the various parts of our land Africa and the diaspora.

As promised Assalama has recorded her audios for our hearing and understanding. I have had the opportunity to listen to them. . And I can't tell you how interesting and rich they are. You just have to listen to them by yourself. 🙏🙏😊

As we were informed, she can't be live with us now due to circumstances beyond her/our control.

However, she's eagerly waiting to respond to your questions at her earliest convenience possible.

So, let's get the conversation going.

Thank you for your continued support and understanding.

Assalama Sidi, Niger: Hello comrades, this is Assalama Sidi, regional director for Oxfam in West and central Africa, prior to holding this new position I was the country director of Niger about 3 years. So, the regional director position is quite new for me. I am sorry I can't have direct interaction with you for this presentation because I have unforeseen trip tomorrow

from near me, the capital city to Zinder out East. It is about 12 hours by car. Wish me good luck. This is a personal trip and I have taken few days off to be able to make it. I have already sent my bio and I am sure you've all seen it. So, I'm not going to talk about my background experience and interests.

I will talk about my work later but let us start with the country, Niger itself. Anytime I travel around the world and say I'm from Niger, people tell me, "Nigeria" and I have to correct them that it's not Nigeria but Niger. What I find sad is that even in Africa there are a lot of people who do not know Niger. When you say Niger, people think about the giant-Nigeria. So, we are kind of diluted, absorbed by Nigeria. For those who do not know Niger, if you take the African map, look at the West part of it, Niger is a vast country located in the Sahel region i.e. West Africa. It is a very big country. It is 1.268M km². The 2/3 of the country in the north, boarded with Libya and Algeria is actually occupied by the Sahara Desert. Niger became independent from France in 1960 and experienced single party and military rule up to 1991. Currently the president is Mahamadou Issoufou. He was elected in April 2011 following the coup and re-elected to a second term in 2016. I mentioned the coup since Niger has experienced 4 different coups since independence. So, we are a little bit of champions in coup d'états. But thank God the situation is quite stable, for about 9 years now. The population is about 23 million people. A fast-growing population with one of the highest fertility rates per woman as you've seen maybe in some reports. The fertility rate is 7.6 children per woman. This is quite high and might be the highest in the world. The population is comprised of 9 ethnic groups: Hausa, Zarma, Fulani, Arab, Tuareg, Kanuri, Tubu and Gurma. Thank God these populations interact peacefully. There are no inter-tribal conflicts you know as witness in some African countries unfortunately. So, people are quite peaceful, interact and get along together for years. The religion is predominantly Islam which constitutes about 99% of the religions. There are also Christians and Animists. The official language is French.

Niger is a very rich country. Its soil is blessed with mighty minerals like uranium, gold, coal, iron, limestone, phosphate and cement. Niger has also been exporting oil since 2011. Uranium was one of the most important mineral exploitation and exportation from Niger. Actually, Niger was the 4th world producer of uranium few years ago. The exploitation of all these minerals as I have sighted contributed to increase the GDP like in 2010 it rose to 5.55B USD. In 2012 Niger's GDP grew by an estimated 13.1% in real time which was incredible. However, despite these impressive figures I am giving you, poverty still reigns. 60% of

Niger's population still live below the poverty line of 1\$ per day. And about 80% live below 2\$ per day. That is the huge paradox the country is facing.

Niger is also one of the poorest countries of the world with minimum government services and insufficient funds to develop its resource base. It is ranked last in the world on the UN development programmes human development index for about 3 consecutive years. Its economy is not well diversified and depends primarily on agriculture which accounts for 40% of its GDP. However, agriculture has also been affected for decades now by recurrent protracting draughts. Niger is a draught prone country and doesn't rain well thus affecting the GDP. Despite significant efforts by the Niger government in the past decade to reduce the country's poverty rate, it still remains high at 41.4% in 2019. This is very recent and it is affecting about 9.5 million people.

In addition to drought as I have mention earlier because of climate change, we've been experiencing flooding. Unfortunately, when the rain comes, they are either short i.e. they start and finish before expected or they come in abundance creating floods that damage crops and sometimes kill the cattle. Niger has in recent years also been grappling with significant refugee influx fleeing conflicts in their regions particularly Nigeria and Mali. For example, in April 2019, the UNHCR registered 221.67 refugees and around 200 displaced persons mainly from Diffa which is the border of Chad and Maradi which is the border of Nigeria. Refugees from Mali flee internal conflicts, attacks from jihadists and non-state armed people. In general, when they flee these conflicts and attacks, they come to Burkina Faso and Niger. On the other side of the border with Nigeria, they flee attacks from Boko Haram. In addition to these refugees, the IDPs are also generally threatened to be killed by Boko Haram in that area in the neighborhood of Chad and Nigeria. They leave their villages and sometimes we witness thousands of households leaving their communities to come and stay in IDP camps.

When I try to foresee a middle term outlook some key factors are likely to undermine Niger's economic performance. Of course, I'll start with CoronaVirus. Though the country is not experiencing severe cases because we are still under 1200 cases, the global COVID-19 pandemic will strain Niger's economy for sure. This is mainly due to increased spending on health and social assistance services for households in mitigating the impact of Corona. The pandemic will also have adverse impact on international trade and foreign investments. The 2nd factor and one of the most concerning one is the deteriorating security conditions that poses some huge risk on the economic growth and public finances. The security situation has

been worsening. I'm sure some of you heard about the terrible attack about a few weeks ago. It was on August 9th when humanitarian workers from an international NGO and their tour guide were killed. This horrible incident unfortunately is showing that humanitarian workers are a target for non-state armed groups. Another factor is the lowering oil price. It is decreasing. This affects the real sector; public finance and balance of payments.

As I mentioned, in 2011, the country started exploiting oil. Unfortunately, the prices started fluctuating all the time, decreasing mostly. Niger also remains vulnerable to climate shocks and fluctuations in global non-oil commodity prices. I've mentioned it, floods, draught and heat are some of the direct impact of climate change that the country has been experiencing for more than a decade now.

Let me now talk about my favorite subject; gender inequalities. More than 50% of the population is women. Unfortunately like many African countries, the majority of the poor people too is women. In this country, women don't have the same access to resources, skills and opportunities as men starting with education. Girls are not all the time sent to school though we are in 2020, almost 2021. If you go to very remote areas in this country, there are a lot of communities who would rather send their sons to school than their daughters. A lot of them don't believe in girl's education. They would rather have their girls married, create a family and raise children than stay years and years in school. I think this is common in many African countries.

The sad thing is that even when girls are sent to school, sometimes they are just taken out. Despite the fact that they are smart, hardworking and have good grades, you see the parents taking their daughters out of school and marrying them off. About health, unfortunately, access to contraception is still an issue. When it comes to reproductive health or sexual reproductive rights, in very remote and rural areas, sometimes women don't have access to these contraceptive methods. And when they do, they don't necessarily have the choice. The husband has to agree before they take any contraception. There are also a lot of beliefs about contraception. If you combine girls being married as early as 15 years and you know they don't have all the access to contraception. Logically is understandable that the fertility rate of the women is one of the highest in the world; 7.6 children per woman. Access to health facilities is not obvious which means even when they become pregnant, they also face a lot of birth complication and can be fatal for them sometimes. In terms of access to land, women

don't have all the time access to their own land. They can access the family land but owning it is a dream far from becoming a reality for women in Niger.

When it is about taking loans, women don't have access to them as much as they want. Women don't necessarily have the access to loans, when they are able to access them, they sometimes do not have the warranty that they can take to micro-finance institutions or the bank to be able to undertake small business entrepreneurship or even grow crops or do anything to be financially autonomous. These are just few examples I am sharing and I know they are common to a lot of African countries. This shows how inequality often hinders women development in this country because of their gender and their reproductive role. They are all the time behind in terms of accessing opportunities and skills.

Now let us talk about myself or a little bit of my work. I think I have put a lot of information about myself in my biography. I'm not going to repeat that. I have been working for about 2 decades in several positions and organizations. Mostly all my work has been done in international organizations. I have had the opportunity to work for the United States Peace Corp for about 12 years in various positions. I'm not going to talk about everything I have done, it'll take hours. However, I'll talk about some of the things that I really enjoy doing and I am passionate about and committed to. Just to talk a little bit about myself, what I want you to know is that for about 3 years, during my primary school, I was the only girl child in school. It happened that my father was the teacher. Nobody in the community wanted to send their daughters to school. So, I was alone. In fact, at the time, even the boys weren't sent to school. Community members were almost forced to send their children to school.

I remember feeling so lonely while at school but trying to adopt to the situation easily. I played soccer and went hunting with my boy friends. I don't know if it is the right word. We were all friends and so young. It didn't feel like I am a girl and they are boys. It was natural and we were all friends. I did exactly what they did. I think I missed having girl friends in the school, play with dolls and other girls' plays. I think somehow, I grew up facing a lot of challenges. 1st being the only girl in school pushed me to do everything the boys did. Pushed me to show unconsciously that somehow, I was their equal. I was very young of course but it kind of shaped me to be comfortable wherever I go. I don't care that there are 1000 men in a crowd and I am the only woman. I don't care that if I am the only leader in the room with thousands of men. **That childhood condition shaped me a lot. I used to say during**

conferences that I was the only girl in my entire school. In turn people are quite impressed and find it strange but that is the reality.

The fact that I was the only girl in primary school, I asked myself why all the girls are not attending school. When in junior school or high school, I had seen girls missing school at the start of the school year in October. When school starts, there are always girls missing. Then among students when we discussed, we learnt that those girls are no more coming to school because they were forced to get married. And some of them were really smart and good friends. It broke our hearts. It personally broke mine to know that these girls were taken out of school against their will and being married off. I assumed that they were being forced to marry because the previous year they were smart and having great scores. I think all these elements in my childhood and teenage life kind of put the seeds of feminism, girl/women rights and activism in my mind. I was asking myself a lot of questions about why there are not a lot of girls in school. Why am I the only girl in school? Why are they not coming back to school? Why are they married? These are the kind of questions that I was asking myself without answers.

It is only when I became an adult that I understood why all this is happening, social norms, gender roles and discrimination. I think when I got the opportunity to work, my desire was really trying to work not only to get the answers to the questions I had in my childhood, but trying to see how I can fill those gaps so that no more girls are taken out of schools when they still want to continue their studies. As many girls as possible, not to say that all the girls in the country get opportunities to attend and succeed in school.

When I got my first job opportunity, I started drafting projects that empower girls. To ensure that not only girls attend school but that they also get support that they need from their teachers, community members and parents to continue with their studies. I have worked a lot in that area... one of the things I really enjoyed in addition to creating opportunities for the girls to succeed in school, is also to create a network with rural and remote girls and women professionals. Sometimes we organize conferences that bring girls from remote areas and link them to exceptional women e.g. women judges, doctors, engineers and lawyers etc. the idea behind it was to inspire those girls because in the communities, they don't see women who succeeded in schools. The parents don't see women who've succeeded in schools. So, unless they see, they meet, they talk to those women, for them only men succeed in school. That was one the first activities I've done, that I still remember and enjoy. I do remember meeting

some of those girls who have succeeded and in becoming professionals working in civil service.

This desire, this commitment, this passion to fighting against poverty and discrimination. The desire to promote and protect women's rights is actually the key driver that pushed me to work with international organizations to promote women rights. I started with Plan International where everything they do is about promoting children rights with a special emphasis or focus on girls' rights. And especially around fundamental rights; protection, education, health and participation. And then now my work with Oxfam. In Oxfam we strongly believe that the power of the people will be the key driver to tackling poverty. We also believe poverty is human made. It is a consequent of human action be it on climate change, be it from governors, policy makers or all types of discrimination and abuse. That is why we often talk about fighting the injustice of poverty. When we mention the injustice of poverty, it is different from poverty itself. It means tackling the root causes of this poverty. In my personal job i.e. my current position, I am more engaged in strategic orientation to the countries.

However, for the last 3 years' experience, I have done work that I am really proud of. Some of it includes working with remote women who can't speak in public. Training them in communication skills, advocacy and their rights. This is so that they know that they can claim their rights and they are capable of voicing their concerns, wishes and expectations. We did this with a local NGO which partnered with us on this job. In short, these women were not only empowered enough but they in turn were able to influence their community leaders and municipality to get lands. For the 1st time ever in that area, women became land proprietors and owners. This is just an example of one of the greatest activities we've done. The other is about policy making. We worked a lot with partners. Most of the activities we implement, we do them through local partners. As an international NGO we believe in strengthening local capacities. So, whatever we do, we try partnering with local community-based organizations so that they get the skills and feel empowered to take and charge their own development issues and advance their own agenda.

We are able to influence the government to fairly share the outcomes of uranium productions to regions which should be getting their fair share. There is a policy in the mining code that says that 15% of the income from uranium production should go to the regions where the uranium is exploited. This is also written in Niger's constitution. When this 15% amount is

transferred to the regions and municipalities, they should be using it to increase access to social services such as education, health and agriculture. So, we've undertaken a study to find out if the government is transferring this amount to the regions and municipalities which should get it. If the municipalities and regions which get it, invest it to increase access to education, health and agricultural services. If the community members are aware that this amount should be used for that or if they simply know of its existence. The study showed that for some regions, the government transferred the amount once. For some it was irregular. It is like they get one year over 4. And for others they never get their fair share. So, after getting the results, we disseminate the findings of the report to all the community levels in all regions. You can guess it created such an interest from mayors, regional and community leaders who started claiming their fair share. Believe me by the end of the 2nd year, all these regions got their fair share. Recently, in one of the regions, the he municipality for the 1st time got 3.3B to their account. This is a complete impact of holding the government into account when they state things into in the constitution, some policy or other important documents. Community members often don't even know the existence of such statements.

That is how Oxfam and its local partners work to ensure transparency budgeting in the area of mining in general or the extractive industries. I was really proud of this. We also work with young people. In this country above 65% of the population is young i.e. under 18. This is one of the greatest strengths of this country. Unfortunately, there is a high unemployment rate. Thank God a lot of young people now are being interested in entrepreneurship. So about 2 years ago, we also worked with a very young youth led organization to ensure that they drive their development of the new youth entrepreneurship strategy. That has been a real success because the young people took everything, did the analysis, hired a consultant, developed the workshop and then came up with a brand-new entrepreneurship strategy for the country and got it approved for the council of ministers. These are some of the achievements I'm proud of. Of course, as a Country Director in the past 3 years, my role was more of giving guidance, inspiring my colleagues and supporting them. I guess that is what Country Directors do in general. But because I strongly believe in some of the projects, sometimes I also put my hands in the work. Because I like doing it. I believe in it. So, I will leave my office go to the community level and support my team. I think that encourages the team and the community that their welfare is important to me.

So, working to influence government and strengthen civil society organizations is not easy in countries like Niger. Sometimes there is shrinking of civic space and you can see civil society

organization activists being arrested., taken to jail. Sometimes even our organizations being targeted creates a lot of tension between us and the government. It does require a lot of risk taking and evidence finding when you are doing this influencing activity.

When you are advocating for people's rights, one of the most important things we do is making sure that all our statements are based on real facts. To get those real facts you really need to do strong assessment studies and get all the evidence in due time so as to influence policy makers. This is just to say that of course nothing is perfect. It needs some risk taking, commitment and clear communication. This is so that the government both at central and local level understand the mission of the organization and its way of working. It is more challenging if you are from the country because the context here is really politicized. People will sometimes think you are from the majority or opposition. This is how politics has completely affected the context. No matter how objective you are sometimes people think you are from one side or the other depending on what you do, your behavior or what you say. That is a very strong challenge. We have to be cautious, aware and know what to do, how to do it and where and with whom.

Barrister Gladys Mbuya, Cameroon: Many thanks for the recording Assalama

Salim Musa, Nigeria (responding to Selina Kwamini): Thank you Celina for this. We will listen and send in our questions and contributions. Thank you Assalama for painstakingly recording the audios.

Alice Nderitu, Kenya: Many thanks Assalama

Alice Nderitu, Kenya (responding to Selina Kwamini): Many thanks Selina

Halima Yoman, Nigeria: Thank you so much Celina and Assalama for the presentation

Dr. Mandiedza Parichi, Zimbabwe : Thanks Selina and Assalama for the insights

Ambassador Mpeo. Lesotho: Will definitely find listen and revert

Florence Mpaayei, Kenya: Thanks, Assalama and Celine. We will send our comments/questions.

Dr. Dorothy Goredema, Zimbabwe: Many thanks Assalama. Very interesting and important issues raised there.

Halima Yoman, Nigeria: I Listened to the audio presentation and it was okay but my question is

1. Were there any challenges faced when you invited the women to attend a conference?
2. Can we also say that early marriage is a contributing factor to the reason why women could not enrol in schools?

Thank you.

Zelpha Ingasia, Kenya: Thank you Assalama for the presentation. Thank you, Selina, for availing it...

Questions:

Are there grass root efforts for women to gain some economic freedom (autonomy) such as small groups loaning and savings? Or revolving funds?

In Kenya we call it chama where a group of women as few as two or five engage in revolving funds where we call it merry go round, all women contribute some money, one woman at a time goes with it and she returns it in turns.

Are women entirely forbidden to own property and livestock. Or there are some few reservations?

For example, in some rural parts of Kenya, women are not allowed to own cattle but can own smaller versions like goats, sheep and poultry.

How are the policies in regards to girl child education? Do they favour the girls staying in school?

Assalama Sidi, Niger:

Good morning friends, let me take advantage of the internet connection I have today to respond to some of your questions. I have seen 4 so far 2 from Halima. The question about women facing challenges when we invite them for the conferences. Answer is no. There was no challenge for these women to attend the conference because we did respect their traditional rules. Knowing their cultural and traditional protocol, we always comply with them to make sure they are attending. If you are inviting girls for example, we need to make sure their parents agree. The teachers agree if she is a student. If you are inviting married women, she is in charge of asking permission from her husband to be able to attend. Sometimes when she really needs the conference organisers to speak to her husband, they do so. But in general, there are no challenges in attending such conferences. About girls' marriages being an obstacle to their studies? Yes! It's a vicious circle.

Girls don't attend school in very remote villages and rural areas. This is because a lot of parents still don't believe in girls' education. They don't see outcomes and advantages of sending daughters to school. So that is why they don't send them. In their practices, values and beliefs a girl should just get married, take care of the household and raise her children correctly. Because of all these beliefs, even those sent to school have a real challenge continuing. Their families don't support and encourage them. As soon as they get to age 12-15, the likelihood of them taken out of school to be married off is high.

It is true the government and a lot of NGOs are working very hard to stop this practice. I mentioned in my biography, one of the regions was actually in 2 districts that we worked with and were able to stop early marriages. At least for the 3 years there were zero cases. But that took a lot of energy, efforts influencing, working with local partners and leaders and building the confidence of the girls themselves to be able to voice themselves. The last element is not obvious considering how conservative some of the communities could be. This is to say there is a ray of hope there's ray of hope on the good practices the NGO are doing here and the government doing some efforts in that area. Though for the government it's more theoretical. They've great policies and strategies but implementing isn't happening.

To the questions asked by my friend Zelpha. The revolving fund or the groups loaning exists in Niger for more than 30 yrs. at least. The international NGO that started training women in such loaning groups is CARE International. I remember at least 20 years ago, visiting some of the groups and seeing the women practice such initiative. Yes, it's happening in Niger and a lot of women are taking advantage of it. One thing I enjoyed seeing from this women loan groups is not only their financial autonomy or that they would get wealth from saving a small amount, taking loans and implementing income generating activities and boosting their income. The thing I most enjoyed is really the empowerment that goes with these saving and loaning groups. I have seen a lot of women being very local and respected within their communities. Above all I have seen women be interested in politics and getting elected at their municipality because of these loaning and saving initiative. I found it fantastic that the training they got is above the importance of saving and loaning and how you can make income generating activities or the financial skills they can get. It is really about the power, the confidence that they get. Excuse me I am passionate about women coming from scratch to become confident and be vocal to the extent of deciding to be part of decision-making process within their communities.

Now about owning property or livestock, in fact, there is no explicit law or practices or rule at the central or local level that forbids women from owning property and livestock. **Allow me to say that in some of the ethnic groups that are herders like the Fulani and the Tuaregs in this country, the majority of the cattle within the household is owned by women.** Of course, this is exceptional in their culture. How they manage household property or income or livestock is different from the agriculture side. Talking about agriculture side, the farmers, it's difficult to see women owning land when it comes to land access, the majority of the land is owned by men. This is coming from cultural values and practices. The beliefs or practices I would say that men own land because women are always called to be married, leave their families and join other families. Consequently, a lot of beliefs give more chances and privileges to men. They are considered the household chiefs and owners and that they are the ones who have the duty to take care of the entire family and nourish it. The belief is that if women owned lands, the risk for the family to lose it is high. This is because if she is married, her husband and children can also access the land to an extent that the 1st family will lose it. These are some of the practices and beliefs that don't allow men to gain land.

About girls' education and policies protecting them, there are actually some very good policies in the country. The question isn't about having policies but implementing and complying to them. about girls' education, I remember in 2012 there was an attempt to pass a law at the National Assembly sanctioning parents, teachers and anybody who would hinder girls' education. But that law has never passed. Because of religious influence, the national deputies i.e. senators' equivalents, have never accepted it to pass despite of all the rational arguments behind it and many people supporting it starting from the president.

The main reason the policy hasn't passed is due to religious influence. Religious leaders have such an influence especially on the National Assembly. When they don't agree on something, it is rare that that thing succeeds. The parliament has strong relationship with these leaders. They are part of their electorate. However, there is a paper stating that when parents take their daughters out of school before 18, or marry them off, they will be sanctioned. The education officials should watch out so that when it happens in any part of the country, they are reported to the right civil officials and get sanctioned. However, it's still happening. You can see girls getting out of school, influenced or forced to get married.

In general, those who really implement the policies are not the government officials. The International and local NGOs and community-based organisations are the ones implementing

the policies. Thank God I have seen a lot of progress in the areas because of these organisations fighting early marriages. It is happening. we are seeing a lot of results. In my biography I mentioned one of the greatest achievements I am proud of is the implementation of one of our projects called 'Marriage no Child Play'. Well in two districts for the four consecutive years we have not seen any early marriage. Though it is heart-breaking, we have reasons to be hopeful. There is a ray of hope. However, we would like more NGOs and the government itself act despite political consideration or influence from religious leaders. This is so that the girls in the country freely enjoy their education and freedom or liberty to choose whom they want to marry. It is something that we will see. May be not in our generation but I'm sure with more and more people being conscious, and stakeholders taking it seriously. In the upcoming years we will reach zero cases of early marriage in this country.

Salim Musa, Nigeria: Thank you Assalama for the brief on Niger republic and highlights on some of the challenges in the Sahel region. My question is; the Sahel region is no doubt going through some turbulence as a result of many insurgencies in the countries that made up the Sahel region. Is there any concrete plan to marshal out any plan to address the challenges in the Sahel by Niger Republic? This is in view of the influx of IDP's into Niger from Mali and Nigeria.

Assalama Sidi, Niger: Hi Salim. To respond to your question, like most countries affected by this insecurity due to the insurgency of non-state armed groups including Boko Haram and Islamic State, Niger's first initiative was military. They decided to do reinforcement of military capacity to put an end to hostilities caused by these armed groups. To do this, several people have been moved from the areas of Lake Chad to allow military operations to take place. Without causing collateral damages. They have established a state of emergency in the area and prohibited e.g. circulation of motorcycles and the trade of paper. There is an important trade around Lake Chad area known as paper trade. The area between Niger and Nigeria is very well known for the quality and quantity of the red paper they produce. The Nigerian government decided to prohibit the trade of this paper seeing that it helps Boko Haram increase their income. But following the resilience of the combatant Boko Haram, they realised that military solution alone would not put an end to this hostility. But prior to that international NGOs and other civil societies have played an important role in advocacy. They have demonstrated that on the contrary, the prohibition of movement and marketing of paper can only worsen the situation.

Oxfam has even implemented a study shared with evidences that the prohibition of paper trade is increasing the risk of having young people join the other side. of course, young people are frustrated and can be easily enrolled into Boko Haram. It has strong campaigns in the region to enrol young people. When G-5 SAHEL was formed to fight terrorism, they also considered the development component as an important alternative that could dissuade the population from being enrolled. One of the key challenges in the area, there is huge complicity between communities and Boko Haram. Sometimes, when they see the combatants arriving, and since some of them are their children, they do not denounce them. So, because of the influence of international NGOs and the limits of military solutions, the G-5 decided to have development component in its strategy.

Niger has revised its budget to allocate a significant portion to strengthen military capabilities to the extent of reducing the parts that go to basic service such as education and health. One initiative consisted of welcoming repentant Boko Haram fighters and give them another chance to gain skills that will help them have a decent life. They were about 200 who were welcomed, trained and given opportunities to undertake income generating activities. Thanks to the support of a lot of donors.

My last point is about international NGOs, of course they were not left in-active in this area. They work within the framework of social cohesion of strengthening the resilience of population through a lot of activities such as agriculture and training of young people in entrepreneurship. There are a lot of NGOs working in Diffa right now supporting young people from that area to have all choices rather than joining Boko Haram and continuing with the horrible hostilities. However, solutions within both the framework of development and military have not yielded success in expected results. As you all know from different media, attacks, kidnappings, unfortunately, those of women and children continue to be observed in the area. There have been a lot of initiatives taken including development, military, cooperation between G-5 SAHEL including support they are getting from other governments e.g. Germany, U.S, and France. However, despite the support the issue still continues. This is my answer, I hope I have given the expected one. I'm still struggling with internet but let me know if you clearly get me. Thank you

Salim Musa Omar, Nigeria: Thank you very much for this informed perspective. The audio is very clear. 🙏

Assalama Sidi: feel free to send in your questions. I am happy to attend anytime the internet allows it.

Zelpha Ingasia, Kenya: Thank you Assalama. Thank you very much

Ambassador Kamara, Liberia: Thank you sisters Assalama and Selina. I will listen and send questions that I may have.

Alice Nderitu, Kenya: Thank you Assalama for a great presentation. I liked how well you weaved the story of Niger the country, your personal story and your work. Niger's position in the human development index is worrying. This remains Africa's paradox - countries rich in minerals that don't benefit the citizens.

I liked the work being done on ensuring locals benefit from the Uranium.

I have also been following news on Niger and was sorry to see on Aljazeera a few days ago reports of 250,000 displaced by floods. So sorry about all these challenges.

Please here are a few questions.

1. What motivated your parents or guardians to keep you in school when all other girls were taken away and married off yet they scored good marks and did well in school? How did your parents withstand the peer pressure not to marry you off? How did you cope alone as a girl in school with all your friends married off?
2. What are the regional bodies doing about the current insurgencies threatening the Sahel?
3. One of the most scaring aspects experienced in the Sahel is the steady advance of the Sahara Desert, as it increases its geographical spread mainly due to climate change. What initiatives are in place in the Sahel to combat this threat?
4. When you narrated that you have to ask husbands for permission for wives to attend meetings and workshops, I wondered whether the wives are allowed to vote during elections. Are they?

5. A final question would be on the history of coups and the issues you listed which for a conflict analyst provide indicators of violence. Do you think there is a probability of what happened in Mali happening in Niger (you don't have to answer question no 5 if it's too sensitive)?

Assalama Sidi, Niger: Hello Alice. To answer to your 1st question which I thought I had mentioned it but maybe not. My father was a teacher. He actually taught me the first 3 primary school grades where I was the only girl in school. Because of that reason, there was no social pressure. My father being aware of education benefits, he was my first support and believed in me strongly. He believed in the fact that I can succeed and therefore I got his and my mum's support.

For your 2nd question, when we think about regional bodies helping to tackle incidences of security in SAHEL region, the key body is the G-5 SAHEL. For those who do not know the G-5 SAHEL, in 2014, the head of states of the region including the one of Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Mali and Burkina-Faso decided to create intergovernmental cooperation framework in order to provide regional response for various challenges. One of the structures launched by the G-5 in the field of security is the G-5 SAHEL Force created in 2017 by the 5 countries. Later they also decided to have a development component as I mentioned in my presentation. Now about the regional bodies, the only one I can think about is ECOWAS. I know when ECOWAS meets, in general they always have in the agenda the SAHEL situation. For instance, the summit held in Burkina Faso in 14th September 2019, the ECOWAS leaders pledged 1B to tackle terrorism. The plan was that it would be funded from 2020-2024. This is one of the most important action that they came up with. However, we know that funding is coming in slowly even prior to COVID-19 pandemic. So, i don't know exactly they are in terms of the progress of funding. But based on unconfirmed sources, the funding is coming slowly. Those are the only 2 regional bodies I could think about.

About the desertification question and what SAHEL and Niger do to combat or fight it, in SAHEL one of the greatest initiatives since 2007 is the Great Green Wall. Many of you might have heard it. In fact, the Great Green Wall is not only a SAHEL initiative. It was supposed to be Great Green Wall that crosses Africa from East to the West, from Djibouti to Senegal. It is not just about growing trees but also giving opportunities in agriculture to women and youth through different initiatives.

What the government of Niger is doing to fight desertification? There are a lot of initiatives implanted for decades. In fact, as far as fighting desertification is concerned, since early 1970s there is a huge arsenal of institutional texts, plans that is even a law in the constitution that states why it is important to fight desertification, it being one of the country's greatest threat. This legal arsenal demonstrates the state's concern to regulate the management of environmental and natural resources as well as transfer skills and responsibilities to grass-root communities. The great thing is that communities at grass-root are also involved in all initiatives to fight against desertification. They are really in the heart of it. However, the application of these texts suffers often numerous shortcomings particularly due to lack of additional text or absence of a consulted institutional framework for monitoring and evaluation or sometimes even lack of knowledge. For instance, a programme framework was adopted in 1972 by the government to fight desertification. It was revised and updated in 1991 to serve as national policy and strategy in fighting against desertification and also advocate for integrated approach and increased accountability for all stakeholders.

One of the greatest initiatives is that during Independence Day on August 3rd which is also known in Niger as Tree Planting Day, millions of trees are planted across the country on that day. In addition to institutional framework, just to give concrete examples of activities such as in the area of soil defence and restoration. There is management of resources such as protection of certain forests, tree nurseries and regenerating of nature. Another area is the energy policy to reduce the consumption of wood for domestic needs. Since 2013 there is a mass campaign encouraging use of gas for domestic needs.

I think the government has also taken into account a lot of elements of that politics so that domestic gas becomes affordable. Another important element is as I have stated, the community involvement in raising awareness of the risks associated with desertification. There has been a lot of training including in school curriculum. But all this is full of dilemmas. One of them is the social food security in the context where climate conditions are unfavourable. The other dilemma is the search of a rational management of natural resources in relation to demographic pressures and operating methods that do not respect the environment. as I mentioned our growth is one of the highest in the world, 33% p.a. Another dilemma is the fight against the effects of draught in the face of economic recession that the country experiences and the state of poverty of the population. The fight against poverty and the low level of agro-civil pastoral production, which is the main source of income of the very population fighting desertification, is quite complex here in Niger. Besides the

government, there are a lot of NGOs and UN agencies like UNDP, World Food Programme, IFAD and other stakeholders are fighting.

For your last question Alice, I would rather not respond. Because I do not know exactly what would happen. Nobody knows! We would just keep our fingers crossed and pray for better resolution, governance and citizens' rights protection.

About your 4th question, Yes! When women travel from one village to another or to an urban city to attend workshops, not just in Niger but all Islamic countries, they need to get permission from their husbands. But that doesn't affect voting. I mean there is no barrier for a woman to vote here. I think I was really trying to focus on the challenges but there are great things happening too in terms of women involvement in different social, political areas of this country. There is no ban of women voting since democracy started in this country, women were allowed to vote at the same time as men.

Women equally as men can apply for any position from local to national, parliament and government. Of course, for government is more of appointment than election. Women have really been on the fore front of fighting for their rights. For example, May 13 is National Women's Day in Niger. This is because right before national conference in 1991, women were part of huge movement that influenced the government to have the national conference. Then when the national conference started at the committee which managed it, there was only 1 woman appointed. So, women decided to protest on May 13th and claim more women representation in the committee. From 1 they went to 7 or 8 women in the committee. That is why since 1991, May 13 is the National Women's Day in Niger.

Sorry for responding only now. Internet connection is very weak and there was a dog barking 😊.

Advocate Flavia Bahati, Tanzania: Very educative session! thank you madam present for the great presentation and thank you Alice Wairimu for asking such an important question.

Alice Nderitu, Kenya: Dear Assalama, many, many thanks for your responses. Indeed, we have learnt quite a bit on Niger. It's extraordinary too to imagine how many of our countries your story arrived at and how powerful that is. Thank you.

FemWise Coordinator Mukondi Mpeiwa, South Africa: Hi Celine

I have a comment that's inspired by Assalama's generous contribution but not limited to it. In her first or second clip she says Niger is 95/99% Muslim. I could be wrong but I believe that in some cases religion, like culture, is closely linked to identity. I am very concerned about the growing discourse in some regions/countries that seems to promote 'Islamophobia' and consistently links Islam to violence, extremism and terrorism. I think it's a very dangerous approach that attacks people and shifts focus from the problem and root causes of many of our challenges on the continent. In fact, I think, like racism, it seeks to undermine/reduce human value based on beliefs- and is very politicized. We need to guard against it and push back not because of our religious beliefs but because we know the danger and consequences of "othering", and creating a false sense of 'us vs them'

Selina Kwamini, Kenya: Hello everyone wherever you are.

I appreciate your contributions and interaction on the session with Assalama on Niger. It's been amazing to see how you went beyond the limitations that were threatening.

For you Assalama, many thanks.

We don't take it for granted that this came just when you were settling in a new role and trying to adjust. Moreover, despite being on the move you ensured that you catered to us. Merci beaucoup.

We wish you the best in your new role.

At this point, I wish to close the Niger seminar. We can now resume with our normal interactions on the platform.

In case of any further information, it shall be communicated here.

Have a wonderful day to each of you.

Blessings!

As always, please our guidelines;

Community Voices for Peace and Pluralism (CVPP)-Africa

Community Voices for Peace and Pluralism – Africa is a non-profit network of peace wakers that offers expertise in preventing, transforming and solving violent conflict through a Peace and Pluralism approach, contributing to the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

We set up this group to bring together women leaders working across various thematic social justice areas particularly peace building and women’s meaningful participation in decision making roles.

We have enabling guidelines, for the users of our WhatsApp group and website, not rules;

1. The CVPP group was formed as an inclusive space for women safeguarding diverse spaces for dialogue by all generations, transforming and resolving violent conflicts, contributing to human dignity and social justice. Ensure your post is relevant and purposeful.
2. Avoid forwards unless they are relevant to the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Avoid cross posting by going through what has been shared to confirm you are not reposting and cross-posting. Links are encouraged. Spamming will pile chats, meaning most will then not follow the discussions.
3. Analyze and give your view or perspective on a subject with respect.
4. We are guided by values and principles as well as our standing as leaders in society and sexist, ethicist, racist, homophobic, political party specific and other demeaning comments or attacks are not allowed. Avoid narrow group views. Stereotypes shall not be entertained on CVPP. Be tolerant and respectful.
5. CVPP is not a place for rumours, innuendo, propaganda, myths or conspiracy theories. Members are asked to share or present what they know to be the truth, facts, evidence or data/information on a subject being discussed.
6. Before posting or replying, always ask yourself this: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it relevant? Is it necessary? Is this a good time to post? Is this going to encourage discussions or

degenerate into animosity? Freedom of expression does not relieve you of your obligation to courtesy, decency and decorum.

7. Contribute regularly and share information on what you are doing to promote our stated common objectives. Consider this a conversation. It is not okay for you to just read other people's input without contributing, asking for information, or suggesting improvements.

8. Do not personalize your chats. Always stick to the issue being discussed or ventilated on without attacking or discussing the person who originated or has commented on the subject.

9. Announcement of events your organization or others are doing is encouraged. However, you cannot initiate causes or activities on CCVP without approval from the forum admin before circulation.

10. We may at times, after discussion here on the forum, support a cause we see as key to encouraging members on CVPP or communities that CVPP Members support or are part of. If such causes are acceptable, the admins shall set up a separate group to advance such an activity or cause.

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12. CVPP exists because members make what we do possible through their voluntary work. We wish to thank you most sincerely for being members of this CVPP family.

Biographies



Assalama Sidi

Assalama Sidi is human and women rights activist who worked tirelessly to promote equality and social justice for about 2 decades. She has been working in development areas such as promoting gender and development including giving voices to women and girls in remote areas, girls' education and protection, youth entrepreneurship and local civil society organization strengthening. In the area of youth entrepreneurship, she coordinated several youth forums giving opportunities to youth and particularly young women so that they get the right skills, confidence and access to resources and support from government and private sector. One of her great achievements in this area is the approval by ministry council last year of a youth led entrepreneurship strategy fully designed by youth to take into account their views, challenges and expectations. Another achievement in the area of combating child marriage is the implementation of a project called "marriage no child play" which reached 0 cases of early marriage in the project area. On women promotion due to her passion commitment and hard work, about two years ago, she coordinated a project that gave not only confidence and advocacy skills to remote women in Niger but above all permitted these women to be first time ever land owners as result of their courage and advocacy at municipal and village elders levels.

Assalama is not only passionate about the work she does in the development area promoting social justice and giving voices to the voiceless, she is also a humanitarian worker leading various food assistance, water access, protection against gender-based violence in refugee and internal displaced camps in Niger. "There is nothing better in life than giving hope to those who think there is no more hope in their lives. Putting a smile on a child or women face who travelled more than 50 km per foot running to save her life because she gets a shelter, water and food and feels safe is worth the best ever salary one can earn" she often says. Niger hosts Malian refugees in its west part and Nigerian refugees on its south and east borders. In the middle there are often internal displaced people running to save their lives from various attacks and conflicts.

Assalama is a hard worker who puts the barre often high to the extent that her direct colleagues think she is never satisfied, yet, she always and in any circumstance try and pushes herself and teams to do better and better. Her passion to serve, her empathy towards the most vulnerable people, her commitment to fight against inequality and hold leaders and decision makers accountable and her strong believe that all human being, regardless of race, gender, religion and any other consideration are equal and therefore should equally enjoy their rights, constitute that flame that encourages her to work tirelessly in everything she does. She is known for never giving up her dreams regardless of the challenges she encounters on her path.

Assalama has been leading teams in various organization for about two decades now. Her professional experience includes but not limited to serving the USA Peace Corps as Associate Country Director, Plan International as Program Director and Deputy country Director and in Oxfam as Country Director and West and Central Africa Regional Director since July 20, 2020. In this position, she provides vision, Strategic Guidance and Support to Oxfam work in the 12 countries were Oxfam operates in West and Central Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone). This include work in Humanitarian, Development and Influencing in line with the Global Strategy and Program Framework.

Assalama graduated from the University of Niamey majoring in sociology and has a long list of leadership certificates including from the certificate in management from Harvard business school.

Out of work, she is a real nomadic herder from one of the minority tribes in Niger, she loves spending her vacations in very calm and remote areas. Being in the middle nowhere watching cattle and listening to birds sing far away from cars, technology, urban noise and pollution.