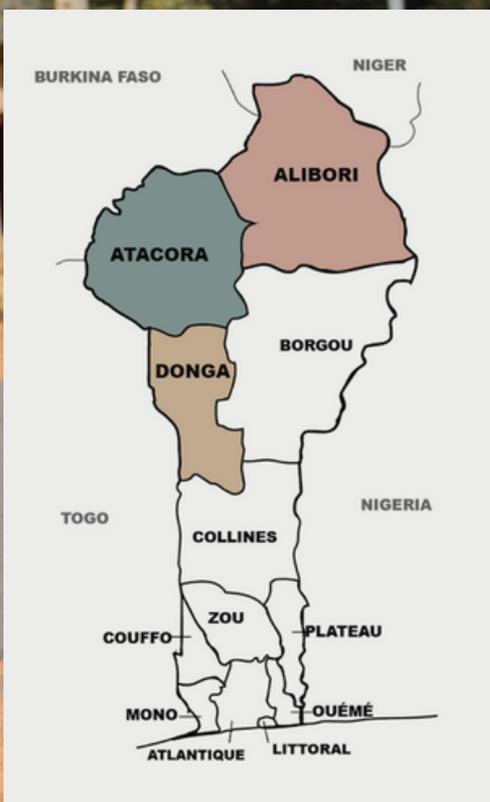


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BEYOND CRIME

Youth perceptions of radicalization and violent extremism in northern Benin



September 2024

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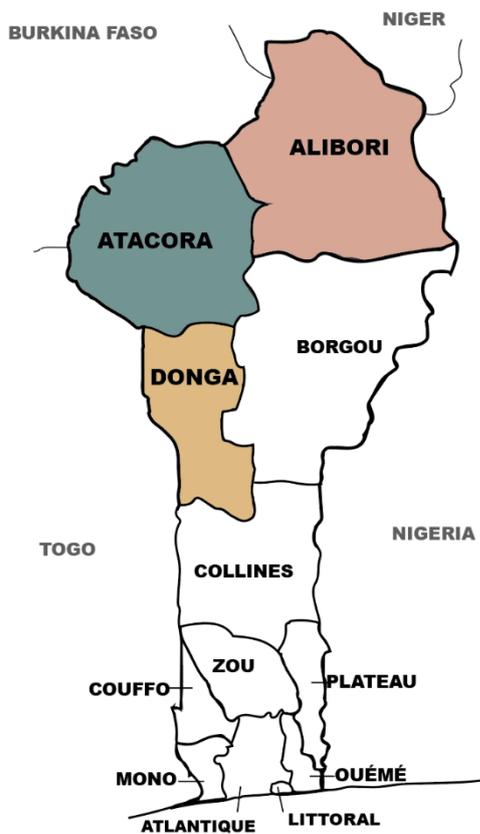
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Many thanks also to the youth organizations and local authorities who always welcomed our teams with hospitality and availability.



Introduction



Studies on youth radicalization and violent extremism have proliferated in recent years, particularly in the Sahel region, with the resurgence of the terrorist phenomenon as a threat to the peace and stability of the region's states. Originally seen as the antechamber to terrorist violence, radicalization is taking on more and more aspects that are changing definitions and perceptions. Successive approaches to such a phenomenon have been enriched by the diversity of experience in

different countries, which has led experts to analyze radicalization as the result of a process, factors or consequences that are political, economic, social, ideological, and so on.

This radicalization manifests itself in the use of violence as a means of affirmation, expression, or vindication of the most diverse kinds. But the study of radicalization soon fell victim to the popularity of a "perfect subject" for media sensationalism, surfing on the spectacular nature of terrorist attacks that tended to spill over from the sahelian epicenter into unsuspected areas such as the Gulf of Guinea. On the other hand, the diversity of experience and the rapid pace of change have led to a multiplication of approaches, often reflecting the preoccupations that experts project onto the phenomenon, which ends up no longer being studied per se. Finally, the specializations of analysts who once focused on subjects such as governance, crime or urban violence have rubbed off on many studies, going so far as to deny the phenomenon its ideological or intercommunity dimensions.

Thus, the predominance of criminological analyses, to the

point of inducing the region's states to adopt a strictly security-oriented approach, has been accentuated by studies focusing often on actors in the "second circle", such as traffickers, logistical assistance couriers and so on. Meanwhile, these studies neglect the actors in the first and third circles. The first circle is made up of ideological/community entrepreneurs whose role is fundamental in recruiting, inciting and instrumentalizing grievances. The third circle, which is often inaccessible to criminological studies, is made up of actors who are predisposed to extremist violence, or who can ideologically prepare for it: recruiters, people who are already indoctrinated and inclined to act. Often, these people are questioned in prison or in situations of "remorse", where numerous biases distort the analysis of their real motivations.

What's more, the tools of the criminological approach are often ill-suited to the subtleties of extremist discourse, with its ideological charge and references that require deciphering, or even exegesis, often beyond the reach of experts lacking the key concepts needed to understand symbols, allusions, and language codes.

It's often after the crime has been committed that many analysts denying the ideological dimension, gain access to the subjects in question, either in prison or in a situation where the security environment, prison pressure or criminal actors weigh heavily,

accentuating the criminological bias despite documentation efforts.

So as not to be encumbered by a listing or cross-referencing of definitions in the context of this study, we could refer to the Institute's various publications that have addressed the phenomenon of radicalization in various contexts, either in the case of countries already affected by extremist violence, or through a prospective approach for others at risk or still under a certain security pressure.

The criminological bias that has had its effect on the approach to the phenomenon of radicalization in the Sahel, has not spared certain studies following the spillover of the epicenter of extremist violence to the countries of the Gulf of Guinea. Many of them suffer from the lack of renewal of conceptual tools, as well as from the rush to "document" a multidimensional and often diffuse phenomenon in contexts where the gaze is oriented by realities elsewhere.

Moreover, in the face of security and political pressure to develop responses, many analysts must have missed the paradigmatic turning point of the accentuation of the communalization of extremist violence concomitant with the first visible phases of the spillover of the epicenter of terrorism from the central Sahel to the coastal countries of West Africa.

Thus, in the case of certain coastal countries, political responses strongly inspired by conclusions drawn from the criminological approach seem not to be learning from the mistakes of the

Sahel, by moving towards predominantly security-based solutions. These sometimes even reduce the extremist phenomenon to a "simple" criminal problem, whereas **criminality is not in itself the root of the evil, but rather one of its symptoms.**

In Benin's case, several studies point to its geographical proximity to Sahelian countries, which are victims of insurgency by armed terrorist groups, porous borders, weak state presence in certain regions, community conflicts, youth unemployment, corruption, injustice, social inequalities, and many other factors. Despite the measures, efforts and mechanisms implemented by the state to counter this advance, the security situation is gradually deteriorating in the Alibori and Atacora departments.

Since the first terrorist attack recorded in 2019, the number of terrorist incidents on Benin soil, particularly in the septentrion, has been on the rise, with a growing number of deaths, injuries, and displaced persons.

Using a comprehensive approach based on the perceptions of local populations, Timbuktu Institute took advantage of several field missions in the departments¹ of Donga, Alibori and Atacora to conduct qualitative interviews with 270 young people living in the various localities and

communes. In addition to these individual interviews, around ten focus groups were organized on site. To avoid "one shot" interviews, we adopted a long-term, continuous observation approach. Thus, the testimonies and responses gathered and on which the present analysis is based are the result of fieldwork extended over the period from March - May 2023 to June 2024² directed, on site, by Dr. Bakary Sambe.

The approach also involved not just sending out teams of investigators, but being present in the field to adjust and complete the approach, if necessary, for greater agility and direct contact with the reality on the ground.

These interviews and focus groups are based on three major questions:

- The potential factors of radicalization of young people in the departments of northern Benin with a differentiated approach considering the specificity of each department and even localities and communes
- Assessing national government responses from a local perspective
- The role of interactions between communities in the north of the country in the radicalization of certain bangs

¹ There is a clear awareness that, beyond departmental boundaries, there are realities that transcend administrative limits in terms of interactions between populations and human dynamics that do not necessarily follow spatial geographical limitations.

² - As the report is essentially based on qualitative interviews and various testimonials given during

focus groups with young people in the three departments, we will indicate in the body of the text, each time, the minimum identity, and exact area (commune, arrondissement, village) or failing that, depending on the sensitivity of the testimonial, the department where the interviewee lives. Dates range March-May 2023 to June 2024.

- The outlook for departments such as Borgou, which has been relatively spared for the time being, but is situated on a socio-cultural continuum that is impacted by cross-border relations with Nigeria in particular (in a forthcoming report dedicated specifically to Borgou department).

This report, which focuses specifically on radicalization factors as perceived by young people in Benin's northern

departments, is the first in a cycle of three studies.

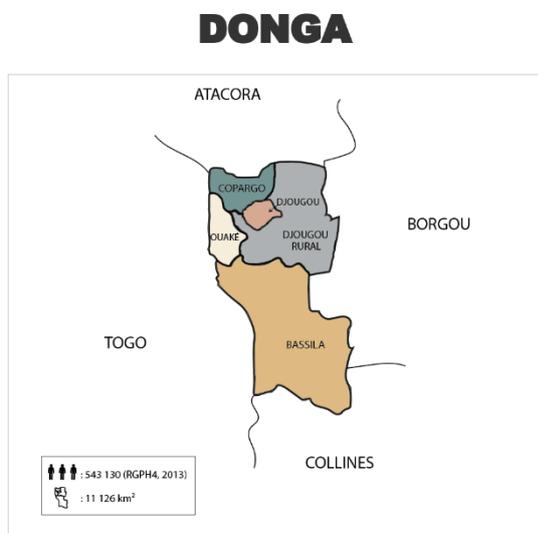
It is divided into three parts, each dealing with a department and covering Donga, Alibori and Atacora.

For each department, the first step will be to present its specific features and socio-economic and human data³, followed by the radicalization factors as perceived by young people, based on the testimonies and observations provided by local people during semi-structured interviews or focus groups, which the team wanted to be as localized as possible.

³ For this data, which are the only ones external to the survey, we have referred to the following official documents and sites (available only in French): Synthèse des principaux résultats du RGPH-4 de l'ALIBORI Cahier des villages et quartiers de ville Département de l'ALIBORI Alibori, Atacora Cahier des villages et quartiers de ville Département de l'ATACORA, Synthèse des principaux résultats du

RGPH-4 de l'ATACORA, Cahier des villages et quartiers de ville Département de la DONGA, Spatialisation des cibles prioritaires des ODD au Bénin : Monographie des communes des départements de l'Atacora et de la Donga, Synthèse des principaux résultats du RGPH-4 de la DONGA, INSAE BENIN

Radicalization factors in Donga: Between socio-political grievances, vulnerabilities, and clash of religious models



Covering an area of 11,126 km² with a population of 543,130 in 2013⁴, Donga department is in west-central Benin. It is bordered to the north by the Atacora department, to the south by the hills department, to the east by the Borgou department and to the west by Togo. Donga comprises four communes: Djougou, Bassila, Copargo and Ouake. These four communes are subdivided into 26 arrondissements and 177 villages and city districts. The town of Djougou is the departmental capital. The majority ethnic and cultural groups in Donga are Yoa (28%), Lopka (18%), Peulh (11%) and Dendi (5%). Islam is the most widely practiced religion (78%) in the department, followed by Catholicism (12%).

In terms of socio-community infrastructure, the 177 villages in the

Donga department have 14 maternity wards, 2 communal health centers, 19 district health centers and 15 dispensaries. In terms of education, there are some 438 public elementary school, 26 1^{er} cycle colleges and 14 2nd cycle colleges. However, access to drinking water is a real challenge for the population. Only a third (33%) of the department has access to drinking water. In terms of economic activities, agriculture, fishing, and hunting are the predominant activities (62%), followed by trade and catering (14%).

On the agricultural front, Donga department is considered the "breadbasket of the country", thanks to its strong cultivation of sorghum, corn, groundnuts, etc. The department's urban markets, notably those of Djougou, Bassila and Ouake, facilitate the supply and sale of agricultural and craft products between the department's towns and villages, and with neighboring countries. The department's urban markets, notably those of Djougou, Bassila and Ouake, facilitate the supply and sale of agricultural and craft products between the department's towns and villages, as well as with neighboring countries such as Togo and Burkina Faso.

⁴ Date of the last general population and housing census for which data is published. There are other piecemeal censuses, but most are inaccessible or

not officially published for various reasons, including data protection, according to some people we spoke to.

Radicalization and violent extremism are often seen by the young people interviewed as *"a refuge from the various socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural problems"*, as described by A.D, from the Ouake commune.

The pitfalls of socio-economic integration: At the heart of inequalities, frustrations, and failures

In a social climate weakened by poverty, injustice, corruption, nepotism, inter-community, and religious quarrels, and "ethnic rivalries" with political underpinnings, young people are asking about their "future", which, according to some, is relegated to second place: *"We young people are simply forgotten by the system. Once we have finished our studies, there is no employability policy,"* complains a young high-school student from the town of Djougou. The question of socio-professional integration is also being raised in protest the political order, which is said to be marked by a certain "nepotism". For this young association leader from the commune of Djougou: *"To get a job, you have to know someone or be an active supporter of a political party in the (presidential) movement. That means you must be in the inner circle of those who run the country"*.

Inadequacies or duality in the education system?

This is largely due to the lack of job opportunities for young people in the

region. For many young people, *"the training provided in schools and universities does not meet the demands of the job market"*. *"The self-employment policies advocated by various governments in response to the issue of youth unemployment have so far remained at the theoretical stage"*, remarks a young journalist from a local media outlet, for whom *"the few personal initiatives taken by young people, for want of support, have come up against the realities of the entrepreneurial world. They end up throwing in the towel. So, any other job offers, legal or illegal, is welcome"*.

A growing sense of insecurity

This situation is compounded by a security climate exacerbated by violence, hold-ups, kidnappings, banditry, and arms and drug trafficking, according to numerous eyewitness accounts. Insecurity in both urban and rural areas is said to be on the rise.

"Faced with increasing oppression, frustration, exclusion and marginalization in almost every sphere, and above all with the absence of a real development policy, the young people who make up the majority of Donga's population will start to cultivate radical and extremist ideologies", warns this other young man. For him, forgotten by the *"system"*, young people will look for the most accessible means to *"assert themselves and exist"* socially.

Accumulation of frustrations and radical temptations

"When you have ambitions and you do your best to achieve them, but nothing comes of it, you are desperate. I have always wanted to be a soldier, which is why I took part in competitive examinations. I was admitted, but failed, because I could not bribe the recruiters. I am a victim of injustice", said a young man from Ouake, a village in the Donga department, who made no secret of his *"desire to join an extremist group"* out of *"social revenge"* and a search for the social justice that is lacking in his country's mode of governance.

As one person working in the field of education explained: *"Most of these young people studied in very poor conditions, but somehow managed to complete their course, and now they are unemployed, once again at the mercy of their parents and the laughingstock of their peers who had once dropped out of school."*

In a department where demographic growth is one of the highest in the country, *"not being able to assert yourself socially or at least provide for your needs is a failure"*, analyzes a young student.

Foreign Islamic organizations and religious humanitarianism to the rescue?

It's worth remembering that the demographic growth that has marked this department is accompanied by several social difficulties and

saturation of basic social services. From urban centers to the outskirts, access to basic social services is difficult or virtually impossible.

To fill the gap, *"it's the Gulf States that donate infrastructure to villages and communes. Today, in the department, we have hundreds of water wells, wells, Franco-Arab schools, and mosques,"* explains a native of the department on how the *"foreigners"* have set themselves up as *"saviors in the face of the laxity of the State"*.

During a focus group in Ouake, some young people explained that, in this department, there are often two options: *"immigration or lament"*. Opportunities to find work are so rare that *"young people spend their days lamenting their fate or taking to the sea to flee"*, concludes a resident of Copargo.

Farming in the face of local conflicts: resilience shaken?

Agriculture, which has always been an important income-generating economic activity in Donga, is increasingly facing the consequences of conflicts over land. As a young man from the village of Badjoudé explains, *"this activity, which should serve as a bulwark or a way out for these young people, has become entangled in the eternal conflict between farmers and herders, or in land disputes"*. These conflicts tend to increase in the face of dwindling resources and the perceptible effects of climatic hazards. *"Not a day goes by, not a day, I tell you, that during the rainy season we do not*

record a case of destruction of a field or plantation by the animals of a herdsman", informs a farmer from Copargo.

Another resident recently dispossessed of his field adds: *"If it were just problems between farmers and herders, it would be even better, but today we are fighting to safeguard our land. Since the government asked everyone to register their land, everyone wants to have land, hence the problems"*. However, even if some of the young people we met had intended to reconvert to agriculture, the problem of access to land is now acute. *"Estates are no longer accessible to everyone"*, explains one young farmer.

The people of the department seem to be denouncing public policies on agriculture and land management. They point to recent measures deemed counter-productive and even affecting the economic resilience of communities.

Indeed, the government, through Decree N° 2022-568 of October 12th, 2022, banning the export of grain soybeans and setting the conditions for implementing the ban on the export of raw cashew nuts and grain soybeans in the Republic of Benin, had already banned the export of soybeans and cashew nuts from April 1st 2024. This decision, taken for the second time, had, for some, *"weakened the economic power of farmers, as these two products constitute the largest sources of income after cotton"*, as explained by this young

farmer from the Ouake area. From the local population's point of view, *"no real alternative has been defined for these young people, despite their desire or right to emancipation"*. Faced with this impasse, this other Ouake resident explains that *"the young people left behind will only turn to alternative solutions to ensure their survival"*.

Young people from Donga within reach of recruiters?

The young people interviewed during focus groups in Djougou maintain that other factors must also be considered when analyzing the risk of radicalization, citing in particular *"Donga's geographical position, which opens it up to countries with deteriorating security situations"*.

For them, *"this situation is very favorable to the installation of a climate where young people, in their thirst for emancipation or social autonomy, are likely to be recruited by terrorist groups"*. Another chilling testimony speaks volumes about this state of mind: *"There are recruiting agents who come to the villages of the Donga department from Burkina Faso in search of young people, supposedly to work in the fields, when in fact they are being trained as elements of armed terrorist groups. The borders between countries are very permeable, and with the similarity of socio-ethnic groups, mobility across other countries is very easy. Most countries in the sub-region share the same communities and social realities"*.

Donga: Between the weight of religion, interference, and experimentation with preaching strategies

In addition to the geographical factor, the religious factor plays a key role in the communities of a department where the weight of religion creates a specificity compared to other localities in northern Benin. The department's religious make-up means that, within a Muslim community with a large majority (80%), different currents are constantly clashing. Salafist-Wahhabi factions, self-proclaimed "Sunnites" and holders of the "authentic" Islamic tradition, clash with communities claiming to be members of the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood.

"Each current wants to be more conformist and rigorist to divine prescriptions and wants to secure a representative share within society", says this young educator, expressing his concern at this growing trend. Indeed, the Donga department is bearing the full brunt of the effects of competing religious models in a context of globalization of belief and transnational connections.

There is every indication that international Da'wah (preaching, calling) strategies based on the development of charitable activities are being deployed in this department with the support of local relays. *"Funded by the Arab kingdoms, each camp implements its own strategies to attract as many followers as possible. From the construction of mosques and*

water wells to financial assistance and financial support, all means are used to keep the faithful within the religious circle", points out this young man active in the local associative milieu.

In fact, we find ourselves back in the mixed pattern of Da'wah and humanitarianism that has flourished in many Sahelian countries, and which favored the long-term establishment of Salafist and/or Wahhabi groups long before the phenomenon of resorting to extremist violence broke out.

Although there is no systematic causal link between Salafism and jihadist involvement, the effects of religious polarization can have a negative impact on social cohesion. People seem to see in this situation a form of ideological offensive by Salafism, surfing on the deficits of state policies in education, health, or social matters: *"If the intention behind these charitable works is the quest for paradise, the objective of ideological abridgement is palpable. As a result, the instrumentalization of religion for personal ends becomes the dogma",* says another young man.

This situation of ideological polarization and internal fragmentation of the Muslim community, seems to be a sign of the erosion of original community ties in the face of the emergence of new types of claims to belonging, surfing on a competition of religious models: *"Today in our commune we had several Islamic currents. We had those who prayed at 1 p.m. and others at 2*

p.m., and in this difference, the two camps fought a real battle. And it should be noted that each camp has its sponsors in the Arab countries, who provide them with money and other resources to continue fighting their adversaries", explains a faithful Djougou resident.

The many testimonies gathered, as well as the open discussions during the focus groups, indicate that in the perception of these young people, radicalization stems from the accumulation of frustrations and *"various problems to which the victims are unable to find a solution"*. Some of the young people interviewed spoke of other Donga natives who confessed to having already joined *"extremist elements"*: *"Many of the young people we met after joining the elements almost all had the same answers or the same motivations, they had no choice, it was the only option to improve their situation"*. According to the testimonies gathered, *"they come from the surrounding villages of Copargo or the commune of Djougou and Ouaké"*.

Conclusion on the case of Donga

The dynamics of the Donga department indicate that prevention is still possible. However, the issue of professional integration, cross-border

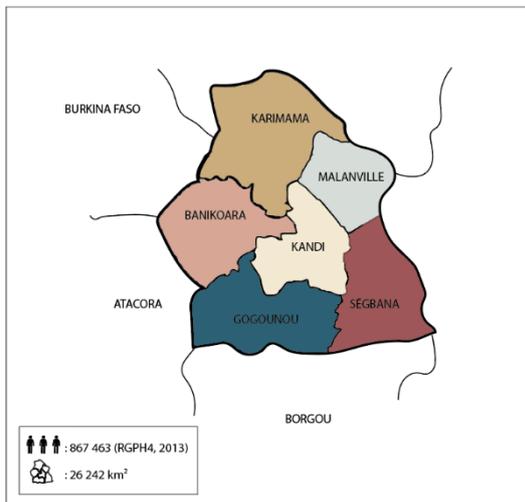
insecurity and social frustrations all contribute to weakening community resilience, encouraging young people to look elsewhere for the means to succeed. Added to this are the problems associated with religious and sectarian incidents, intensified by the competition between Islamic models and the interference of foreign organizations. There are also countless difficulties of access to land, depriving farmers of their main source of income. The combination of these factors, in a region plagued by insecurity and a preacher offensive, makes young people vulnerable and potential recruits for terrorist groups always on the lookout for massification.

Donga, usually considered far from the epicenter of extremist violence, is already experiencing the beginnings of a multidimensional radicalization reminiscent of other contexts where these weak signals have appeared, according to juvenile testimonies and the analysis of perceptions gathered. We need to pay close attention to all these signals, which are already clear and call for awareness of the diffuse nature of the threat in this department, even though it is still relatively spared from exactions and attacks on the same scale as those already plunging neighboring Alibori and especially Atacora into mourning.

Alibori at the crossroads of conflicts

Between inter-community tensions and the preacher offensive

ALIBORI



Located in north-eastern Benin, Alibori department covers an area of 26,242 km² (23% of the national territory). It is bordered to the north by Burkina Faso and the Republic of Niger, to the east by the Federal Republic of Nigeria, to the south by the Department of Borgou and to the west by the Department of Atacora. In 2013 (latest general census available), Alibori department had a population of 867,463, or 8.7% of Benin's total population. The department is made up of six (06) communes: Banikoara; Gogounou, Kandi, Karimama, Malanville and Segbana, with a total of two hundred and twenty-nine (229) villages. The town of Kandi is the department's capital. Alibori is mainly populated by the Bariba, Peulh, Dendi and Mokole. Most of the department's inhabitants practice Islam (81%), Catholicism (9%) and animism (4%). Access to drinking water is a real

problem. Very few districts have a water supply system or public boreholes. In the education sector, Alibori has a low literacy rate. In 2013, only 18% of the population over the age of 15 could read and write. The department's economy is dominated by agricultural activities, notably cotton and food production. In addition to agriculture, large and small livestock farming and fishing are widespread in the department. The human poverty index is highest in the commune of Karimama (60.1%) and lowest in the commune of Kandi (52.8%). The communes of Karimama and Segbana are the most affected by all forms of poverty, while the commune of Kandi is the least affected in the department. The Malanville international market is the most attractive in the department, followed by Banikoara and Gamia. Parc W, a cross-border biosphere reserve shared by Benin, Niger, and Burkina Faso, is Alibori department's biggest tourist attraction. But since 2020, Alibori has been facing incursions from armed terrorist groups, which have had a negative impact on the peace and quiet of the population. The W National Park, which covers 8,000 km² in the department, is considered by some security analysts to be the rear base and command center of these elements of armed terrorist groups.

The factors driving radicalization in Alibori are largely determined by the region's socio-economic, political, and ethno-cultural situation. In a social context riddled with community, ethnic, political, and religious conflicts, the future of young people is "mortgaged", according to some witnesses. *"In our region, we have all the problems of this world. Every day, you hear about a dramatic situation in the department. Our problems run deep and are not new,"* declares a young student from Karimama.

Between inter-community tensions and the instrumentalization of grievances

The various ethnic, cultural, rural, and religious communities living in this region still seem very divided and *"prey to clashes causing death, injury and displacement"*, says this young farmer from Banikoara. Harmony between these communities is largely dependent on circumstances. For example, the Dendi, the Bariba, all farmers by profession, and the Peul herders, have long-standing conflicts. *"The problem is not just one between farmers and herders"*, it has taken on the proportions of hatred between the communities. This manifests itself in *"insults, curses, the globalization of an isolated case, clashes without valid causes resulting in deaths, injuries and displaced persons"*, explains a young Fulani from the region.

In addition to the ethnico-cultural issue, there are intra-religious

differences within the Muslim community itself. For example, the Tidjaniya Islamic branch, made up mainly of Peulh, and the so-called Sunni branch, made up of Dendi, Bariba and Boo, have real problems of coexistence in places of worship. *"The religious situation has deteriorated to the point where marriages between young people from different branches are refused, even though they are all basic Muslims,"* says a young man from Malanville.

In such a context, violent extremist groups play on several aspects: insecurity, intra-religious tensions and an intensification of preaching activities mixing preaching and threats: *"They arrived in our village and preached for two hours in the central mosque, saying they had already called the security forces to leave before they arrived. They reassured us that they were not our enemies but our protectors. "They asked us to choose their side by refusing to denounce them, and to point out the wealthy whom they were going to force to pay zakat for the benefit of the poorest, in accordance with the teachings of Islam, which advocates social justice"*, testifies a group of young people living on the outskirts of Banikoara.

In addition to the tense community context, the security situation, characterized by armed robberies, kidnappings (especially of herdsmen for ransom), targeted assassinations, and arms and drugs trafficking, bears witness to the fragility or absence of calm. According to a young

community mediator working in the communes of Gogounou and Ségbana, *"violence and kidnappings have increased overall in the region in recent years. The commune of Ségbana is one of the villages in Benin with the highest number of kidnappings in recent years"*.

Between local conflicts and cross-border dynamics

Alibori's geographical position in relation to the Sahel countries, which are heavily affected by the security crisis, makes the department a corridor for elements of armed terrorist groups, who transit through Benin to reach Burkina Faso and Niger, due to the porous nature of its borders. In fact, in the department, within Park W, there is a junction point between the three countries, a sort of crossroads between Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger known as the triple point. This crossroads reflects the difficulty of ensuring safety in a socio-cultural continuum linking the three countries. These different aspects have often been exploited by elements of armed terrorist groups to increase their numbers by forging links with the communities bordering the Park.

Although young people make up the largest demographic segment in the department, they are *"marginalized and excluded from all development projects"*, laments a young teacher from Kandi. The number of unemployed, illiterate, *"stigmatized and marginalized young people*

continues to grow", she warns. Almost all of them have the same refrain: *"We had finished our studies, without any integration policy or plan for the future"*.

However, the department's various natural assets, which should be conducive to self-employment for young people, have been *"confiscated"* and *"placed under private management"*. This involves the privatization of the management of Park W.

As a result of this privatization, many communities that had drawn their economic livelihoods from this environment have found themselves dispossessed and wronged. *"There used to be whole villages that made a living from the Park's economic benefits, but now the situation is such that they are overwhelmed by poverty. Since the Park was privatized, they have been forbidden to carry out their activities and have been expelled from the area,"* says a young man from the village of Alfakoara in the commune of Kandi.

Faced with the impossibility of continuing their pastoral, agricultural or fishing activities, the *"very dissatisfied"* victims will set out in search of other economic opportunities to meet their needs. As testified by the young people who took part in the focus group in Kandi, elements of the armed groups have taken advantage of this situation, implementing a strategy that consists of recruiting *"idle youths"*, *providing them with money and motorcycles*

(often Bajaj brand) to supply them with fuel and foodstuffs. This refueling activity has employed hundreds of young people throughout the Alibori department," says a source in Malanville. In addition to the park another exogenous factor has been added to the list.

A department "victim" of the Niger-Benin crisis?

Since the coup d'état in Niger on July 26th, 2023, which led to the closure of the borders between Benin and Niger following sanctions imposed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the refusal of the new Niger authorities to reopen their borders with Benin for security reasons, economic activity in the region has come to a standstill. Thousands of people who used to earn their income from transactions on the corridor are now unemployed.

From Kandi to Malanville, traders and transporters are suffering the full impact of the border closure: *"The situation that has prevailed in the department for over eight months now, with the closure of the borders between Benin and Niger, is not at all encouraging. No economic activity is going on. Poverty is the order of the day. Its impact on security in this case is undeniable. People are hungry, while the crisis between the two countries drags on. The two countries have embarked on an incomprehensible arm-wrestling. And it is not just young people who are likely to join the elements, even the*

elderly and women, because everyone is fed up," laments a young man we met in Malanville.

Land disputes and deteriorating inter-community relations

Apart from the economic factor, one of the key factors behind radicalization in Alibori is land disputes. *Since the dawn of time, Alibori has always been the scene of clashes between the Peulh communities (herders) and the other communities that populate the region",* says this young man from Kandi. On average, according to a municipal official, *"around a hundred cases of conflict between farmers and herders are recorded across the department every year, resulting in deaths, injuries and agricultural damage".*

Tensions are still high between communities opposed by land-related disputes. Apart from conflicts between farmers and herders, the adoption of Law N°. 2017-15 of August 10th, 2017, amending and supplementing Law N°. 2013-01 of August 14, 2013 on the land and property code in Benin, seems to have indirectly further weakened social cohesion. This new law requires landowners to have the land title to benefit from the full right of possession (Art. 112).

In fact, many rural actors had been working the land for generations without any official documents or title deeds. *"The formalization of land*

ownership led to expropriation," explains this young farmer.

The number of victims, particularly in the Peulh community, is growing. Many of them occupy estates formerly farmed by farmers and sometimes left fallow. The result is injustice, sometimes even resulting from judicial decisions. In the management of community crises, many frustrations are reported, thus deteriorating the social climate, especially in the arbitration of land-related matters.

According to a young Fulani herdsman, *"this land formalization affair quickly became a settling of scores with the aim of expelling the Fulani from the locality. How else can you understand how someone who has lived on an estate for years can be expelled like a bad person, when he has built his home on the estate and his children and grandsons were even born there?"*

Like this herdsman, many other people, particularly from the Peulh community, have been evicted from their camps or hamlets by pseudo-landowners, sometimes backed by court rulings. *"This has led to an increase in communal hatred, xenophobia and intolerance,"* says a resident of Karimama. Communities that were once allies have become enemies.

Targeted and arbitrary arrests: A growing stigmatization of Peulhs?

From the very first attacks on Beninese territory, arrests within the Peulh community following *"false accusations"* have exacerbated tensions between communities, further accelerating radicalization among some young people. *"Several members of the Fulani community were arrested and sent to the Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism (CRIET) on the basis of mere suspicions, sometimes even motivated by antecedents or personal differences",* laments this young man from Goumori.

A Fulani lady from a village not far from Karimama says: *"Too many people in our community have been arrested. Some, because of their style of dress, others because of their activity. It became very complicated for us. There were no words to define it, it was a targeting motivated by the lies of our enemies".*

Another local farmer adds: *"The people were denounced or accused of belonging to a terrorist group. Once they had been arrested and sent to the CRIET (court for the repression of economic and terrorist offences), those who had denounced them seized their farmland. You will agree with me that to snatch someone's property, all you must do is accuse them, they are arrested, and the property is yours. This is the society we live in today.*

"The communities' hatred of each other knows no bounds, and it seems that no holds are barred," laments a young man from the Somprékou district.

Alibori, a target for preachers and foreign organizations?

It is in this *"gloomy sphere"* that the department of Alibori, sharing borders with countries in the sub-region affected by terrorism, will be confronted with numerous security problems. *"Alibori will very soon be impacted, firstly by the massive and regular arrival of jihadist fighters on its soil, who use its forests as strategic retreats and, secondly, take advantage of divisions to proliferate the ideals of radical Islam"*, explains this young teacher from Kandi. *"As the region is highly Islamized and characterized by religious tensions, the question of the instrumentalization of Islam for personal ends seems obvious. This is reflected in the construction of a multitude of mosques throughout the region, in virulent preaching and propaganda"*, she adds, deploring the *"neglect of this problem"*.

For this young researcher, who has travelled the length and breadth of the region, *"from Kandi, Ségbana and Malanville to Karimama and Banikoara, the religious situation remains the same, strongly influenced by Arab countries. The very rigorist or categorical interpretations of Islam*

advocated by these movements appeal to certain young people left behind by society, unemployed and looking for an image in society⁵".

The movement of preachers, as well as the activity of Islamic organizations said to be supported by Gulf countries or NGOs, seems to be attracting the attention of religious leaders fearing an aggravation of tensions between the components of the Muslim community in Alibori: *"At first, we had come across them from village to village, from hamlet to hamlet, a dozen or so preaching under the pretext of calling for Islam. But they were mobilization campaigns. By the time we realized it, it was already too late,"* reports a Sufi religious leader from the commune of Kandi.

In this region faced with these various problems, which are potential factors for radicalization and violent extremism, *"the answer to the question of young people's future is still uncertain. The only clear opportunity open to them is to collaborate with elements of the forces of evil"*, warns this young man from Gomparou.

"Despite arrests by the defense and security forces, young people continue to flock to these elements", he insists, adding that *"young people's attraction to this phenomenon is the result of the failure of social measures and development policies over the years"*. For him, the strategy adopted by violent extremist groups is to present themselves as an alternative and *"give*

⁵ Anonymity preserved at the request of the person concerned.

young people the opportunity, firstly, to satisfy their needs and, secondly, to assert their independence from the system".

Conclusion on the case of Alibori

Alibori's geographical position is one of the keys to understanding the security situation in northern Benin. Firstly, Alibori borders Niger, as does the W National Park, which forms a junction with Burkina Faso and Niger. Secondly, the presence of violent extremist groups in the region is now widely reported, with recurrent attacks. For example, attacks have already been recorded in the communes of Kandi and Karimama. *"Jihadists seize people's telephones to delete videos they consider haram"*, warned a community activist from Karimama during the focus groups. Similarly, a student from Banikoara asserts that *"jihadists go round certain villages to explain their political and*

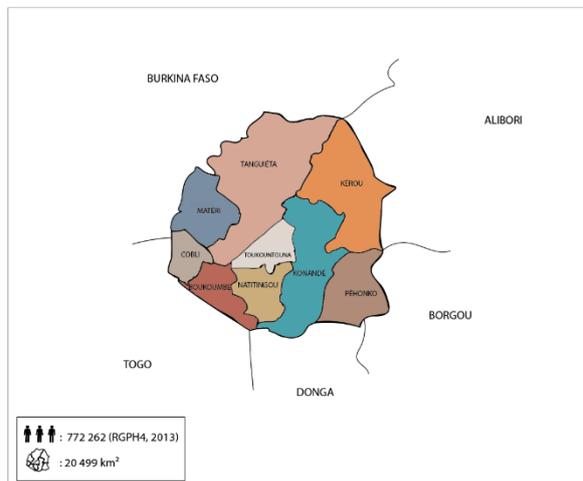
religious ideas to the people". Finally, a dynamic that tends to be downplayed: the community parameter accentuated by some inter-religious impulses within the Muslim community. If community tensions between farmers and herdsmen - which sometimes go so far as to stigmatize identity - predate the jihadist gangrene from the Sahel, it goes without saying that this gangrene can find a more than favorable breeding ground in this department.

These dissensions are no longer merely socio-economic (access to land and property), but now tend to take on religious overtones. What is more, the diplomatic row between Benin and Niger, which led to the closure of their common border, has exacerbated an already fragile socio-economic situation, particularly for idle youth who, as testimonies attest, are warning of their situation.

Atacora, between vulnerabilities and overflowing insecurity

Towards a new coastal epicenter in northern Benin?

ATACORA



The Atacora department covers an area of 20,499 km², with a population of 772,262 (7.7% of the national population). It is bordered to the north by Burkina-Faso and the Alibori department, to the west by Togo, to the east by the Borgou and Alibori departments, and to the south by the Donga department. Atacora comprises nine (09) communes: Boukoumbe, Cobly, Kerou, Kouandé, Pehunco, Materi, Natitingou, Tanguieta, Toucountouna, and includes 384 villages. Natitingou is the department's capital. Atacora is predominantly populated by ethnic and cultural groups such as the Otamari (59%), Bariba (19%) and Peulh (12%). Religious practices are dominated by Islam, followed by Catholicism and other traditional religions. In terms of socio-community infrastructures, health

coverage is mixed. For the 384 villages in the department, there are around twenty dispensaries and maternity wards. The department also has more than forty district health complexes. In terms of access to drinking water, more than half of Atacora's villages, districts and towns have at least one public well or borehole. In education, in 2013, the school enrolment rate was 13 points below the national level, at 65%. Considered Benin's granary for sorghum and rice, agriculture is the main source of income for the people of Atacora (74% of the population). In addition to agriculture, commerce accounts for 16% of the department's economic activities. Atacora boasts an array of tourist sites that attract thousands of tourists every year. The panorama and habitat (Tata somba, Taneka village, Koussoucoingou panoramic site), the mountainous landscape (Taneka sacred cave, Boukoumbe forest, Tanougou and Kota waterfalls) and the hunting areas of Porga and Atacora, Pendjari park, offer picturesque scenes to tourists. However, since 2019, the Atacora department has seen an incursion by elements of terrorist groups into its territory. Numerous attacks on defense and security force positions, kidnappings of civilians and theft of livestock have been recorded. Despite the measures taken by the Beninese authorities, the security situation in the department remains critical.

Increased communalization of conflicts

Community diversity is one of the main characteristics of the Atacora department in northern Benin. While some see this diversity as a factor of cohesion and an opportunity for dialogue, others see it as a cause of conflict, affecting cohesion and understanding between different segments of society.

Atacora is mainly populated by the Wama, Otamari, Natimba, Groumatche, Dendi, Bariba and Peulh communities. Cohabitation between these communities is delicate and always marked by certain social upheavals. This is not only true in rural areas, where conflicts are fueled by land disputes.

Natitingou, the urban capital of the department, is described by this young man as *"the obvious theater for the expression of communal hatred between the Wama and the Otamari"*. Like these two communities, others are also opposed by issues of *"superiority or inferiority complex, and experience recurrent clashes"*. In the perception of young people who deplore the *"deficit of egalitarian citizenship"*, even political and administrative affairs are managed along ethnic lines.

"The different communities in the Atacora are very divided, with each claiming to be the leader of the zone, which leads to disagreements on matters of territorial belonging," points out a young man from Natitingou.

According to the young people, nepotism, corruption, marginalization, poverty, and unemployment are the result of this social situation, as they deplored during the focus groups.

Socio-economic vulnerabilities and inconsistencies in land management

In addition to these factors, which contribute to the multiplication of conflicts, young people say they share socio-economic and socio-political problems. According to them, social inequalities are on the increase. *"Unemployment is too high, so young people who used to live in urban centers are returning to rural areas,* where they are looking for forms of solidarity that are lacking in city culture.

At the same time as inequalities and the *"feeling of abandonment"* deplored by this young student are increasing, certain measures taken by the authorities in the context of land governance seem to be aggravating the socio-economic vulnerability of young people: *"Given the impasse and the virulence of conflicts between farmers and herders, land tenure disputes and the ban on cultivation in areas designated as forest reserves, young people's dreams of engaging in agricultural or pastoral self-employment are proving unattainable"*, laments a young farmer from Tanguiéta. According to another student from Matéri, *"Here, the end of studies is synonymous with the end of all dreams, because after studies,*

there is no favorable follow-up. The few jobs that do exist are already reserved for close relatives or the highest bidders”.

In Tanguiéta in 2020, the arrival of the NGO African Parks is said to have led to the dispossession of several farmers from their farmland. Park boundaries have been reconsidered and uncoordinated regulations adopted to restrict farming activities in the surrounding area. As a result, farmers have been forced to relocate or reduce the size of their fields. *"In addition to the farmers, traditional hunters, fishermen and stockbreeders have been forced into unemployment,"* says this young man from Matéri, lamenting the *"uncoordinated management of natural areas"*.

It should be remembered that, prior to these bans, many of the area's inhabitants were developing economic activities that were their sole source of income. The decision to prevent them from pursuing their activities had even led to clashes between young people from the surrounding villages and the defense and security forces.

According to the young people who took part in a focus group in Tanguieta, it is unacceptable that all activities linked to the park are forbidden to local populations. *"Since the Park's security was reinforced by the NGO African Parks, conflicts between herders and farmers have increased considerably. Both are now obliged to exploit the little vegetation that remains. What's more, in its*

demarcation, African Parks did not consider the surrounding dwellings. Many settlements have been evicted. Most of the victims feel they have been wronged by the park's management, which was intended to be associative," says a former Boukoumbé farmer who has turned to small-scale cross-border trading.

From misunderstandings to the instrumentalization of frustrations

In addition to the deterioration in the socio-economic situation of villagers following the installation of the NGO African Parks, the adoption of Benin's new land and property code seems to have rekindled inter-community tensions. And as in most departments of the septentrion, the community that feels most aggrieved is the Peulh.

According to testimonies gathered from young villagers living near the park, *"many members of the Peulh community have found themselves without land to farm, and even the portions of land on which their camps are built are threatened with eviction"*.

From the commune of Matéri to Natitingou, via Tanguiéta, Toucountouna, Cobly, Boukoumbé, Kouandé, and Kérou, *"thousands of Fulani have been ordered to leave"*, according to local young people active in mediation committees. This situation has created, and continues to accelerate, a real upheaval in this community, which feels increasingly stigmatized. *"Countless land-related cases are still pending before the*

courts", asserts a young Natitingou resident whose close relatives have been expropriated. According to him, "these different situations will be sources of frustration within communities and convincing arguments for extremist groups who propose themselves as an alternative solution to combat the situation".

During interviews with young people from areas bordering the park, we heard several reports of "people who have been approached by elements of extremist groups to offer their assistance in reclaiming land". According to them, "the land belongs to God". The irruption of religious arguments in the explanation of local conflicts could be a sign of interference or, at the very least, an indicator of the irruption of religious actors close to extremist groups in a field of interaction that is more than conflictual and conducive to the instrumentalization of grievances and frustrations.

When extremist groups take on the role of community protectors

A young member of the Fulani community living in the commune of Matéri testifies in this vein: *"It was at the end of 2022 when they came to our hamlet, they asked us to trust them, that no one would be able to expel us from our land and that if they insisted, they would kill them all. They thought they were defending the Fulani community".* Another young man added: *"Jihadists approached*

me and asked me to join their ranks because my community (Fulani) is too marginalized and a victim of injustice. They told me it would be better for me to go to paradise as part of the holy war, than to die at the hands of the police".

What is more, as part of the fight against violent extremist groups, hundreds of people have also been arrested, most of them *"on the basis of mere suspicions or denunciations motivated by intercommunity hatred",* says a young girl from the commune of Kouandé. Several similar cases have been reported by associations defending the Fulani community, notably Sudu Pulaku, Darjaa Pulaku and Sudu Baba, particularly in the communes of Matéri, Dassari, Porga, Tanguiéta and others. *"This situation weighed heavily in the decision of many young people in this community to join the enemy camp",* laments this young community mediator.

For this Peulh woman active in conflict prevention, *"Given that some members of the Peulh community are persecuted by the forces of law and order, they say they prefer to join the jihadists. There, they would feel safer".* In this case, we find a typology of attractive factors in which feelings of insecurity and the desire for protection are combined. It is often in such situations that the security and defense forces become *"part of the problem they were trying to solve",* as this teacher from Kérou testifies. For her, arbitrary or targeted arrests multiply after each attack, behind

which *"people always try to see the hand of the Peulhs"*.

Atacora: just a transit zone for fighters, or a recruiting ground?

Bordering Togo to the west and Burkina Faso to the north, the Atacora is a crossroads for *"elements of armed terrorist groups, who travel from one country to another without being bothered"*, says this young man from Materi. Another resident of Tanguiéta adds: *"They use rural tracks or bypass roads to avoid the position of Beninese security and defense forces"*.

Since 2022, the inhabitants of the department have become increasingly accustomed to the passage and presence of elements of armed groups known locally as "bush people". For this farmer from a village on the Togo border, where he goes to farm, *"their various movements are reported daily by Beninese farmers who regularly rub shoulders with them"*.

This circulation of elements of violent extremist groups, part of the daily life of communities in areas where borders are only theoretical, in fact establishes familiarity and permanent contact, while the security forces seem to be gradually losing the battle of intelligence. At the same time, border populations are being stigmatized, and seem to be establishing a more trusting relationship with elements of extremist groups. *"These different contacts have an impact on the lifestyles of young people, who see these elements as*

opportunities to realize their dreams, or at least to free themselves from economic gloom," asserts a young man who has noted contacts between extremist groups and certain "persons".

This situation has become worrying in areas such as Porga, in the commune of Dassari not far from the Burkinabe border. *"Many people living in villages along the border and even inland, such as Materi Centre, Porga and Boukoumbe, trade economically with these elements. They have people at their service who provide them with everything they need, and most of their collaborators are young people,"* says a local resident.

A security and criminological approach out of touch with local realities?

One of the most striking elements in the analysis of the situation in the Atacora is the contrast between the deep local knowledge of the dynamics of violent extremist groups and the predominantly security-based approach, which lacks local ownership or support. Repression, which some young people describe as "targeted", would even appear to be one of the most persistent motivating factors used by extremist groups for recruitment purposes.

The criminological approach is said to have resulted in national authorities focusing on repression, with the effect of disconnecting national policies from local concerns and perceptions. It seems to have distracted attention

from the root causes, and focused efforts on symptomatic treatment, while the situation is worsening to the point of leading to a vicious circle of victimization–persecution–seeking protection and joining extremist groups.

During a focus group on the situation in Atacora and, more specifically, on the modus operandi and recruitment techniques of extremist groups, local players demonstrated a detailed knowledge of recruiters' strategies and the ways in which young people are recruited, as illustrated by this meticulous description of the procedures adopted: *"Elements of armed terrorist groups need three categories of people or collaborators. A first category in charge of intelligence, a second in charge of supplies and a third in charge of the field (the soldier). The first two categories are those for which most young people in Atacora apply. Their task is to provide information on the security situation and the movement of armed forces personnel, as well as to supply fuel and food. The last category, however, has no shortage of candidates, as it's the highest paid level."*

The analysis of such an assertion cannot be confined to the criminological dimension of trafficking or other illicit activities. This testimony not only exposes the instrumentalization of socio-economic vulnerabilities, but also the loss of the intelligence battle on the part of the security forces, whom the

local population trusts less and less. It also points to the management of relations between the state, whose primary interface they are, and the local population, who make "rational" choices between adhering to repressive policies, financial incentives, and the offer of protection by violent extremist groups.

Ideology and religion: "repressed" or ignored factors in criminological approaches?

"Another factor that attracts young people to extremist groups is the religious factor. The different religious currents that clash in the department, especially with outside interference and assistance, accelerate the radicalization process", says this young journalist who took part in the focus groups in Atacora. Other testimonies from young people in Kouandé and Kerou emphasize the ideological dimension: "Threats, targeted preaching, propaganda or aggression, religious intolerance between Sunni Muslims and Tidjaniya is at its highest level. We are now witnessing the emancipation of the sectarian spirit. It is not uncommon in the commune of Kouandé to receive messages in a village forbidding the faithful to go and pray in such and such a mosque, on pain of death".

In fact, this part of northern Benin, like Donga, is also feeling the effects of the competition or clash of religious models within Islam, which are being instrumentalized by aggravating the already yawning fractures at

community level: *"In October 2022, in a village in Kouandé, a message was posted forbidding worshippers to come and pray in a mosque on pain of attack. Although prayers continue in this mosque, this action reflects the level of radicalization of the author of this letter and demonstrates his intentions"*.

In Natitingou, a religious crisis broke out within the Muslim community as early as 2016, following a dispute over the appointment of a successor to the Imam of the central mosque after the latter's death. Two would-be imams engaged in a merciless tug-of-war", explains a young man from the town who is well acquainted with religious circles.

Such phenomena are not anecdotal, as they illustrate the socio-political challenge of controlling religious leadership, which has become more complex with the interference of certain countries and organizations close to them in the management of worship, to the point of posing real problems of governance of the religious in a country where the practice of Islam still seems most peaceful.

It is above all the socio-political effects and repercussions that such events can have that become factors in the polarization or crystallization of radicalism. Another account of the incident illustrates this strong crystallization, leading to tensions that rekindle desire within a community riven by innumerable contradictions: *"This crisis, because of the excesses*

and public order problems it caused, obliged the political and administrative authorities to ban access to this main mosque, with a significant deployment of defense and security forces. When this crisis was resolved, two camps were formed, and tensions between them remain active to this day. According to another mosque-goer, the situation remains tense: "Whenever the opportunity arises, both sides are ready to fight, and everyone is on the alert".

"Bush people approach young people": the beginnings of an indoctrination process?

"In the villages and hamlets, there are numerous concentration cells where new elements are brainwashed," testifies a young peasant from Dassari. In these testimonies from young people from Matéri or Tanguiéta, the link is often made between this "connection" between elements of extremist groups and young people, as well as the effect of trans frontality on these interactions: *"These cells are in the villages surrounding the Parc Pendjari or on the Burkina Faso side of the park,"* says a young local. He adds: *"When a young person goes to these camps, when he comes back, his behavior, his conception of things and his character change. His whole mind is turned towards the afterlife, and his goal is to die a martyr's death"*.

Conclusion on the case of Atacora

The characteristic vulnerability of the Atacora department, both in terms of inter-community tensions and socio-economic frustrations, warrants greater vigilance in the fight against terrorism, which should mitigate security approaches. We note that the community issue is the result of various difficulties, ranging from unequal treatment according to ethnicity, to discrimination in employment, to the stigmatization of certain communities suspected of colluding with violent extremist groups. This climate of suspicion, combined with the critical management of land and natural areas, which has had an impact on many trades, is far from contributing to an effective fight against violent extremism.

It should be noted that the geographical location of this department, bordering Togo and Burkina Faso, makes it a zone that could serve as a transit area, or even as a development area for local incubators. One of the main risks is the sympathy that can arise from this familiarity with the presence of terrorist elements, sometimes presenting themselves as protectors of a section of the population that feels itself to be the victim of a certain

injustice that the local authority is unable to redress.

In any case, we need to move towards a mixed approach that not only manages security imperatives, but also builds resilience by giving local communities their rightful place. Crime, which is often highlighted, does not seem to be the root of the problem, but rather one of its symptoms, inviting us to address, on the one hand, inter-community tensions and, on the other, the socio-economic vulnerabilities of young people in search of opportunities and integration. The situation in this northern part of Benin is more than a national concern. It could carry the regional risk of the emergence of a new coastal epicenter.

Unsuitable or misunderstood national responses?

Between 2021 and April 2023, Benin recorded at least twenty terrorist attacks on its territory, particularly in the northern part. In January 2024, the government reported a total of 43 civilians and 27 soldiers killed⁶. Attacks on security and defense force positions, planting concealed explosive devices, kidnapping individuals, or sabotaging public infrastructure are just some of these acts.

To counter this terrorist threat, the Beninese authorities have adopted

⁶ See : <https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/01/25/benin-le-gouvernement-intensifie-sa-lutte-contre-le-terrorisme-dans-le->

[nord-du-pays_6212989_3212.html](#) (consulted on August 23, 2024)

several measures⁷. While civil society is working on several development and awareness-raising projects, the state authorities have opted for a predominantly security-based approach. In the aftermath of the first *official* terrorist attack on Benin, the government took measures to counter armed terrorist groups present on its territory. One of these measures is the massive deployment of Benin's armed forces (FAB) to secure the territory and control strategic points. The unit in charge of this mission is called the National Guard. It is deployed in several locations around the country.

Since its deployment, it has achieved several successes. Dormant cells are immediately detected and neutralized, and the supply chains of fuel and supplies for elements of armed terrorist groups are broken. Benin, like other armies in the region, still seems to have the reflex of considering the terrorist threat as exogenous, adopting an approach more akin to conventional warfare, and proving ineffective against the asymmetric strategy of terrorist groups. So, despite the successes achieved, the terrorist phenomenon seems to persist, with the threat spreading from the North, even creating transit areas from Donga and Borgou.

Despite military action on the ground, terrorist acts continue. Throughout the

discussions with these young people from the three northern departments, many of them insisted on the implementation of a national policy to prevent radicalization as distinct from counter-terrorism measures, inspired by a security or even criminological approach to a multi-faceted phenomenon. *"The central authorities favor a purely security-based approach. The creation of the "Haut-Commissariat à la Sédentarisation des Éleveurs" (High Commission for the Sedentarization of Breeders) clearly shows that, for the State, the sole aim is to fight the threat militarily. Its logic obscures the preventive and forward-looking approach, which must be complementary to the security approach"*, deplores this expert who works closely with youth structures in the Alibori and Atacora departments. In his view, *"we must not turn a blind eye to the ethnocultural dynamics at play. The State must not persist in a strategy that will only reinforce ethnic targeting, with all the stigmatization already at work"*, he adds.

Analysis of the preceding factors has clearly shown that it is socio-economic factors and inadequate social development policies that make many young people susceptible to the rhetoric of terrorist groups. Ideological factors facilitating recruitment and indoctrination add to these vulnerabilities.

⁷ The Timbuktu Institute will soon be publishing an analysis of the state's responses and young people's perceptions of them.

Several important initiatives have been taken to this end since February 17th, 2023. In Parakou, the Beninese government and its partners officially launched the activities involved in implementing the project to support the strengthening of social cohesion, the prevention of violent extremism and the fight against conflicts linked to transhumance. The aim of this project was to strengthen the resilience of the populations of the northern departments, which have for some time been confronted with the phenomena of radicalization and terrorism.

The USAID-OTI Littoral Regional Initiative (PRAPC) was also part of this community-based approach to strengthening social cohesion, fully involving young people and initiating dialogue between communities. Other initiatives following the example of this project are already underway, but tackling socio-economic vulnerabilities with real policies enabling young people to access the means of subsistence is proving to be a real emergency.

Conclusion

The northern region of Benin is facing a complex situation characterized by the emergence of a jihadist insurgency born of radicalization and the rise of violent extremism among young people. However, this situation is the result of decades of inter-

community tensions, land conflicts, acts of social, political, and economic marginalization and religious divisions prevalent in the region. These various factors have all had a negative impact on young people.

For most of these young people, radicalization and violent extremism have gone from being an eventuality to a bulwark, a way out or even an ideal way of life. This situation has even reached the most unimaginable proportions, more so as for most of these young people, joining the camp of elements of armed terrorist groups would be a deliverance. An analysis of the various radicalization factors leading young people down this path has revealed a close link between their motivation and the country's socio-economic and political situation. Given the urgency of the situation, tangible solutions are urgently needed to avoid increasing the threat to peace, security, and development in the region. The major challenge is to improve the living conditions of these young people. The State's military response to a phenomenon that has its roots in social, political, economic and community problems seems disproportionate. It is crucial to recognize the risks of a further deterioration in the security situation in this part of Benin, and to provide appropriate and innovative solutions to ensure stability.

Recommendations

In line with the methodology adopted for this study, which is based essentially on listening to communities, particular to young people from the three departments, the recommendations put forward will also be those emanating from the local players themselves. This approach has been deliberately adopted to break away from preconceived ideas and the

replication of toolboxes and solutions taken out of context.

Thus, the young Beninese from the three departments who were interviewed or met over a long period of time, to avoid the bias of interviews limited to the time frame of a conventional study, made the following recommendations as a matter of priority:

- Reduce economic vulnerability by ensuring that people, especially young people, have access to income-generating activities and jobs that can provide them with a livelihood (Donga, Alibori, Atacora)
- Stimulate self-employment through a culture of entrepreneurship that reinforces existing employment policies and mechanisms (Donga, Alibori, Atacora)
- Preventing violent extremism by raising awareness through close collaboration between local authorities and youth structures, and by giving full scope to digital means of communication (Donga)
- Organization of community dialogues involving young people, local authorities, religious and traditional leaders (Donga)
- Strengthen border security and law enforcement equipment, promote civic participation by all citizens, carry out serious studies on the issue of youth radicalization, encourage exchanges of practice and experience (Alibori).
- Develop, in a collaborative manner, a coordinated national program to prevent and combat violent extremism, organize regular community consultations, and create a partnership with decentralized communities (Alibori).
- Prioritize close collaboration with local authorities, and work through local authorities such as the mayor, district chiefs or delegates before reaching out to the target population in the field. This is to build people's confidence and facilitate the smooth running of awareness-raising sessions (Alibori).

- Mobilize and train young people to raise awareness of violent extremism, listen to them as part of better governance of the State, combat unemployment and idleness, avoid arbitrary arrests (Alibori)
- Train security forces and raise their awareness of violent extremism and involve community radio stations in raising awareness of violent extremism, while encouraging local youth associations and organizations working to prevent violent extremism (Alibori).
- Promote dialogue between communities, combat stigmatization, promote social cohabitation and cohesion, avoid arbitrary arrests, raise awareness of the importance of good resource management, encourage partnerships between communities (Alibori)
- Create a framework for dialogue involving all stakeholders (youth, facilitators, local authorities, law enforcement agencies) and facilitate sporting and cultural activities with an intercultural and intercommunity dimension (Alibori).
- Raise awareness of tolerance and the culture of peace among different communities, promote and facilitate communication between communities, promote inter-community mixing through marriages, cooperatives, or groups, avoid discrimination and stigmatization between communities (Atacora).
- Effectively involve local communities in decision-making processes, sedentarism herders by granting them the necessary conditions for their activity, delimit grazing corridors and areas, prohibit night grazing, review the geographical boundaries of Pendjari Park (Atacora).
- Publicize the land, property, and pastoral codes in local languages, make minority groups aware of the efforts of law enforcement agencies, and develop inter-community cross-fertilization activities (Atacora).
- Raising awareness to improve dialogue between law enforcement agencies and local communities (Atacora)
- Create alternative income-generating activities for park residents, create grazing areas and watering points for livestock (Atacora).
- Sensitize communities to land and agro-pastoral conflicts, as well as landowners, opinion and community leaders, law enforcement agencies, herders, farmers, and religious leaders, for ongoing dialogue (Atacora).

- Create training centers for the professional integration of young people and raise awareness, organize dialogue sessions between breeders and farmers, avoid stigmatization (Atacora).
- Promoting social cohesion between communities, regular awareness-raising sessions followed by cultural events, promoting the integration of reconverts into society (Atacora)
- Organize intra- and inter-community awareness-raising and sharing meetings, periodically organize inter-community animation classes, create inter-community mixing activities such as gardening (Atacora).
- Develop advocacy projects through youth associations in each locality to convey and share their concerns with the relevant authorities, with associations able to hold practical sessions with local authorities (Atacora).
- Raise awareness of the damaging effects of violent extremism among all social strata of the population, facilitate inter-community dialogue, set up village committees to strengthen community dialogue and awareness-raising campaigns targeting women's groups (Atacora).
- Create a framework for consultation between groups or associations, lobby local authorities to promote social dialogue, lobby local authorities to involve women in decision-making processes, lobby local authorities for open and inclusive social dialogue (Atacora).
- Adopt a participatory approach that involves everyone, conduct mass awareness-raising campaigns on the pastoral and land tenure codes, effectively apply the legislation in force, set up schools in Fulani communities, organize exchange visits to popularize the concept of Sedentarization among herders. (Donga, Alibori, Atacora)
- Carry out direct interventions in communities with local associations, lobby for agropastoralism issues to be considered in communal development plans, create partnerships between herders' and farmers' associations. (Donga, Alibori, Atacora)

Sources of human and socio-economic data on the departments:

Summary of the main results of RGPH-4 in ALIBORI

https://instad.bj/images/docs/insae-statistiques/enquetes-recensements/RGPH/1.RGPH_4/Synth%C3%A8se-des-principaux-r%C3%A9sultats-du-RGPH-4/Plaque-ette-Alibori-final.pdf

Cahier des villages et quartiers de ville Département de l'ALIBORI

<https://rgph5.instad.bj/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ALIBORI.pdf>

Alibori

<https://decentralisation.gouv.bj/prefecture/1/alibori/>

Atacora

<https://decentralisation.gouv.bj/prefecture/2/atacora/>

Cahier des villages et quartiers de ville Département de l'ATACORA

<https://rgph5.instad.bj/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ATACORA.pdf>

Summary of the main results of ATACORA's RGPH-4

https://instad.bj/images/docs/insae-statistiques/enquetes-recensements/RGPH/1.RGPH_4/Synth%C3%A8se-des-principaux-r%C3%A9sultats-du-RGPH-4/Plaque-ette-Atacora-finale.pdf

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Spatialization of the priority targets of the SDGs in Benin: Monograph of the communes of the departments of Atacora and Donga

https://developpement.gouv.bj/media/Spat_bj_Monographie%20Atacora%20Donga_03_02.pdf

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Donga

<https://decentralisation.gouv.bj/prefecture/7/donga/>

INSAE BENIN

<https://instad.bj/>



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