

# NIGER

POPULATION IN 2016

**20.672.987**

SIZE

**1,270,000 KM<sup>2</sup>**

HDI RANKING 2016

**188/188**

INEQUALITY ADJUSTED HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX 2016

**0,253**

GENDER INEQUALITY INDEX 2016

**0,695**

CIVIC SPACE (CIVICUS MONITOR 2017)

**OBSTRUCTED**

**HDI** - Human Development Index and its components, ranks countries by HDI value and details the values of the three HDI components: longevity, education and income.

**IHDI** - Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index - IHDI looks beyond the average achievements of a country in longevity, education and income to show how these achievements are distributed among its residents. An IHDI value can be interpreted as the level of human development when inequality is accounted for.

**GDI** - Gender Development Index, measures disparities on the HDI by gender. The table contains HDI values estimated separately for women and men; the ratio of which is the GDI value. The closer the ratio is to 1, the smaller the gap between women and men.

**Civic space** - The CIVICUS monitor assigns each country a rating on civic space based on constant analysis of multiple streams of data on civic space. The rating is open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed. <https://monitor.civicus.org/Ratings>

## Introduction

The Republic of Niger is a landlocked country named after the Niger River, almost the largest country in West Africa. The Sahara Desert covers over 80% of the country. Over 78% of the population lives in rural areas. Its population is very young, with 47.5% being under the age of 15 years and is concentrated in the regions of Maradi, Zinder and Tahoua.<sup>3</sup>

The country is constantly threatened by periodic droughts and desertification. The economy is concentrated around subsistence with some commercial agriculture in the more fertile south and the export of raw materials, especially uranium ore.

The country has ratified most international human rights treaties and has also adopted several sector policies to ensure that indigenous people, those with disabilities, the youth, the elderly and women are protected. The implementation of policies is weak due to a lack of financial resources and/or policy decisiveness in a country where cultural and religious values and traditions gravely affect the living conditions of women and other vulnerable groups.

Voice in Niger is managed by Oxfam and will focus on:

- 1 Strengthening the legal framework and its implementation, in particular, laws for social protection against child marriages and alike;
- 2 Access to basic services such as adequate and inclusive education, health services and infrastructures;
- 3 Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and access to land for women and other gender identities;
- 4 Enabling the participation of members of the Voice target groups, and;
- 5 Engagement of decision makers and duty bearers in advocacy processes and implementation.

## State of Affairs

The Constitution adopted in 2010 sets out the legal and institutional framework in Niger. This text guarantees the rights and liberties for all citizens and specifically prohibits all forms of discrimination against women, youth and people living with disabilities. It also ensures the right to education for children, social protection for the elderly and equal opportunity for people living with disabilities toward their promotion and/or social reintegration for people living with disabilities.

### People living with disabilities

According to the 2012 general census, people living with disabilities made up 4.2% of the total population. People with physical disabilities are generally not rejected nor feared. Instead, they are most often granted compassion and empathy. The traditional culture puts people living with disabilities on the priority list when it comes to public assistance.

Having said that, attitudes are shifting and increasingly people living with disabilities find themselves being victims of social exclusion, stigmatisation, negative perceptions and beliefs. Sometimes they are feared or isolated and perceived as being violent based on their impulsive or unpredictable behaviours. They are economically challenged and denied public assistance, and do not fully benefit from the essential basic services (health, education, etc.). Access to work, vocational training and other economic opportunities are also very limited. As for spatial exclusion, most public buildings (hospitals, schools, etc.) are not designed to facilitate access. The same pattern can be noted in public transportation. In politics, the views of people living with disabilities are not considered in decision-making processes. Politically, people living with disabilities have limited engagement in civic participation.

<sup>3</sup> National Statistics Institute, Comprehensive figures, 4th Census - 2012

People living with disabilities articulate the following demands:

- To enhance and ensure access to health services;
- To target more people living with disabilities when implementing projects and programmes that assist vulnerable groups;
- To fight against stereotypes through the media and community meetings.

Finally, gender-based exclusion strengthens all other forms of exclusion for women and girls living with disabilities. It is difficult for women living with disabilities to access sexual and reproductive health services. In addition, women/girls living with disabilities are unable to fully engage with their communities because they are marginalised and discriminated against both by their own family and the society.

### Sexual Minorities – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex (LGBTI)

In Niger, unlike other countries in West Africa (such as Senegal and Ghana), there is no specific legislation against LGBTI people. Similarly, the law does not protect the LGBTI community and/or same sex couples either. The criminal code does not refer to any specific offence for those who engage in consensual same sex practices and relationships, especially among men. However, the text refers to offences that can be regarded as “public indecency”. People convicted of such offences can face between three months and three years’ imprisonment and a fine of XOF 10,000 to 100,000 (between 15 and 150 Euros) (Article 276 of the Criminal Code).

Like elsewhere, statistics on the number of people who identify as LGBTI are absent. What is clear is that socially, they adopt a low profile. They usually meet in private homes or other discreet places that do not publicly expose their sexual orientation or gender identity. Men (“yan daoudou” or “yan loutou” in Hausa) tend to attend social ceremonies and mingle with women in traditional musical groups. Lesbians (“yan madigo” in Hausa) are less visible due to additional discrimination and other forms of abuse.

According to the 2012 report by the U.S. State Department on Human Rights in Niger, “although there were no known cases under the above law, gays and lesbians however were subject to discrimination and stigma”. Sexual minorities struggle to assert themselves largely due to deep religious intolerance. The clerics and Islamic associations against sexual minorities openly express their radical opposition in mosques and during cultural events such as the International Festival of African Fashion.<sup>4</sup> The government’s response to dissolve several Islamic associations has not stopped the Islamist lobby, which continues to maintain its radical discourse against sexual minorities.

Intolerance from the population is made public; bar and restaurant owners in Niamey, the capital, are known to deny LGBTI people access after protests from customers. In terms of public policy, the national HIV and AIDS Strategic Plan 2013-2017 takes into account the needs of Men having Sex with Men (MSM) and there are informal groups emerging to increase awareness and carry out peer education.

### Women facing exploitation, abuse and/or violence

In Niger, gender based violence and early marriage is based on traditional practices, patriarchy, religion and high economic dependency ratios. This is highest in Maradi and Zinder regions. Based on the information gathered in the 2006 UNDP Human Development Report, the following violations are listed: discrimination based on marital status, men’s

<sup>4</sup> CULTURE-NIGER: Government to Ban Islamic Groups Opposed to Fashion Festival, Saidou Arji and Noel Tadeignon. NIAMEY, Nov 15 2000 (IPS): <http://www.ipsnews.net/2000/11/culture-niger-government-to-ban-islamic-groups-opposed-to-fashion-festival/>

veto for their spouses to participate in public events including political meetings, the difficulty for women to run for any elective positions despite the law on quotas about women's elective and administrative representation, etc.

Girls face many obstacles including economic injustice, physical abuse and lack of access to education. The gross school enrolment rate in the 7-12 year age group is 57.6% among girls compared to 68.7% for boys. These disparities show the real need to bridge the gap at the elementary and high school levels. This situation is even worse in rural areas where very intelligent young girls are often unable to continue their studies due to lack of opportunity and because of family tradition.

Access to and ownership of land is a real issue for women in Niger. This is because neither the customs nor the legislation promotes equal access to such rights. According to the customs, women cannot be landowners, but they can use plots made available to them by men. According to the Islamic law, after a husband passes away, his wife/wives are entitled to inherit half of what their husband has, but this provision is not systematically implemented<sup>5</sup>. This deprives women from being empowered while perpetuating their dependence on their husbands.

The social exclusion of women victims of abuse, exploitation and/or violence, is based on traditional practices, biased interpretation of religious texts and economic dependency ratios. Women are also barred from undertaking economic or political activities without the permission of their husbands. Confinement of women occurs, especially in Hausa speaking and in upper social classes, and is regarded as a source of prestige. Within polygamous households where confinement is the rule, there is usually hierarchy between women, based on the order of entry into the home. The eldest or the first one has a certain right of precedence over others

### Age-discriminated vulnerable groups

In Niger, Voice has identified children aged from 7 to 12 years (elementary level) as the most vulnerable. They face issues of non-attendance at school, family abandonment and having to live on the streets. These children are exposed to various risks including drug addiction, disease and crime. There are many children under 18 years of age serving time in prison for petty crimes.

Other cases of rights violations are children (aka *talibes*) under the guardianship of Islamic instructors or *marabouts*. These children are usually from rural families who send them to live with other families in the hope of receiving an Islamic education. Many *talibes* are exploited and neglected and have to provide for themselves. This means many end up begging for food and clothing, compromising their learning and education.

Education for children living with disabilities remains a significant problem in Niger. There have been numerous unsuccessful attempts at creating special education programmes for the deaf and the blind. Instead of providing positive outcomes, such approaches further isolated and stigmatised these children. NGOs are now advocating for the promotion of an inclusive education concept with Handicap International, the Niger EFA coalition and the Niger Network for the Development of Education as major players. The main obstacle remains the lack of competent teachers to meet the needs of children living with physical or mental disabilities.

Young people (15-25 years) also face stigma, especially in rural areas. For example, because of their age, young people are not trusted to take on certain social responsibilities. There is a huge disparity when it comes to young people's access to education, employment and economic opportunities. This economic exclusion is reinforced by the fact that most of them are not enrolled in school and their families abandon them exposing them to risks such as drugs, prostitution, crime and begging. Young people in rural areas lack opportunities when compared to those who are in cities. In politics, there is no

youth involvement in key policy decision-making processes even though these decisions may affect them directly. Very few young people are represented in the government and within political parties.

In Niger, there is political commitment to meeting the needs of the elderly, defined as people over the age of 60 years. On paper, government programmes exist to ensure the elderly are supported and protected through various initiatives built around respect. Most of these are not implemented or effective. At the village level however, solidarity and support for senior citizens is even less visible. There is systematic and implicit exclusion from actively participating in community activities although their wisdom and advice is often requested about certain topics such as funerals and traditional weddings, to name but a few. They face stigma and exclusion and are considered "incapable" and "out-dated" in their ways of thinking and doing. Older people often lack income to meet their basic needs. The phenomenon of older people begging, particularly in urban centres and accompanied by young children, is increasingly common. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of any social/health protection schemes. There is limited participation of older people in political affairs except those who have some influence because of their educational level, economic status or knowledge of the system. The elderly lack space for leisure activities and personal hobbies. There is discrimination between educated seniors who have more influence and who live in urban areas compared to those who are uneducated and living in the countryside. There are few structures to support or promote the rights of this part of the population.

### Engaging with civil society

Civil society organisations are working through networks and grassroots interventions and groups to improve the living conditions of the Voice target groups. Most organisations are engaged in providing direct services in urban centres (vocational training, income generating activities, networking efforts) and less on advocacy. There is a need to reach out to other social groups/layers, which do not benefit from any NGO or association support. Grassroots community groups need to be identified and supported in order to contribute to significant changes in the Nigerien society. Similarly, to strengthen the advocacy ability and interaction between organisations, existing networks need to be reinforced in terms of use of information communication, social media and/or technology.

There are two important structures working with the youth, namely, the National Youth Council and the Youth Parliament. These two organisations can become key allies in advocacy but their close ties with the government may alter their power to advocate on critical issues. This is especially true regarding the National Youth Council whose configuration/composition varies according to the sitting government cabinet. Therefore, any engagement with these structures should be subject to a deeper context analysis to assess their independence and their ability to carry out advocacy for the rights of the youth.

Working openly with the LGBTI community is risky in Niger due to the social hostility towards them. Discretion and keeping a low profile is of utmost importance.

<sup>5</sup> Rural women and agricultural land in Niger in written contributions from participants: Dimitra partners and FAO colleagues, Ali Abdoulaye, Coordinator, NGO VIE Kande Ni Bayra.