SAFETY, SECURITY, AND PEACEBUILDING IN MAURITANIA: THE ROLE OF ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION

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Introduction

In a Sahelian context shaped by instability and shifting security dynamics, Mauritania stands out as a relatively stable country, despite persistent structural vulnerabilities such as youth unemployment, regional inequalities, and limited access to education and economic opportunities. In some Mauritanian urban and peri-urban areas, concerns have been raised about the influence of transnational extremist ideologies on vulnerable populations. Combined with socio-economic marginalisation, rapid urbanisation, and the weakening of traditional support networks, these factors may increase susceptibility to extremist narratives, although they do not inevitably lead to violent extremism.

These dynamics call for a broader understanding of security. Security cannot be reduced to military or law enforcement measures alone; it must also encompass the social, economic, and educational factors that underpin long-term stability. This is in keeping with the concept of human security, as defined by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)[1], which moves beyond the traditional state-centred understanding of security to focus on protecting and empowering people by addressing the conditions that threaten their lives, livelihoods, and dignity.

Within this broader perspective, Adult Learning and Education (ALE) can play an important role in Mauritania and across the Sahel. By addressing the underlying socio-economic conditions that contribute to insecurity, ALE helps strengthen resilience, social cohesion, and human security. This article examines the role of ALE as a tool for social cohesion, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. It argues that security-focused approaches alone are insufficient and that inclusive strategies centred on human development are essential for addressing the root causes of insecurity and building more peaceful, resilient, and inclusive societies.

Social cohesion, cultural diversity, and the role of ALE

Mauritania is characterised by rich cultural, linguistic, and social diversity, which is both a national asset and an important foundation for social cohesion. Situated at the crossroads of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world, the country occupies a unique geographical and cultural position that has long been shaped by exchanges between different traditions, identities, and ways of life.

Mauritanian society comprises several communities, including Arabs (Moors), Fulani, Soninké and Wolof peoples. Each has its own language, cultural heritage, traditions, social practices, and forms of knowledge - all of which contribute to the country's rich national heritage. This pluralism is especially evident in regions where different communities have lived side by side for generations. In these areas, relationships are built on mutual respect, solidarity, cultural exchange, and peaceful coexistence. Such long-standing interaction has strengthened trust between communities and reinforced a shared sense of belonging to one nation.

Maintaining this social fabric requires sustained efforts to promote intercultural dialogue, tolerance, and inclusion. Valuing different cultural identities, respecting linguistic diversity, and ensuring the participation of all communities in economic, social, and political life are essential for strengthening national unity and preserving social peace.

Intergenerational dialogue promoting peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, and peacebuilding, organised in the Tiris Zemmour region by a consortium of three Mauritanian civil society organisations

Mauritania's diversity can be a powerful driver of development and social cohesion when supported by policies and initiatives that promote peaceful coexistence, intercultural dialogue, and the active participation of all communities. Within this context, ALE has an important role to play in peacebuilding. By creating inclusive learning spaces, encouraging dialogue across cultural and social divides, recognising diversity, and fostering mutual respect, ALE helps strengthen more inclusive, resilient, and cohesive communities.

Contemporary approaches to conflict prevention recognise adults as key actors in promoting social cohesion, mediation, and the peaceful transformation of conflict. Rather than focusing only on responding to conflict after it has emerged, these approaches emphasise developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to identify tensions early, facilitate dialogue, and build trust within and between communities.

ALE supports these objectives by strengthening critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and active citizenship. These competencies enable individuals and communities to engage constructively with differences, resolve disputes peacefully, and participate more effectively in local decision-making. In doing so, ALE contributes to stronger social cohesion, greater resilience, and more sustainable peace.

In a country where significant territorial and social inequalities persist, ALE also provides an effective means of addressing structural factors that can contribute to instability. Through literacy, vocational education and training, entrepreneurship, and other lifelong learning opportunities, it expands economic and social opportunities, particularly for people who have been excluded from formal education. By improving livelihoods and socio-economic prospects, particularly through vocational training and entrepreneurship, ALE also helps reduce the vulnerabilities that can fuel social tensions.

In addition, ALE promotes the inclusion of vulnerable groups, including women, young people, refugees, and socially marginalised populations. Strengthening civil society organisations through non-formal adult education further supports local governance, encourages civic participation, and enhances communities' capacity to address disputes peacefully, including those related to natural resources and access to essential services.

ALE in action

In Mauritania, the UNDP's broader concept of human security is reflected in two initiatives implemented by *Ensemble pour un avenir meilleur* (EPAM) (Together for a Better Future) in the commune[2] of Sebkha in Nouakchott. The first, *Support for Vocational Training and Socio-economic Integration of People in Vulnerable Situations* (Projet d'appui à la formation professionnelle et à l'insertion des personnes en situation vulnérabilité) (2021-2022), aimed to strengthen participants' skills, improve their living conditions, and expand opportunities for social and economic inclusion. The second, *One Woman, One Trade* (Une femme, un métier), launched in 2024, provided vocational training to vulnerable young women in hairdressing and soap making.

Through training in information technology, tailoring, hairdressing and beauty services, and electrical installation, more than 280 young people, including a substantial proportion of women, acquired practical skills to support their socio-

Entrepreneurship and future-oriented vocational skills training organised by EPAM in partnership with civil society organisations in the municipality of Sebkha, benefitting young programme participants

economic integration. For many participants, this training opened pathways to salaried employment, professional internships, and self-employment, while others established their own income-generating activities.

Together these initiatives demonstrate how ALE can contribute to human security by strengthening livelihoods and economic independence. By equipping vulnerable groups with practical and vocational skills, ALE can help to reduce economic vulnerability, expand opportunities for participation, and strengthen the resilience of individuals, families, and communities.

Limitations and future directions

Despite its significant potential, ALE in Mauritania continues to face structural challenges, including inadequate funding, limited geographical coverage, and a shortage of qualified human resources. These constraints are compounded by the need for stronger coordination among governmental institutions, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders.

To strengthen the contribution of ALE to social cohesion and peacebuilding, the following priorities should be considered:

- Integrate non-formal education more fully into national policies as a recognised component of lifelong learning, human development, and social cohesion.
- Strengthen the capacities of local actors, particularly civil society organisations, to incorporate conflict prevention and peacebuilding into their programmes. This includes promoting a culture of peace, developing dialogue and mediation skills, and fostering partnerships among communities, public institutions, and civil society at both the local and national levels.

Conclusion

ALE is a powerful means of strengthening social cohesion, preventing conflict, and contributing to sustainable peace. Through more inclusive education policies and active citizen participation, Mauritania can build stronger, more resilient communities that are better equipped to address social and security challenges.

More broadly, this analysis highlights a fundamental principle: lasting security depends not only on security measures but, above all, on human development, social inclusion, and equal opportunities. ALE should be recognised not simply as an educational priority, but as a vital component of efforts to reduce disparities, expand opportunities, and promote peace, resilience, and inclusive, long-term development.

References/Further reading

Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement. (1994). *Rapport mondial sur le développement humain 1994 : Nouvelles dimensions de la sécurité humaine*. Oxford University Press.

Endnotes

1 The UNDP identifies two essential aspects of human security: 'first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression; and second, protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life - whether in homes, in jobs or in communities' (United Nations Development Programme, 1994, p. 23). United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (1994). *Human development report 1994: New dimensions of human security*. Oxford University Press. https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-1994

2 Municipality.