

Youth and Agency in the Context of International Strife

CASID: A Virtual Roundtable on Youth Agency and the Education Crisis in Mali



Participatory Research on Education and Agency in Mali (PREAM) is a 3 year research project conducted in partnership between McGill, Plan international and the Université des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Bamako. It is funded by Dubai Cares.

A Reflection on The Canadian Association for the Study of International Development (CASID) Annual Conference

By Dr. Seydou Loua and Dr. Kattie Lussier

On May 18, 2022 the Mali team took part in a round table at the conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development (CASID).



The virtual roundtable was entitled 'Beyond the peels: youth agency and the multiple layers of the education crisis in Mali' and chaired by Dr. Kattie Lussier from McGill. It was an opportunity for the researchers from ULSHB to

present their work on PREAM to an international audience and to synthesis the preliminary findings of the first phase of the project before going to the field again for round 2 of data collection. The contributors presented the initial findings of the participatory visual methods' workshops conducted with 120 young people (60 boys and 60 girls) from 13 to 18 years old in six communes of Segou and Mopti regions in December 2021.

Dr. Moriké Dembele presented on the situation in Mali and how the different dimensions of the crisis influence education. He discussed the main factors that complexify research in the regions of Segou and Mopti and the methodological choices that were made in order to be able to study education and agency in a context of crisis. Dr. Seydou Loua discussed the consequences of the armed conflict and the social tensions in the regions on Mali's education system as well as the implications of the crisis on young people's agency. He also presented the point of view of the young participants on the situation and their experiences of the crisis.

Following this presentation, Dr. Fatoumata Keïta talked about the gender dimension and girls' agency in times of crisis. She presented the similarities and differences between girls and boys art productions and highlighted different aspects of a girls' life in Mali that influence their agency. Dr. Mamadou Dia concluded the session by reflecting at what the future holds, looking beyond the crisis and exploring agency as a vector of peace. In this final presentation, questions were raised on what young people can teach us about what is possible beyond the conflict. The concluding session also initiated reflections on the contribution of agency to peace processes and the role of development and education actors.

The round table was a space of exchanges and enabled the researchers involved in the project to share ideas and experiences. It also allowed the team to clearly put on the table the

open debate on the question of youth agency and the relation to insecurity. The debates around whether some attitudes and behaviors can be considered signs of agency or not in relation to Mali's culture and traditions were particularly interesting. These discussions and reflections are likely to continue throughout and beyond PREAM.

The round table also provided the opportunity to interrogate how Mali's school curricula, the pedagogical methods employed by teachers and the education provided in the family often fail to encourage and foster youth agency. One point that all researchers agreed on is that, so far, it is not possible to establish a direct relation between schooling and youth agency in Mali since one doesn't always justify the other.

Fieldnotes and Fieldwork from PREAM: A Few Words from Our Interns

Some Notes from The Field

By Aïché Danioko

As a 2022 IHDW intern from the Global Health Scholar program at McGill University, Ms. Danioko, who is of Malian origin, got the chance to interact and participate in a research session held in Mali with researchers from the the Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako (ULSHB). Here, she recounts her experience in the form of field notes, a research strategy often practiced and encouraged in the field.

On Friday, May 13th, the day began with a training session on sexual harassment, which was followed by an introduction to the PREAM project, its research goals and its aims. Seated at the very back of the room by the lead researchers, Dr. Fatoumata Keita, Dr. Moriké Dembelle and Dr. Seidou Loua of the Université des Lettres et des Sciences

Humaines de Bamako (ULSHB), positioned me as distinct from the prospective interviewers who were interacting directly with the children. Although they were considerably more experienced researchers and scholars than myself, my proximity to the primary researchers at ULSHB, with whom I would spend most of my time, gave me a distinct status. My affiliation to McGill University (and by extension, Canada) also contributed to this. For the first time while being in my hometown, I was introduced as a McGill student first.

The most notable part of that day was the translation session of the questionnaire. We were joined by Bamanankan linguists and presented the questions in French. Then, Dr. Dembélé would play an audio of the tentative translation to the speakers. From the first question, there were vocal disagreements about the translation. Students questioned the translations of their professors, who also disagreed among themselves and it resulted in a very lively discussion. Like many people in the room, I realized that although I was fluent, I did not know the language as well as I thought. Regardless, I was very happy to be able to learn from, and sometimes participate, in this conversation.

This process allowed me to think about the process of translation in general and its position in the project. Because French is so different from Bamanankan and Dogonsso, there is invariably an alteration of the question when it is translated. Often during this process, translations would be rejected on the basis that they did not effectively represent the original French sentence. Many questions could not be effectively translated by a single sentence and required the addition of some layers of nuance by the interviewer to allow the child to understand. It brings to the fore whether the questions and ideas explored would be different if they had initially been formulated in Bamanankan and Dogonsso?

The following day, the ULSHB technical specialist and I led the training session on the use of the data collection software, SurveyCTO, on the tablets. I was surprised that in less than a few days, I had gone from seeing the software for the first time to being considered an expert in it. This allowed me to understand expertise as something that is enacted rather than held, something that must be acknowledged by an audience (Carr, 2010). As an “expert”, I was also tasked with testing and grading the prospective interviewers during an exercise with the tablets. My performance of expertise and the grading of the training attendees that followed contributed to the authority with which I was regarded. This was a bit disorienting because I was in a familiar place (Bamako) but I occupied a position that was unfamiliar, as I was introduced as a McGill student and an expert in SurveyCTO. Nevertheless, it was a valuable and enjoyable experience, like the rest of my time working alongside the ULSHB team.

PREAM Fieldwork: A Note on Visual Participatory Research Methodologies

By Margaux Deroi

As an Arts Internship Office intern Ms. Deroi has been tasked with examining the particular social science strategies that are used in the IHDW's PREAM project. Here, she reflects on the opportunities and challenges that were faced by researchers and summarizes their inputs into the 'Big Picture' of the fieldwork.

The research project PREAM, *Projet de recherche participative sur l'éducation et l'agentivité au Mali*, is divided into 3 phases: visual participatory workshops with 120 adolescents, an investigation with 1000 adolescents, and the presentation of the work of adolescents, coupled with workshops with adults and youth.



120 drawings were collected during the fieldwork



Aïché Danioko is a second-year student doing a B.A. in Ecological Determinants of Health with a minor in Pathology. Her interests include neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), social and medical anthropology, and African history. As a student from Mali, she looks forward to working on the Participatory Research in on Education and Agency in Mali (PREAM).

The project uses different participatory visual methods (PVM) as research strategies which are particularly effective in communicating with youths. Cellphilm is one example, where short videos made with cellphones aim to transmit an engaged message. The first step to this method is an introduction to visual ethics, followed by a brainstorming session, the creation of a storyboard, reflections, screening, and filming. Twenty three cellphilm were created in six schools in the regions of Mopti and Segou in December 2021. The participants were 13 to 18 years old, with an equal number of girls and boys. They were asked to create a cellphilm where they either have the capacity to act and help themselves or do not have the

capacity to act and help themselves. Drawings were also used as another PVM technique, where youths were asked to draw what “helping yourself” looks like. The discussions following the art production were an opportunity to shed light on the messages and intents of the young participants, enriching the data available.



One of the six schools that are part of the fieldwork in Mali

The fieldwork was not without challenges! Planning the workshops was difficult due to recurrent teacher strikes and security issues, as the research took place in conflict zones within Mali. It was also laborious to coordinate the two teams in the two study areas simultaneously. Time was also an issue as the art production and reflection took a significant amount of time which was not always available. In addition, several languages are spoken in Mali, and hence the language proficiency of the researcher was another concern. Nevertheless, the PVM methods positioned the research participants as active collaborators in the knowledge production. Hence, it is particularly relevant when working on agency as adolescents are by far the best suited to tell us about their vision of their life, their goals, and their ambitions.



Adolescent girls watching a cellphilm



Margaux Deroi is a U2 student in International Development, minoring in Gender, Sexuality, Feminist, and Social Justice Studies. She is strongly interested in the understanding of structural inequalities, with a particular emphasis on gender dynamics. She is also engaged in her community through different volunteer initiatives as she truly believes that grassroots implications are the basis of social change. She hopes to continue her studies by doing a master's degree abroad in medical anthropology.