Qualitative Insights and Strategic Narratives in Niger: A Report of Findings, Insights and Ideas
January 2014

Context
Background
Recent shifts in the family planning landscape in Niger have created new momentum to address family planning issues there. Specifically, Niger’s preliminary 2012 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) found that Niger’s fertility rate is the highest in the world and has increased since 2006, from 7.1 to 7.6 children per woman. Moreover, the 2006 DHS found that Nigerien men and women’s ideal number of children was higher than this fertility rate, at 11.0 children for men and 8.8 children for women.

These findings—and the increased fertility finding in particular—have galvanized the Niger Ministry of Health (MOH) and non-governmental actors in Niger to take decisive action to increase women’s use of modern contraceptives. The Hewlett Foundation has started by engaging Hope Consulting (HC) to develop a family planning scale-up strategy, which provide recommendations for how the Nigerien Ministry of Health, major donors, and major family planning actors might scale-up funding and programming in Niger. The strategy will complement Niger’s Plan d’Action de Planification Familiale 2013 – 2020, finalized in mid-2013.

HC’s recommendations will be based on an in-depth analysis of opportunities to increase modern contraceptive use in Niger through supply- and demand-side interventions, based on in-depth qualitative research, a nationwide survey of women age 15 - 49, and an analysis of supply-related barriers to use.

In addition to providing inputs to the national survey, this engagement’s qualitative research was intended to offer insights into family planning dynamics in Niger, and in particular how the family planning community can think about encouraging an increase in modern contraceptive use when Nigerien men and women both want more children than they are currently having.

The Qualitative Research
Focus of this Document
This report provides these insights, around family planning dynamics in Niger. It also offers key themes that can be used to shape marketing or communications efforts, and a set of communication campaign concepts. Here, we’ve aimed to provide rich material that will be valuable to those developing communication campaigns, and to those who are thinking comprehensively about how to increase child spacing in Niger.
We also expect to return to the findings and insights presented here at the end of the qualitative research phase, to provide color around how to appeal to the priority population segments which are most open to modern contraceptive use.

**Research Structure**

In November 2013, Hope Consulting conducted qualitative research in Niger, including 18 focus groups, 21 healthcare provider interviews, and 84 family planning consultations observed. This report provides observations and insights from the focus group discussions. A full Phase 1 report-out is provided in complement to this document, and provides specifics on focus group structure and locations.

Focus groups had six participants per group (an optimal number for good discussion). They were conducted in Niamey, Zinder, Tahoua, and multiple villages at distances of 10-40 kilometers outside each of these cities, over a period of 16 days. For security reasons, we were not able to visit deeply rural areas, nor the north or east of Niger.

Focus group participants were segmented between men and women, young (15-24) and “old” (25-34), married and unmarried, with and without children. All of our attendees but one was Muslim. We also had a few widows, divorced, remarried, and first or second wives in attendance, as well as a cross section of social classes. Our intention was not to segment learning as one would when doing quantitative research, but simply to maximize the opportunity to obtain comprehensive perspectives and food for thought.

The discussion guide outline was “over designed” allowing us to adapt as the research progressed. We paid close attention to creating both a research outline and an environment that would lead to frank, open, revealing, and lively discussion, and we believe we achieved this goal.

Our primary goal was to reveal the rational, emotional, and cultural narrative drivers of experience for our participants, as representative of a cross section of Nigerien society, and to use these to develop strategic insights and ideas that can be further developed and serve as the basis for message, campaign, product, and program development.

**Preliminary Note: A Study in Contrasts**

Niger is a study in contrasts which defy easy summaries, where mobile phones live alongside magical thinking, and motorcycles are ridden by people also wearing talismans. For anyone describing Niger, every sentence should end not with a period, but rather continue with a preposition such as: and, however, but, yet, etc. Only in this way can a sense of the full landscape of Niger be understood.

In this report, our task will be to provide a sense of this dynamism and diversity, while at the same time identifying narrative coherence as it pertains to maternal health and family planning to work. Phase II, the quantitative research, will put hard numbers around some
family planning dynamics in Niger, but this research reveals the primary narrative drivers and future possibilities for action and change.

**About this Report**

The findings outlined in this document reflect a qualitative approach to research in design, implementation, analysis and reporting. We will present a summary of patterns and possibilities, observations and insights, and entrenched and emerging narratives that arise from a close reading of deep qualitative inquiry and discussion—the key strengths of qualitative research.

Accordingly, this document does not offer a blow-by-blow account of every question and answer asked in focus group discussion, nor does it make any attempt to quantify these responses. Lastly, while we designed the research to reach out to various population segments, including urban and rural, male and female, younger and older, married and unmarried, this report is not the output of a segmentation study: the sample is too small, the methodology was not appropriate to segmentation, and this was not our goal.

However, we adhere to a strict reporting rule. Any finding reported below represents a common statement or a summary of a series of comments, unless otherwise indicated (i.e. analyst observations, uncommon statements, direct quotes, etc.).

**Report Structure**

This report is divided into five sections:

I. **Background Themes**

*The primary narrative dynamics that underlie all that is to follow*

II. **Detailed Findings**

*The largest section. Learning is presented as it emerged through the structured topic discussion guide*

III. **Insights**

*Output of analytic and lateral thinking suggested by the findings in Section II*

IV. **Strategic Possibilities**

*Alternative strategic futures to be developed by partners*

V. **Campaign Recommendations**

*Specific ideas for execution*

VI. **Conclusions and Next Steps**

I. **Background Themes**

There are five narrative foundations at work in Niger that influencing our thinking about family planning. The first two are around Niger’s cultural context, and the second three are more directly related to family planning in Niger.
A. Cultural Context

Two important cultural themes are a communal ethos and reasonableness and rationality vs. rationalism. These reside in the background, and affect all family planning considerations that follow.

A Communal Ethos

Niger is a friendly place. The people are nice, warm, respectful, peaceful, polite, and always interested in “chit chat.” Women walk arm in arm with women, and men walk arm in arm, and holding hands, with men. Laughter is frequent. Commiseration is constant. People sit very closely together on mats, they pray hip to hip. They have very little privacy and few solid doors or glass windows. To pass a person is to greet them, and specifically to wish them divine peace. A primary virtue, and a hope for one’s children, is to be useful, to take care of others, to make a contribution. Conversely, to take, to hoard, or to be a thief is the top transgression on nearly everyone’s lips, because it so boldly contradicts the ethos of community. There is a palpable sense of togetherness, and even a popular expression that “we are all in this together.” As we’ll see below all of these characteristics have roots in the religion of Islam rather than in poverty.

Reasonableness and Rationality vs. Rationalism

In the modern West, since the 18th century enlightenment, we tend to conflate these three words, and identify the first two as synonyms for rationalism. However, rationalism is a modern concept that claims that reason alone, in the forms of formal logic and empirical evidence, is the only acceptable paradigm for making claims about reality and reaching decisions. It is so enshrined and ingrained in us that it is often difficult to see the world from outside it, or prior to it. However, from the perspective of pre-modern or non-Western societies, like Niger, rationalism is reductionist, and therefore both cognitively and emotionally impoverished, an overreaction to the worst abuses of superstition. Pre-modern (and increasingly, postmodern) societies often take pride in the coexistence of reason and intuition, fact and myth, etc.

So it is tempting, yet lazy, for Westerners to encounter non-modern belief systems found in societies like Niger and fail to see reason and reasonableness at work. But we suggest noting two points:

- Nigeriens are acting very rationally, making clear and constant cost-benefit calculations and strategic decisions within the context of what they believe, know and experience. Their mental model, narrative frame, and available information may be foreign or suspect to the narrowly rationalistic Westerner, but Nigeriens are as rational as any Westerner. Indeed, with high culture and personal introspection being
elusive luxuries, they are arguably engaged in more real-time rational decision making than most Westerners.

- Nigeriens are reasonable. As we shall see, they live in a context of prescribed roles, proscribed behaviors, and powerful cultural and religious narratives. Yet they are common-sensical. They seek to avoid unnecessary burdens, often subverting, trading off, forgiving, asking forgiveness, refusing bad marriages, or simply looking away. They live within a powerful narrative, but when this narrative confronts with reality, they are usually reasonable and flexible, within certain parameters that we’ll identify below. Again this reasonableness can be understood as rooted in their version of Islam.

B. Considerations for Family Planning

Three additional themes provide the context within which family planning is considered. These themes include religion, sexuality, and shifting generational dynamics.

Religion

Niger is a secular state. But it is clear that the culture is Islamic and that the religion is the culture. It is an all permeating narrative superstructure that cannot be overstated. However, to understand the nature, impact and possibilities of Islam in Niger, it is important to understand four points:

1. Islam in Niger is traditionalist, not fundamentalist
Fundamentalism is a modern invention, and represents a reaction to a perceived threat by the rationalism and disruptive change associated with modernity. It is uncompromising, extremist, harsh, violent, and anti-rational. But traditional religion is not like this; it is not reacting to modernity, because it never confronted it. As such, while it provides a powerful framework within which its followers live, it is more organic, gentle, friendly, flexible, and discerning than modern fundamentalism. Islam’s key themes are paradoxically quite humanistic, and include peace, accord, togetherness, contribution, helping, submission, thriving, respect, manners, reliance upon Allah for support, and minimizing one’s burden.

While its horizons may be limited, traditional religion is not mean-spirited, unlike modern fundamentalism. It lives alongside reason and pragmatics. At its best, it even champions reason and confronts the real challenges of lived life with intelligence and compassion. For examples, recall how medieval Catholicism, prior to the modernist threat, was friendly to science, integrated Greco-Roman culture and philosophy, and sponsored art and research. Think about how modern common-sense Catholics integrated into America, set aside Vatican teachings about birth control, and saw a Catholic elected President. However, Papal infallibility has nothing on the absolute sovereignty of Allah.
2. Niger is Islamic, not Islamist
In contemporary discourse, to be Islamist is to be a rigid, extremist, modern fundamentalist, committed to imposing a version of Islam which is believed, often erroneously, to have existed in an imagined, purer past. It is the Islam we associate with terrorism, Wahhabism, Salafism, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and Al Shabab. But, like its Christian counterpart, this fundamentalism is a modern invention, representing a reaction to the perceived threat of modernity. While there is a more conservative religious wing in Niger, and it may be growing in influence, these radical movements do not (yet?) have a foothold in Niger and are derided when mentioned. Rather, Niger is traditionally Islamic.

3. Islam in Niger is pre-modern, not modern
In Niger, Islam has neither reacted to nor embraced modernity. It is in something of a time warp, the “same as it ever was.” However, this may change as modernity makes its presence felt, particularly through digital communications technology and foreign media (i.e., Brazilian soap operas). The question will be whether the Muslim population reacts by: 1. Listening to anti-modern fundamentalists who will smell an opportunity, 2. Finding a reasonable and gentle way forward under the influence of liberal educated Imams, or 3. Engaging in “grassroots theology,” making it up as they go along, much as American and Mexican Catholics have done (see below).

4. The Ummah (community) is everything
Islam does not have a modern Western concept of separation of church and state, or of individual vs. community. However, it is important to note that this is not necessarily a recipe for totalitarian theocracy, much less for specifically fundamentalist totalitarian theocracy. To the Western visitor, marinated in media images of aggressive fundamentalist jihad, this distinction may be lost. But in traditional Islam, as in Niger, the community is a sacred space, a safe space, the context and goal of all: an organic, blessed locus of togetherness in shared values, shared understanding, and shared well-being, where respect, politeness, empathy, and mutuality prevail within strict understandings of roles and responsibilities. Unlike the post-Enlightenment West, religion is not a “private matter”; it is irreducibly communal. In Niger, all children belong to and “do for” the community. Individuals showing off or slacking off are quickly frowned upon as un-Islamic. Of course, human nature being what it is, there are examples of crime, evil, selfishness, and sin, but these are the exceptions that prove the rule.

In the Nigerien experience of Islam, there is no apparent atheism, no converting to another religion, and no distinction between practicing or non-practicing. There is little concept of devout vs. backsliding. It simply IS. However, the one crack in the wall is when the majority mocks the conservatives (“The conservative clerics’ wives all hide their birth control pills!”).
Islam establishes the roles and responsibilities of each person. “We have to” and “we don’t have to” are always said in reference to Islam. The ultimate authority is the Koran, followed by commentary and teachings of the founders (Hadith), then the local cleric, and finally the authority or interpretation of the father or husband. Whether the message is conservative or liberal, and both do exist, it is communicated via this chain of authority.

The narrative framework of Islam, its rule for living, may be subverted or stretched, but it is never discarded. To do would be to take leave of the community, and perhaps of one’s senses. For the 95% of Nigeriens who are Muslim, there is no other acceptable reality. The limits and possibilities of narrative horizons in this context will be a theme for development below.

Islam, like many traditional religions, is highly ritualized. Time is cyclical rather than linear, with 5 daily calls to prayer and seasonal feats, and prescribed behaviors in courtship and marriage behaviors. Time will be a large factor as we discuss spacing and birth rates.

Islam has what religious studies scholars call a “low theological anthropology.” This is to say that Allah is absolutely supreme, human persons have minimal agency, and absolute peace comes from submission to the will and mercy of Allah. Life is “written,” and the phrase “Allah willing” is used in a way that is more than a figure of speech. This issue of agency will stay with us.

Sexuality

Niger is highly sexualized, and in ways that differ from the Western abstractions of sexuality that are often communicated in the media. In Niger, sex is part of nature and ever-present. Factors that contribute to this sexualization include: the ever-present sex and birth cycle of animal life in rural and not-so-rural life; small homes, constant chitchat; polygamy; early marriage; widely cited teachings in Islam regarding spousal sexual duties; few windows and doors that provide privacy; frequent infidelity; transactional sex outside of marriage, for presents or necessities; open acknowledgement of lust as a primary driver and one of the reasons to marry; a focus on procreation and householding over building emotional intimacy.

In recent years, urban nightclub life, Brazilian soap operas, and porn broadcast between midnight and 4 a.m. have expanded the horizons, vocabulary, practices, and expectations of some. “Once you get the taste of a man, you will not stop.”

While there is a spoken narrative of virginity, this is often subverted. Boys visit “call girls,” and girls may be raped or otherwise taken advantage of by suitors using “black magic.” Relatives or boyfriends may demand payback for their financial investment in gifts of
food and clothing. So, while the narrative of chastity is strong, the reality on the ground is more complex. However, the presence of the primary narrative cannot be discounted, because even in subversion, it establishes its dominance. In other words, you don’t have bother to subvert a weak narrative, only a strong one.

**Shifting Generational Dynamics**

Participants in the focus groups, both older and younger, are conscious of trending differences in experience and attitudes between the previous and current generations (above/below age 25). Given the traditional and static nature of life in Niger, this strikes us as important, and a possible indicator of broader social changes. Interestingly, the differences in generational attitudes and experience fall along a continuum, and are not as stark as a generation “gap” would be. This creates interesting opportunities for dialogue. Hallmarks of this development expressed in the focus groups include:

**More:** Participants observe *more* of the following that in the past: empowerment; mutuality within couples (just a bit); agency, choice, and expressed opinions; arguments and confrontation with authority; emphasis on education: “The past was ignorance, today is enlightenment...the difference is education”; divorce; digital technology: phones and internet (note: outdoor advertising for phone carriers is ubiquitous, and internet cable projects are visible along roads and highways); self-descriptions as open minded; choice of spouse, career, etc.; love for spouse; stubbornness and hard-headedness; outspoken, disrespectful children; evolving job goals (among young, unmarried women in Niamey, these included newscaster, government minister, researcher, banker, politics, lawyer, teacher); appreciation for modern birth control methods, especially to space births; focus on need for money; need for children who take modern jobs, in or close to cities.

**Less:** Ignorance (there is a tendency to deride the older generation(s) as ignorant); respect, especially for parents and elders; very early marriage (under 18 and especially under age 15); arranged marriages (“We did away with this ignorance”); polygamy – among some; respect by children and teenagers; strictures on visiting a girl at home; “patience,” defined as acceptance or forbearance.

Importantly, unlike famous generation gaps in the West, such as those observed in the United States and Western Europe in the 1960s, Nigerien generational dynamics do not involve the wholesale throwing off of older generations’ worldview. In Niger, it is more evolutionary than revolutionary. However, in the Nigerien context, where change is rare and time is cyclical, these shifting worldviews strike us as significant.
II. Detailed Findings

In this section, we will provide summary learning, with a focus on participant comments, and following the rough outline of the discussion outline, although this varied somewhat as the groups progressed.

Education

Given poor literacy rates, it is not surprising that time in school is minimal. Many Nigeriens have no more than 2–6 years of education, often starting later than in the West, and much of the education is limited to Koranic education.

However, this may be changing. In cities, close-in suburbs, large villages, and among younger people, education rates are higher, with 10th grade attendance and higher becoming more common. More significantly, attitudes toward education are evolving:

- In addition to the traditional role of socializing children into the community, education is understood as a pragmatic necessity for financial well-being. It is the key to a good job and a thriving family. Understandably, appreciation for high culture and critical thinking do not figure prominently.

- Among older people, men and women, there is frequent regret about leaving school when they did, a wish they could go back, and a desire for significantly more education for their children. “Our kids must get as much as they can.”

- Among younger people, education is emphasized as the key to greater opportunity, subtly suggesting an evolution in the economy and expectations, perhaps via exposure to other countries through media or work-travel migration by men.

- Among the old and the young, Koranic education continues to be considered valuable. And well it should, as it embeds the dominant narrative framework into each member of the community, teaching children roles, rules, and mores. If Koranic education were taken away, a crisis of anomie—social or ethical standards—would ensue.

- However, also among both groups, an appreciation for Western education is apparently on the rise. “It’s good to know French.” “It’s necessary for good jobs” or for “improvement in living conditions.” A balance of Koranic and Western education is the sweet spot, and may represent a sweet spot for family planning actors, as one likely cannot live without the other in any model of change in Niger.
– Education is seen as a key driver of “enlightenment” (the present and future) and against “ignorance” (the past). “You can help others.” “We need more and more education.” “Do away with ignorance.”

– Often, the reasons to stop attending school have to do with interaction between the education system and personal experiences and circumstances: discouragement at failing a crucial test; boredom; parental pressure; a teacher striking a child; illness; or the need or desire to make money, to get married, or to avoid a scandalous pregnancy by getting married first.

– It is possible to continue in school after marriage, albeit more so for women, and especially before having children or when still in their parents’ house. But even those with children said it is possible to “get a babysitter.”

– Education can be seen properly falling into three categories: Koranic, Western, and health-related, insofar as health workers and health centers are seen as important sources of learning about the body, about medicine, about possibilities and choice, and about pragmatics. Schools are places to “get sensitized” and “become enlightened.”

**Ideal Marriage Age**

This topic was pretty straightforward. A few outliers said that the ideal marriage age is “as soon as a girl reaches menarche” or “when a man is 27,” but most chose 18-20 years old for women and a bit older than that for men. They said, “We’re very sensitized now,” referring to new laws, mores and health concerns that make very young marriage both illegal and less appealing. For women, 18+ is preferred because: 1. it is considered to be a healthy age to get pregnant, and 2. “You know everything” and “there’s nothing more our parents can teach us” about how to run a household at that age. In the cases when girls are married very young, the bride will stay at her parents’ house until she has reached maturity, unless her husband fails to control his lust, which is frowned upon.

Among younger women, there was a growing emphasis on self-sufficiency that comes via education, professional school, a trade, a job or a business. For men, the age to marry is usually older, 22 and above, because this the age when they expect to be able to fulfill their (Islamic) duties to provide for their family: they may need to get a job, go abroad to make money, and gather resources in order to provide for a family.

**Courtship**

We observed a clear dynamic among older women, who seemed to lack any agency in their courtship. The oft-repeated formula for how women met their mates was,
“He saw me, he loved me, we got married.” The husband sees, desires, and then works it out with the parents. The woman is mostly passive, at least in focus group participants’ telling.

This has changed for the younger generation: rejection of suitors is frequent. While “he saw me, he loved me,” still occurs, we were also told that “we choose” and “we loved each other, and then went to our parents.” Other than that, the dynamics are often seen the same the world over: good vs. bad intentions, fondling, refraining from sex, giving in to sex, leading a person on, measuring looks against money, etc.

_Life after Marriage_

This was a mixed bag. A successful marriage is defined by good living conditions, peace, accord, respect, and sexual satisfaction. Deep intimacy and soul-mate levels of agreement and connection are not mentioned.

In almost every case, marriage is preferred to being single, and is praised as being: 1. mandated by Islam, 2. a clear improvement in living conditions, and 3. better than being in your parents’ house. One “feels mature, like a woman” and “can eat whatever you want” and “have a family of your own” and “be more useful than just hanging around at home helping with chores.”

On the other hand, divorce rates are high, estimated by participants as high as 50% or more, polygamy is a strain on some marriages, some men cut their wives off financially after an indulgent courtship, and others rule with an iron fist and withhold any number of permissions (even to go out). Many men “step out,” fail in their duties, break promises, and refer to a woman who stands up for herself and her opinions as “a difficult woman,” marking her as a bad Muslim and a candidate for abandonment. So the fantasy about marriage is good, and often real, but there are many instances in which it’s not ideal.

In the case of older women, there is an emphasis on patience, forbearance, willingness to suffer, dignified resignation, and/or a commitment to subvert and go their own way. Among the younger women, there was a balanced blend of contentment, idealism, and a fiery defiance.

_Polygamy_

In the communities we visited, polygamy appeared to be infrequent and declining. “When he takes a second wife, it’s really bad.” However a few younger, unmarried men expressed desire for 4 wives and 16-40 children. But the primary learning here was that the topic just didn’t seem to come up very much. Could it be in decline in the types of communities we visited?
Ideal Time to Have a First Child

Again, findings vary. Overall, the classic answer of older people was to say that a woman should have her first child within the first year of marriage, if she is over 18. Exceptions to this might include time to finish school or a circumstance where her husband is working outside the country. Younger women occasionally claimed a period of 2-3 years after marriage, although this implies they are using birth control prior to “validating the marriage” though childbirth, a very forward-minded perspective in Niger. They do this to finish school or test the marriage for compatibility.

Ideal Number of Children

As is to be expected, there is not a clear pattern, but the range of findings reveals interesting dynamics. This is not something they think about much, and they have to be drawn out in most cases to even address it and express a preference. The ideal number of children is considered to be something for Allah, not the individual. High numbers are common, with 6+ mentioned frequently. However, numbers in excess of 10 usually elicit giggles.

But generally, many children is considered a blessing from heaven, and a reason for a future blessing in heaven, as the number of people one takes care of in life is a mark of honor for Muslims. “Men are like herders. In heaven, we will be asked how many people we took care of.”

Given a choice, some people declare an interest in between 2 and 4 children, with a slight tendency in this direction by more educated people, but not really; younger women also expressed a preference for fewer children, but we struggled to see a clear trend here. Because of the precepts of Islam, to have no children at all, is not an acceptable choice or wish.

In the end, it is Allah who decides, blesses, and withholds. Allah can overcome your will, and also overcome birth control. He can send another pregnancy even while you are breastfeeding. It is all in his plan. Moreover, Allah expects parents to welcome as many children as they receive, and to provide for them. While there is trust that Allah provides, in conversation it appears that providing for children is really the responsibility of the husband.

The “Allah decides” narrative is so strong that conversations around real limits in resources to provide for children, even when backed up by facts about birthrate and poverty and development in Niger, simply fall flat. These thoughts either don’t exist or are taboo. The conversation never goes farther than, “We pray we get the number we
can take care of.” Therefore, we believe the ideal number of children is too far outside the narrative framework to gain traction and consideration.

One outlier comment was made in a men’s group: “Educated elites stop at three children.” We’re not sure what to make of this, and don’t know if there is an implication of being bad Muslims or having no need for the labor/help that children may bring.

**Advantages/Disadvantages to Having Many Children**

The advantages to having many children are emotional and practical and include pride, support, help at home, on the farm, and in business, help with younger children, and help when you are old. In short, help.

Disadvantages include looking older than your years (and inviting the possibility of a new wife or abandonment) and, in the case of having children too close together, health problems, malnutrition, unfriendly gossip, being “filthy,” and “having two children that look like twins.”

**Hopes for Children**

The hopes that parents have for their children are straight out the Islamic-Ummah narrative. These include: to be a good Muslim; to know how to pray; to have good character, good habits; to be organized (capable); to be religious; to get a good (moral) education; to be blessed (interpreted in terms of materialism, health, and peace - a kind of thriving); to be and get a good wife/husband; to respect and be respected; to be useful, to help people; to take care of the family; to take care of themselves; and, with one exception, to have a better life, with less hardship than their parents had.

**Fears for Children**

Again, fears for one’s children are straight out of the traditional Muslim script: to not be a good Muslim; to be a thief; to not be useful; to be wandering the streets, especially for girls; to be a bad girl; and to be too dependent upon others.

**Duties**

**Duties towards children:** Islam presents clear duties for men and women in Niger towards their children. These include:

- **Primary duties:** Moral education, a Muslim upbringing (including Muslim values, expectations, duties, and household skills), and providing access to other education
(this may be limited to Koranic education; however, Islam encourages the development and use of reason).

- **Secondary duties:** Health, food, shelter, and to help their child secure a suitable spouse.

**Duties towards spouse:** Responsibilities include sexual satisfaction and a commitment to (Islamic) peace in the household in addition to fulfilling the roles and responsibilities pertaining to children and house-holding.

What was not expressed includes deeply emotional love and encouraging self-esteem, personal potential, fulfillment, and expression, etc.

**Discussions with Husband**

We inquired about the extent, nature, and topics of discussions between spouses. Not surprisingly, time for discussion was limited, and usually limited to “chit chat” about daily events. Exceptions that allow broader conversation topics about one’s feelings and hopes include occasional late night pillow talk and periods of courtship.

However, we noticed that when talking to men, “discussion” usually referred to men sharing their expectations, preferences, and priorities, to be accepted by the woman. As men see it, Islam clearly establishes that “the house is mine,” and there is no requirement to discuss the details if this means seeking agreement rather than obedience. Moreover, being seen spending much time in leisure enjoying conversation with one’s wife is considered taboo, unmanly, frivolous. However, in a way, due to the economic challenges, lack of high culture, and clear rules and expectations established by Islam, there appears to be not very much to talk about anything other than the details and challenges of daily life.

A few exceptions may be: 1. a slightly increasing emphasis on mutuality among the young (perhaps), and 2. The need for “peace and harmony” in the household. An overly dictatorial husband may find himself alone.

As a result, there appears to be a close bonding among women. It appears that the longest conversations, subtle conspiracies, and intimacies are shared by women with other women. We witnessed this in openness, physical closeness, and quick bonding in the group discussions.

**Husband Power**

The dynamics of power held by husbands are interesting to consider. Per traditional Islamic culture, “It’s a man’s world,” as James Brown might have said. Men are the
unchallenged official head of the household. Life is dictated, permitted, and forbidden per their rule. This is, in turn, defined by the requirements of Islam. The husband can be understood as a kind of surrogate cleric, interpreting, implementing, and “man-splaining” how Islam is interpreted at the household level. However, this is a double-edged sword, as the husband may be more conservative, liberal, or pragmatic than the local cleric.

There are a few limits on a husband’s power:

- If the husband does not fulfill his responsibilities, his moral authority is eroded
- A wife may be knowledgeable about religion, and so may be able to make arguments and appeals
- Husbands want, and Islam emphasizes, peace and harmony, including in the family
- Women have many opportunities to subvert
- Divorce and infidelity initiated by the wife are always options
- The wife may be smarter or more strong-willed than their husbands
- The husband may need the wife to co-conspire in private transgressions against religious orthodoxy

*Maturity*

Maturity looms large as a concept in Niger. A man must be “organized.” A woman must be able to safely give birth and run a household. They and their children must be good Muslims and contributing members of society. And socialization drives maturity in a structured way. The path to maturity looks like this: family moral education and chores > Koranic education > (optional Western education) > physical maturity > organization > marriage and children.

Because not having children by choice is not an option, any expanding career choices and ambitions must happen alongside parenting, not in place of it. Indeed, people who choose to have few children are considered bad Muslims and “cowards,” insofar as they don’t trust Allah to guide and provide.

*Subversion*

Subversion was discussed in the context of birth control. We were struck at how matter of fact and pragmatic participants were in their discussion of subversion. There wasn’t a lot of shame, guilt, or reflection about subverting: “Of course you must hide the pills.” “He’s not the one who has to be pregnant.” “Only you, Allah, and your doctor will know.” However, subversion is thematically broader than that, so we present it here ahead of specific discussion of birth control methods and practices. The broader issue is the extent to which, manner in which, and motivations and narrative reasons for subversion in the context of a very prescribed and proscribed cultural context. Each act of
subversion represents a breaking in of an alternative worldview vs. the orthodox frame. For this reason, we consider it worthy of particular attention.

Subverting behaviors mentioned include hiding birth control methods from one’s husband, terminating a pregnancy through traditional methods such as drinking ground leaves and/or prayer, going outside one’s village to find a liberal cleric, using birth control methods prior to marriage, having transactional sex to as a means to obtain presents or necessities, seeing a prostitute (men), etc.

Subversion is accompanied by a dynamic of forgiveness. Transgressors, when caught by their husband or seen by Allah, pray for forgiveness. This is interesting for two reasons: first, the frame has enough fluidness at the border to allow for subversion to occur, and second, a reliance on the wisdom and mercy of others transcends rules and takes circumstances into account.

In this regard, every rigid orthodox system reaches a crossroads where it must make a choice. It can either enforce rules mercilessly (see the Taliban), or interpret rules in light of greater themes, such as Allah’s mercy and desire to see humanity thrive and live in peace. Transgressors who rely upon forgiveness posit a god that cares about the spirit more than the letter, and loves us for who we are, even while guiding and calling us to something better.

This, in turn, suggests two categories of subversion or transgression:

1. **Sinning.** An action that is inarguably wrong, and represents a failure of a person to do what they know to be right.

2. **Stretching.** This is what happens when a person or group has an opinion that what they are doing is not wrong, and that the theology or rulebook needs to be reinterpreted or evolved, without undoing the core belief system. This occurs in more liberal circles that see traditions as “living” and therefore responding to present human needs and evolving circumstances or knowledge. This may be done formally at the level of leadership, or at the grassroots level, as we see in the cases of the American and Mexican (and recently Irish) Catholic handling of the issue birth control or divorce. In many cases, today’s subversion is tomorrow’s orthodoxy, unless it is poorly managed and invites a backlash.

Lastly, we did observe a slight generation variance in this regard, as older women (who recall were only 25+) seemed to adhere more to the orthodox script and resigned to suffering rather than subversion. But they subvert too, if with just a bit more circumspection.
Birth Spacing

Birth spacing brings us to the heart of our research. The primary learning is that, with the exception of a small minority of conservatives (old and young, male and female), spacing is enthusiastically embraced, within limits. Crucially, it is generally understood to be permitted and even encouraged by Islam. Equally crucially, the issue of spacing and birth control is not specifically addressed in the Koran. So it is a matter of interpretation, discourse, judgment, and conscience, albeit with a plurality of clerical opinion in its favor. Interestingly, the conservatives are usually spoken down by others and seen as cranks, ignorant, or misled. “Even the wives of clerics hide their pills.” “No, it is permitted.” “We love spacing.” “We love birth spacing.” “We love family planning.” “Being pregnant with a baby in your lap is really bad.” “You don’t want them to look like twins.” “The older one can help the mother and the younger child.”

The overwhelming reason to space is expressed as “to take a rest.” We heard this phrase over and over, in every location. This rest is interpreted in terms of health, for the mother and for the newborn being breastfed and given an opportunity to “grow up,” meaning to thrive and be weaned. There is an opportunity to heal, regain strength, and both obtain and deliver adequate nutrition. A secondary reason to space is to give the husband time to acquire the resources to have the next child. Indeed, sometimes the men drive spacing and demand that their wives get a birth control method. Moreover, some men consider too-frequent pregnancy to be the women’s fault and the women’s problem. “Even your husband will hate you if you have a child every year.” “If she keeps having them, it’s her problem.”

The permissible timeframe for spacing is set down by Islam at 2.5 years, to coincide with weaning a child from breastfeeding. This may be extended if there are clear health issues. A few participants said it could go as high as four years, and our online research found one cleric who claimed four years as an upper limit. Of course, difficulties in getting pregnant, especially at older ages, may naturally increase spacing. Note that a period of spacing after a miscarriage is also recommended and acceptable.

The benefits of spacing are primarily physical health, peace of mind, and thriving. Secondarily, they are time to get additional resources, “not looking one hundred years old at forty,” “keeping things tight,” and not encouraging the husband to get a second, younger wife.

The limits on spacing are driven by: 1. a teaching and cultural inheritance that emphasizes populating the Muslim community, here and in heaven, 2. the traditional need for household labor and help, 3. Expectations of child mortality, and 4. a deeply embedded belief that spacing for long periods is a failure to rely upon Allah to provide. Spacing is often accompanied by prayers that Allah provides only the number of children one can support, along with trust that Allah will provide the resources to support
whatever number of children one has. Also note that voluntarily stopping having children or any form of lifestyle driven sterilization is strictly forbidden, because it tries to circumvent Allah and fails to rely upon him.

When we probed more deeply into the topic of relying upon Allah for resources, in this extremely poor country with the world’s highest fertility rate, we received blank stares and a repeat of their practice of putting their trust in Allah. This identified for us the limits or borders of the narrative. There are some topics that lie outside the narrative and, while not taboo to discuss, may just not compute, like discussing snow with a Bedouin or sand with an Inuit. The dynamic of fertility and available resources vs. relying upon Allah is one of them.

Obstacles to spacing include: “ignorance”, a preference by the man for many children, status, and conservatism (“Do what the religion says, and question everything else.” “Koranic advice is more important than teaching medicine”).

Net, positive conversations around spacing are and must be framed in terms of health, wellness, thriving and their attendant burdens, and not in terms of lifestyle, wealth, or ease.

*Family Planning*

Interestingly, many participants believed this term to refer to household management rather than birth control or child spacing.

*Healthy Looks*

Because health was such a priority and common topic, we conducted a projective exercise in which we asked participants to imagine a woman in peak health and to describe her appearance and life. They responded that this woman: has nice skin; looks younger than her years; lives in a villa with air conditioning; is monogamous; only has 2-3 children; well taken-care of, able to have children without effecting her looks; and has a husband with paid government job.

In other words, it appears that good health is associated with a modern, urban, elite lifestyle, suggesting possibilities for narrative evolution, insofar as health is a priority.

*Unwanted Pregnancy*

We probed deeply into the difficult topic of unwanted pregnancy and found a complex dynamic. On the one hand, one must welcome all that Allah provides with open arms, considering it a blessing. This was the first, default, and most common response. And we believe it.
However, when probed, there are other responses, including: pray for a miscarriage with verses and a visit to the cleric; induce a miscarriage or stillbirth via traditional methods; if unmarried, it can cause a scandal, so secretly buy birth control or abortifacients purchased from street vendors; terminate at the first sign of pregnancy via medication available at the health center; or give birth in a field, commit infanticide, and claim it was a miscarriage or stillbirth. One group estimated that 50% of those with unwanted pregnancies will terminate them.

Again, we see straining at the edges of the narrative in the service of health, wellness, economic stability, and reducing a burden on the family or on the woman. Sometimes, in the case of a scandalous pregnancy, a woman will commit a large transgression in secret in order to maintain the appearance of rectitude in the community, suggesting that the maintaining the community narrative is stronger than adhering to its moral behavioral core. This is the classic basis for much hypocrisy.

**Birth Control Methods**

We asked about participants’ opinion, knowledge, and experience of contraceptive methods (aka, spacing methods). Key findings follow, as always based upon participants comments:

- Increased education from the health center, home economics class, and each other leads to increased use of modern contraceptives. An ethos of education subtly raises sophistication levels, and suggests opportunities and narratives in addition to childrearing.

- “Pills” and “shots” are by far the most widely known and widely used methods. The pill was described as “my friend.” Shots were described in projective exercises as “my friend for life,” “my shield,” and like a cement house, located in a town; a sedan car; an aircraft; and as rich, wealthy, and aspirational. The circumstances described represent a step up in “living conditions.”

- Knowledge and experience with contraceptives fall off dramatically after pills and shots. Often, the recommendation about which method to use comes down to the preferences of the health worker and the supplies she has at hand. However, women express interest in knowing about all methods.

- Condoms appear to be used mainly to prevent STDs and HIV, and more by single people. Because premarital sex is taboo, and extramarital sex is not well viewed, it took some probing before condoms were discussed.
- For single people, contraception is often considered the woman’s concern, responsibility and risk. “The man doesn’t care.”

- The process for selecting a contraceptive method is to go to the health center and have the methods explained by a health worker, who gives a blood test to determine what method is “right for your body.” This may be followed by a period of trial and error. But importantly, this is sphere where women claim to make the final choice, a rare area of empowerment. An exception is cases where the husband decides, but women have had success convincing or subverting when there is disagreement. After all, the Koran doesn’t specify. So this becomes a place where education encourages a culture of greater agency.

- While traditional methods, such as herbs, potions, talismans, and prayer are well known and fairly prevalent, most women are opposed to them or have abandoned them. They are considered ineffective or found to be ineffective, and are abandoned. This is another example of a slight fraying at the edge of the narrative, and part of a conversation about modernity.

- Women have an assortment of concerns about various family planning methods, some based on real experience, some on hearsay, and some on misinformation or misinterpretation. These include:
  - The implant disappears if you get heavy / over overweight
  - You can get pregnant while using any method
  - Shots can cause prolonged bleeding
  - Shots and implants may lead to barrenness
  - Shots and implants increase appetite and make periods of poor nutrition harder to endure, or lead to weight gain
  - The IUD can shift or disappear
  - It may be hard to get pregnant after getting off pills
  - You can/cannot get pregnant while breastfeeding
  - The West sends us their bad pills
  - A husband’s sperm can overpower birth control if it is strong

- Throughout this, women have an interest in being knowledgeable about contraceptive methods, and will seek information from health workers and from each other in chit-chat. Other sources of information include pharmacies and, to a much lesser extent, street vendors (who are generally not trusted).
Dangers

A few stark dangers were discussed and are worth mentioning:

– Some girls will try to spread HIV so they won’t be alone with it
– Some boys puncture the condom to get revenge for a slight

Experience with Health Care Workers

It emerged in our expert commentator interviews that health workers could often be rude, arrogant, critical, classist, resentful, and high-handed. This was confirmed in a few focus groups. “They scold us.” “They make us suffer.” But while a few people did mention these negative characteristics, by and large our participants seemed to be pleased with the quality of service they received from health workers. “They are our partners in health.” “They tell us to protect ourselves.” Again, we see the clinic as a powerful source of education, with an impact on a modern experience based in knowledge that goes beyond its narrow role to take on a kind of cultural significance, with a place alongside Koranic and Western school-based education.

A few concerns remain. First, some health workers seem to be presenting a limited range of family planning options, most likely privileging what they prefer or have available. And second, stocks can be inconsistent, forcing women to go to pharmacies or borrow from each other. This is not possible with shots, implants, or IUDs. This undermines the consistency required to be assured protection from pregnancy. But in most cases, women use the will of Allah to explain an unexpected pregnancy.

III. Insights

In this section, we will highlight insights based on the above findings and observations. These look at the bigger picture, surface possibilities, and represent a deeper level of analysis and lateral thinking. This section drives the strategic possibilities below.

Powerful Words

We find it useful in any narrative inquiry to pay particular attention to words and concepts that come up often in discussion, and to highlight those words which may be leveraged to better understand our audience in order to find successful ways to engage them and to create messages, programs, or products they will accept. We recommend that all communications, products, and programs take these powerful words into account.

In this study, powerful and prevalent words include: suffer; patience: forbearance, acceptance; burden (bearing it, limiting it); rest; peace; peaceable advice; organized (males: enabling men to provide); education; courage (to act while trusting Allah); reliance upon Allah; grown up (able to thrive); community; togetherness; health; living
conditions; contribution, usefulness; permission (from husband, Allah, cleric); mature (age 18, not at puberty); agency.

**Narrative Instability**

It is easy and tempting to see Niger as a static society in which traditionalism reigns, and little changes. However, there is evidence of narrative instability, in other words a kind of fraying at the borders. This suggests that Niger may be ripe for change, if this change is well framed and well managed. Examples of this instability or fraying include: personal choice, subversion strategies, changing sexual mores, the role of traditional medicine, focus on education, marriage age, a decrease in use of talismans and charms, etc.

In addition, while there were observable modern tendencies among younger and more urban people, this was not overwhelming or clear cut. The very fact that we did not find a clear set of trends that we could associate with particular demographics (male-female, old-young, rural-urban, married-unmarried) suggests, in our judgment, that this instability is broadly located and ready to be tapped. As soon as fundamentalists observe the same thing, they will leverage it, so we need to be first and out-maneuver, out-think, and out-“market” them.

**Non Starters**

Three clear non-starters emerged. First, appealing to prosperity. Second, appealing to individual ambition. And third, seeking to contradict, dismiss, defeat or circumvent Islam. The latter is the non-starter nonpareil. Any solution to the challenges in Niger associated with high fertility absolutely must start and end in the context of Islam. Islam is the primary fact on the ground and cannot be overstated. “We hope we’re not saying anything against Islam.” “This is Islam, not opinion.” The road forward must look for points of overlap and emergence between Islam and modernity.

**The Backward Advanced**

Niger is the poorest nation on earth. But it is also an Islamic nation. From with the context of Islam in Niger, Nigeriens are blessed, even in their poverty. This is because Islam sees itself as the fruition of the Western Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). It is the full and final set of teachings for a way of life that leads to happiness and divine favor, shared by the Prophet, wrapped in sacred community and bathed in the love of Allah. The numbers say Niger is backward, but the primary narrative in some ways insists it is religiously advanced, which may explain the equanimity many Nigeriens manifest in the face of poverty. While they appear enthusiastic about getting help and knowledge from the West, Nigeriens are also cautious and give the impression they know something we don’t. And perhaps they do.
An exchange in a focus group illuminates this dynamic:
Women: “You Westerners, you always want to come help us when you see us suffering.”
Moderator: “Would you rather we didn’t?”
Women (smiling wryly, with a wink): “No, then we’d cry.”
Hmm...

*Increased Empowerment*

As an impoverished, polygamous, traditional Islamic society, women’s status is circumscribed. However, there may be some desire and possibilities in this important area. Consider:
- Many women have their own farms
- Some women have their own petty trade businesses
- Women have found ways to subvert authority
- Women have a source of knowledge and support in health centers
- Women are allowed an education in most cases, and are increasingly prioritizing education

A powerful empowerment message may run up against the husband’s permission narrative, but more subtle messaging will most likely be taken up by women.

*Grassroots Theology and Discerning the Will of Allah*

In her paper, *Catholics Using Contraceptives: Religion, Family Planning, and Interpretive Agency in Rural Mexico*, Jennifer S. Hirsch outlines the phenomenon of grassroots theology to refer to the attempt to embrace a practice of birth control that is outlawed by official church teaching while doing so *as Catholics in good standing*. The brief synopsis of the paper is that Mexican Catholics, like American Catholics before them, had to look for theological resources and themes in their own tradition (i.e., God’s love, forgiveness, mercy, and desire for human happiness) that would trump a specific teaching of the Church, such as the impermissibility of birth control.

While the general moderate-liberal consensus within Islam favors limited spacing, we see women and men in Niger relying on Allah’s forgiveness and mercy when they find themselves deviating from orthodoxy by spacing for long periods, inducing miscarriages, and having pre-marital or extra-marital sex.

In considering how to promote greater spacing, we might add the Muslim themes of: 1. thriving physically, economically, and educationally, 2. the responsibility to provide, and 3. maximizing use of one’s reason. As an Imam we spoke with said, it’s not about the sheer numbers of Muslims one has, which can create a burden, but Muslims who thrive and build a thriving community.
Moreover, while many participants said things like, “We’re Muslim, so we...XYZ” or “As Muslims, we...XYZ,” others introduced a level of abstraction in their discussion of religion, referring to “the religion” or that “in the religion, we’re supposed to...XYZ” or “the religion says...” In these cases, the religion is referred to as a thing apart. While this does not represent a rejection of Islam, it may suggest a willingness or ability to think outside or independently of Islam’s current parameters and not just within them, a hallmark of modernity.

The larger insights are the idea that a tradition can be living. It can evolve to meet human needs and human knowledge, larger themes can trump smaller themes, and thinkers and clerics at the top and ordinary people at the bottom are involved in developing and applying this practical theology. Nigeriens “never want to go against Allah” and need to be sure that “this is approved by Islam,” but what this actually comprises is subject to ongoing interpretation. It is an area for discernment, itself an Islamic theme. Will contemporary Muslims in Niger learn to move from one will of Allah to another will of Allah, as the story goes? And who will help them? How can we help them, or partner with those who can? Do health clinics work with Allah or against? Is a partnership possible?

Progressive forces must work with and within Islam, bringing out its humanistic, discerning, and pragmatic aspects rather than fighting against it, inviting a backlash, and crashing on the rocks.

Who Provides?

While the ability or willingness to consider the paradox of relying on Allah to provide in such a poor country lies outside the frame of consideration and discourse, the paradox remains. Just what is the dynamic between self, Allah, and others (neighbors, government, NGOs) to provide? How does one navigate between self-reliance and relying upon Allah? Where do faith and pragmatics intersect and diverge? What new understanding might emerge? Does one “tie one’s camel” and then rely upon Allah, as the story goes? This topic is the elephant in the room and will have to be addressed overtly or covertly if Niger is to evolve its use of family planning.

The Chit Chat Revolution

Niger is an oral culture. In addition to the ubiquity of radio, people are each other’s best source of opinion and perspective. Word of mouth media is essential and unavoidable, and when it comes to meaning, everything in Niger can be said to be crowd-sourced, participatory, and distributed. Paradoxically forward-oriented, Niger is a culture that vests much in authority, while simultaneously making do with incomplete knowledge that travels and morphs through the powerful media engine of “chit chat.” In Niger, to
influence the conversation starts with being *in* the conversation, seeding information and memes that get taken up and discussed. Like the country itself, all communication is a stimulus ending with a preposition, rather than being a closed loop, a message from on high. It is a thought starter, material for a curious and pragmatic people with few leisure activities to take up and work with in their daily lives and discussions.

*Health Education*

As we mentioned above, health clinic education is powerful education. It is scientific, pragmatic, and personalized, with immediate real world results. And it represents a modern frontier. In some ways, it may be the education experience that most captivates its audience. So while greater health and family planning education is a driver of change in Niger, it is also something of a self-driver. The very existence of this type of education creates the conditions for its own advancement.

*Frontiers of Agency*


In Niger, personal agency and responsibility are minimal. Allah takes the credit or blame for nearly everything. All outcomes are written, planned, and affected by Allah. In addition to Allah, authority figures (parents, elders, clerics, men) have agency. After that, it’s black magic. Women’s choice comes in last. At the same time, we see subversion, secrecy, “stepping out,” feistiness, divorce, “playing dead,” “difficult women,” increased choosing of one’s spouse, choosing one’s preferred family planning method, and a thirst for empowering education and economic independence, all of which suggest a stretching at the edges of the narrative in the direction of increased agency. It would be naive and premature to suggest or seek to precipitate a revolution in women’s agency in Niger. However, there is a bubbling desire and signs of movement that can be tapped into.

*Pragmatism and Its Discontents*

As we have already mentioned, the dynamic between orthodoxy and pragmatism is rich in Niger. The overt narrative is one of orthodoxy, and we believe people are deeply committed to it. But again, at the edges, pragmatism takes over. This is a hallmark of traditional, common-sensical religious communities. It is a driver of aspirational ritualistic and ethical codes, living alongside dynamics of forgiveness and mercy. After all, “We’re all in this together” and “No one is without sin.”
The point of emergence between the narratives of orthodoxy and pragmatism is in the themes of being *unburdened* and *thriving*. Allah does not want us to carry unnecessary burdens, to experience hardship, or to suffer. He smiles upon those who use their reason, and “tie their camel” to him and his teachings. Moreover, he wants us to thrive. Giving birth to children who fail to thrive, lack education, starve, and are not useful is not Allah’s wish. Rather, he wants a community of thriving, healthy, wise, prosperous, and strong Muslims, enjoying his blessings and converting the world. Family planning, education, and progress may be a key part of this, if properly framed as a hierarchy of values where thriving and wellness may trump one less year or so of spacing.

*It’s About Time*

Niger, like most traditional societies, lives with a static-cyclical sense of time, rather than a linear sense of time. Yes, time moves forward as people can be seen getting older, and Islam does have eschatology (a vision of the end times).

However, day to day, Niger does not experience the individual or collective narrative of progress, achieved goals, realized plans, and dramatic change. Instead, cyclical seasonal duties and feasts, being socialized into expected roles, inherited wisdom and consistency with past generations and the overall way of life are normative and defining. Life is ritualized, travel is minimal and pragmatic, friends are for life, and much is quantified on the calendar, including 40 days of post-partum abstinence, 2 years of breastfeeding, 2 – 3 years for spacing, a 4 month limit on celibacy, a test in 10th grade, being marriageable at 18, etc.

With this said, while no culture is without feasts and markers, a linear sense of time is more elastic. It yields to preferences and plans, flowcharts and campaigns. Niger cannot be converted to a linear sense of time. Little elements of temporal linearity may be introduced slowly and subtly as education and career opportunities evolve, and personal empowerment grows, with implications for spacing and choice in family life.

**IV. Strategic Possibilities**

**A. Points of Leverage**

When seeking to evolve a narrative frame, it’s important to identify points of leverage. We must identify people or populations which have overlap with the message, product or program we are developing and who might become partners or advocates. In this case, we identify the following points of leverage:

- **Health workers:** Health workers are trusted sources of education and valued information. They are a window into modernity. Potentially nearly as influential as a
cleric, they can be targeted to maximize their effectiveness, knowledge, contribution and appreciation of their own role.

– Clerics: Clerics still hold great power, as they are the keepers of the primary Islamic narrative. However, it is not written that clerics need to be in opposition to modernity. Clerics have a responsibility to keep up with latest thinking, to meet the needs of their flock, and to maintain Islam as a living force in the community. Clerics do not want to fall behind or become marginalized. Therefore, clerics can be targeted for education and partnership, perhaps by other clerics, to engage the pressing issues facing Niger and the ways in which a compassionate Islam may forward the solution. To use a baking analogy, would a cleric prefer to represent a religion that is like a stale cake that everyone looks at but nobody eats, or more like a wonderful sourdough starter that keeps on yielding food?

– Educators: There is much energy behind education. As we’ve noted, health centers can be a kind of education center. In addition, with participation from clerics, Koranic schools may sow the seeds of greater and more modern family planning. And Western education can include in its curriculum discussions of traditional and modern ways of living, with their implications for science, economics, health, and family life, and it can encourage students to engage these issues thoughtfully and creatively.

– Young People: Niger is a very young country. As noted above, there is an observable generational shift even between 15-24 year olds and 25-34 year olds, especially among women. While it cannot be confused with the periods of social unrest in 1960s America and Europe, there is an opportunity to connect with young people, help frame a future for them, and perhaps connect them to global (or regional) youth. Many of the themes in this document speak directly to their concerns and experience.

B. Themes

These themes represent areas for further development in messaging, marketing, product and program development. These appear to have the most potential for engaging people in ways that they really think, feel, and live, while also inviting them to evolve and expand their narrative. All of these have direct implications for and applicability to family planning:

Thriving and Organized: For every Nigerien mother and child, the first challenge is thriving, or “growing up,” which is to make it past the first 40 days of life and then to the 2 year mark. This is deeply embedded and ingrained in experience and culture. In adult life, the concept of being organized is closely related to thriving insofar as it creates the
conditions to thrive: food, shelter, healthcare, and education. We suggest that expanding the definition of thriving to include progress, prosperity, opportunity, options, and self-determination in adult life, or “maturity.” Done well, themes around thriving and organization (“being on top of it”) will not contradict Islam and may even leverage it. After all, in its golden age, Islam thrived to a very great degree.

Responsibility and Contribution: This theme focuses on making conscious choices to maximize and extend the contribution of each person. It is not about quantity of people required to live well, but the quality of each person’s contribution. And as jobs increasingly become urban, less manual labor is needed in agriculture. With a responsibility/contribution theme, it becomes possible to increase focus on the responsibility of parents to provide something more than subsistence care and minimal education to their children. Parents can thrive to provide longer and better education, more personal presence, an emotional life, and a sense of choice and plans for the future to their children. Responsibility and contribution allow each person to think about contribution in a way that may start to feel like progress and linear time, rather than stasis and cyclical time or lack of progress.

Longer Spacing and a Shorter Childbearing Timeframe: Children and family are central to Nigeriens’ lives. Choosing to not have children, radically limit the amount of children one has, or cease having children as a lifestyle choice is a non-starter. The only legitimate reason not to have many children in Niger is one’s own health or that of one’s children. However, it is possible that rising health expectations and a liberal interpretation of Islam (either officially or at the grassroots) may add time between births. In addition, women may choose to make a health-based argument to stop having children at a particular pre-menopausal age. Lastly, there is evidence of a willingness to break with tradition in order to finish school or test the marriage, thereby having one’s first child after 2 or 3 years after marriage rather than the traditional 1 year. For example, if a woman marries at 20, has her first child at 22, has 1 child every 4 years, and stops having children at 40, she will have 5 children rather than today’s national average of 7.6 children per woman (Note: This number of children may be lower due to miscarriages and child mortality, but both should decrease as health standards improve). If Niger’s economy modernizes, this fertility rate is likely to fall further in future generations. For the foreseeable future, however, having a shorter timeframe in which to bear children and longer spacing between children seems like a reasonable goal, and it plants the cultural seeds for greater change.

Stronger Family and Community: Closely related to thriving and adjusting the timeframe for birth is the idea of building stronger families and community. Historically, a child – any child – could help to provide manual labor in agriculture or around the homestead. Today, more families appear to seek children with specific capabilities. There are benefits to having a French speaker in the family, someone with knowledge of Nigerien bureaucracy, or someone with aptitude as an entrepreneur. Perhaps 3 capable, thriving
adult children are a greater asset than 8 children of lesser knowledge and skill. This applies not only to families, but to entire communities and to the nation. Supported by policies and programs to increase children’s likelihood of success, messaging around this theme become a persuasive argument for smaller but more prosperous families.

**Partnership with Allah:** Allah stands alone as a god defined by sovereignty. The Western god is omnipotent, but Islam translates literally as “submission.” Islam has what is known in academic religious studies as a low theological anthropology, which is to say a huge difference and distance between Allah and humanity, and very little power or independence for humanity. However, Allah does expect humanity to use its reason and free will to discern and act upon the best path forward in specific circumstances even as it walks in a life determined by Allah. In this way, humanity can partner with Allah by taking on the responsibility to forward their shared agenda, starting with thriving, wellness, prosperity, and learning. In this context, blessings might be understood to expand from being blessed by one’s static life circumstance (one is blessed to have what one has in life), to include notions of greater thriving and progress. In this regard, Nigeriens have much stepping up to do: there is no theological reason they must be as passive or accepting of their life circumstance as they appear to be. By framing change in terms of partnering with Allah, conflict between modern and traditional agendas is diffused.

**Living Islam:** Religious and political traditions can ossify, grow reactionary, and become belligerent as they feel threatened by rapid change and creative forces more powerful than themselves. Soviet communism and Christian and Islamic fundamentalist extremism are good examples of this phenomenon. However, a thriving tradition is a living tradition. It reframes itself and re-appropriates key emphases, values, and teachings to address each new time and context. In the area of family planning, Islam has a broad consensus, but it is not monolithic. There is room for a variety of voices and opinions. A powerful foundation for more family planning and falling birth rates may be provided by a solid yet adaptive vision of Islam, driven by respected thinkers and activists in the local and international Muslim community. Something as simple as redefining a women’s maturity from the onset of menses to 18 years old is evidence of the kind of adaptive flexibility required to live within a changing world: maturity remains the abiding issue, and it is merely reframed. As the classic story affirms, sometimes the better part of wisdom is to move from one will of Allah to another more important will of Allah through greater discernment. Encouraging or facilitating dialogue, communication, and action around how one “lives Islam” is a key strategic communications opportunity.

### C. Campaign Concepts

This section offers campaign concepts that can be used in strategic communications. These concepts are designed to reflect the reality, cultural priorities, and dominant yet evolving narrative in Niger. Each of the concepts is aimed at: a) increasing average
spacing between children to above its current 31 months;\(^1\) b) delaying first birth beyond the current median age of 19;\(^2\) and c) accelerating the decline in fertility as women approach menopause.

These concepts do not stand alone: they should be developed creatively, piloted, and executed in education, outreach, and communication campaigns. They are meant to be read as the core concept or idea that education or outreach is meant to capture:

**Thrive!:** “Thriving is more than merely living for 40 days. It means living the Islamic values of increasing prosperity, reducing burdens, raising health standards and expectations, increasing living conditions, maximizing education, doing duty to your family, using the gift of reason, seeking knowledge, overcoming ignorance, and actively participating in Allah’s plan for his people. Thriving is being a good Muslim.”

**We’re All in This Together:** “We work with each other and with Allah, to take responsibility for creating the conditions of our life, including our family life. The best way to do our duty and submit to Allah is to, as the classic story says, ‘Tie your camel, then rely upon Allah.’ We should use our own reason and resources to take good care of ourselves, in the situation we find ourselves in. When it comes to our families, it is important to make sure that we understand what Allah wants for our children’s well-being. Sometimes the answers are surprising. Sometimes these answers take us to new ideas and practices in birth spacing, birth limiting, and when to start and stop having children.”

**Let’s Be Honest:** “Real life is complex, full of decisions and daily challenges. Sometimes, to do what’s best for our families, we have to stretch or even break the rules. But we do what we think is right, and what is good in the moment, and sometimes we just have to ask for forgiveness for what we’ve done. Sometimes these choices are complex, hard, or even funny. But, in the end, we know that Allah wants us to be happy, healthy, and thriving, not suffering. Let’s be honest, life as a Muslim is about peace, not about suffering. And getting to peace sometimes means that we need to stretch the rules a bit: by starting to have children a little later, spacing a little longer, and even stopping having kids a little earlier. Let’s be honest, sometimes even the cleric’s wife has to hide her pills!”

**The Choice is Mine:** “Young people today understand that they can own more of their choices. Better education, open attitudes, less ignorance, new opportunities, new jobs, and frank chat with friends and family make us aware of what is possible. We make decisions each day about how we will live. The choice is ours. And this applies to when

\(^1\) Niger DHS. 2012. 
\(^2\) Niger DHS. 2012.
we marry, who we marry, how many and when we have our children, how we raise them, and what we want for them. It’s our responsibility, it’s our choice."

D. Practices

The qualitative research suggests that the quality of family planning counseling in Niger is quite poor, and that this is very negative. While certainly not a positive, we are putting much pressure on healthcare providers to be the sole and perfect source of information about family planning and contraceptive use. We can use informal communication channels and astute ways of communicating to ensure that our messages reach and influence target audiences.

Reimagine Media: As a largely illiterate country, radio and phones are the obvious media of choice in Niger. But we recommend maximizing the power of other crucial media: health workers, imams, and chit chat. Health workers are uniquely knowledgeable and trustworthy sources of relevant information, imams are the powerful keepers of an expanding or contracting vision of Islam; and chit chat is the primary medium of sharing and discernment. These are media. We recommend initiating messaging in cities, suburbs, and large villages/regional centers, where population density makes messages more likely to “go viral,” and supporting these messages in national media. A map can be developed of conversation content for each target group (healthcare providers, imams, women, couples). Don’t be afraid to use radical honesty and occasional cheeky humor.

Use Powerful Words: We find it useful in any narrative inquiry to pay particular attention to words and concepts that come up often in discussion, and to highlight those words which may be leveraged to better understand our audience in order to find successful ways to engage them and to create messages, programs, or products they will accept. We recommend that all communications, products, and programs take these powerful words into account.

In this study, powerful and prevalent words include: suffer; patience: forbearance, acceptance; burden (bearing it, limiting it); rest; peace; peaceable advice; organized (males: enabling men to provide); education; courage (to act while trusting Allah); reliance upon Allah; grown up (able to thrive); community; togetherness; health; living conditions; contribution, usefulness; permission (from husband, Allah, cleric); mature (age 18, not at puberty); agency.

These words carry loaded meaning. They bring the weight of culture, they create bonds of understanding, and they offer permission to engage. They should be used wisely and well in communications channels and initiatives. Using powerful words will turbo-charge connection and create the preconditions for understanding and change.
Consider Radical Honesty and Humor: Nigeriens laugh easily and often, have a knowing glint, and are open to even taboo topics. They seem to enjoy radical honesty, occasionally poking fun at sacred cows as long as the narrative frame permits it. In developed countries, a medium risk-high reward strategy that has had great success in advertising has been to lead with humor and bracing honesty. However, this humor is not shallow or gratuitous. Rather, it pointedly expresses a discovered truth, and gets attention through its radical honesty. The best humor rings true and runs against accepted convention. The jester is often the prophet. The best humor is never disrespectful, because it respects truth. Cheeky humor and radical honesty may be something to leverage. As one person in Niger said about laughing, “It’s better than crying.” And a tragic-comic perspective certainly beats a tragic mindset.

VI. Conclusions

Niger lives within the strong narratives of traditionalism, Islam, poverty, and deflected responsibility. All of these support a stasis, in which high fertility rates and underdevelopment coexist, often reinforcing each other. However, as we’ve seen, there is some fraying at the borders of these narratives, driven by young people, technology, and education. We believe that radical change cannot come to Niger in the short term, and attempts to rush it will only serve to activate resistance. However, radical attention to the subtleties of new narrative possibilities, as outlined in this document, can serve to add momentum to generational shifts. They can help frame, forward, and support new narrative dimensions, which support new awareness and new behaviors. From our perspective, any more will do violence to the culture and be rejected, and any less will miss an opportunity to support change for humane outcomes in Niger and for Niger.