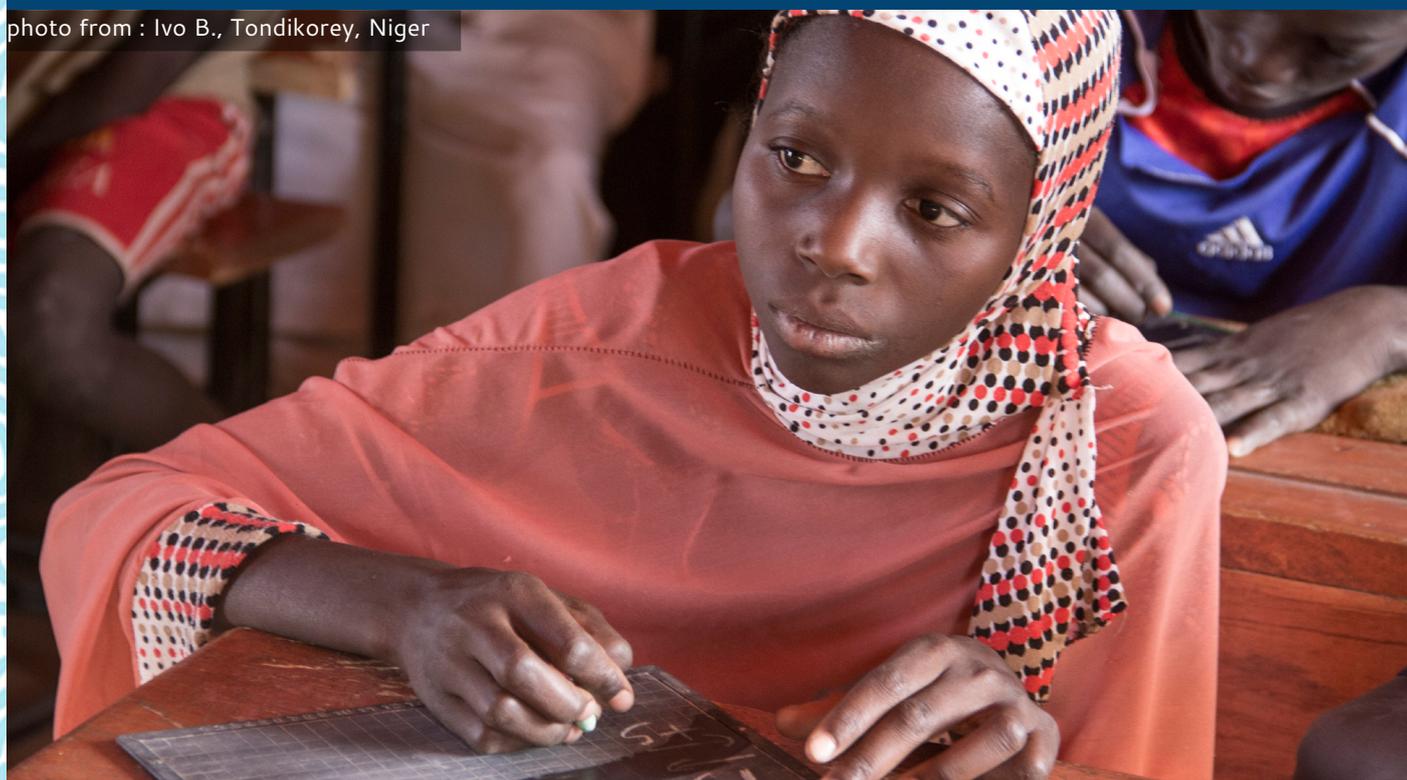




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**HOW TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF PRIMARY
AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE
COUNTRIES OF THE REGION?**

LE DÉBAT DE WATHI
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Introductory note

HOW TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE REGION?

1. Why this theme?

- **Because** many French-speaking countries in the region have very high illiteracy rates. The situation is particularly a cause for concern in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, which display literacy rates below 30%. The situation looks more favorable in English-speaking countries (Nigeria and Ghana) but all countries are struggling to offer both quantity and quality in educational services to their extremely young and fast growing populations.
- **Because** education is a key element in the economic, social, cultural, and political development of a country. Countries that have experienced a high level of economic performance over the last decades are those that have managed to put in place effective education systems appropriate to their circumstances and choices of economic direction (Singapore, Taiwan, Mauritius, Botswana, Rwanda, etc.). Just as skills acquired and developed in early childhood, knowledge and skill acquisition in the 6-to-18 age bracket determines the future level of the individual and collective human capital.
- **Because** the shortcomings accumulated by students during primary and secondary education (especially in writing, reading and mathematics) have significant repercussions when they move on to higher education or begin a professional life. These shortcomings show the urgent need for all stakeholders in the education sector to become aware of their responsibilities. The quality of primary and secondary education largely determines the ability of a country to face, with well-trained women and men, future challenges in all areas.

- **Because** West Africa continues to stand out due to low enrollment rates on average, despite significant progress at the global level and in some countries of the region (the net enrollment rate in primary school is over 94% in Togo, 93% in Cape Verde and 92% in Benin, <http://uni.cf/29aZ7lj>). However, out of the 21 countries in the world where the net enrollment rate in primary education is less than 60%, more than a third are found in the region. In Burkina Faso and Niger, for example, less than two out of five children get primary education. At the secondary school level, net enrollment rates are significantly lower everywhere (42% in Benin and 69% in Cape Verde, <http://bit.ly/297IKly>).
- **Because** inadequacy or lack of school facilities and infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, frequently unfinished curricula, repeated strikes, and demands for an increase in teachers' wages do not enable the creation of the conditions needed for quality primary and secondary education.
- **Because** the dramatic privatization in the education sector, from preschool to higher education, has created over the last two decades, two-tier education systems in which public schools are gradually abandoned by parents. Quality human resources in the education sector opt for private schools where they have better working conditions and higher income. Parents make huge financial efforts to provide a better education for their children by sending them to expensive private schools, but quality is not always ensured.
- **Because** we must rethink the education systems entirely to make them more appropriate to the economic, social and cultural realities in the countries of the region, and even more so to the needs of future generations and the kind of society we want to build. Beyond the knowledge transfer happening in schools, it is urgent to look into current practices such as abuse, sexual harassment, corruption, and bad examples set by some actors in the education sector, which threaten children's physical, psychological, and moral integrity.

2. What are the main topics to be explored?

2.1 The education systems in the countries of the region: analysis of the current situation

- Are there differences between the education systems of French-speaking, English-speaking and Portuguese-speaking countries? What are they and what lessons can be learned?
- Is the gap between training in private schools and public schools an obstacle to a quality education system? Does parents' choice to enroll their children in private schools contribute to the weakening of public schools and the creation of a two-tier society?
- What are the roles, responsibilities and capacities of local, national and regional actors in the formulation of policies on primary and secondary education?
- Is free and compulsory primary education effective in all countries of the region? What assessment can be made of these measures?
- What reforms should be initiated to improve the quality of primary and secondary education and make the learning process more efficient?
- What is the place of private denominational institutions (Christian, Islamic and other schools) in the education system of the countries of the region? What is the level of quality in such schools?
- What is the contribution of unions to the efforts to improve the quality of education? Do they play a positive role or do they defend the sole interest of teachers?
- Why are strikes recurring in the education systems of the countries of the region? How to durably improve the relations between teachers unions and governments to avoid further sacrificing children's education?

2.2 Quantitative indicators of school enrollment and attendance

- What are the primary education enrollment rates in the countries of the region? Are all school-age children enrolled?
- What are the secondary education enrollment rates in the countries of the region?
- What are the primary education completion rates in the countries of the region and how can they be improved?
- Are there gender disparities in school enrollment, retention, and completion rates? How can we change the situation?
- Which countries of the region have achieved high enrollment rates and gender equity?

- Are there disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of enrollment, retention, and completion rates in primary and secondary education? How serious is the problem? What are the public policies aiming to reduce inequalities in access to education?
- What plans do the countries of the region have for young people who drop out of school early? Are there alternative learning systems for out-of-school youth?
- In recent years, who are the exemplars in the region when it comes to performance of their education system? What strategies did these countries put in place to obtain good results?

2.3 The quality of curricula, teachers, and educational contents

- What is the content of primary and secondary school curricula in West Africa? Are the current curricula appropriate to the realities of the region?
- Do children in the countries of the region meet the learning expectations, particularly in reading, writing, and science?
- What is the level of teacher training? How are teachers of each grade level trained in the countries of the region? What are ways to control teaching skills? How do the Ministries inspection services work?
- What are the learning conditions in primary and secondary schools?
- What is the place of technical and vocational education in the secondary education systems of the countries of the region?
- Do the current education systems promote the acquisition of useful knowledge and skills students can apply to their everyday life and future?
- Are there programs to assess school curricula, teacher training, and students' knowledge and skill acquisition?
- Do the education systems in the region foster computer and media literacy among students?
- Do the education systems in the region encourage the development of critical thinking, independence, sense of responsibility, and other cross-disciplinary skills?

2.4 The funding of education

- How much of the budget is allocated to the education sector in the countries of the region, and how is this share distributed among the different levels of education?
- Who ultimately pays for primary and secondary education in the region? Parents, taxpayers, donor countries and aid organizations?
- What are the advantages, problems, and dangers of the proliferation of private schools?

- Is the cost of a quality education reasonable compared to the average income of households in the region?
- Should we reform the status of teachers? How to standardize working conditions in public systems where permanent teachers (with civil servant status) and teachers on a temporary contract coexist?
- How to fund access to quality education in both urban and rural areas?

2.5 Family environment and school environment

- What role do parents play in their children's academic achievement? Do they get involved enough in the skill acquisition process?
- How does the evolution of parents' economic activity influence children's education and the monitoring of their school life?
- Are educational methods and compliance with a code of ethics included in teacher training programs?
- How to prevent or combat sexual harassment in schools? Are there organizations addressing these issues in national systems?
- What are the consequences of corruption in schools: purchased grades, leaked examination questions, payment of bribes by parents to avoid situations such as their children repeating a grade?
- How to improve infrastructure and facilities to make the school environment more conducive to student learning, safety and fulfillment?
- Are school calendars and schedules appropriate to children's needs and the natural and economic conditions of West African societies?

2.6 Education systems in other regions of the world

- What are the differences between the education quality indicators in the countries of the region and those in countries with similar economic conditions, in other regions of Africa and other continents?
- What are the main distinguishing features of education systems and policies in some Asian, American and European countries? What can we learn from them to make useful reforms in West Africa?
- Which countries of the region have implemented major reforms inspired by foreign models? Have they seen enhanced academic performance?
- Have West African countries inspired methods of primary and secondary education to other countries in Africa and in the world?

3. How to participate in the debate?

- Contributions by experts in the issues discussed are welcome. So are observations, accounts, opinions, and recommendations from all citizens.
- We particularly welcome articles that refer to one or more specific countries, are based on concrete examples and include recommendations for action and reform.
- You can submit short articles (500–1000 words) or longer ones (1500–2000 words). Although the maximum length of a contribution is 2000 words, short articles are more likely to be selected and published by WATHI. All articles must be accessible to the general public, well written and structured.
- Without having to write a structured article, you can send your comments, observations, and recommendations to infowathi@wathi.org. The most relevant contributions will be published on the website.
- You can also submit a short audio or video recording to share your experiences and concrete reform proposals.
- We invite you to send your article with a 50–word biography and preferably a good picture of yourself.

CONTACTS

www.wathi.org

Please send your articles and contributions at: infowathi@wathi.org

The debate is also taking place on WATHI's Facebook and Twitter accounts:

Link to Facebook : <http://on.fb.me/1L2kOSk>

Link to Twitter : https://twitter.com/WATHI_Africa