

EDUCATION IN SITUATIONS OF INSECURITY IN WEST AFRICA

Thursday, November 28, 2024

INTRODUCTION

West Africa is facing an upsurge in security challenges. Between 2020 and 2023, attacks by non-state armed groups in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger led to the closure of more than 13,250 schools, affecting around 2.5 million children, according to UNICEF. In Burkina Faso, the number of schools closed due to insecurity rose by almost 33%, reaching 6,150 in 2023. One school in four was closed in the country. In Mali, 1,726 schools ceased operations, depriving 517,800 children of schooling by the end of 2022.

Educational infrastructures have been severely affected. Between 2021 and 2023, schools were the target of violent attacks ranging from physical destruction to mass kidnappings of pupils and teachers. These attacks weaken community confidence in education systems and increase the risk of long-term school drop-out. These closures are not only caused by direct attacks on schools, but also by massive population displacements. By 2023, there were over 2.9 million internally displaced people in the central Sahel region, the vast majority of them school-age children. These children, often uprooted and traumatized, lose not only access to education, but also a secure environment essential to their development.

The daily lives of out-of-school children are also fraught with danger. They are far more likely to be recruited into armed groups than schoolchildren. Girls are particularly exposed to gender-based violence.

As part of WATHI's series of events dedicated to strengthening and transforming education systems in West Africa, with the support of the Irish Embassy in Senegal, the issue of education in situations of insecurity could not be ignored. In a region where insecurity is still preventing the reopening of schools in some countries, the efforts of governments and partners to promote distance learning must be continued and reinforced to guarantee educational continuity for the students concerned.

INVITED PANELISTS

- **Nasroune Walet Ouefane**, Executive Director of the NGO Asdemin (Supporting children's schooling and development for better national integration Mali)
- **Koffi Segniagbeto**, Country Manager, Global Partnership for Education
- **Priscilla Gomes**, Regional Education Officer for West and Central Africa, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Note : QUICKs are short documents produced from WATHI's virtual roundtables. They present the main findings and avenues for action, and are intended to feed into public debate, collective action and the decisions of political authorities.

KEY FINDINGS

- Today, nearly 14 million people are forcibly displaced in West and Central Africa, more than half of them children. Among the worst-affected countries are Burkina Faso, with 2.1 million internally displaced people, and Mali, where 1.4 million people have been forced to flee their homes. In Niger, 1 million people are displaced, equally divided between refugees and internally displaced persons. Conflict and insecurity have a profound impact on the quality and continuity of education, particularly for vulnerable populations such as displaced and refugee children living in areas of instability.
- More than 14,000 schools were closed in 2014, depriving children of safe learning spaces that are essential to their well-being. Many schools are attacked, set on fire or staff and learners are abducted by non-state armed groups. This climate of fear discourages families from sending their children to school, even after they have reopened. The situation is exacerbated by a shortage of teachers. The latter have fled the conflict zones, while those who remain have to work in extremely difficult conditions, further deteriorating the quality of teaching.
- Conflict-affected children, particularly the displaced, face additional obstacles in the form of a lack of psychosocial support, language barriers for refugees and a serious shortage of educational infrastructure. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than half of the region's refugee children do not attend school. Girls are particularly hard hit, with even lower enrolment rates than boys. Prolonged interruptions to schooling increase the risk of dropping out; only 17% of refugee children reach secondary school, a rate well below national averages, with girls still more penalized than boys.
- The schools that remain open are overcrowded and under-resourced, compromising the quality of education and reducing pupils' future prospects. Girls are particularly exposed to dangers such as early marriage, sexual violence and various forms of exploitation. Boys, for their part, face an increased risk of forced recruitment by armed groups. Deprived of a stable school environment, these children become vulnerable to the pressures exerted by these groups, which exploit their isolation and precariousness.
- In the long term, lack of education leads to a vicious circle of poverty and exclusion. The link between education and stability is well established. Countries with high levels of education enjoy greater social and political stability. Conversely, those with poor access to education suffer more internal conflict and violence. Lack of access to education compromises prospects for reconstruction, perpetuates dependence on humanitarian aid and hampers the emergence of lasting peace, whether for host populations or displaced persons.
- The Sahel is a region where the population is widely dispersed, presenting a real challenge for education. In Niger, every year, some 25,000 additional 6-year-olds need to be welcomed into the school system. This requires the construction of 600 to 700 new classrooms, the recruitment of 600 to 700 additional teachers, and an additional budget of 10 to 15 million dollars. The closure of 14,000 schools in the Sahel is equivalent to the total number of schools in Niger, illustrating the scale of the problem. To accommodate school-age children, an additional \$12 million would be needed. Niger's education budget increases by around 15 to 20 billion FCFA per year. If 15 billion is used to integrate new pupils, only 5 billion is left for other expenses. This has a serious impact on the quality of learning. In addition to demographic and budgetary constraints, there are security challenges, which only accentuate the fragility of the education system.
- The COVID-19 pandemic forced many schools to close, using digital technologies to guarantee educational continuity. In some countries, distance learning has proved an effective solution, making education accessible to a larger number of families. However, this digital solution has its limitations, such as the low availability of technology, limited access to the Internet and digital equipment, and the scarcity of educational resources accessible online or offline. Despite these challenges, some regional initiatives are emerging. UNESCO's Dakar office is developing important digital educational resources, accessible even in emergency and insecure situations. Some partners are setting up access centers for these resources, enabling the most vulnerable pupils to continue their learning.
- Support from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) plays a crucial role in helping to sustainably transform education systems and meet the challenges facing countries. Thanks to this support, a large number of children who would otherwise not have had access to school are able to attend. Although governments invest heavily in education, representing the sector's main source of funding, GPE helps to ensure essential structural changes. National budgets are generally allocated to paying teachers' salaries, while external

funding is used to cover expenditure on infrastructure and educational reforms, often unattainable with national resources alone.

- Mali is experiencing a significant increase in the number of internally displaced people and, since last year, a massive influx of refugees from Burkina Faso, which has doubled the country's refugee population to over 160,000. The difficulties faced by refugees, displaced persons and host communities are often similar, including interrupted schooling and the urgent need for school reintegration. One of UNHCR's strategies to remedy this situation is the implementation of the « Strategy for accelerated school enrolment », which enables children aged 8 to 12 to follow a condensed 9-month educational program before entering the formal system. In Niger, community initiatives have been set up to adapt education to the needs of displaced populations. UNHCR has forged two partnerships. With the University of Geneva (InZone program), enabling young refugees, displaced persons and nationals to follow distance learning courses in Niamey and Diffa in fields such as emergency education and community health. With the Bioforce Institute in Dakar, which trains refugees, displaced persons and members of host communities to become community relays, thus facilitating access to education and humanitarian aid in hard-to-reach areas.
- The region is already struggling to provide quality education for its population, and the influx of refugees is exacerbating this pressure. This phenomenon is not confined to the Sahel. Today, 22% of the world's refugee population is hosted in less developed countries, putting a strain on fragile education systems, particularly in rural areas, where school infrastructure is limited or non-existent. Nevertheless, West Africa remains a region of hospitality. Despite their own difficulties, Sahelian countries welcome refugees without questioning their integration into national education systems. Unlike in other regions, no parallel education system has been set up to ensure that displaced people are better included in formal education.
- The arrival of refugees puts pressure on school infrastructure, but can also represent an opportunity for local development. In Chad, in 2015, faced with an influx of refugees from Nigeria, a refugee camp was set up with two elementary school. Today, half the pupils are Chadian children, as there were no schools in the area before. Integrating refugees into the national system therefore enables an inclusive educational response that benefits the whole community. Chad, which hosts 1.2 million refugees (a figure that has doubled in a year and a half), has developed a well-established system. Teachers are identified by UNHCR and its partners, as well as by local education authorities. Tests and diploma verifications are carried out before recruitment. Training in the Chadian curriculum in Arabic is provided by the relevant authorities. Thanks to this scheme, refugee teachers obtain the same qualifications as their Chadian counterparts and take part in teaching.
- The forced recruitment of boys by armed groups is a key factor in the continuation of conflicts. This is a serious violation of children's rights, exposing them to a violent and traumatic environment, and conditioning them to violence, perpetuating regional instability. Deprived of education and future prospects, these children in turn become agents of violence, maintaining a cycle of fear and destruction within their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Engage in discussions between governments and non-state armed groups to facilitate the reopening of schools. A multi-sectoral approach must be adopted, based on international frameworks such as the Declaration on Safe Schools and the Global Framework for School Safety. These initiatives aim to ensure the protection of students and educational staff, as well as guaranteeing educational continuity.
- Improve safety on the way to and from school by setting up risk-assessment committees and providing escorts for children in sensitive areas.
- Train teachers and raise students' awareness of protective measures in the event of an attack (evacuation plans, warning signals), and involve local communities in identifying risks and implementing appropriate solutions.
- Include refugee teachers in schools to maintain their professionalization while filling teacher shortages in certain regions.
- Train teachers and involve youth organizations in the psychosocial support of students and communities, giving them the means to organize discussion sessions and support activities adapted to children in distress

- Install safe rooms in schools, equipped with locks, lighting and all the amenities needed in the event of an attack.
- Carry out systematic assessments of the vulnerability of education systems to adapt protection measures and guarantee safe and sustainable access to education.
- Design rapid response plans to adjust educational methods to the specific needs of local communities.
- Build teachers' skills and integrate teaching approaches adapted to the needs of girls, children who have suffered violence or psychological trauma, to ensure a safe and inclusive school environment.
- Supporting local initiatives to ensure educational continuity carried out by communities. In Mali, women have set up community schools to prevent their children from dropping out of school or joining armed groups.

QUOTES FROM PANELISTS

«Security in the Sahel region has very serious and multiple consequences on access to education, particularly with the massive closure of schools in conflict zones in central and northern Mali.» **Nasroune Walet Ouefane, Executive Director of the NGO Asdemin Mali.**

«In many countries, the use of technology is an effective solution, but its weakness lies in Internet access, which remains limited.» **Koffi Segniagbeto, Country Team Lead, Global Partnership for Education.**

«In the Sahel region, a number of initiatives are underway. UNESCO's Dakar office has a significant program of educational resources that can be mobilized and made available to students, including those in emergency and insecurity situations.» **Koffi Segniagbeto, Country Team Lead, Global Partnership for Education.**

«Schools are attacked, set on fire and children abducted by non-state armed groups. This climate of fear discourages families from sending their children to school, even when schools reopen.» **Priscilla Gomes, Regional Education Lead for West and Central Africa, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.**

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[VIDEO OF THE CONVERSATION](#)



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