

HOW TO IMPROVE THE LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF TEACHERS IN WEST AFRICA?

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INTRODUCTION

In education systems worldwide, teachers play a central role. They are the architects of future generations' education, the pillars of knowledge transmission, the bearers of culture and the builders of hope in societies facing diverse challenges. In West Africa, their role is even more crucial given the region's rapid demographic growth, exponential demand for education, and the urgent need to train a large, often marginalized youth to meet development challenges. Yet, in this same region, teachers face particularly precarious living and working conditions. They are both indispensable and neglected, at the heart of national ambitions, often sidelined in public policies.

This paradox is striking: while the strategic role of education in human, social, and economic development is increasingly recognized, the very teachers who are key actors continue to face major difficulties. In West Africa, many countries struggle to recruit enough teachers to meet the needs of their educational systems. The shortage is striking, not only in terms of numbers, but also in quality, continuous training, institutional support, and social recognition. This is not simply a personnel shortage, but rather a genuine structural issue in the management and promotion of the teaching profession.

It is therefore urgent to fundamentally rethink the living and working conditions of teachers in West Africa. This issue can no longer be treated as a mere sectoral concern reserved for Ministries of Education, but as a strategic challenge at the core of development policies. It calls upon governments, technical and financial partners, local authorities, civil society, teachers' unions, and citizens themselves.

This virtual round table aims to bring together diverse voices (researchers, teachers, union leaders, ministry representatives, technical partners) to jointly identify concrete, sustainable, and contextually appropriate ways forward for West Africa. The goal is not to reinvent the wheel, but to listen to stakeholders on the ground, highlight positive initiatives, and strengthen political commitments around a matter as essential as teacher well-being.

Improving the living and working conditions of teachers in West Africa is not only a matter of social justice but also a key condition for building resilient, inclusive, and forward-looking education systems.

INVITED PANELISTS

Pr Abdoulaye Anne, Professor in the Department of Educational Foundations and Practices, Faculty of Education Sciences, Laval University Canada

Mr Paul Gnelou, President of the African Network for Education for All (ANCEFA), Côte d'Ivoire

Pr Alpha Amadou Bano Barry, Minister of National Education and Literacy of Guinea (2020–2021), Lecturer/Researcher, University of Sonfonia, Conakry, Guinea

Pr Marie Odile Attanasso, Economist, lecturer and researcher at the University of Abomey-Calavi, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Benin (2016–2019)

Note : QUICKs are short documents produced by WATHI's virtual round tables. They present the main findings and courses of action and are intended to fuel public debate, collective action, and decisions by political authorities.

KEY FINDINGS

Living conditions

- Teacher salaries vary considerably across countries in the sub-region. Despite some adjustments, many teachers leave the sector each year for other fields perceived as more lucrative. For example, in Benin, all universities are understaffed. Recently, 37 Beninese PhDs were recruited by Guinea, while Benin has not hired any higher education staff since 2019. Yet, Sub-Saharan Africa faces an estimated shortage of 15 million teachers. In Côte d'Ivoire, teachers do not have any medical coverage. Overall, the cost of living is high compared to the salaries earned.
- The issue of remuneration is not just about numbers. It affects professional dignity, financial stability, work motivation, and teachers' ability to fully engage in their educational mission. An underpaid teacher is a vulnerable teacher and often forced to take on multiple jobs to survive, to the detriment of teaching quality. This creates a vicious cycle: low motivation, absenteeism, mass departures to other sectors or countries offering better conditions, and loss of expertise within the national education system.
- In Guinea, teachers' living conditions are better in urban than in rural areas, pushing many to prefer big cities where they can also engage in supplementary activities. Although rural allowances are higher, they remain insufficient to attract teachers sustainably. Teachers represent more than 50% of public servants in several countries; in Guinea, they constitute 55% of public sector staff from kindergarten to higher education.
- In Guinea, private-sector teachers often earn more than their public-sector counterparts, sometimes four to five times more depending on qualifications and skills. Less than 30% of private primary teachers lack a high school diploma, contrasting with the public sector where over 55% of primary teachers do not hold this diploma. This qualification gap influences salary differences. Moreover, Guinea's government pays teachers according to years of study, and its education budget (15%) remains low compared to other countries.
- In Benin's public primary sector, salaries range from 135,000 to 300,000 CFA francs depending on rank. Several categories exist: permanent state agents (APE), contractual agents, and teacher trainees (AME), recruited for renewable one-year terms. Although a recent decision provides for full-year payment, remuneration remains low.
- In the private sector, teachers are often hired with low qualifications, sometimes without even a basic diploma (BEPC), earning salaries near the minimum wage (52,000 CFA francs), rarely exceeding 80,000 CFA francs. Ongoing reforms aim to raise recruitment standards: a high school diploma is now required to teach at the primary level, and a master's degree is required for secondary school inspectors to justify higher pay.
- Beninese teachers lack genuine health insurance coverage. Coverage is minimal in public hospitals, while quality care is mostly available in private urban clinics. Residence allowances of 2,000 to 4,000 CFA francs are vastly insufficient given real estate prices. This precariousness discourages young people from entering the profession.

Working conditions

- Teachers often face overcrowded classrooms, especially in urban areas, where the pressure from high student numbers is compounded by unpaid overtime for lesson preparation and grading.

- In some regions, school infrastructure is exposed to severe weather and recurring crises (floods, conflicts, etc.), further worsening working conditions. Occasionally, schools are requisitioned to shelter disaster victims. In rural areas, housing conditions are precarious and sometimes undignified: young teachers are posted to isolated locations, living in makeshift shelters far from their families, which increases their feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. No psychosocial support is provided to safeguard their mental health, despite some experiencing trauma related to crises.
- In Benin, a significant disparity exists between urban and rural learning environments. While infrastructure and furniture are generally available in cities, rural areas remain severely under-resourced. Under such conditions, it is difficult for teachers to perform at their best. Reforms are underway to modernize work tools and reduce lesson preparation time.
- The lack of public transportation and insufficient investment in social housing also limit teachers' well-being. Access to clean water and electricity remains problematic in some areas, hindering improvements in their working conditions.
- Regarding professional training, it is often deemed inadequate, too brief, and poorly adapted to local realities. For example, in Guinea, continuing education has sometimes been used as a pretext to grant salary supplements without a real assessment of its impact on teaching quality. At one point, \$60 million was invested in continuing education with no measurable effect on pedagogy or student outcomes. There is broad consensus on the need to first strengthen initial teacher training, considered the foundation for sustainable improvement. Continuing education can only be effective if built on solid foundations.
- In the private sector, teacher categorization remains problematic. In theory, salary increases of 5 to 10% are expected after several years of service. Collective agreements exist but are very unevenly applied. Some institutions circumvent the rules due to lack of strict oversight. This situation highlights the limits of the regulatory system and the failure to enforce national regulations.
- On financing, there is heavy dependence on donors who sometimes influence public policy definition. Poor coordination between ministries, especially Education and Finance, prevents optimal resource allocation. In some countries, like Mauritius, merging these two portfolios has led to significant progress. Better synergy between these institutions could make a difference.
- Finally, the lack of reliable statistical data presents a major obstacle to understanding problems and strategic planning. Without data, states sometimes invest heavily in low-priority areas, yielding no tangible effect on teacher satisfaction. This also prevents gathering a critical mass of information to guide public policies, rendering educational sector governance uncertain or even improvised.

Ongoing and future efforts

- In Côte d'Ivoire, a salary increase was implemented between 2021 and 2023 to improve teachers' living conditions after a decade of frozen promotions. This reform included higher housing and transportation allowances, the introduction of family benefits, and a comprehensive overhaul of the general civil service status aimed at establishing a more attractive career profile.
- In Burkina Faso, a special status was adopted in 2020 for professions in education, training, and employment promotion. This status enabled salary increases; for example, a category B teacher can now advance to category A3 through an evaluation process. School principals are now recruited within a specific administrative body, enhancing their professional recognition.
- In Togo, to tackle teacher shortages and overcrowded classrooms, recruitment drives have been undertaken alongside the reopening of teacher training institutes for primary and secondary education.
- In Guinea, several thousand teachers have been integrated into the public service to guarantee stable employment and better pay. Additionally, a comprehensive census of teaching staff uncovered 5,555 ghost teachers still listed on the payroll. The savings generated by eliminating these "duplicates" were converted into bonuses redistributed to actual serving teachers. This initiative has significantly improved

their living conditions.

- In Benin, an ambitious reform of technical and vocational education is underway. It aims to offer more attractive salaries from recruitment to boost teacher motivation. The reform also covers staff responsible for teacher training, paving the way for structural improvements in the sector. These developments offer encouraging prospects for Beninese teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make education a national priority by ensuring coherent and equitable budget planning while combating poor governance and waste. Education must be placed at the heart of political decisions, with a strong commitment to promote it through concrete, visible, and sustainable actions. This involves predictable financial resource allocation aligned with specific objectives tailored to the country's realities. Budget distribution should be fair across regions (urban, rural, marginalized), education levels (primary, secondary, higher, vocational training), and genders to reduce structural inequalities.
- Provide decent housing for teachers posted in rural areas, guaranteeing access to water, electricity, internet, public transport, and adequate medical coverage. Having accommodation near the school promotes professional stability and reduces staff turnover, a frequent problem in rural zones.
- Increase teachers' salaries, especially in public primary education, through raises and the introduction of bonuses. Better remuneration acts as a lever of social justice, strengthens recognition of teachers' roles, boosts motivation, and supports retention—an essential condition to ensure quality education.
- Improve career prospects by better regulating the status of permanent, temporary, and contractual teachers. It is necessary to establish transparent statutory frameworks that guarantee fundamental rights, clear paths to tenure, and career progression based on seniority, training, and performance.
- Invest in quality school infrastructure. Ensuring a safe, inclusive, and conducive learning environment is vital to reducing school dropout rates, particularly among girls and in rural areas. This means constructing safe and accessible buildings, separate toilets for boys and girls, equipping classrooms with functional desks and blackboards, and developing appropriate libraries and laboratories.
- Strengthen the quality of initial teacher training and introduce support mechanisms such as mentoring or post-training supervision. More rigorous training combining professional practice and digital tools, along with sustained support, would significantly improve teaching quality.
- Improve the collection of reliable data on teachers and schools. Accurate information (staff numbers, status, training levels, geographic distribution, working conditions, infrastructure state) is indispensable for identifying real needs, effectively guiding resources, and adjusting education policies according to observed outcomes.

QUOTES OF PANELISTS

“Those who make decisions for others do not live the realities on the ground. And that is a real justice problem in governance.” **Alpha Amadou Bano Barry, Lecturer-Researcher, University of Sonfonia (Guinea), Former Minister of National Education of Guinea**

“Unfortunately, the impact of a child's early years of education is often neglected. In many schools, there is neither quality instruction nor properly trained teachers. It is mostly private institutions that have qualified teachers, which exacerbates deep inequalities.”, **Marie Odile Attanasso, Economist, Lecturer-Researcher at the University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin), Former Minister of Higher Education of Benin (2016–2019)**

“The population is both a strength and a weakness. It becomes a strength when investment is made. Human capital relies on education and health. This awareness starts with attention to early childhood.”
Marie Odile Attanasso, Economist, Lecturer-Researcher at the University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin),

Former Minister of Higher Education of Benin (2016–2019)

“As long as our states do not consider education as a true investment, no lasting impact can be achieved.”

Paul Gnelou, Africa Director, Global Campaign for Education

“Teacher training is often too brief, insufficient and poorly adapted to field realities. Added to this are unattractive salaries. Every year, many teachers leave the system to seek better conditions elsewhere, even though the country faces a severe shortage of teaching staff.” **Paul Gnelou, Africa Director, Global Campaign for Education**

“The challenges of education are primarily structural, especially when considering the functioning of academies, inspectorates, and ministries. Political will without effective organization produces little effect.” **Abdoulaye Anne, Professor, Laval University (Canada)**

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