

CRISES AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION: CURRENT SITUATION OF UNIVERSITIES IN THE SAHEL

26 June 2024

INTRODUCTION

Security and political crises in the Sahel have direct consequences on the functioning of universities. Armed conflicts, political instability, and terrorist attacks have led to the closure of numerous institutions, the exodus of teachers and students, as well as a drastic reduction in public funding. Despite these challenges, these crises offer an opportunity to redefine the mission of universities. They must position themselves as essential actors in analyzing the causes of crises and developing solutions adapted to local realities. However, fragile infrastructure and resource shortages remain major obstacles to implementing these initiatives.

Although Sahel universities produce quality knowledge, this knowledge often remains disconnected from practical realities and immediate population needs. Research is frequently theoretical, and its results struggle to be integrated into political decision-making processes. The gap between academic production and citizens' daily concerns limits the impact of this knowledge on crisis management. For research to have a real effect, it is essential that it be adapted to local challenges and integrated into public crisis management strategies.

Universities play a crucial role in regulating crises in the Sahel. They must go beyond their traditional training mission to become strategic think tanks focusing on the social, economic, and political causes of the crises. Thanks to their capacity to mobilize diverse disciplines, they are particularly well placed to propose innovative and sustainable solutions.

INVITED PANELISTS

Dr. Jacqueline Konaté, Director General of the Center for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (CIAR-Mali);

Dr. Oumarou Hamani, Scientific Director of the Laboratory of Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development in Niger (LASDEL);

Prof. Abdoul Karim Saidou, Associate Professor of Political Science at Thomas Sankara University;

Prof. Moussa Batchily Ba, Retired History and Civilization researcher at the University of Nouakchott.

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

- Socio-political instability has profoundly affected the university system in Mali, resulting in years marked by significant irregularity. Repeated strikes by both teachers and students have disrupted the normal academic calendar. This phenomenon has directly caused overlapping academic years, complicating the planning and validation of programs. The LMD system, which relies on a specific number of hours to validate a year, has suffered from this instability, as students have not always been able to complete their training within the allotted time.
- Faced with this situation, authorities have often prioritized security, relegating concerns related to education and teachers' working conditions to the background. This approach has further deteriorated the social climate, especially in Mali, where indefinite teachers' strikes have paralyzed universities for several months.
- While the immediate impact of strikes is noticeable in sectors such as public finance, where even one or two days of strikes can disrupt economic management, the consequences of university strike often remain invisible in the short term. However, prolonged disruptions severely harm the country's future, as a failing education system eventually affects all other sectors of society.
- Another worrisome consequence is the exodus of the best teachers. Confronted with slow reforms and difficult working conditions in public universities, many choose to join private institutions or emigrate abroad.
- It is difficult not to question how Burkina Faso, which saw the 2014 popular uprising ending nearly 27 years of authoritarian rule under Blaise Compaoré, now finds itself engulfed in a series of intertwined crises: security, economic, humanitarian, identity-related, and more.
- This situation stands in stark contrast to the previous image of Burkina Faso as a stable country in a region plagued by conflicts, notably in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Niger. Once considered a regional mediator in multiple crises, the country has seen its stability quickly deteriorate. Yet, the region was already experiencing tensions, civil wars, rebellions, economic crises, and security challenges long before Burkina Faso itself was plunged into turmoil.
- This lack of long-term vision and crisis anticipation, whether political, economic, or security-related, seems to be one of the main causes of the current situation.
- Another important point is the weak mobilization of knowledge, both modern and traditional, in the face of the crisis. A primary weakness lies in the absence of deep reflection fueled by academic knowledge and available expertise. Research centers, universities, and intellectuals have not been sufficiently engaged to propose sustainable solutions. Traditional knowledge, rich in mechanisms for social and political regulation, has also been neglected. This deficit in knowledge mobilization has worsened crisis management. The current situation demonstrates the crucial importance of anticipation and integrating knowledge into social regulation processes.
- Going back to the early 2000s, signs of insecurity were already present in Niger, though mainly localized around urban outskirts. At the time, intercommunity tensions often linked to access to natural resources like water or land were palpable but underestimated or poorly managed by authorities.
- The fall of the Khadhafi regime marked a decisive turning point, plunging the country into lasting instability. However, this insecurity is not a recent phenomenon: it has roots in old tensions, poorly anticipated and unresolved conflicts. Today, the security crisis in Niger is widespread, affecting not just the north but also the south and east of the country.
- This chaos is the result of decades of neglect toward visible warning signs. A notable example is the Ouallam department, marked by intercommunity conflicts primarily between the Zarma and other indigenous ethnic groups. The "Utah tragedy," a significant event, illustrates how these tensions, initially

perceived as localized, gradually escalated.

- Livestock theft, often perpetrated by bandits from neighboring countries, was a recurring problem for Peul herders, but these incidents were then considered marginal. Authorities, slow to react, failed to grasp the seriousness of the danger. Yet, these seemingly isolated conflicts were already early signs of expanding insecurity.
- Mauritania has stood out in recent years for a certain stability, especially regarding security. However, as a Saharan region member, this stability does not imply the absence of challenges, particularly given the growing crises in neighboring countries.
- It is useful to recall that about ten years ago, regional concerns mainly focused on environmental issues such as drought, desertification, and education, addressed by the Sahel Club through aid policies and sectoral strategies.
- The situation has since evolved toward much more violent and ideological crises centered on power struggles, often motivated by identity and religious considerations. This shift raises questions: why were these transformations not anticipated or adequately analyzed?
- Responses mainly come from external sources without genuine endogenous reflection on internal social changes. This inability to provide appropriate responses, especially in the Sahel, highlights internal contradictions that previous targeted policies could manage. Today, the education system is weakened, social growth hampered, and a large portion of resources directed toward external solutions at the expense of local approaches.
- In recent years, higher education in Burkina Faso and neighboring countries like Niger has undergone deep changes. There has been a multiplication of universities, contrasting with the time when Ouagadougou concentrated most of the university offer. This expansion has accompanied diversification in courses, increased student and teaching staff numbers, and a stronger desire to integrate digital technology in learning. For example, Burkina Faso now has a functional virtual university and several initiatives aiming to professionalize education. The University of Thomas Sankara's Initial and Continuing Training Institute exemplifies this, offering not only bachelor's and master's degrees but also certificates and customized training, demonstrating adaptability to labor market needs. This dynamism is also reflected in the creation of vice-presidencies in public universities responsible for relations with the private sector, highlighting the growing importance of employability in strategic decisions.
- However, this expansion occurs amid increasingly constrained budgets. Despite political upheavals since 2012 and transition regimes, the general trend remains unchanged: budgets allocated to higher education and scientific research continue decreasing. This phenomenon intensified due to the security crisis affecting the country. Faced with rising terrorism, Burkina Faso had to revise budget priorities with a massive increase in military expenditures. From the presidency of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré to that of Captain Ibrahim Traoré, the defense budget has continuously grown. Training and equipping over 50,000 Homeland Defense Volunteers (VDP), mobilized to support the armed forces, demand substantial resources. Consequently, increased security spending came at the expense of key sectors like education, higher education, and scientific research. This paradox is striking: while the country undergoes a multidimensional crisis, the mobilization of knowledge and researchers, who could provide strategic and intellectual responses, remains underexploited due to insufficient means.
- Another major issue resides in social sciences and law, disciplines inherently linked to political dynamics. In a context where academic freedom and freedom of expression are shrinking, knowledge production in social sciences becomes increasingly complex. The current environment does not favor open and critical debate essential to developing independent scientific thinking. There is a rise in discourses advocating "decolonization of knowledge" and academic practices, notably within pan-Africanist and sovereigntist circles. While this intellectual reappropriation is legitimate, it sometimes translates into heightened distrust towards researchers and intellectuals perceived as agents of a system to be dismantled. This distrust, coupled with increasing restrictions on freedoms, limits academics' leeway and their capacity to contribute effectively to debates and solutions regarding national challenges.

- Thus, the university situation in Burkina Faso and the region stands at a crossroads. On one side, institutions seek to adapt to new realities by diversifying courses and strengthening links with the private sector. On the other, they suffer budget cuts and a political climate that weakens intellectual production, especially in social sciences. This paradox highlights the urgency of rethinking priorities: faced with security and economic crises, mobilizing knowledge and valuing research should be seen as strategic levers, not secondary sectors. Far from being a luxury, higher education and research are essential pillars to anticipate and respond to contemporary challenges.
- Higher education and research in West Africa are influenced by many political, economic, and social factors. This can be analyzed at three main levels: politicization of campuses, institutional instability, and structural challenges of the university system itself. The politicization of academia is not new. For decades, many teachers and researchers are co-opted by regimes to hold advisory, ministerial, or other influential political roles. Some openly display political affiliations and form informal groups to defend particular ideologies.
- Despite frequent political and social crises, some regional universities have maintained functional stability. In Niger, for example, strikes have significantly decreased in recent years. The state, as the main university funder, has limited teaching interruptions and guaranteed better continuity of academic programs. However, the mismatch between the ever-increasing student population and insufficient infrastructure hinders the academic calendar's smooth running. Governments invest in new infrastructure construction, but these efforts fall short of actual needs.
- One major challenge for higher education in West Africa is research funding. While notable progress has been made with laboratories and research teams focused on specific themes, the majority of funding still comes from external sources. This raises a crucial question: who benefits from knowledge produced by African universities? In many cases, research is commissioned by international donors seeking to better understand social, political, or economic dynamics. The results are then exploited by these donors to guide their development aid policies.
- This poses a real problem of scientific sovereignty. African states finance research little and, consequently, lose control and valorization. The lack of local funding also affects the structuring of scientific communities. Very few researcher networks are exclusively African, supported by African funds, addressing specifically African issues. Many African academics are integrated into international think tanks and networks, increasing external dependency and limiting local dynamics in knowledge production and application.
- Social sciences, particularly political science, play a crucial role in formulating effective responses to security challenges. Although abundant research exists, it remains largely unknown and underutilized by policymakers. This disconnect between academic research and public policy is a major issue needing urgent resolution.
- A main obstacle lies in the gap between academic production, often expressed in technical jargon, and policymakers, who often lack tools to fully exploit research results. Researchers, sometimes seen as outsiders, find themselves in a delicate position, their analyses interpreted as criticisms or challenges to existing decisions.
- Thus, relations between researchers and policymakers are often tense, as research findings may be viewed as contestation. It is important to recall that researchers focus on knowledge production but should not necessarily be involved in policy implementation. When directly involved, they face ethical and practical challenges of being judge and party.
- Unfortunately, in many cases, policymakers still turn to non-specialists, such as charlatans or marabouts, who gain popular support with seductive but unfounded speeches. This poses a real challenge for knowledge producers, often competing with purveyors of illusion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increasing the strategic importance of education. It is essential that Malian authorities consider education as a strategic priority, on par with other vital sectors such as security. This recognition will not only strengthen the education system but also ensure the country's stability and prosperity in the long term. Such a vision must be anchored in a coherent national policy encouraging continuous training, pedagogical innovation, and the integration of local knowledge.
- Valuing the role of intellectuals in crisis regulation. Intellectuals, researchers, and academics must be fully integrated into crisis management and regulation mechanisms. Their expertise, particularly in analyzing the root causes of social and economic crises, is indispensable. It is crucial that authorities acknowledge and value this intellectual contribution so that crisis responses are not only political or military but also informed by rigorous analyses that consider the country's social, cultural, and economic realities.
- Developing a coherent national policy in science and technology. To fully exploit Mali's potential in science and technology, it is pivotal to establish a coherent national policy that supports local talents. This framework must include targeted funding and provide an environment conducive to the emergence of solutions adapted to the country's needs, while encouraging local innovation. Authorities, in collaboration with the private sector and researchers, must create infrastructures capable of meeting current and future challenges, especially in technology and innovation.
- Strengthening collaboration between researchers and decision makers. It is essential to establish strong collaboration mechanisms between researchers, policymakers, and social actors. Advisory committees or dialogue platforms should be set up so that research results directly influence political decisions. This approach will ensure that public policies, especially in sensitive areas such as land management and education, are evidence-based and adapted to local realities.
- Building researchers' capacities in advocacy and communication. Investing in the training of researchers, especially in advocacy and communication, is necessary. Although many produce high-quality research, they often lack the tools needed to influence public discourse and interact effectively with decision makers. Specific training programs should be developed to help them better communicate their findings to social and political actors, making their work more accessible and useful for society as a whole.

QUOTES OF PANELISTS

"If you want knowledge, it must be financed. Unfortunately, funding always comes from outside, and it is this outside which profits from the knowledge." Dr. Oumarou Hamani, Scientific Director of the Laboratory for Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development in Niger (LASDEL)

"Researchers and scientific knowledge are often perceived as enemies by politicians. Leaders need to have more trust in research centers." Dr. Oumarou Hamani, Scientific Director of LASDEL

"No nation can develop or prosper without genuine sovereignty in knowledge and know-how production." Sibiri Jean Zoundi, Member of the Secretariat of the Sahel and West Africa Club (CSAO)

"Despite the immense agricultural and food challenges, investment in agricultural research in Africa fell from 0.54% to 0.39% of agricultural GDP between 2000 and 2016." Sibiri Jean Zoundi, Member of the Secretariat of the Sahel and West Africa Club (CSAO)

"All problems observed in other sectors somehow originate from the general education system." Dr. Jacqueline Konaté, General Director of the Center for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (CIAR-Mali)

"There is a great imbalance between enrollment in the humanities and enrollment in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), while job creation increasingly occurs in these fields." Dr.

Jacqueline Konaté, General Director of the Center for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (CIAR-Mali)

“It is precisely through knowledge, critical thinking, and reflection that adapted responses to the crises we face can genuinely be formulated.” Dr. Abdoul Karim Saidou, Associate Professor of Political Science at Thomas Sankara University

“A lot of teaching and patience is needed to help students understand that being critical does not mean one does not love their country or opposes the government.” Dr. Abdoul Karim Saidou, Associate Professor of Political Science

“We do research, but when we formulate recommendations, decision makers ignore them because they do not need them to continue governing.” Dr. Moussa Batchily Ba, Retired Lecturer and Researcher in History and Civilization at the University of Nouakchott

“One of the current problems in research is the lack of involvement of the diaspora.” Dr. Moussa Batchily Ba, Retired Lecturer and Researcher in History and Civilization at the University of Nouakchott

“We have a new generation of young connected researchers capable of mobilizing funds and producing research. We must find ways to ensure that this knowledge production has a real impact on the economic and social development of countries.” Halidou Ibrahim Hima, Lecturer-Researcher at UAM University of Niamey

“Developing endogenous research in Africa is a neglected area, and the Covid crisis has shown the potential Africa could have in scientific production.” Célestin-Alexis Agbessi, Lecturer at Paris Cité University, Medical Researcher at the Faculty of Sciences of Cotonou, and Coordinator of Emergency Medicine

“The question arises regarding regionalization: how to reconcile today’s astronomical research costs with the massification of higher education in African universities?” Célestin-Alexis Agbessi, Lecturer at Paris Cité University, Medical Researcher at the Faculty of Sciences of Cotonou, and Coordinator of Emergency Medicine

TO GO FURTHER

VIDEO OF THE CONVERSATION



WATHI's main website

www.wathi.org



facebook.com/wathi.org/



[@WATHI_ThinkTank](https://twitter.com/WATHI_ThinkTank)



[@wathi_think_tank](https://www.instagram.com/wathi_think_tank)



[@wathi-think-tank](https://www.linkedin.com/company/wathi-think-tank)

Our podcasts 'Les Voix(es) de WATHI' are available on :

