POLICY BRIEF

Learning on the move

Facilitating the continuation of learning for children in conflict-affected settings in the Sahel

ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Center for Universal Education at BROOKINGS

HALIMATOU HIMA

Executive Summary

This policy brief analyzes the effects of insecurity on education in the Sahel, highlighting how attacks against schools and forced displacement disrupt learning. With over 9,000 schools closed because of insecurity in the Central Sahel, with the majority in the Liptako-Gourma area, and 3.3 million people displaced, the region faces a protracted educational crisis that requires both emergency measures and long-term planning.

Challenging conditions are shaping educational aspirations and outcomes in gendered ways. The specific needs of adolescents, particularly girls, are often overlooked, further exacerbating exclusion. In insecure areas, girls are at risk for increased violence on the way to and from school and within school premises, resulting in lower retention and high dropout rates. Crises and displacement not only worsen gender inequalities in education but also shift gender norms. For example, women taking on leadership roles is a change that could shape educational aspirations, especially for girls. A multisectoral approach addressing child protection, sanitation, nutrition, and mental health can mitigate major barriers to education for forcibly displaced girls.

This brief argues for a joint regional and subnational lens to understanding the crisis of education and forced displacement in the Sahel, emphasizing the need for relevant programs that consider educational aspirations; shifting social and gender norms; and structural barriers to maintain, demand, and ensure reentry, learning, and retention. The brief concludes with recommendations focused on four dimensions of inclusion—availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability—drawing on findings from field research conducted in Niger and an analysis of secondary data covering Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

I. Introduction

Insecurity, conflict, and forced displacement are affecting learning and education in the Sahel, a region with some of the lowest educational outcomes in the world. Armed groups target schools, students, and teachers. In Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, attacks and threats against education have led to the closure of over 9,000 schools, a sevenfold increase since 2019. Learning on the move is often an elusive quest for children and youth, who make up 60% of the 3.3 million people forcibly displaced in the Central Sahel, driven out of their homes by the deteriorating security situation.[1] In some areas, getting to school or being in school is no longer safe. Children from displaced communities face greater educational barriers and setbacks to education as they cope with overlapping deprivations (Admasu et al. 2021). Even when schooling is available, the psychological trauma from conflict negatively affects children's and young people's well-being and academic achievement (Singhal 2019; Bene 2022). Children who were lagging behind preconflict tend to fall even further behind (Brück, Di Maio, and Miaari 2022).

Girls and young women in conflict settings face acute marginalization and vulnerabilities that affect their education. Conflict and violence exacerbate gender inequalities in education: Four out of five countries with the largest gender gaps in education are facing war or insurgency (Nicolai, Hine, and Wales 2015). Girls in conflict-affected regions are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school at the primary level than their peers in nonconflict settings, and they are less likely to return following school closures, disruption, or destruction of school infrastructure. In the Sahel, the difficulties faced by girls translate into severe gender gaps and lower gender parity indices in conflict and fragile settings. Girls also tend to have lower learning outcomes than boys (Plan International 2019; UNICEF 2021). Furthermore, crises exacerbate preexisting violence against women and girls (Onyango et al. 2019; Peterman et al. 2020), reducing their chances of attending, staying in, and completing school at all levels (Raqib 2017; U.N. 2020). Evidence shows that girls are especially targeted on the way to and from school, and this exposes them to heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence and child protection abuses (FAWE 2020; GEMR 2011; Onyango et al. 2019; Sherif 2018).

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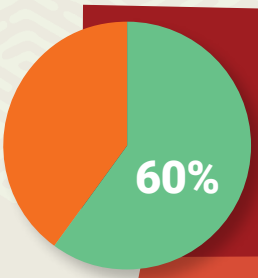
1. From 2017 to 2022, the population of forcibly displaced increased threefold in Mali to 600,000, doubled in Niger to 285,000, and was multiplied by nearly 185 in Burkina Faso. Over 1.9 million people are forcibly displaced in Burkina Faso alone.



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The ability to continue learning in crisis settings can be the most potent reminder to children and young people in forced displacement that a better tomorrow is possible (Machel 1996; UNSCR 2021a). Studies from a diverse set of countries have shown that educational access in conflict settings could signal a return to normalcy, reduce feelings of exclusion (Thyne 2006), and increase the likelihood of peace duration in the case of civil war (Ishiyama and Breuning 2012). Gender-responsive education in emergencies can help close access and retention gaps, especially for girls at the secondary level (Ossai 2021). Investment in education is a prerequisite for sustainable peace (Buckland 2005).

If the protracted nature of the crises in the Sahel is any indication, the number of children and youth in need of education support in conflict settings and in forced displacement is likely to increase in coming years. The issue of education on the move in the Sahel continues to be an emergency, and one that has also become a protracted crisis, with parts of the region acutely affected. Conflict-induced inequalities in education can have intergenerational consequences and deepen subnational disparities, fueling tensions and grievances that further undermine social cohesion (Bertoni et al. 2019; Chamarbagwala and Morán 2011; Omoeva, Moussa, and Hatch 2018). Because of the possibilities that education offers, and simply because it is a human right (U.N. 2010; UNSCR 2021b), it is crucial to ensure the provision of education and the continuation of learning for all children and young people in settings of crisis and conflict. While there is growing evidence on education in crisis settings, major gaps still exist in understanding what interventions work, under what conditions, and for whom. Beyond narratives of victimhood, the literature is scarce on Sahelian girls' and women's educational experiences and aspirations in forced displacement, as well as how they navigate their conditions within shifting societal norms.

This policy brief analyzes how insecurity affects the educational experiences and outcomes of forcibly displaced children in the Central Sahel, exploring the intersections of displacement, gender, and education. It argues for a response that systematically integrates emergency measures with long-term planning, and for the importance of a joint regional and subnational framing to understand education in conflict settings. The brief highlights how educational pursuits in forced displacement are affected by shifting social institutions, often in gendered ways, and argues that policies that account for educational aspirations can be more effective. It concludes with policy recommendations, anchored in four dimensions of inclusion (availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability)—drawing on findings from field-research conducted in Niger and a qualitative and quantitative analysis of secondary data covering Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

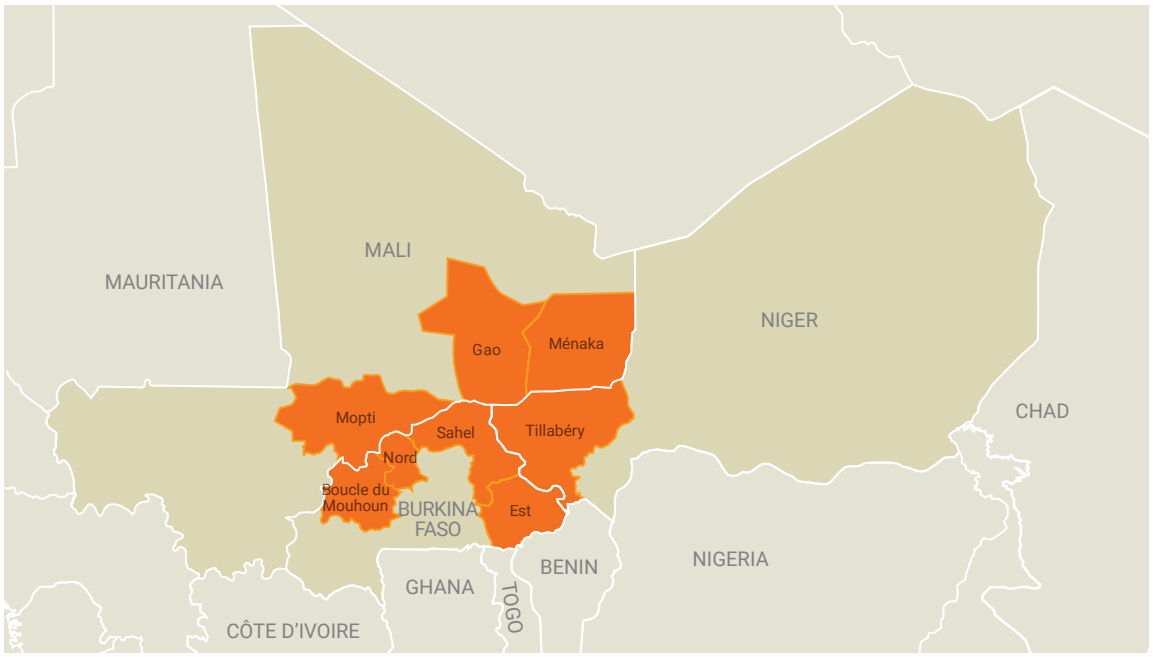
II. Setting and policy context

This policy brief focuses on what is known as the Liptako-Gourma region, commonly referred to as the "three-border" area of the Central Sahel, connecting parts of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (see Map 1).[2] This section frames the context and underscores the centrality of analyzing the education crisis in the Central Sahel from a joint regional and subnational lens. Considering the regional nature of insecurity, shared ecological spaces, and fluid borders, examining the education crisis in Tillabéry (southwestern Niger) without considering Gao or Ménaka (eastern Mali) provides an incomplete picture. A more comprehensive approach includes accounting for early warning systems that address regional and cross-border dynamics, recognizing that crises and violations affecting children often have far-reaching impacts beyond national boundaries.

Furthermore, as this brief will show, the closure of schools as a result of insecurity has evolved into a protracted crisis, which continues to deteriorate: as of March 2024, insecurity and violence have led to the closure of over 9,000 primary schools in the three-border area, depriving around 1.54 million children of education (UNICEF, 2024). This situation is compounding a pre-existing education crisis, with girls particularly affected as the interaction of insecurity, forced displacement, and gender intensify existing gender-based violence and perpetuate long-standing patterns of marginalization.

In the face of growing needs, the national response and international support to the crisis of education in conflict settings in the Sahel remain inadequate. Additionally, there is limited evidence on what works to deliver learning in areas where schools have been closed as a result of insecurity and in areas that are insecure in the Sahel or why existing frameworks or programs do not translate into actual change, suggesting the need for country-specific analysis to tease out subnational dynamics.

MAP 1. The three-border area of the Central Sahel



Source: Assanvo, William, Institute of Security Studies, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-organised-crime-fuelling-terror-groups-in-liptako-gourma, December 2019. The areas (highlighted in orange) on Map 1: The three-border area of the Central Sahel, shows the Liptako-Gourma region—in Burkina Faso: Est, Sahel,[3] Nord, and Boucle du Mouhoun; in Mali: Ménaka, Gao, and Mopti; and in Niger: Tillabéry.

2. The phrase "three-border area" and Liptako-Gourma will be used interchangeably in this policy brief.
3. There is a subregion in Burkina Faso called "Sahel"—not to be confused with the larger Sahel region.

The issue of school closure in the Sahel is as much an emergency as it is a protracted crisis. The three-border area has experienced the highest number of closures of schools and attacks against education in Africa, with Burkina Faso and Mali most affected. National aggregate education indicators can miss key subnational dynamics. The number of schools closed as a result of insecurity in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has increased 10-fold between 2017 and 2021.

2.1. A JOINT REGIONAL AND SUBNATIONAL LENS IS CRITICAL TO UNDERSTANDING THE CRISIS OF EDUCATION AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN THE SAHEL

The education crisis that is unfolding in the Sahel region must be situated within a larger historical and regional context, with the year 2011 as a major inflection point. That year, the onset of the Libya crisis precipitated a spiral of violence in neighboring West African Sahel countries.[4] Preexisting local fragility risks and grievances contributed to and sustained the crises, threatening decades of hard-won progress in education and gender equality in education. In the three-border area, the marginal presence of the state has resulted in poor delivery of basic services, providing a fertile ground for the proliferation of organized crime and terrorist groups that deliberately target education (Assanvo 2019; Assanvo, Dakono, Théroux-Bénoni, and Maïga 2019). The wave of military coups in the region risks further undermining much needed investment in education and social sectors, as military regimes face heightened fiscal pressure and as state institutions generally stagnate in a "transitionary" phase (Mahmoud and Taifouri 2023).

Viewing the Sahel's Liptako-Gourma as a single unit offers a clearer understanding of the regional education crisis, shaped by internal and cross-border displacement. Most refugees in western Niger and Burkina Faso are from Mali, and most refugees in Mali are from Burkina Faso (UNHCR 2024).[5] Some refugees have experienced multiple forced internal displacements before crossing over to a neighboring country. Many internally displaced persons (IDPs) also share the unfortunate reality of multiple displacement.[6] Additionally, with the intensification of violence and insecurity, it is not uncommon to find both IDPs and refugees living alongside host communities. This confluence creates a new reality with a multitude of linguistic heritage and shifting gender norms, which has implications for the provision of education for children who are forcibly displaced—including ensuring mother-tongue-based multilingual education (Abu-Ghaida, Lahire, and Silva 2021; Person 2020).

2.2. THE CRISIS OF EDUCATION HAS BECOME PROTRACTED AND DEMANDS A RESPONSE THAT SYSTEMATICALLY INTEGRATES EMERGENCY MEASURES WITH LONG-TERM PLANNING

The issue of school closure in the Sahel is as much an emergency as it is a protracted crisis. The three-border area has experienced the highest number of closures of schools and attacks against education in Africa, with Burkina Faso and Mali most affected (U.N. 2022).[7] National aggregate education indicators can miss key subnational dynamics. The number of schools closed as a result of insecurity in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has increased 10-fold between 2017 and 2021 (GCPEA 2020; OCHA 2018, 2022c). Schools are closing not only because of insecurity spillovers, but also because they are the target of deliberate attacks (Benedikter and Ouedraogo 2018) and threats of attacks, and because teachers and students fear for their lives

4. The Sahel covers over 3,500 kilometers and spans the African continent from west to east. It contains parts of 10 countries: Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. The noun "Sahel" comes from the Arabic word sahil, which means shore or coast—and has historically been a major corridor for trans-Saharan trade. The brassage of various cultures aided in the flourishing of centers of learning, which in turn fostered a significant amount of sociocultural exchange between previously unconnected communities.
5. In the case of Niger, at the national scale, the majority of refugees are from Nigeria if we account for the Lake Chad Basin area. However, in the western part of Niger, the majority of refugees are from Mali.
6. More information about IDP's can be found here, https://www.unhcr.org/in/about-unhcr/who-we-protect/internally-displaced-people.
7. The annual Secretary General report on children and armed conflict verified 120 attacks on schools in Mali, including the burning of educational facilities, and 46 attacks on schools in Burkina Faso, including the abductions and killing of protected persons related to school (U.N. 2022).

and safety and thus flee or simply stop going to school premises (NRC 2022). In Mali, for instance, 7 out of 10 schools closed because of threats of attack, not physical attacks themselves (Cluster Education 2022). Armed groups in the region instill fear unto populations by giving ultimatums to teachers to vacate and close schools. Table 1 captures the magnitude of school closures. By June 2022, one in five schools were closed because of insecurity in Mali. Niger's region of Tillabéry, bordering Mali and Burkina Faso, has seen a rapid increase in school closures of schools as a result of insecurity: the number of schools closed more than doubled between 2020 and 2022.

Countries in the Sahel have adopted a series of measures aimed at addressing the issue of children being driven out of school by insecurity.[8] Some of the measures include (1) a program to redeploy teachers from closed schools in Burkina Faso; (2) distance teaching via radio; (3) the setting up of *écoles de regroupement,* or cluster schools, in Niger (DREN 2022); (4) a more institutional response with an education in emergencies unit set up in Niger to "ensure access to quality education in emergencies in an environment for all girls and boys aged 3 to 17, affected by school interruption due to crises"; and (5) a "'Resilient Schools' project to strengthen the resilience of schools in the face of the security crisis through the Safe Schools approach" (Ndabananiye, Ndiaye, Tran Thanh, and Tréguier 2021).

Despite all good intentions, policy analysts argue that the capacity of these education systems to respond to the crisis, while strengthened, remains inadequate. "There is often a significant gap between intentions and practice—we have devised excellent programs on paper but on the ground, the reality of implementation is different from what we hope for" explains an administrator based in Tillabéry's regional education office as part of the research reported in this brief. Sahelian governments are constrained by the difficulty to finance a crisis of education that was unforeseen, that is lasting longer than anticipated, that is complex and dynamic, and that weighs heavily on domestic expenditures. For instance, the full implementation of Burkina Faso's strategy for education in emergencies for the period 2020–2022 would require 55.5 billion CFA francs (~U.S. $84 million), well above available resources (Ndabananiye et al. 2021). With nearly 7 in 10 schools closed in some regions in the three-border area and only a few reopening, a response centered on an "emergency" level may be missing an opportunity to more systematically tackle a crisis that is stretching into a prolonged situation.

Solving the education crisis must go hand in hand with solving the wider security situation (Idahosa and Abiodun Bakare 2020) and a response that systematically accounts for a longer term view to addressing education in emergencies, in lieu of incremental, ad hoc approaches. If the current education crisis is not managed urgently, then millions of children and youth face an uncertain future with limited opportunities.

2.3. GENDER SHAPES EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN THE SAHEL

Extremist and armed groups often impose the adoption of gender norms that undermine women's autonomy, mobility, and agency (Idrissa 2019). This is no different in the Sahel, where in some areas, extremist groups target or ban girls' education. These more restrictive gender norms and notions of masculinity in conflict-affected contexts expose women and girls to extreme vulnerability and greater risks of gender-based violence (UNHCR

TABLE 1. Schools closed because of insecurity in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger

	SCHOOLS CLOSED		REGIONS MOST AFFECTED
	As of May and August 2022	*As of May and June 2023*	
Burkina Faso	4,148 schools, affecting nearly 686,000 students and over 20,000 teachers	5,318 schools, affecting over 878,000 students	Regions in the Liptako-Gourma account for 80.1% of all schools closed in Burkina Faso (Boucle du Moujoun: 20.0%; Sahel*: 23.4%; Est: 25.3%; Nord: 11.4%).
Mali	1,766 schools, affecting 529,800 students and over 10,000 teachers	1,545 schools, affecting over 463,000 students	Regions in the Liptako-Gourma account for 67.4% of all schools closed in Mali (Mopti: 51.9%; Ménaka: 8.4%; Gao: 7.1%).
Niger	890 schools, affecting over 73,000 students	958 schools, affecting over 73,000 students	Tillabéry region in the Liptako-Gourma accounts nearly all schools (95.5%) of schools closed in Niger.

Source data: Cluster Education of Mali (2022, 2024), Ministry of Education of Niger (MEN 2022, 2024), Ministry of Education of Burkina Faso (MENAPLN 2022, 2024)

8. All three countries have passed national legislation on the protection of refugees, adopted, respectively, in 2008, 2018, and 2017, and these laws grant equal education rights to refugees (Assemblée Nationale 1997, 1998; Conseil des Ministres 2011).

With the population of forced displacement in the Sahel being predominately young and female, forced displacement is not gender neutral in its consequences. In a precarious reality where negotiated social ties are crucial for survival, gender norms shift with forced displacement and conflict

2022c). Forced displacement resulting from violence and insecurity brings increased marginalization, which in turn increases the gender-based violence that may have predated the onset of insecurity and forced displacement. The majority of forcibly displaced persons in the Sahel region are women and young people under the age of 18 (UNHCR 2022c). In the face of heightened precarity and marginalization, women and girls are susceptible to negative coping mechanisms such as "survival sex" (Adebajo 2020, 2021), child marriage (Ajayi 2020), and increasingly forced or voluntary enrolment in armed groups as a means to escape deprivation or to protect themselves from insecurity, among other reasons (Abatan 2018, 2021). Additionally, studies have found that forced displacement intensifies the incidence of child and/or forced marriage in contexts where child marriage was already prevalent before conflict and insecurity (Brons 2021).[9] Beyond cultural considerations, in the context of forced displacement, child marriage as a negative coping mechanism can become a currency to secure material benefits and kinship ties with the host community (Brons 2021).

With the population of forced displacement in the Sahel being predominately young and female, forced displacement is not gender neutral in its consequences. In a precarious reality where negotiated social ties are crucial for survival, gender norms shift with forced displacement and conflict (Medie 2022). Although the durability and drivers of these changes need to be interrogated, these shifts have implications for women's rights and for girls' education, shaping societal views on who should have access to education and why. Other than from the prism of victimhood, less is documented about how women and girls from the Sahel who are forcibly displaced reimagine their conditions within often rigid societal norms and despite the lived challenges. While forced displacement exposes women and girls to heightened vulnerability, little is known about how the novel reality of displacement could shape agency and choice and shift societal norms, even if temporarily.

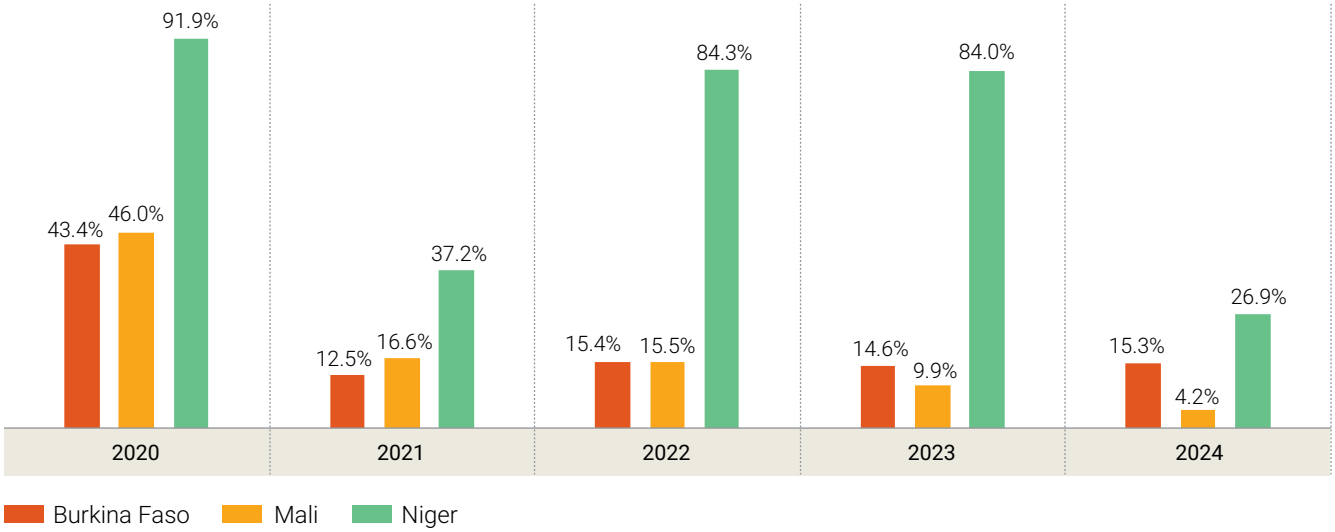
Similarly, there are major gaps related to how insecurity, conflict, and forced displacement shape the educational experiences of boys and young men. Gender-sensitive studies tend to frame young men and boys from the perspective of counterterrorism and armed groups' enrolment (Samuel and Ojewale 2022; UNDP 2017; UNESCO 2017), and this narrow framing can undercut effective response.

2.4. HUMANITARIAN APPEALS FOR EDUCATION IN THE SAHEL HAVE BEEN ENDEMICALLY UNDERFUNDED, DESPITE GROWING NEEDS

There is a major gap between growing educational needs and funding allocation, which fails to match the political rhetoric on the importance of education in armed conflict. Globally, financing for education in crisis settings has been consistently low, representing less than 3% of global humanitarian aid over the last two decades and reaching only 2.6% in 2022 (OCHA 2023). In the Sahel, the proportion of education funding is decreasing, while international support for education in conflict remains low and stagnant, in the case of Burkina Faso and Mali, where humanitarian appeals for education remain underfunded (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the quality of funding—how much arrives, in the right place, in the right way, and at the right time—undermines the effectiveness of efforts to provide education in emergencies (INEE 2020; Scott 2015). Even as funding streams such as Education Cannot Wait (ECW) now

9. A recent study on child marriage, "Conflict and Girl Child Marriage: Global Evidence" (Krafft, Arango, Rubin, and Kelly 2022), shows great heterogeneity in findings on the relationship between child marriage and conflict. This study underscores the need to consider how gender norms may interact with contextual economic, social, and demographic factors to reflect different outcomes.

FIGURE 1. Coverage of Humanitarian Appeal for Education (2020–2024)



Source data: Financing Tracking Service (OCHA 2024), Plan de Reponse Humanitaire (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger)

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provide multiyear support for education in emergencies and fill an important gap (ECW 2023), a siloed approach to humanitarian and development funding for education in crisis often creates tensions between short- and long-term strategic planning (EiE Hub 2022; Jalbout and Bullard 2022). The emergency response comes too late and is often not fast enough to keep children from facing long periods of interruption in learning during forced displacement and relocation.

Furthermore, limited consideration and poor financing on child protection and gender-based violence—both of which are crucial in facilitating the mobility of girls and their ability to continue learning—is a severe impediment. Programming on gender-based violence and child protection both receive less than 1% of global humanitarian allocation (OCHA 2024).

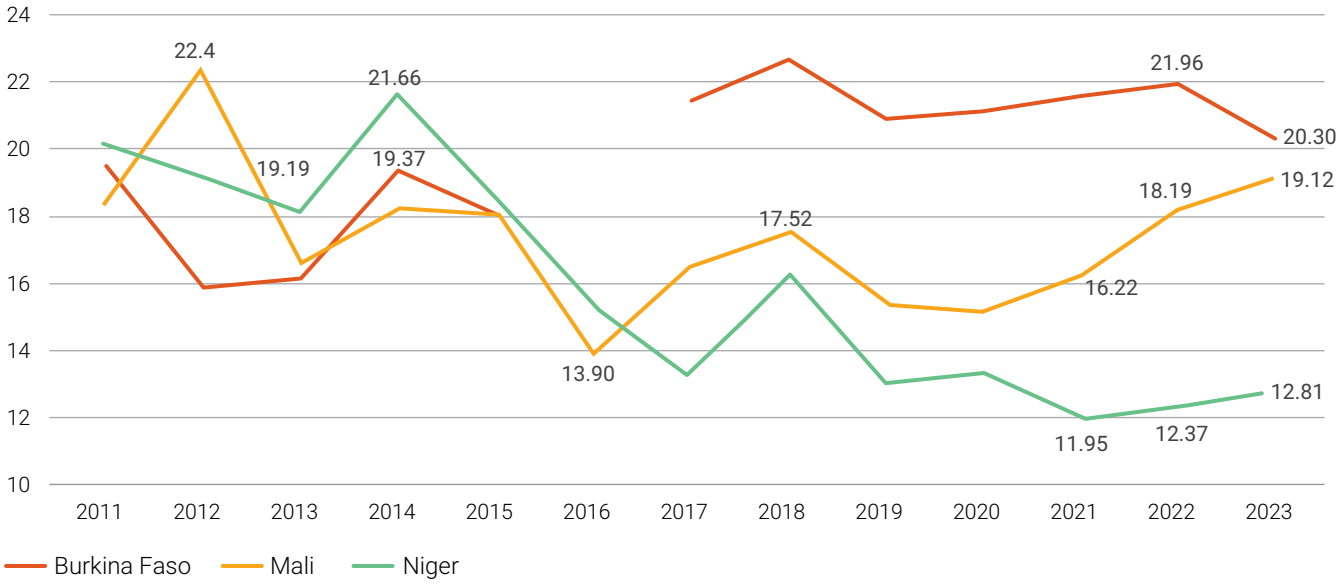
Global and regional systems have responded to the crisis of education in the Sahel with targeted financing and programming to affected regions—even though the ongoing geopolitical changes are affecting the nature of engagement on development issues. While there is a need to rethink the role of governments in devising and implementing sustained strategies for the provision of education in emergencies, the coverage of humanitarian appeal for education in Sahel countries raises additional questions. "Because everyone is talking about the Sahel, there is a perception that we are getting a lot of support, but that is far from the truth. We can see that crises are not equal, even if the human consequences are felt regardless of geographies," said an official at the Ministry of Education of Niger interviewed as part of the research presented in this brief.

Just as education needs in humanitarian settings increase, government expenditure on education as a proportion of total government expenditures has either decreased (Niger) or essentially stagnated (Mali and Burkina Faso) since 2014 (see Figure 2).[10] These patterns underscore the growing challenges that governments face in addressing competing and

10. UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action recommends 4–6% of total gross domestic product (GDP) spending on education and/or at least 15–20% of public expenditure to education (GEMR 2023).

urgent priorities, including security. Education appears to be a major casualty of widespread insecurity, with a weakening of the institutional capacity to respond to preexisting and novel challenges in the education systems. Yet, while there is evidence on what works to deliver learning in areas affected by insecurity and crises (Burde et al. 2023; ECW 2024; GPE 2022), there remains a gap in understanding why current knowledge or programs do not necessarily translate into change in practice, making country-specific analyses like that presented in this brief critical.

FIGURE 2. Expenditure on education as a percentage of total government expenditure



Source data: Institute for Statistics (UNESCO 2024)

III. Methodology

This policy brief identifies how insecurity and violence affect educational access and outcomes, and what conditions and policies could better facilitate the continuation of learning for forcibly displaced children, with a gender-analytical lens. The analysis was guided by three key subquestions:

1. How does insecurity affect educational trajectories for children, especially for girls who are affected by insecurity and violence in the Central Sahel's Liptako-Gourma area?
2. What are the aspirations, lived realities, and specific barriers related to educational and learning opportunities faced by girls and young women who are forcibly displaced?
3. How can policies and programs better support educational access and retention for children who are forcibly displaced by conflict and insecurity?

The research uses quantitative and qualitative methods including (1) interviews with women, men, girls, and boys in a forcibly displaced community on the outskirts of the town of Tillabéry, Niger;[11] (2) interviews with youths who have encountered insecurity and violence; (3) interviews with policymakers, traditional chiefs, researchers, and civil society organizations at the national and subnational levels; (4) interviews with former and current teachers and representatives of the parent-teacher association; (5) focus group discussions with young women and young men, aged 17 to 25, separately, as well as children, girls and boys aged 9 to 16, in host communities; and (6) extensive secondary data collection at the district level in the regional offices of the Ministry of Education of Niger as well as quantitative data covering the broader Sahel region (see more details in Appendix A).

Conducting rigorous research in conflict-affected environments presents challenges, with researchers often foreign to the contexts in which they are working and unfamiliar with local languages (Burde et. al 2017). A conscious effort was made throughout the research process and in this brief to legitimize and engage with the narratives of forcibly displaced persons, with a sensitivity to sociocultural nuances and in the language that they speak—while being aware of the dual positionality of the researcher as an insider/outsider.

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11. Sitting with the girls in an IDP camp and walking with them to the nearby school premises to facilitate discussions and gain a better understanding of conditions on the way to, from and at school.

IV. Findings

Findings are presented across three levels: community, school, and institutional.

4.1. FINDINGS AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL: What are the aspirations, lived realities, and specific barriers related to educational and learning opportunities faced by children and youth who are forcibly displaced in the Sahel?

4.1.1. There is high but unmet demand for education among forcibly displaced communities

Education matters for forcibly displaced communities, as a priority and not an afterthought. In IDP and refugee settings, schooling provides structure and hope for children and families. The adoption of coping mechanisms to ensure the continuity of learning are common among forcibly displaced communities in the Central Sahel. During a focus group discussion with parents in Tillabéry, a father who had to flee his village with his family explained that one community in Kafounou, in the region of Tillabéry, crowdfunded 600,000 CFA francs (~U.S. $950) to maintain their children in school by hiring private teachers. Because of fear, the teachers ended up leaving.

Coping measures, adopted by communities, are not always effective at delivering better learning outcomes for children. However, the value of such measures must be understood beyond the quantifiable outcomes, highlighting the importance forcibly displaced communities place on education and challenging the assumption and narrative that these communities need to be convinced of its value. Most already are. Similarly, in an IDP camp near Tillabéry, parents who fled insecurity emphasized that the only silver lining of their situation was the possibility for their children to attend school once again. One mother stated, "We walked for 15 days, leaving behind a good life, and the only good thing about this move is the possibility of education for our children. All that we have left to give them [children] is education."

Global frameworks present robust understandings of "what works" in principle,[12] but this has not sufficiently translated into improved educational pathways for forcibly displaced children in the Sahel. Furthermore, current frameworks do not sufficiently capture the educational aspirations of forcibly displaced persons in the Sahel. According to education officials interviewed for this study, programs place a strong emphasis on sensitization efforts, often overlooking major structural barriers to the continuation of learning in this specific context. As one field education officer explained, "when we assume parents are the problem, then all the attention is placed on convincing them to send children to school. But we need to look at whether the education system is doing enough to keep these children in school and learning." Recognizing the demand for education among these communities could better inform policy responses, many of which assume an unwillingness to partake in education and focus on "sensitizing" parents on the value of education. While demand-side issues exist and may worsen with deteriorating conditions, especially for girls, addressing key barriers to education would better support communities that already see education as valuable. As interviews with communities from rural

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12. Global frameworks such as the Conceptual Framework for Education in Emergencies Data (UNESCO 2023) and the EiE Competency Framework (INEE 2020) and its Minimum Standards for Education.

The pursuit of education has high opportunity costs for forcibly displaced persons, even when free and accessible. . . . Providing relevant educational opportunities is crucial to maintaining consistent demand and engagement.

areas in Tillabéry underscore, families sometimes move, driven by the desire for both safety and schooling.

4.1.2. Education must prove its value to remain relevant for communities that face many competing urgent priorities

The pursuit of education has high opportunity costs for forcibly displaced persons, even when free and accessible. Although communities value education, the outcomes are not always clear to them. Providing relevant educational opportunities is crucial to maintaining consistent demand and engagement. A mother living in an IDP community in the Tadress neighborhood, in the outskirts of the city of Tillabéry, explained why she did not insist on her children attending school even though she understood the importance of education, "Most drop out by the 7th grade. We have nothing. Young boys go to look for work, and girls are married off around 15 or go to the capital city to work. It seems this school is not made for us or our children." Boys are expected to work to support family income, while girls often handle household chores and face a higher risk of child marriage in a context where this practice is already prevalent (Ajayi 2020; Brons 2021).

Challenging conditions shape educational aspirations (what people hope will happen in the future) and expectations (what people believe will happen in the future given current realities), often in gendered ways. Although aspirations for education are high, young people interviewed expressed doubt about their educational futures because of a lack of support from the state, and were discouraged by poor prospects, even for educated youth.

Studies have shown that unmet expectations and relative deprivation can fuel support for violence and extremist ideologies (Bhatia and Ghanem 2017). Similarly, a lack of expectation and the sense of having nothing to lose can drive support for extremist ideologies. Young men from Tillabéry mentioned that hopelessness has led many of their peers to cooperate with extremist groups. One 18-year-old, out of school for three years as a result of closures of schools, noted that "some are finding in these activities [with armed groups] what school failed to provide—a stable job, income, and sometimes a sense of purpose."

4.1.3. Forced displacement exacerbates harmful gender practices and reinforces factors that exclude girls from education, but also reshapes social norms and gender roles

In the region of Tillabéry, reported incidents of child protection incidents and sexual and gender-based violence have surged since 2020 when insecurity intensified in the region, and attacks against schools became more recurrent. Parents reported that girls face increased vulnerability to such violence on the way to and from school and within school premises in insecure areas. Reported cases of sexual and gender-based violence more than doubled between 2019 and 2021 (DREN 2022), likely underestimating the true extent. Interview participants report that stigma, lack of support, and fear of reprisal often prevent reporting.[13] Study participants perceived a resulting increase in the incidence of child marriage for girls. During the focus group discussions, mothers mentioned that by age 15, many girls are married off "for protection," or "because there are no other options or nothing to look forward to." This not only disrupts their education but also increases their risk of experiencing further violations. Families marry off their daughters because of economic distress and to form "protective alliances" (Moderan and Maiga 2022), fearing that girls left "idle" and out of school may face sexual violence and pregnancy, which would bring dishonor to the family. A focus group of forcibly displaced women highlighted that maintaining the dignity of the family is a primary concern. Insecurity, school-related gender-based violence, and harmful gender norms perpetuate a cycle of violating girls' rights, to, within, and through education.

Forced displacement disrupts families, livelihoods, and heightens gendered vulnerabilities, but it also provides an unlikely space for shifts in gender norms. With increasing insecurity and a lack of educational opportunities for girls, the regional child pro-

13. Interview with child protection officer from the regional office, August 2022.

tection office noted that "parents see marriage for their daughters as the best alternative." Displacement was also described as weakening social networks and support systems that provide a sense of cohesion, increasing risks for teenage girls and hindering their education. Gains and cultural shifts toward accepting girls' education can be undone in displacement contexts. At the same time, as communities move, there is a complex reconfiguration of gender roles, and this can, sometimes, provide a space for women (mothers in particular) to exercise new forms of agency in the absence of male figures in a predominantly patriarchal societal construct (see Text Box 1). These issues highlight the need to understand the gendered dynamics of insecurity and crises on education.

4.2. FINDINGS AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL: How does insecurity influence educational access, retention, and completion, especially for girls, who are affected by insecurity and violence?

4.2.1. Quality education—grounded in a multisectoral and multipronged approach—is particularly crucial to ensure the continuation of schooling and learning

Without quality and targeted efforts to meet the needs of children who have experienced forced displacement, education remains exclusionary. Quality encompasses both the education systems in host communities and principles of equity and inclusion. There are four key dimensions of inclusion in conflict contexts that programs could pay attention to: (1) availability (are educational institutions adequately equipped); (2) accessibility (are schools within reach, safe, and free of hidden costs?); (3) acceptability (are all children welcomed, and are curricula and teaching methods relevant? Are forcibly displaced children proficient in the language of instruction?); and (4) adaptability (do schools address psychosocial and emotional needs and adapt to specific needs?). See Figure 3.

For the majority of forcibly displaced children, there can be no continuity of learning if there is no quality. Children who have been through trauma need tailored support to get to school (*accessibility*), to stay in school (*acceptability*), and to learn in a supportive environment (*adaptability*). Neglecting quality affects retention and learning for both boys and girls. As a mother in a camp for displaced persons stated, "There are many reasons our daughters might give up. . . . schools must work hard to keep them engaged. Otherwise, it is easy not to stay." This study finds that the social discourse on education in forced displacement—its purpose, opportunities, and exclusions—can significantly impact demand. Evidence from this research points to the need to rethink education support during extended crises and armed conflict, while acknowledging the tensions education systems face between quality and access even before the onset of insecurity and forced displacement.

BOX 1.

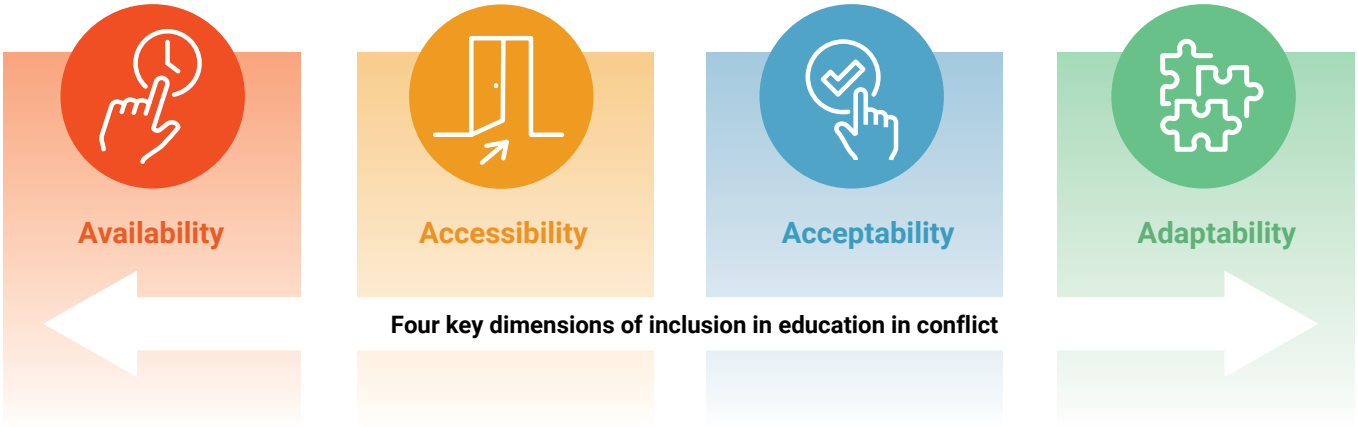
Gambi,* a leader and agent of change in her community—defying narratives of victimhood

Gambi is a woman in her 50s who stands as a leader in the Tadress community of displaced persons near the city of Tillabéry. She is one of the two women who are literate and has organized women from two villages (now living side-by-side in forced displacement) to create economic opportunities and engage with local and international nongovernmental organizations. Gambi keeps track of students' attendance, although she agrees that it is challenging to keep children in school due to financial difficulties and the need for children to work to support family income. She sees education as critical: *"When people come to our communities, they talk to me because I can write, and the other women trust me. Education is something powerful. Other parents too now see the value of educating girls, even more, now that we are displaced. All we have left to give them [children] is education. Without education, we walk in darkness."* Yet given the level of systemic exclusion, she explains that it is not surprising that her community sometimes questions whether education is within reach.

Most men have moved to urban centers and the camp is mostly composed of women, children, and elderly, with women increasingly in charge of community decision-making. Gambi's engagement problematizes and defies the narrative of victimhood that often paints the lives of women and girls who are forcibly displaced.

* Story shared with Gambi's permission and name changed for privacy.

FIGURE 3. The four dimensions of inclusion in education in conflict and crises settings



Source: Framework developed by the author.

A multisectoral approach integrating child protection, sanitation, nutrition, and mental health can mitigate major barriers to education for forcibly displaced girls. For example, limited access to water significantly affects girls' education and is exacerbated in displacement settings. Focus group discussions and interviews revealed that preadolescent and adolescent girls faced challenges managing their periods because of a lack of water at school and in makeshift tents. One girl aged 12 noted, "You carry your own water for that time of the month.... Many prefer to stay home rather than face their periods at school." This basic need being overlooked highlights how education that is simply provided still excludes girls. All the girls interviewed agreed that lack of water makes attending school even more difficult. The specific needs of adolescents, particularly girls, are often overlooked, further exacerbating exclusion.

Providing education—without grounding the response in quality and equity—often leaves forcibly displaced children behind, leading to early exit. Disengagement with schooling is the result of an education system that does not recognize or account for the structural barriers that forcibly displaced communities face.

4.2.2 Grounding the response to education within an understanding of community needs can lift some of the structural barriers that push forcibly displaced children out of education systems

Providing education—without grounding the response in quality and equity—often leaves forcibly displaced children behind, leading to early exit. Disengagement with schooling is the result of an education system that does not recognize or account for the structural barriers that forcibly displaced communities face. The resilience of displaced children is tested by a web of structural factors (Traoré and Moumouni 2022), creating a double loss, as children are failed by education systems both before and after displacement. Many displaced children reported being often too tired to learn because they had to work to help with family income or community needs. Rising violence disrupts farming and commerce, which in turn imperils food security and hinders education. Undernutrition, a major concern in displacement, affects learning and cognitive development (Ke and Ford-Jones 2015; *The Lancet* 2016; Weinreb et al. 2002). A student in the Tadress IDP camp noted, "You often have to tighten your stomach with water at recess and go back to class." For many forcibly displaced, schools do not seem conducive to success, highlighting the need for multisectoral approaches that address education beyond traditional measures.

4.2.3. Tailored psychosocial support for students and teachers could improve learning conditions for forcibly displaced children

Lack of socio-emotional and psychosocial support affects both teachers and students. Interviews reveal that many displaced children have witnessed atrocities, as schools are targeted by armed groups. Teachers, feeling ill-equipped to handle such situations, expressed a need for support to manage classrooms with children who underwent difficult situations. In some urban centers in Tillabéry, teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by the increase in demand for education, with the arrival of refugees and IDPs. One teacher noted, "It is one thing to support one or two children who have witnessed atrocities; it is another to

welcome 100 or more." Teachers in host communities shared that they receive limited training for providing psychosocial support and questioned whether it is their role to offer these services, given their already heavy workloads. This raises questions on other essential services such as child protection, which are direly underfunded.

There was also a gap between policies and their implementation, as evidenced by the mismatch between school officials' willingness to enroll displaced children and the lack of financial and human resources to support this. Despite policies mandating under-resourced schools welcome IDPs and refugees, few schools reported benefiting from additional resources to do so. Furthermore, teachers in the Liptako-Gourma, facing real threats, reported a pervasive fear after attacks on their colleagues—citing that in the villages of Moliya, Thèm near Anzourou and Ziba, as well as near Téra, many teachers had been targeted and killed. Teachers are seen as key representatives of the state, since many of the village chiefs have been compelled to leave.

4.2.4. Poorly managed transitions between forced displacement and resettlement undermine the continuation of learning

Lack of support in ensuring the transition between displacement and resettlement, both into camps or within host families, undermines school retention and the continuation of learning. In an IDP camp near the city of Tillabéry, a nearby primary school was deemed "inaccessible" by parents and children. A parent noted, "Forcibly displaced children are tested and placed in classrooms without adequate support or remedial classes to account for lost learning time. Many come without previous school records." An official from the regional office of education of Tillabéry reported that children who missed years of schooling as a result of school closures struggle to catch up, often facing arbitrary class assignments that demoralize them. A 12-year-old shared, "I should have been in CM1 (fifth grade) today, and now I am in the same class level as my second junior sibling in second grade, and that is discouraging."

Education systems have yet to effectively address these learning gaps, leading to low retention and reentry, which means that formal learning stops altogether. There are even greater difficulties in lower and upper secondary schools. In the Tadress IDP community, hosting over 200 young people, only two (a boy and a girl) were reported to have transitioned from primary to lower secondary school in four years by moving to another town, since there was no lower secondary school in the vicinity of the IDP camp. Most education programs were said to focus on entry and reentry for children of primary-school age—with little attention to those that need to transition into the lower and upper secondary levels.

Education remains largely inaccessible for forcibly displaced children, with high dropout rates and low retention, even after moving to a safer place. In Tillabéry, nearly four in five displaced students drop out and join a growing number of out-of-school children (DREN 2022). This trend has been confirmed by a 2021–2022 relocation program, implemented by the regional education office, where only 19% of girls and 17.7% of boys were reassigned to classrooms. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the security crisis has worsened dropout rates by the fifth grade, with few internally displaced students able to return to school (Ndabananiye et al. 2021).

4.3. FINDINGS AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL: How could policies and programs better support educational access and retention for children who are forcibly displaced by conflict and insecurity?

4.3.1. Children forcibly on the move become "invisible," and the lack of adequate disaggregated data makes it difficult to quantify educational experiences and needs

The educational experiences of internally displaced children are not fully understood or documented, given that prolonged and multiple displacement are often overlooked by conventional data. Children who are internally displaced are often forgotten and unaccounted for (Machel 1996; Mooney and French 2016; UNICEF 2019), since they often become "absorbed" within the larger population. Once children are resettled within host communities or families, they are often rendered invisible in both data and research. For example, while there is aggregate data on out-of-school children in conflict-affected settings, the proportion of out-of-school children among IDPs is often unknown. In Niger, the national strategy on education in emergencies underscores that internally displaced students can join schools in their host communities—even without a birth certificate. Children with disabilities, some with injuries sustained from conflict, face even greater vulnerability in forced displacement.

A major challenge is that despite being granted protection and the right to education during displacement, return, resettlement, and reintegration, there is no legally binding instrument or treaty that universally applies to IDPs (Adeola 2020; Droege 2008; ICRC 2018; IDMC 2022). Current political frameworks such as the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) address specific needs of refugees, but do not explicitly focus on the needs of internally displaced students (UNICEF 2019)—although the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement explicitly underscore the right to education for children and training for youth (GP20 2018; OCHA 2004). As such, their specific education needs are unaccounted for.

Education remains largely inaccessible for forcibly displaced children, with high dropout rates and low retention, even after moving to a safer place. In Tillabéry, nearly four in five displaced students drop out and join a growing number of out-of-school children.

4.3.2. Gender-responsive early warning systems can aid in prevention, as attacks on girls' education often foretell attacks and threats of attacks against school and forced displacement

Restrictions on girls' education often happen well before physical attacks against schools. Families reported that it is not uncommon for armed groups to warn communities to keep girls out of classrooms, and families may withdraw girls from school when they hear of attacks in nearby villages. As such, early warning systems that are gender-responsive and attuned to changes in the discourse on girls' education could inform prevention efforts. The study found that in insecure areas, reversal of gains in girls' education at the community or village level were often linked to general malaise or fear about sending girls to school, or, at worst, direct threats against girls' education. Insecurity and poor quality education can interact with enduring sociocultural factors to cement a perception that schooling is not for girls.

Furthermore, school closures often signal impending attacks on villages, which may result in forced displacement. In parts of Tillabéry region, schools were closed for three years before populations were forced to flee because of threats from armed groups. An official from the Tillabéry mayor's office noted that these armed groups see schools as ideological battlegrounds. Given that one of the main aims of armed terrorist groups is the physical erasure of schools, they target education through threats and violence against teachers, students, and arson of schools. A better understanding of the dynamics around attacks against education and their incorporation in early warning systems could have implications for monitoring systems and efforts to prevent such attacks.

4.3.3. There is a need to understand what alternative learning programs deliver and how

Various alternative education programs are being implemented in the region, mainly by nongovernmental organizations and governments. In the three Sahel countries, this study identified three types of such programs: (1) programs linked to existing education initiatives, such as financial and in-kind incentives; (2) stand-alone programs, in parallel to national systems, such as community-based homeschooling, accelerated education, and blended learning (e.g., radio instruction); and (3) hybrid programs that support displaced children, such as nonformal, student-centered learning and "bridge" or passerelle programs that prepare children for mainstream schools.

While these programs provide learning opportunities, they leave out many students and often lack gender responsiveness. The effectiveness of these programs in fragile and insecure contexts requires more robust evidence (Burde et al. 2023). Innovative approaches can temporarily improve education access in insecure areas but do not guarantee sustained learning. There are positive examples, such as the three functional cluster schools in Ouallam, in the region of Tillabéry, where the collaboration of various partners in education, water and sanitation, and feeding programs seems to be a success factor.[14] However, with the recent coup, many international partners have stopped operating altogether.

Field education officers and teachers interviewed reported that, in insecure areas, while distance learning opportunities have the potential to improve educational access and learning they can expose teachers and students. Ongoing distance learning programs by local and international nongovernmental organizations in areas with closed schools (and where communities have been unable to move) often serve few students and operate discreetly to protect against reprisals.[15] In four communities in Torodi and Téra, local teachers conduct classes in secrecy to minimize risks. Much analysis of distance learning focuses on inequality and hardware interventions (UNICEF 2021) and assumes that distance learning is safe or uncontested—a misconception in the Central Sahel.

14. Interviews with two officials at the regional office of education, August 2022.
15. With the growing insecurity, some families cannot leave their communities even though schools remain closed: children face a deprivation in learning, which current programs do not address.

V. Recommendations

The following five policy recommendations could help address the issue of learning on the move for children in the Central Sahel, whether in cluster schools, host community schools, or schools reopening in their home communities. The overarching objective is to focus on ensuring the continuation of learning: each school that reopens in a safe learning environment and every learning space provided can be a window of opportunity for displaced children. The recommendations have implications for policy, planning, and practices of education in crises settings, and proposes a framework to rethink these policies through the ABCDE principles (adaptation and autonomy, behavior and belonging, context, data and evidence, and expectations and engagement): (a) adopting an iterative, evidence-based, multipronged approach; (b) understanding behavior and societal norms in forced displacement; (c) considering context and communities; (d) addressing data visibility and evidence; and (e) aligning expectations and aspirations. See Figure 4.

5.1. APPROACH: Policies must adopt an approach that is multisectoral, multipronged, and gender responsive

In conflict-affected areas, integrating child protection with education and strengthening connections between education, health, and social services are crucial. The response to education in emergencies should account for all areas that forcibly displaced communities have identified as their needs: food, water, education, and health (OCHA 2022b). The experiences of girls carrying water during their menstrual cycle and children learning while hungry underscore how failing to provide water or food or psychosocial support in schools sets children up for a premature exit from schools. For girls, a gender-responsive approach would link education with child protection and the prevention of gender-based violence, both of which are underfunded.

This multipronged approach requires better equipping teachers with training and tools to address the needs of displaced children. Teachers in crisis settings often serve as educators, psychologists, and first responders without additional training and support, in a context where many other services have collapsed. Addressing this need is particularly important in schools with large numbers of internally displaced children. As one teacher in Tillabéry noted, "You are in class, and someone comes with firearms and burns the school. This affects you for a lifetime." Research shows that well-supported teachers can significantly improve learning experiences for children (INEE 2020). Policymakers and practitioners, based at the regional level, emphasize the need for both training and monetary incentives to improve teacher retention.

5.2. BEHAVIOR AND NORMS: Policy interventions need to better understand how the reconfiguration of gender norms shapes educational aspirations

In the Sahel, most forcibly displaced people are women and children. Conflict creates a disproportionately higher proportion of female-headed households, many of whom are led by widows or functional widows who face greater vulnerability to poverty (Buvinić, Gupta, and Shemyakina 2014; Driey 2021). Understanding these gender dynamics is crucial for mitigating

FIGURE 4. Policy recommendations: Rethinking the ABCDE of education policy, planning, implementation, and practices in crises

negative impacts and leveraging opportunities for women's leadership in the absence of men. Children in female-headed households face heightened vulnerabilities, compounded by discrimination faced by their mothers' status as widows (Onofrio 2021; Van de Walle 2013).

Few analyses or programs consider the shift and reconfiguration of gender norms and roles during forced displacement. Women often become decisionmakers in their communities, a change that could influence educational aspirations, especially for girls. As women take on visible leadership roles, perceptions of their capabilities shift (Alidou 2008). Supporting women's leadership within forcibly displaced communities and providing economic opportunities can encourage parents to educate daughters because they can see what is possible when women are given an opportunity to exercise agency. Furthermore, economically secure mothers better support their children's education. With adequate support, women (like Gambi) and girls—who are often disadvantaged within households, communities, and host communities—can be agents of positive change.

5.3. Context and communities: Policy needs to better account for the wider context and communities' needs, including vulnerabilities faced by parents and host families or communities

Schools are not an island but are connected to the broader socio-economic and cultural dynamics of the families they serve. Existing literature on what shapes the demand for schooling emphasizes parents' reluctance to engage with formal education for socio-economic and cultural reasons. However, for marginalized, forcibly displaced communities, disengagement with formal education is partly driven by structural challenges (insecure resettlement, high dropout rates, low learning, and lack of psychosocial support) and by the failure of programs to provide support to both displaced and host families. Host families bear significant burdens in welcoming IDPs (UNHCR 2022g).[16] Studies in displacement contexts, including Kenya and Somalia, show that programs that reduce financial barriers for displaced children in female-headed households can help sustain learning, especially for girls, who are often the first to leave school when families face financial stress (UNICEF 2021).

Policies should better consider the needs of host schools and communities, recognizing that forcibly displaced children are integrated into existing school systems with their own challenges. Many policies fall short as a result of a lack of resources (financial and human) for host schools and communities. For example, school directors in the region of Tillabéry emphasized that no amount of "sensitization" about hosting IDPs or refugees could replace the need for additional resources and financial, human, and logistical support, as capacity is limited. In some areas inaccessible to teachers, some nongovernmental organizations are piloting programs to support *Makarantas* or Qur'anic schools in providing literacy and numeracy and thus expanding the range of educational spaces available for displaced children. Opportunities exist to deepen evidence and understanding the fragmentation and possible linkages of traditional and modern education systems.

5.4. Data and evidence: It is essential to better document the educational experiences of internally displaced children

Educational outcomes and experiences of internally displaced children need to be tracked better. These children are often listed in aggregate statistics, making it difficult to understanding how their educational trajectory has been disrupted. Who gets to reenroll after education interruption, who stays in school, and why, are often subject to a web of privileges and conditions that are social, political, gendered, and at times racial, and that confer unequal education opportunities. Making these children more visible in administrative data could provide further insights into education gaps and guide more inclusive policies and programs for both forcibly displaced children and their host communities.

Furthermore, the dearth of evidence on what works to deliver learning in areas affected by insecurity and crises in the Sahel underscores the need for more rigorous studies on existing programs, like blended learning through low-tech solutions and radio, as well as accelerated learning. Evidence from studies in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso shows that accelerated learning programs can address the needs of children who have never enrolled, are over the age for year one, or have dropped out (Baba-Moussa 2020; Hima 2021). Outside of the forced displacement context, a second-chance program had some success in providing out-of-school children with literacy and numeracy skills before transitioning them into conventional or vocational schools. Such programs could provide good practice in offering learning opportunities to the growing number of out-of-school children caused by insecurity and forced displacement.

16. In Burkina Faso, for instance, 90% of IDPs live with host families (UNHCR 2022g).

Educational outcomes and experiences of internally displaced children need to be tracked better. These children are often listed in aggregate statistics, making it difficult to understanding how their educational trajectory has been disrupted. Who gets to reenroll after education interruption, who stays in school, and why.

5.5. Expectations and aspirations: Policies that consider the expectations and aspirations of girls and boys, and young men and women, can be more effective and provide incentive and better support for continued learning

An ecosystem approach is needed that integrates and legitimizes a variety of educational opportunities—formal, nonformal, traditional, and vocational—in forced displacement contexts. Policies and tailored interventions must better account for educational aspirations and expectations of different age groups. For instance, there is a major gap in addressing the needs of children and teenagers who have been out of the classroom for years. Many young people (aged 17–26) interviewed in Tillabéry had been out of school as a result of forced displacement expressed a lack of interest in returning to formal schooling and pointed to the need to expand the definition of education beyond schooling and to provide for alternative skills-based and vocational training opportunities.

Relevant vocational and skills-based opportunities linked to local market demands and needs could provide an alternative avenue and employment opportunities for young people who have faced prolonged interruption in learning in formal schooling and who may be vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. Yacine, a 20-year-old man warned, "When you destroy education, you prepare us to become thieves or worse. Without an alternative, it is easy to join armed groups." Kalifa, a 19-year-old, added, "Without any opportunity, the heart darkens." Studies find that unmet expectations and relative deprivation could be a driver of support for violence and recruitment into armed groups (Abatan and Sangaré 2021; Bhatia and Ghanem 2017). Moreover, the expansion of education without adequate economic opportunities could be a catalyst for violence if not accompanied by measures to prevent political violence, socio-economic inequality, and inequitable resource allocation (Danzell, et al. 2018).

Expanding learning opportunities beyond primary education into the teenage years could reshape educational aspirations and expectations. Current programs often solely focus on the primary level, neglecting the lower and upper secondary education that is crucial for the adolescent years, when girls are vulnerable to dropping out and child marriage and young men to recruitment into armed groups. Many displaced students expressed high educational aspirations but doubted their prospects because of the multiple challenges they faced and lack of appropriate support. Girls often cited that beyond 15 years of age, education seems out of reach, given their current conditions. Addressing these gaps with targeted support can shift expectations about educational success and possibilities.

VI. Conclusion

This policy brief engages with one of the most fundamental deprivations that children and young people face in regions affected by conflict and violence: the denial of access to education and learning. Despite concerted efforts and global commitments, including the landmark resolution on education in armed conflict, the continuation of learning is not possible for millions of children who are forcibly displaced. Warsan Shire (2022) captures this plight: "No one leaves home unless home chases you, fire under feet. . . . You only leave home when home won't let you stay."

Countries in the Sahel are facing a severe crisis of education, with attacks on teachers, students, and Qur'anic teachers, particularly in the Liptako-Gourma area. Extremist groups target schools to undermine formal education, challenging its values and the possibilities it offers women and girls. Insecurity has displaced millions and interrupted learning and education for nearly 2 million children in the Central Sahel (EiEWG 2022; GCPEA 2020). Conflict disrupts learning for all children, girls and boys alike, yet the deliberate disruption of education in conflict settings is often gendered, making it necessary to tease out the ways in which being out of school exacerbates preexisting gender inequalities and to critically engage with how conflict intersects with gender to restrict access to education. Crises and forced displacement not only worsen gender inequalities in education but also create a reconfiguration of gender norms within communities. When poor quality education combines with existing socio-cultural factors, this situation not only perpetuates gender disparities but also cements the belief that schooling is useless. Further, interruption of education and learning in conflict contexts, where schools are often targets of violence, has adverse psychological and cognitive effects on both students and teachers, undermining educational outcomes.

The challenges in the Sahel—low educational outcomes, gender disparities, a rapidly growing population, and overlapping crises—test the region's ability to deliver education and threaten development prospects. This brief highlights the need for policies, planning, and practices that address the urgent educational crisis while developing long-term solutions. The protracted nature of the crisis demands an approach that integrates humanitarian responses and development planning to ensure continued learning. Understanding structural issues faced by forcibly displaced girls and boys, especially those internally displaced and often invisible in conventional data, is essential.

What is at stake when conflict and violence rage are not only the consequences of devastation in the present but also a legacy of loss with lasting consequences on education and life opportunities. This brief raises further questions on the need for evidence in education in crises settings in the Sahel and hopes to bring a useful contribution on how to, in the words of a Nigerien teacher, "Do everything to keep children learning even if under a tree in the chief's compound."

APPENDIX A
Methodology

This study draws from data collection undertaken from July to December 2022, as well as extensive fieldwork in Niger in the regions of Tillabéry and Niamey from July to September 2022. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research, and was completed in multiple stages.

STAGE 1. Secondary research and data collection. In the first stage, secondary research was conducted, and data were collected from various institutions in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger at the national, local, and rural levels.

STAGE 2. Interviews were conducted in the region of Tillabéry and Niamey in Niger with forcibly displaced teachers, policymakers, and key stakeholders. As schools were closed, the fieldwork engaged with children and youth who were forcibly displaced and some who were part of host communities.

STAGE 3. Interviews with researchers working in the field of education in emergencies were further conducted to discuss some of the early findings and draw from emerging research in the field.

Table A.1 provides more detail on research questions, methods, sources, and participants.

TABLE A.1. Research design

RESEARCH QUESTION	EVIDENCE	METHOD(S)	SOURCE(S)/ PARTICIPANT(S)	SETTING	TIMING (2022)
Hoes does insecurity affect the educational trajectories of children in conflict?	Access rates in primary schools	Document and metadata review	Country reports, UNESCO/ UNICEF/WB data and data from Ministries of education	Secondary search (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger)	July–August
	Understanding how access is impacted in parts of Niger	Focus group discussions (FGDs)	Primary and secondary school students (grades 4 to 6) Youth in the region of Tillabéry	FGDs with 25 students of primary-school age in the region of Tillabéry FGDs with 25 out-of-school children of primary-school age in the region of Tillabéry FGDs with 25 youth (aged 15–23) from the region of Tillabéry	August
	Understanding aspirations of forcibly displaced communities on education	Focus group discussions	Parents who are forcibly displaced Primary and secondary school students who are forcibly displaced	FGDs with 12 women from the Tadress community in the outskirts of the city of Tillabéry FGDs with 5 men from the Tadress community FGDs with 10 girls of primary-school age from the Tadress community FGDs with 5 girls of secondary school age from the Tadress community FGDs with 6 representatives of the parent-teacher association of Tillabéry	August
	Understanding how conflict affect/disrupt educational systems	1-on-1 interviews	Officers at the Ministry of Education and the regional office of education as well as the regional office of the Ministry of Child Protection and Gender	Regional education office of Tillabéry • Interview with the director of the regional office • Interview with the statistics officer Regional child protection office of Tillabéry • Interview with the regional director of child protection and gender • Interview with the gender officer at the regional office of the Ministry of gender	End of July–August
		1-on-1 interviews	Primary and secondary school directors, teachers, and students	Interviews with 5 primary-school directors in Tillabéry Interviews with 5 representatives of the parent-teacher association	August

TABLE A.1, *continued*

RESEARCH QUESTION	EVIDENCE	METHOD(S)	SOURCE(S)/ PARTICIPANT(S)	SETTING	TIMING (2022)
What are the aspirations, lived realities, and barriers related to educational and learning opportunities faced by girls and young women who are forcibly displaced?	Understanding how conflict affect learning environment and outcomes for girls	1-on-1 interviews	School director and teachers	Regional education office of Tillabéry	August
		1-on-1 interviews	Primary-school students including girls and boys (grades 4 to 6)		August
		FGIs	Primary-school girls (aged 10–15)	FGDs with 18 out-of-school and schooled girls of primary and secondary school age in the region of Tillabéry	August
	Understanding structural issues that affect girls and boys differently	1-on-1 interviews	School director, teachers, regional district officers	Regional education office of Tillabéry	End of July–August
		1-on-1 interviews	Parents	Regional education office of Tillabéry	End of July–August
		FGDs	Families	3 families in Tillabéry and 2 displaced families in Niamey	August
How can policies and programs better support educational access and retention for children who are forcibly displaced by conflict and insecurity?	Administrative data on the evolution of closures of schools over the last few years	Document analysis		District-level and regional documents	End of July
	Perspectives of policymakers on current policies	1-on-1 interviews	Director of Primary Education, State Ministry of Education, civil society organization	State-level actors	August
	Perfectives from humanitarian actors	1-on-1 interviews	U.N. agencies, international and local civil society organizations in Tillabéry and Niamey	Interviews with Plan International: child protection officer (1), education officer (1), gender experts (2), program officer working in the community of Say (2), humanitarian affairs officer (1) Interviews with Save the Children (3); World Vision in Tillabéry (2) and Niamey (2)	August
	Workshop with security and defense forces trained in child protection	Workshop		Security and defense forces who intervene in Tillabéry (6) and received training in child protection and on the Safe Schools concept	August

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HALIMATOU HIMA currently works with the World Bank's Fragility, Conflict and Violence (FCV) Group, covering Coastal West African countries. Her interests lie at the intersection of policy, research, and practice, with an expertise in education, notably in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, economic development, and institution-building. As minister counselor at the Permanent Mission of Niger to the United Nations (2020–2021), she worked on Security Council affairs including children and armed conflict, humanitarian issues, women, peace and security, and multilateral affairs with nongovernmental organizations and U.N. agencies, and was the principal negotiator on the landmark Security Council resolution 2601 (2021) on the protection of education in armed conflict.

Halimatou has worked extensively in the social and economic development sectors in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote D'Ivoire, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Togo, among other contexts, and was part of the World Bank's Global Delivery Initiative, where she co-authored multisectoral publications on education, water and sanitation, and agriculture. She previously worked as a community organizer and child protection officer and contributed to the response to the refugee and IDP crises in the Central Sahel. She has published on education, socio-economic inequalities, critical gender analysis, and public sector reforms. As part of the 2018–2020 Next Einstein Forum, she organized the first series of Africa Science Week in Niger, impacting thousands of Nigerien students and early career researchers. She has also consulted with UNICEF, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), and BRAC Sierra Leone.

Halimatou grew up in Arlit, in northern Niger. She holds a Ph.D. in Development Studies from the University of Cambridge, an M.A. in Public Policy from Harvard University, and a B.A. in International Relations, Economics, and Africana Studies from Wellesley College. Halimatou speaks Hausa, Zarma, English, and French and is learning Portuguese.

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