Regional Overview and Education Trends

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

Escalating conflicts intensify large-scale forced displacement

The West and Central Africa (WCA) region currently hosts over 13 million persons of concern to UNHCR, including 1.6 million refugees and 7.6 million internally displaced people. The region counts 5.5 million forcibly displaced children (refugees and IDPs).

The main conflicts affecting the region – in central Sahel, the Central African Republic, the Lake Chad Basin and North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon – show no signs of abating and continue driving up humanitarian needs while humanitarian access remains a recurring challenge.

During the past year, improving the protection environment for all displaced populations was a top operational priority, including child protection; prevention of gender-based violence and assistance to survivors; education and livelihoods; and strengthening community-based protection systems to reinforce self-reliance and social cohesion. Despite this, the number of children in need of humanitarian assistance has multiplied, as has the share of unmet needs.

57 million children, adolescents and youth are barred from attending school in the region, representing a quarter of the 236 million out-of-school worldwide\(^2\). This figure is all the more alarming when considering that it is twice the region’s share of the global population of children of the corresponding age (6 to 18 years old – 12.05 per cent)\(^3\). In Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger more than half of all children and adolescents do not have access to education.

Many countries in the region are facing increased insecurity, with cross-border spillover of conflicts and intercommunal violence having a major impact on the protection of children and youth, including on their access to education and vocational training. By the end of the 2021-2022 school year, over 12,400 schools were closed in eight countries of the region, either because they are a direct target of attacks by Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) or because teachers have fled leaving no-one to teach, or because parents are too frightened to send their children to school or are themselves in a process of repeated forced displacement to safer areas\(^4\). The spread and intensification of conflict is having an increasingly devastating effect on access and continuity of learning for all children, and particularly for forcibly displaced children\(^5\).

When they do have access to education, refugee children often learn in overcrowded and under-resourced environments (lack of infrastructure, learning materials, sanitation facilities, etc.). Data on teachers is fragmentary but shows that teacher/pupil ratios in refugee-hosting schools are well above recommended ratios, which has a negative impact on both teaching and learning experiences. In addition, the refugee or community teachers who make up most of the workforce in these schools are often inadequately supported, trained and paid. There are few opportunities for them to gain recognition of qualifications obtained in their country of origin and/or to access national qualifications that would allow them to be included in the national education system of their asylum country.

The further refugees progress through the education system, the higher the barriers become, as evidenced by the significant drop in enrolment rates between primary and secondary and between secondary and tertiary education (see next page).

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\(^2\) UNESCO GEMR and UIS (2022): [https://education-estimates.org/](https://education-estimates.org/)

\(^3\) UNPD/DESA (July 2022), Population Estimates 2022: [https://population.un.org/wpp/](https://population.un.org/wpp/)

\(^4\) Education Under Attack in West and Central Africa: 2022 Update.

\(^5\) See page 4 for links to country dashboards which show that refugee education access rates at all levels are consistently lower than national access rates.
Welcoming but woefully under-resourced national education systems to make refugee inclusion an effective and sustainable reality

Data from 15 countries\(^6\) in WCA illustrates how refugee children and youth are falling behind their non-refugee peers when it comes to access to an inclusive quality education. Across the region, UNHCR is supporting the inclusion of refugees in national education systems from the onset of an emergency refugee inflow through protracted displacement situations and in longer-term development planning. Among other things, this requires more support for teacher training and salaries, new infrastructure, adequate and relevant learning materials, safe transport to and from schools, access to examinations and certification, and closing the digital divide affecting refugees.

In the 2021-2022 school year, according to data collected by UNHCR Operations, 216,785 refugees attended school across the region from pre-primary to secondary (out of a total population of 706,597 refugees aged 3 to 18). Girls represent almost 49 per cent of the refugee school population, which can be considered a major achievement in a region where girls are largely discriminated against in terms of access to education.

Average refugee gross enrolment rates (GER)\(^7\) for the region stand at 58 per cent for primary level, 19 per cent for secondary level, and only 1.6 per cent for tertiary level. These figures represent a slight increase over the previous school year for the secondary and tertiary levels (which were respectively at 15 per cent and 1.2 per cent), while primary enrolment is down by one point (from 59 to 58 per cent).

Yet, challenges remain stark as 66 per cent of refugee children of primary and secondary school-age (i.e., 381,259 children) did not attend school during the past year. This represents an increase from the previous school year, when the out-of-school rate was 60 per cent. This can be explained not only by the increase in the number of new refugees in the region (+14 per cent between June 2021 and June 2022) who have not yet been able to return to school, but also by the growing insecurity that has led to the closure of many schools, secondary displacement, and consequent school dropouts in several countries in the region.

In addition, access rates to education for refugees in the region remain significantly lower than the global access rates, which stand at 68% for primary, 37% for secondary, and 6% for higher education respectively\(^8\).

Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and Niger are the countries with the lowest enrolment rates (primary and secondary levels combined), while Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, and Ghana\(^9\) are the countries with the highest ones. The average regional net enrolment rate (NER)\(^10\) is significantly lower than the average regional GER (28 per cent against 43 per cent), indicating a large proportion of over-age children in the classrooms.

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\(^6\) Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Togo.

\(^7\) The gross enrolment rate (GER) is the total enrolment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the official age group corresponding to this level of education. The GER can exceed 100% because of early or late entry and/or grade repetition (UNESCOUIS).

\(^8\) UNHCR Education Report 2022: All Inclusive, The Campaign for Refugee Education. Global enrolment rates refer to the 2020-2021 school year.

\(^9\) In some of these countries (Benin, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana), enrolment data is not available for the entire school-age refugee population, which may overestimate enrolment rates. Some of these data have therefore been excluded from the calculation of regional percentages.

\(^10\) The net enrolment rate (NER) is the total number of students in the theoretical age group for a given level of education enrolled in that level, expressed as a percentage of the total population in that age group.
Access the full education data dashboard for the West and Central Africa region for the 2021-2022 school year here.

Also access the national\(^{11}\) and sub-regional dashboards\(^{12}\) by clicking on the maps below:

380,000+ refugee children of primary and secondary school-age are out-of-school in West and Central Africa.

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\(^{11}\) National dashboards are available for countries with sufficient reliable and comprehensive data.

\(^{12}\) Sub-regional dashboards are available for the central Sahel countries and for the ECOWAS countries.
UNHCR’s Education Response

Supporting refugees’ access to safe and quality education and promoting continuity of learning for all

During the 2021-2022 school year, UNHCR provided ongoing support to Ministries of Education in the region to facilitate the inclusion of forcibly displaced children and youth in national education systems, at all school levels, to enable them to have equitable access to safe and quality education in both emergency and protracted displacement situations.

Over the entire school year, a total of 255,000 children and youth benefitted from UNHCR education support (compared to 201,000 the previous year), including 178,500 refugees, 58,650 IDPs and 17,850 host community members.

To facilitate this inclusion in national education systems, UNHCR and its partners undertook activities throughout the school year to strengthen the reception capacity, safety, and quality of learning environments in schools hosting refugee, IDP and host community children:

- **351 classrooms** were built or rehabilitated in 8 countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Ghana, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria), allowing thousands of refugee, internally displaced and host community children to access safer and better equipped school environments in which improved quality education can be delivered.

- **532 schools** in 9 countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Gambia, Liberia, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria) were supported with Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) interventions (such as water points, latrines, hygiene committees, etc.) enabling schools to be safer while increasing access and retention of children and teachers.

- **4,590 teachers** were trained on pedagogical approaches to education in emergencies and displacement, but also on child protection, and psychosocial support in 8 countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Liberia, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria) to improve the reception and care of children, with the aim of improving their retention in school as well as their learning outcomes.

- **111,781 school kits** were distributed to children in 11 countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal) and **12,282 children** were assisted with cash-based interventions in 10 countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo), with the aim of improving access to education for the most vulnerable children and youth.

- **1,053 refugee students** received higher education scholarships in 13 countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo) to support their university or vocational studies, including through in-country university enrolment, UNHCR tertiary scholarship programme (**626 DAFI scholars**), technical and vocational education and training, connected higher education, and third country scholarships.
HIGHLIGHTS OF UNHCR EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS IN THE 2021-2022 SCHOOL YEAR

Click on each image to access the full monthly newsletter featuring UNHCR’s education interventions in the region.
UNHCR is grateful for the support of donors who contributed to its education response in the West and Central Africa region with unearmarked and earmarked funds:

And private donors including Australia, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, Spain, and the United States.

Refugee teacher giving an outdoor class to Sudanese children in a refugee camp in eastern Chad. ©UNHCR/Colin Delfosse

CONTACTS

Charlotte Berquin, Education Officer, berquin@unhcr.org
UNHCR Regional Bureau for West and Central Africa, Protection Service

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