

3rd General Assembly of the Sahel Alliance

4th April 2022, Madrid

Declaration on Education and Youth in the Sahel

The Sahel is one of the youngest regions in the world with some 50 million young people under the age of 30, who represent almost 65% of the population and are a driver of social development and sustainable growth. The fast demographic expansion of the region only reinforces the necessity of investing in youth, particularly through education and vocational training, as a key factor for prosperity, peace and stability. Indeed, in a region which is plagued by conflict and insecurity, the feeling of exclusion and disillusionment of the youth in the face of a lack of economic and social integration opportunities constitutes a breeding ground for the expansion of terrorist groups and actors perpetrating acts of violence. In this context, the members of the Sahel Alliance recognise the urgent need to develop young people's cognitive, transferable and vocational skills to ensure their autonomy, their ability to exercise their rights and to develop their employability or capacity for self-employment, in order to guarantee an inclusive development and to fight against the feeling of exclusion and the lack of confidence in public institutions and policies.

Although significant progress in school enrolment has been made in recent years, major efforts remain to be undertaken on the education front, with a very low youth literacy rate in the Sahel: barely more than one in two youths (57%), compared to 75% globally in sub-Saharan Africa¹. Universal access to education – including basic education - remains a challenge: rapid population growth remains a constraint on the system's ability to meet growing demand, with more than 40% of primary school-age children not in school. The place of residence and socio-economic background of young people are particularly discriminating factors of exclusion, as are gender (less than 50% of women are literate) and disability. In addition, school closures in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating conflicts and security risks jeopardise the continuity of children's schooling. Lastly, Sahelian youths suffer from socio-economic exclusion and are severely affected by unemployment and underemployment. Around 44% of young people in the G5 Sahel countries are neither in school nor active, two thirds of them are women and the majority live in rural areas. Therefore, vocational training to ensure the employability of young people and their inclusion in the formal economy remains a key challenge.

Recognising the importance of providing opportunities for the Sahelian youth, the Sahel Alliance members have, since the launch of the initiative in July 2017, dedicated a permanent coordination group to youth education and employability. This group supports the G5 Sahel countries in pursuing three objectives: (i) to generalise the development of basic skills, (ii) to massively develop youth training and (iii) to promote youth employment, particularly for the most vulnerable. The G5 Sahel member states also all have a policy document or strategic framework for youth, with priority sectors being education, vocational training, health, participation in public life, employment and entrepreneurship.

In this regard, the Sahel Alliance members support the recommendations of the **new Sahel Education White Paper**, launched by the World Bank and the G5 Sahel Heads of State in

¹ISU, UNESCO [UIL launches a study on literacy in the Sahel region](https://www.unesco.org/en/uis/2019/04/uis-launches-a-study-on-literacy-in-the-sahel-region) | UIL ([unesco.org](https://www.unesco.org))

December 2021 in Nouakchott, which documents the obstacles encountered at the level of schools, education systems and socio-cultural environments that hamper the schooling and learning of many children. Sahel Alliance members particularly emphasise the need to structure their interventions around the three main sets of proposed transformative actions: i) reducing the lack of learning opportunities as a prerequisite for sustainable growth and development; ii) increasing girls' enrolment across all levels of education and break the intergenerational cycle of low human capital; iii) increasing adult literacy rates, with a focus on young women, to improve labour productivity and empowerment by shoring up employment-oriented vocational training. It is also about promoting a fairer allocation of resources to the most disadvantaged areas, especially rural areas. Lastly, policies that are more sensitive to issues of inequality, particularly gender inequality, are especially needed.

In order to achieve these objectives, it is critical that the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel and the conflicts affecting the region be better taken into account in the educational policy response. Indeed, the multiple crises facing the Sahelian countries (physical and food insecurity, massive population displacements, health crisis, economic slowdown, lack of financial means, lack of confidence of the populations in the institutions) interrupt or restrict the educational trajectories of young Sahelians. The fragility of individuals, social groups and institutions is a determining factor in the feeling of exclusion, which increases the risk of conflict. In this context, it is essential to preserve the gains achieved and limit the impact of crises on education systems and the schooling of children, particularly girls. Therefore, the Sahel Alliance members also fully support the recommendations of the "**Education in Emergency Contexts in the Sahel**" workshop, organised in September 2021 by the Sahel Alliance coordination group dedicated to youth education and employability, and recognise the need to adapt their provision of education projects and programmes to crisis contexts and regional fragilities.

In light of these observations, the Sahel Alliance members call for:

- **Increased mobilisation in the education and vocational training sector.** Only 8,5% of the projects in execution or under appraisal in the Sahel Alliance portfolio as of 31/12/2021 concern these sectors. The shortcomings noted in terms of infrastructure, equipment, educational materials and human support call for massive investment, not only in education systems (including the quality of teaching and teachers' skills) but also in developing young people's professional skills to meet the needs of the job market, in order to ensure their socio-economic integration and autonomy.
- **Greater consideration of the education and vocational training sector in the budgetary trade-offs of the G5 Sahel countries, in accordance with the Nouakchott Declaration on Education.** With around 3% of the region's GDP devoted to the education sector, the level of public spending in G5 states remains below the average for sub-Saharan Africa (4%) and the minimum thresholds recommended by UNESCO (6%). Increasing the share of education and vocational training in public spending and the efficient and equitable use of dedicated resources, despite the strong budgetary

pressures linked to the deterioration of the security situation in the Sahel, remain an essential prerequisite for the implementation of policies and reforms that favour access to quality education for all.

- **A better coordination and adaptation of the technical and financial partners' interventions in order to pool the means and methods, while aligning with national sectoral strategies and development plans and with the G5 Sahel Integrated Youth Strategy.** The members support the implementation of multi-sectoral projects that address the challenges of education, protection and health, and ensure flexibility in funding modalities to allow for the adaptation of interventions to crisis contexts and a better sustainability of programmes. The content of education-related development projects and programmes must also be adapted to these contexts of fragility and meet the immediate needs of young people.
- **Promoting innovative approaches to ensure educational continuity for crisis-affected children, particularly in refugee camps and IDP sites,** such as bridge schools, mobile schools or temporary learning spaces (TLS), which provide non-formal educational activities for children in safe conditions.
- **Developing the vocational skills and employability of young people and women, in order to foster their economic inclusion.** The development of transferable and vocational skills could be significantly improved through more developed and innovative vocational, technical and agricultural education adapted to the reality of local contexts and labour markets. Business start-up support, intermediation and career guidance services should also be developed, as should be financing opportunities which promote self-entrepreneurship.
- **Supporting efficiency and equity in the education sector by strengthening the capacities of devolved and decentralised stakeholders and by channelling resources as a priority towards the most vulnerable areas, as close as possible to the populations.** The members recommend that external investments be included in local programming mechanisms (municipalities, regions), that the technical capacities of local authorities be strengthened and that the planning of risk and conflict sensitive solutions be integrated. They also stress that the involvement of communities in school and vocational training centres management is crucial for the successful outcome of the reforms undertaken.