

ISSUE BRIEF

Education in Crisis: Schools in Mali as Arenas for Conflict and Peace



Search for
Common Ground

AMANDA FELDMAN

JULY 2023

At a Glance: In 2022, Search for Common Ground (Search), in partnership with UNICEF, conducted conflict and landscape analyses of three regions in Mali (Gao, Mopti, and Timbuktu) to ascertain the state of education in the country and the threats that limit children's access to it. We found that education in Mali is severely threatened, particularly by conflict, and that communities are struggling to find adequate strategies to prevent or respond to education losses. This brief asserts that improving education in the country requires conflict-sensitive interventions that address the root causes of conflict and respond to the potential of schools to serve as drivers of conflict and peace.

Mali lies at the geographic heart of the Sahel, a region facing compounding challenges of political instability, violent extremism, intercommunal conflicts, and resource scarcity. Since the 2012 political crisis, the country has been a [hotspot](#) for violence in the region, experiencing rampant violent extremism, banditry, and intercommunal conflicts, which have resulted in a “catastrophic” humanitarian situation and the [displacement](#) of over 385,000 civilians. In this context, access to education has sharply declined, with hundreds of thousands of children out of school and tests consistently returning poor results. To address this need, Search partnered with UNICEF in 2022 to conduct conflict and landscape analyses of three regions in Mali (Gao, Mopti, and Timbuktu) to determine the threats that exist that limit children and youth's access to education, communities' perceptions of education, and community members' capacities to respond to losses of education. This paper captures insights from these scans and argues that more effective interventions are needed to address the root causes of education losses in the country. In Mali, where conflict is the major driver of education losses, *education interventions must target schools as critical nexuses of potential conflict and integrate conflict-sensitive approaches across the development, peacebuilding, and humanitarian sectors.*

Education is a major conflict issue in Mali.

Conflict is now the *leading cause* of school closure and disruption, exacerbating an already weak education system. As of August 2022, over 1,800 schools were [closed](#) and 750,000 Malian children were out of school due to conflict, up 15% from the previous [year](#). Attacks by armed groups and inter-communal violence were cited by community members across Mali as the primary [drivers](#) of school closures. These conflicts affect education in two key ways: (1) insecurity in communities, including within schools, **makes attending school unsafe or forces school closures**; and (2) insecurity **dampens economic prospects in communities, leading to insufficient resources for schools or rendering parents unable to pay school fees** or spare potential labor.

Schools (and schooling) are under attack in Mali. Education centers in Mali are among the most [threatened](#) systems in the world, subjected both to the effects of general insecurity and attacks specifically levied against schools, students, teachers, and administrators. Between 2020-2021, there were over 650 [attacks](#) against schools alone. Across Gao, Mopti, and Timbuktu, community members cited religious conflicts as the most significant conflicts affecting attendance and enrollment. Violent extremist groups attack “classical,” secular, schools as part of their campaigns to impose Sharia law on communities and mandate attendance of Quranic institutions. Parents who choose to send their children to classical schools face attacks and intimidation. Moreover, many violent extremist groups forcibly close classical schools or destroy didactic materials, requiring students to attend

Quranic institutions or leaving them entirely without reliable alternatives. In addition, in areas where intercommunal tensions are high, schools can become locations of attack for groups seeking to target “the other.”

Intercommunal tensions lead to violence in schools and within communities. In areas where intercommunal tensions persist, students reported feeling unsafe around members of other ethnic groups and faced risks of attack on the way to school or in schools themselves. In Mopti, parents reported not sending their children to school because of ethnically motivated student-to-student conflict. In Timbuktu, parents indicated they were hesitant to send their children to school because of unwanted ethnic mixing. Schools currently provide opportunities for violence and negative social interactions between children. These conflicts in turn worsen community social cohesion, fueling future cycles of violence and insecurity, for example, when parents of students in conflict intervene.

Current and past responses have inadequately addressed the impacts of conflict on education in Mali. Despite the prevalence of past education interventions in the country, changes in education indicators, including attendance and enrollment, gender and regional parity, and quality of learning, have [stagnated](#). Humanitarian responses such as building schools, training teachers, or providing school supplies, fall short of addressing the root drivers of education losses in a community, which in the case of Mali are conflict-driven. The vast majority of community members in Gao, Mopti, and Timbuktu reported not possessing resources or strategies to mitigate the consequences of education losses. Peacebuilding and development responses can bridge this gap both by eliminating the underlying conflicts that lead to continued education losses and creating the foundations for sustainable development through resilience and capacity building.

Education as a connector, not a divider.

Tackling education losses can help realize the positive potential of education to build peace. Education is a common ground issue; it can bring people together and contribute to peace. When children are in school longer, their average future household income [increases](#) as does country GDP. They also have the opportunity to create positive cross-cultural relationships with children from other ethnicities and religions when relations are safely managed, which can translate into greater social cohesion inside and outside the classroom. Outside of school, children are more [vulnerable](#) to recruitment into armed groups, early marriage, and economic exploitation. These risks fuel underdevelopment and indeed, in Mali, directly feed into existing conflicts and violence. Keeping children in school thus matters tremendously for Mali’s peace and development.

Improving social cohesion in schools can have ripple effects in communities. Teachers in Mali are well-positioned to effect change but currently possess insufficient resources, which is partly responsible for the current teacher shortage. Equipping teachers with proper resources, including training, can enable them to not only better deliver on educational goals but also impart important social values (like teamwork and respect) that inherently build social cohesion in communities. [Peace education](#) curricula can also build the capacities of teachers and students to deal with conflict and promote peace in and outside schools. In Tunisia, Search programs introduced peace curricula and peace clubs into schools, after which teachers reported decreased intolerance of other groups among students and increased acts of kindness, sharing, and non-violence. In Yemen too, peace education positively contributed to conflict resolution among high schoolers vulnerable to violent extremism.

Integrated humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding interventions can address the root drivers of violence in Malian communities and education spaces. Education assistance is a multifaceted issue that requires collaboration between the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors. Siloed approaches from each sector will only continue to provide piecemeal attempts at solving the symptoms of Mali’s education crisis. Coordination between these sectors is necessary for more [effective](#) and long-lasting interventions and to address each of the root drivers of education losses in the country, including conflict as well as poverty, insufficient resources, and social factors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Support holistic strategies for safeguarding schools, through foreign assistance and diplomacy.** Attacks on schools in Mali are among the [highest](#) in the world; communities in the country demonstrably need greater resources to address their impacts and the impacts of conflict generally. Only through meaningful engagement with the Mali government will education spaces be secured. International partners must employ a two-pronged approach to (1) leverage diplomatic pressure to raise the seriousness of attacks on schools and encourage the Mali government to recommit to protecting schools; and (2) support community-based, people-to-people approaches focused on education as a common interest and concern. Protecting schools can make them safer spaces for students and reduce much of the violence inhibiting attendance and enrollment.
- 2. Address chronic conflict and fragility as a means of promoting education and protecting schools.** Activities in Mali must focus on *long-term solutions* that address the root causes of education losses in the country. These drivers, including ongoing violent conflict, as well as other social and economic factors such as poor livelihoods, cultural beliefs, and insufficient state resources, can only be addressed through sustained investment across the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors. Given the prominence of religious conflicts across all communities of the project, **preventing and mitigating religious conflicts must be a priority to achieve education goals, as should be resolving intercommunal conflicts, general insecurity, and banditry.**
- 3. “Do More Good” in education interventions.** Education centers have the potential to serve as safe spaces for learning and arenas for peacebuilding in Mali. Education programming must, at minimum, be conflict-sensitive. It is imperative that interventions do not exacerbate existing conflict dynamics or fuel new grievances in communities. Programming should instead capitalize on the potential of schools by integrating components improving social cohesion, polarization, and other conflict dynamics. Targeting schools in meaningful, conflict-sensitive interventions can realize acute education gains and contribute to broader community social cohesion.