



ESCALATING CRISIS IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL: Advocating for children's rights

August 2024

Background

The Sahel, a region of immense potential, is home to one of the fastest growing humanitarian crises globally. The surge in armed violence and the volatile security across West Africa's three central Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger)—with spillover effects to neighbouring countries—is having a devastating impact on children's survival, education, protection and development. The impact of climate change in the central Sahel, one of the most vulnerable regions to the climate crisis, is exacerbating existing levels of poverty and hindering opportunities for sustainable development. Around 10.5 million children are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance and protection services.

In the last three months of 2023, grave violations against children in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger increased by more than 70 per cent compared to the previous three months. In the first three months of 2024, nearly 1,400 people were reportedly killed in violent incidents, 66 per cent higher than the same quarter last year. Three million people, mostly women and children, have been displaced, due to insecurity, both internally and across borders. Insecurity and violence is also impacting essential services, with approximately 470 health facilities out of operation.

Food insecurity and malnutrition are affecting millions of children and families across the Sahel. Over 7.5 million people in the central Sahel will struggle to feed themselves in the June–August 2024 lean season, according to the March 2024 *Cadre Harmonisé* food security analysis released by the Permanent Inter-State Committee for Drought Control in the



Sahel. The situation is particularly worrying in conflict-affected northern Mali, where an estimated 2,600 people are likely to experience catastrophic hunger (IPC/CH phase 5).

This complex crisis is undermining hard-won development gains and depriving violence-affected communities of access to essential services. The partial suspension of aid in the central Sahel and increased insecurity have compounded the situation by creating disruptions and delays to the delivery

of life-saving assistance and essential services. UNICEF's humanitarian appeals in the central Sahel were only 8 per cent funded on average as of June 2024, and only 25 per cent funded in 2023.

Insecurity is also spreading south to previously unaffected countries. The crisis is extending over borders to the coastal countries of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, threatening millions of children.

Key concerns for children

A protection crisis

The central Sahel has experienced a shocking 28-fold increase in the number of reported attacks against civilians in the past eight years, jumping from only 44 attacks in 2015 to 1,251 in 2023, with children and women paying the highest price. In 2023, 2,653 grave violations against children were verified in Burkina Faso (1,219), Mali (1,141), and Niger (293), including recruitment and use, killing and maiming, and abduction.

In the central Sahel as many as 7 in 10 girls were married before age 18, and Niger and Burkina Faso are among the 10 countries with the highest levels of child marriage worldwide. Conflict and violence across parts of the Sahel also risk interfering with progress made in ensuring every child's right to birth registration, which is the foundation of legal identity.

A climate and protection of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) crisis

The central Sahel is one of the world's most water insecure and climate-impacted regions in the world. Temperatures are rising 1.5 times faster than the global average, significantly worsening humanitarian needs. Groundwater levels are dropping, requiring some communities to dig wells twice as deep compared to just a decade ago. Rainfall has become more erratic and intense, leading to floods that contaminate scarce water supplies. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were included in a recent global analysis that identified 10 countries facing a triple burden of children lacking basic water or sanitation services, under-five child deaths from WASH-related diseases, and climate threats that impact WASH services.

Conflict further worsens the situation. In Burkina Faso, for example, 58 water points were attacked in 2022, as a tactic to forcibly displace communities. Children are the most vulnerable when water is scarce, resulting in disastrous health, nutrition, and other humanitarian consequences.

A health and nutrition crisis

The crisis is threatening the very survival of children, and of pregnant and lactating women. Burkina Faso, Mali and

Niger are among the 12 countries at the epicentre of a global nutrition crisis, with an estimated 896,000 children under five in the central Sahel who will face severe wasting in 2024 (including 436,000 children in Niger). This is of serious concern because, unless they have access to treatment, children who are severely malnourished are 11 times more likely to die of diseases than well-nourished children. Armed conflict has also disrupted health systems with nearly 470 health centres closed, further reducing access to life-saving health care services and exacerbating preexisting health problems.





© UNICEF/UN0431859/Ketta

An education crisis

Nearly 2 million children are deprived of education due to insecurity in the central Sahel. The region is home to some of the highest rates of out of school children in the world. Girls, children with disabilities, and children living in conflict-affected areas are particularly impacted. Around 8,400 schools were shut down in 2023 due to violence, a 68 per cent increase compared to the previous year. In 2023, attacks on schools were perpetrated by armed groups and forces in Mali (11), Burkina Faso (33) and Niger (5) and the military use of schools by armed actors was reported across the region.

Limited investment in the education sector by governments means the quality of education is often very poor. In Niger, nearly 3 out of 4 students who finish primary school do not have basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Humanitarian access constraints

Humanitarian access to the most vulnerable populations is increasingly challenging due to insecurity, logistical and operational constraints, and bureaucratic impediments. In Niger, humanitarian partners have for the past year struggled to bring supplies into the country due to border restrictions. In Burkina Faso, aid agencies are increasingly forced to rely on expensive air transport to deliver assistance, reducing the overall humanitarian reach. 'Besiegement of territory tactics' by armed non-state actors has deprived 1 million people of free movement and necessary supplies. In Mali, the MINUSMA withdrawal at the end of 2023 has impacted humanitarian action and additional resources are urgently needed for critical support services

including logistics, security, mine action and medical evacuations. Despite these access challenges, UNICEF continues to reach children through different mechanisms including by partnering with local actors (such as traditional leaders) in addition to the private sector, and frontline workers in affected communities.

Spillover on coastal countries

The insecurity and displacement are spilling over to West African coastal countries, notably affecting remote communities in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, placing an additional nearly 4 million children at risk. Between January 2021 and October 2023, 882 security incidents were reported in the northern regions of these countries. These concerning developments are unfolding in extremely fragile and underserved communities overwhelming scarce infrastructure and depleting resources, in areas where children already have very limited access to essential services.

Neglected Youth

The number of adolescents and young people is rapidly growing in the central Sahel and they face particular challenges linked to both age and gender. Despite many examples of young people putting in place innovative local solutions and contributing to both development and social cohesion, their potential to contribute to national and community development is hindered by an overall under-appreciation of youth, alongside high rates of out-of-school adolescents and limited employment opportunities.

UNICEF in action

Despite risks and limited resources, UNICEF and partners – working with local organizations – continue to deliver support, applying a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach and adapting to the growing risks that children face. A key part of this approach is striving to prepare, anticipate and take early action in affected areas, while also strengthening national and local capacity and resilience to mitigate the risks and impacts of emergencies.

UNICEF does this by:

- **Prioritizing community-based interventions and investing in capacity building of local actors, including communities, local authorities, civil society organizations and the private sector**, who are best placed to consistently reach the most vulnerable children. Localization is a fundamental approach to ensure the continuity of service provision, as well as community acceptance even in the most challenging circumstances. It also fosters local ownership, builds resilience and strengthens social cohesion, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable programme interventions.
- **Strengthening the protection for children affected by conflict, hostilities and insecurity** by engaging with all parties to conflict and developing action plans to end and prevent grave violations against children. In addition, UNICEF works with government authorities to develop and implement handover protocols to help ensure the release of children associated with armed forces and armed groups to civilian child protection authorities for the provision of quality and comprehensive reintegration and reunification support.



- **Collaborating with child protection actors and partners to provide reintegration support to children released from armed groups** or who have suffered other violations of their rights.
- **Engaging young people** and equipping them with skills to improve their welfare, employability and build peace within their communities. UNICEF involves young people in programme design and delivery as agents of change.
- **Delivering life-saving supplies** in hard-to-reach areas. Despite funding shortages, UNICEF's programming in the central Sahel reached 3.8 million women and children with health services in 2023. More than 2 million people were reached with access to safe water.

But UNICEF operations are facing crippling funding shortfalls: in 2023, UNICEF's humanitarian appeals for the three central Sahel countries received only about a quarter of the funds required – or approximately US\$105 million.

In 2024, around **US\$482** million is still urgently required to help **9.4 million people** across the region, including **7.4 million children**, but so far **we have only received under US\$38 million**.

Recommendations

The scale of the emergency in the central Sahel and the spillover into West Africa's coastal countries urgently require a strong response by the international community to prevent a worsening of the crisis. Increased humanitarian aid is needed, alongside long-term flexible investment for sustainable development to expand access to essential services and social protection, and to address the underlying causes of conflict and insecurity. Withdrawing aid or imposing stringent conditionalities risk punishing the most vulnerable by creating disruptions and delays to the delivery of life-saving assistance and the provision of essential services.

Despite all the challenges, the Sahel is a region with a vibrant youth and huge potential. With increased attention and the right engagement and investments, the region can see incredible progress for children and get back on the path to sustainable development.

To make this a reality, UNICEF calls on:

- **All parties in the ongoing crisis in the central Sahel to respect their obligations under international law** and protect children and the infrastructure they rely on for survival, protection and development.
- **All parties to engage in dialogue with the United Nations to establish and implement action plans** to prevent and end grave violations against children.
- **All parties to respect humanitarian action**, and to enable safe and sustainable

access for humanitarian assistance and protection to affected populations.

- **Governments across the central Sahel and affected coastal countries**, along with technical and financial partners, **to prioritize expanding access to services and protection** as pathways to peace and security.
- **Donors to provide sufficient, long-term, and flexible funding**, prioritize climate-adaptive anticipatory action and preparedness interventions, and invest significantly more resources and attention in supporting a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach. Such action should focus on resilience- building, essential social services provision, and social cohesion among communities in an increasingly volatile and fragile context.
- **Donors to reconsider the suspension of aid and/or stringent conditionalities.**



© UNICEF/JUN0684385/Dejongh

If bilateral aid is not considered a viable option, redirect funds to United Nations agencies or non-governmental organizations that are on the ground and have appropriate modalities for directly reaching children and other vulnerable populations.

- **Stakeholders invested in security, stabilization, humanitarian, and development action to ensure that their activities and approaches promote the best interests of the child**, respect international law and protect marginalized communities.

unicef 
for every child