



THE STATE OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SAFE SCHOOL DECLARATION (SSD) IN THE SAHEL, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO AND NIGERIA

➔ **ADVOCACY BRIEF**

SUMMARY

- 01 Introduction**
- 02 A regional Education Jeopardized by worsening crises**
- 03 The key role of SSD in protecting children's education**
- 04 State partnership as a means of pushing SSD agenda**
- 05 Community and civil society engagement as a vector for change**
- 06 Efforts to strengthen legal instruments to ensure a protective environment for schools**
- 07 Conclusion & Recommendations**

INTRODUCTION

West and Central Africa region faces the worst humanitarian needs in years requiring, with 67,5 million people in need of urgent humanitarian assistance, including almost 14 million children in need in the sector of Education[1].

The upsurge in violence in the region has seriously undermined children's prospects for survival, education, and development. In 2022, it was reported that **57 million children in Central and West Africa did not attend schools** which represents almost of quarter of children worldwide[2]. As of March 2023, **13, 731 schools remained closed in the region** (6,134 in Burkina Faso, 1,762 in Mali , 1,344 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), 878 in Niger, 181 in Nigeria) as a direct consequence of attacks by non-identified armed groups or the climate of insecurity[3]. In addition to the deaths and injuries caused by attacks, they often lead to a high drop in student attendance, deployment problems and teacher retention in insecure areas.

The Safe School Declaration (SSD) aims to mitigate the effects of armed conflicts on Education by encouraging states and partners to foster a protective environment for education in fragile contexts. Since its launch in 2015[4], 17 of the **27 West and Central African states** have endorsed SSD, the Republic of Congo being the latest one in October 2022[5]. Endorsement and adherence to its guidelines means that countries are committed to putting in place all the structures and policies needed to implement the declaration. These include setting up a national steering committee to monitor the declaration, reporting on attacks on schools and domesticating SSD within the national legal framework.

This brief will highlight the situation of education under attack in the Central Sahel, DRC and Nigeria, the progress made towards the implementation of the declaration across the region and the gaps. It will focus particularly on the structures put in place for operationalization, the actions undertaken and the legal framework. This advocacy brief will not cover the monitoring and follow-up of cases of attacks and the repression of the perpetrators of violations.



A REGIONAL EDUCATION JEOPARDIZED BY WORSENING CRISES

57 million children in Central and West Africa no longer had access to school benches in 2022 due to insecurity[6]. The region was one of the most affected by attacks on education in 2020 and 2021, with conflicts involving non identified armed groups and taking a cross-border dimension. Based on data collected by the regional protection monitoring mechanism, Project 21[7], 51% of children in Central and West Africa have no access to formal secondary education because of school closure due to threats by armed groups[8]. Between January 2018 and June 2023, at least 130 arson attacks on schools were reported across Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Niger and Nigeria[9].



Schooling became difficult for us because the sound of the bomb explosion in our school premises destroys the ABCs in our mind - Quote from a conflict affected child in Yobe, Nigeria.

In Nigeria, 70 incidents of attacks on schools have been recorded between April 2014 and December 2022 resulting in the killing of 184 learners with 88 injured [10]. In some incidences, girls have been continuously and deliberately targeted- whether it is on their way to school and in school, but also then being forced to be child brides, child soldiers and exposed to sexual violence. In Burkina Faso, there were over 250 reports of actual or threatened attacks on teachers in 2021. As of June 2023, 6 149 schools were closed in the country[11] that is home to almost half of the schools closed in Central and West Africa[12], leaving more than one million children out of school[13] and vulnerable to early marriage, child labor, or being recruited by armed groups. In the same period, 958 primary schools were reported to be closed in Niger[14]. Mali was among the four countries with the highest incidences of attacks on schools in 2022[15]. A little over 463 000 children continue to be affected by the closure of more than 1,545 schools in Mali due to insecurity as of June 2023[16].

The disruption of education caused by the attacks has put many children at greater risk of gender-based violence, child labour, child marriage, abductions, maiming, trauma or recruitment by armed groups just to name a few. Attacks on students, teachers and schools are jeopardising girls' access to safe, quality education. Between 2015-2019, girls were directly targeted or more exposed to attack because of their gender in the DRC and Nigeria[17]. Attacks on education can lead to forced marriages, unwanted pregnancies resulting unwanted pregnancies resulting from rape and early pregnancies, stigmatisation and psychological psychological problems that reduce the likelihood of girls to return to school[18]. Some countries in the region have also seen an increase in cases of serious violations against children, with Burkina Faso recording an 84% increase in 2022[19]. DRC recorded the highest number of grave violations with no less than 2,420 children impacted by killing and maiming, abductions, sexual violence and recruitment and use according to this year's UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict[20].

"I am happy to be back to school. I always go to my classes, even if I haven't had breakfast. Studying is more important than eating".

Charlotte 11 years old, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)



For girls, when we drop out of school, even for short periods, we are forced into marriage. The situation has worsened with the advent of COVID-19, which has forced us to stay at home and has also led many of our friends to become pregnant. We join the members of the Joining Forces alliance in calling for safe schools in the Sahel now and asking that the following measures be taken as a matter of urgency[21], **From an open letter from Children from the Sahel to world leaders during the Abuja conference in 2021**

THE KEY ROLE OF SSD IN PROTECTING CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

SSD is a great tool that came to set out the responsibilities of each country in securing and protecting their schools against attacks. This has led to a wave of endorsements by states to demonstrate their willingness to comply with international standards. In the West and Central African region, 17 out of 27 states have endorsed SSD since 2015[22]. Adherence to the SSD guidelines means that these countries commit to take substantial actions to uphold the implementation of the declaration and its guidelines. These include setting up a national steering committee to monitor the implementation of the declaration, reporting on attacks on schools and domesticating SSD within the national legal framework.

At the regional level, in June 2021, Save the Children set up the SSD Sahel platform on the implementation of the SSD. This platform, which brings together international NGOs, UN agencies and representatives of the various ministries active in the implementation of the SSD in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, is a forum for collaboration and exchange between countries on best practices in the implementation of the Declaration and to ensure better monitoring



of its ownership by the actors in the implementation process. In addition to the regional initiative, organizations like Save the Children working with partners supported countries in strengthening their institutional and legal frameworks for implementing SSD and involving civil society and communities in the process.

STATE PARTNERSHIP AS A MEANS OF PUSHING SSD AGENDA

One of the best ways of pushing forward the SSD agenda has been the involvement of the states themselves in its implementation. This work is being reinforced through the establishment of national steering committees led by the states themselves. These committees, made up of INGOs, UN agencies, government ministries and civil society organizations follow up on SSD implementation through a defined annual action plan .

Mali

In 2018, the Malian government through a decree, established a national steering committee to follow up on SSD implementation, as well as nine regional and four local technical committees. This was the result of intense advocacy carried out by Save the children and other partners. The declaration implementation committees led at the national level by the deputy national director of fundamental education and governors at regional level have made it possible to report cases of violation of the SSD guidelines and take action.



“A few months ago, after a session of training on SSD in a local community, I was informed of a case of occupation of a school by military forces. Thanks to the open channel of communication with the forces within the national steering committee, I was quickly able to pass on the information to the person in charge, who removed the unit from the school.”

Mamadou Kanté, deputy national director of fundamental education in Mali

They have also actively taken part in the series of workshops on the Safe Schools Declaration contextualization and trainings for institutional and civil society organizations as well as militaries.

Nigeria

In Nigeria, the state has taken ownership of the cause by leading or having a significant presence in most groups that aim at making schools safe. For instance, the Education in Emergency Working Group (EIEWG) established an Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) charged with responsibility of implementing the SSD and its guidelines. Nigeria has also developed and launched a National Plan on Financing Safe Schools 2023-2026. This led to the establishment of National Safe Schools Response Coordination Center (NSSRCC). The center is charged with responsibility of monitoring and collating threats of attack with a view to mitigating all threats of attack. They are also responsible for providing effective response in an event of attack. The center has set up a special school safety squads in both Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps and Nigeria Police Force.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso is the most recent country to have set a national steering committee to oversee the implementation of the SSD. On 14 August 2023, under the leadership of the ministry in charge of education, a joint interministerial decree has been signed. Save the Children played a key leadership role, alongside other organizations in advocating for the establishment of this steering committee, developing the drafts of technical note and ministerial decree, which have been used as reference document leading to the final decree.

Niger

As for Niger, the country has yet to set up a national steering committees despite having two regional ones.

Niger also has more general structures dedicated to the protection of education in emergency situations embedded in their ministries of Education. For instance, the Ministry of Education has set up an emergency unit to coordinate actions aimed at ensuring access to education in a protective environment. While the purpose of these structures is to ensure the protection of education in emergency situations, their action plans do not focus solely on making schools safe, and do not bring together the main players involved in the latter.

Democratic Republic of Congo

DRC has a taskforce composed of 7 NGOs to oversee the implementation. In September 2022, during the summit for democracy initiated by Save the Children in the country, the key ministries and partners involved in the SSD made a common strong commitment to urgently set up a National Steering Committee. The process is still ongoing.

For some of the four countries that have technical committees in place, one of the great issues remains the insufficiency of funding to implement the committees annual action plans. In the DRC, for example, the SSD taskforce has remained inactive since its implementation in 2022 due to structural issues. Only part of the Mali SSD national steering committee's action plan has been covered due to a lack of funding, and most of the regional committees that have been set up have remained inactive.

COMMUNITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT AS A VECTOR FOR CHANGE



We want to share with you our concerns about the fact that many children no longer have access to school. You can therefore continue to work to ensure that children have access to education and feel safe, extract from the Dori children's open letter to the government. [23]

Many of the 13, 731 schools were closed in part of West and Central Africa as a result of direct attacks by non-identified armed groups (NSAGs)[24]. In most of these contexts, religious and community leaders have an entry point with these groups. Favouring a community-based approach to raising awareness among groups in cases where contact is open has therefore proven to be successful. Thus, an important step forward in the region has been the capacity building of communities on SSD.

In Burkina Faso, local organizations are part of the monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM) process in documenting the six graves violations. In the SSD steering committee, civil society organisations (CSO) working on education are represented and actively take part in the discussions. Despite challenges in reaching out to armed groups actors, Save the children and partners have developed alternative approaches to continue the promotion and dissemination of the SSD and its guidelines within communities and toward conflict stakeholders. A series of trainings have already been organized toward ministry in charge of education keys agents and communities. In Mali, for example, in addition to the awareness raising towards the armed groups and other actors, Save the children and partners have supported the national steering committee carry out various awareness-raising campaigns among communities on SSD. This led communities taking the lead on informal negotiation with non-identified armed groups that resulted in the reopening of a few schools in central Mali in the region of Mopti most specifically.

In addition to direct community engagement, localisation is the approach promoted to drive change. Local civil society and the local partners supported have been at the forefront of initiatives to reopen schools by working closely with communities. For instance, in 2019, the Children and Youth Ambassadors for Peace (EJAP) committee, made up of civil society organisations and set up with the support of Save the Children in Mopti region, central Mali, succeeded in negotiating with armed actors, the reopening of schools in two localities in the Bandiagara and Bankass cercles[25]. The same applies to local partners, who regularly run awareness-raising campaigns with community leaders.

In Nigeria, the involvement of children's Parliament, Girls Champions and Child Rights Advocacy Clubs has also been a tool for disseminating and raising awareness of SSD. Parliaments and other children's groups have taken part in several initiatives and conferences on SSD. For instance the Children Parliament in Borno represented other children globally at the fourth international conference on SSD in Abuja (2021) and presented the children's manifesto[26].

“You can't know what is affecting a child without asking a child”
Quote from a conflict affected child in Borno

Hon. Madina Abdulkadri, Member, Borno State Children's Parliament (Dikwa) and Save the Children Girl Champion, 15-yearsold, recited her poem “Child in Conflict.” She made a plea to stop the war on children, emphasised that there is no peace when children are at war, and noted that decisions should be made with children so that their voices can be heard. She ended by highlighting that educating children “reserves a better tomorrow for the nation” [27]



Despite all the efforts made and the results achieved, there is still a great need for crucial material and financial support to enable local partners and local civil society to lead the reopening of schools.

EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN LEGAL INSTRUMENTS TO ENSURE A PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR SCHOOLS

In addition to sensitization activities carried out, endorsing the SSD has charted a legal pathway in safeguarding the right to education in many contexts. A breakthrough for the region has been the efforts made to domesticate the SSD within the legal framework of the countries.

In Nigeria, with the support of organizations like Save the Children, the inter-ministerial committee's advocacy led to the development and approval of a national Policy on safety, security and violence-free schools with its implementing guidelines in August 2021. The policy commits to ensuring that institutions like the Federal Ministry of Education, mainstream the safety and security of schools in the performance of their functions[28]. Prior to that, Nigeria also had a set of national legal instruments that promote SSD guidelines, in particular the Child Rights Act - a domestication of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child- that is a contribution to the rights of children to safe and secure school environments.[29]

Minimum Standards for Safe Schools have also been developed in 2021 to communicate the mechanisms to be put in place by all schools to address all kinds of hazards and violence for the continuation of schooling at all times. Also, the SSD Trainer's Guide and Participants' manuals launched in 2021 by Ministry of Defence with funding support from Save the Children are currently being used to train security agencies and human rights organizations on the protection of education.

At the beginning of the year, the Burkina Faso government adopted the National Strategy for Education in Emergencies to ensure educational continuity for students in emergency situations.[30] Its aim is to strengthen the resilience of the education system and to put in place appropriate and coherent mechanisms for responding to the main emergency situations affecting education in the country, including armed conflict, while incorporating crisis prevention, preparedness and response measures. Back in 2019, the government of Burkina Faso took a significant step towards implementing the Declaration on Safe Schools by adopting a strategy for the protection and continuity of education in areas facing major security challenges. This strategy includes strengthening school security and rebuilding schools that have been damaged or destroyed.[31]

In Mali, a legislative text on the protection of schools and universities during armed conflicts has been developed under the leadership of the national steering committee with the support of Save the children in 2022 in the absence of national legislation adapted to the effective implementation of SSD in both substantive and procedural terms.

In countries such as the DRC and Niger, the absence or inactivity of a national steering committee to monitor the SSD could partly explain the lack of legal instruments relating to the SSD guidelines. For the others, implementation as such is often disrupted by the various administrative movements and reshuffles partly due to political instability. In Mali, for example, since the draft text was drawn up, it has struggled to be taken on board by the stakeholders. There is also a problem of appropriation of these texts due to a lack of dissemination .



CONCLUSION

Operationalization of SSD in the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger), Nigeria and the DRC has made great strides, thanks to the initiatives of children, communities and states around the issue with the support of INGO.

The setting up of national steering committees in all these countries except Niger and DRC and efforts to domesticate the declaration in national legal instruments on the one hand, but also the concrete cases of schools reopening thanks to awareness-raising campaigns on the other, are a reflection of this.

Nevertheless, political instability in the region coupled with insufficient funding to support the action plans of national and regional committees are contributing to the slowdown in the operationalization of SSD.



RECOMMENDATIONS



States are encouraged to

- Ensure that decision making bodies, and coordination mechanisms are put in place and functioning to operationalize and implement the Safe School Declaration (SSD)
- Fund the steering committees put in place to support their action plans.
- Emphasis on communities' capacity building to negotiate the reopening of closed schools through community-based mediation and negotiation approaches.
- Mobilize all relevant stakeholders in order to implement the commitments of the Declaration, including SSD Guidelines within existing or new coordination structures.
- Use existing monitoring committees to encourage reporting and action to remedy breaches of the declaration and release funds consequently.
- state are urged to uphold their obligations to children, particularly those affected by schools attacks, with perpetrators of violations against children, teachers and schools staff held to account.



Financial and technical partners :

- Provide more resources for local school reopening initiatives and action plans developed by national monitoring committees and encourage the exchange of good practices between countries to improve ownership and implementation of the EHR.
- Support national strategies for the protection of education in emergencies, on the one hand, and action plans for the implementation of ESD developed by national monitoring committees, on the other.
- Support strong global and regional cooperation and exchange of good practices and lessons between countries through the state-led implementation network or SSD Sahel platform on the implementation of the Declaration on the safety in schools.
- Hold states that have approved the DSE accountable for implementing their commitments at high-level forums.

RECOMMENDATIONS



INGOs must :

- Support the SSD implementation framework by strengthening institutional advocacy for the adoption and implementation of SSD-related legislation.
- Step up their efforts to raise awareness among SSD stakeholders by involving civil society organisations more in the dissemination of the guidelines.
- Amplify children's voices Children as catalysts for change to ensure their unique insights and lived experiences as a guide towards SSD implementation
- Support local civil society and communities in taking ownership of the declaration, its guidelines and implementation tools including data collection, reporting, and prevention actions, appreciating their influence at the community level.

REFERENCES

- 1-[2023 Humanitarian Needs and Response | ReliefWeb Response](#)
- 2-[In Central and West Africa, 57 million children, adolescents and youth aged from 6-18 years old are .](#)
- 3-[Unprecedented School Closures Jeopardise the Future of Millions in West and Central Africa - Burkina](#)
- 4-[Safe Schools Declaration – An inter-governmental political commitment to protect students, teachers, schools, and universities from the worst effects of armed conflict \(protectingeducation.org\)](#)
- 5-[Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Mali, Niger,Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Togo , Endorsement – Safe Schools Declaration \(protectingeducation.org\)](#)
- 6-[education under attack 2022 update-fr.pdf \(humanitarianresponse.info\)](#)
- 7-<https://response.reliefweb.int/west-and-central-africa/protection/projet-21>
- 8-[Microsoft Power BI](#)
- 9-[Education in Danger: Arson Attacks on Schools in West Africa - Burkina Faso | ReliefWeb](#)
- 10-[Education Under Attack in Nigeria | Save the Children's Resource Centre](#)
- 11-[Rapport statistique mensuel de données de l'Education en Situation d'Urgence du 31 mai 2023](#)
- 12-[le burkina faso abrite désormais près de la moitié des écoles fermées d'afrique centrale et de l'ouest \(unicef.org\). rapport statistique mensuel esu avril 2023.pdf](#)
- 13-<https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/rapport-statistique-mensuel-de-donnees-de-leducation-en-situation-durgence-du-31-mai-2023>
- 14-<https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/niger-school-closures-update-dg-echo-ministry-education-education-cluster-echo-daily-flash-06-june-2023>
- 15-[global coalition to protect education from attack, education under attack 2022.](#)
- 16-[Cluster Education Mali - Situation des Ecoles, juin 2023 - Mali | ReliefWeb](#)
- 17-[Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack \(2020\), Education Under Attack](#)
- 18-[GCPEA \(2019\), "It's very painful to talk about": the impact of attacks on education for women and girls](#)
- 19-[atrocities alert no. 354: children and armed conflict and mali - mali | reliefweb](#)
- 20-[Atrocities Alert No. 354: Children and Armed Conflict and Mali - Mali | ReliefWeb](#)
- 21-[04th International Conference on SSD/PlanInternational Open-letter-Abuja-Conference FR.pdf \(protectingeducation.org\)](#)
- 22-[Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Mali, Niger,Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Togo , Endorsement – Safe Schools Declaration \(protectingeducation.org\)](#)
- 23-[JOURNEE DE L'ENFANT AFRICAIN MESSAGE D'ENFANTS DE DORI | Burkina Faso | Save the Children](#)
- 24-[Unprecedented School Closures Jeopardise the Future of Millions in West and Central Africa - Burkina Faso | ReliefWeb](#)
- 25-[administrative units made up of villages](#)
- 26-[We do not want to be scared any longer \(education.gov.ng\)](#)
- 27-[OUTCOME-REPORT-ON-THE-ABUJA-CONFERENCE-ON-THE-SAFE-SCHOOLS-2021.pdf](#)
- 28-[National Policy on SSVFSN.pdf](#)
- 29-[EIEWGN NPSSS Scoping Study Final.pdf](#)
- 30-[Education en situation d'urgence : le plan d'action triennal glissant 2023-2025 approuvé - Ministère de L'Education Nationale, de l'Alphabétisation et de la Promotion des Langues Nationales](#)
- 31-[brochure situation d'urgence \(savethechildren.net\)](#)