

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE, INSECURITY AND HUMAN CAPITAL IN THE SAHEL

DEMOGRAPHY PEACE SECURITY IN THE SAHEL

Demographic projections indicate that the majority of countries in Central Sahel will continue to experience rapid population growth until at least 2050, due to the high fertility rates in the region. As this trend continues, it becomes crucial to find ways to improve the region's human capital in order to mitigate the risk of armed conflict and terrorism. Equally important, such improvements in human capital are essential for the region to harness the demographic dividend. Despite recent progress to make such improvements, these efforts remain inadequate. Further investment in education, vocational training, and gender equality are highly needed across the region.

- **The Central Sahelian population projections suggest a continued strong population growth by 2050.**
- **The high demographic dependency ratio in the region is a significant hurdle to achieving economic, social and political development. Lower fertility is key to realizing the demographic dividend.**
- **Capturing the demographic dividend through the human capital development will remain an important factor for achieving sustainable economic development and peaceful societies.**
- **Improving the healthcare sector, investing in education systems and vocational training at all levels (for both girls and boys), and promoting gender equality will be key in developing the region's human capital.**

HARNESSING THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

Global demographic statistics show that around 98% of the growth in the world population during the next decades will take place in less developed countries and that sub-Saharan Africa remains the region with the highest fertility rate. The Central Sahel region, consisting of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, is characterized by rapid population growth due to high fertility and a significant decline in mortality especially infant mortality. Between 1960 and 2020, the populations of the countries in the region grew four to seven times in size, corresponding to average growth rates of between 2.5% and 3.0% per year. Recent estimates indicate that future growth will continue at this rate.

This rapid population growth combined with poverty, youth unemployment and scarcity of resources among several other factors have exacerbated this fragile region's security situation, especially in terms of violent conflict and terrorism. However, if well managed, the Central Sahel has the potential to effectively reap the enormous demographic dividend presented by its greatest asset, the youth. While

this opportunity exists, significant challenges remain with respect to harnessing this demographic window of opportunity within the region: namely, human capital formation.

EDUCATION

Economists and development specialists have identified education as a key factor for countries to realize their demographic dividend. Education levels reflect the quality of human resources available in a population. Further, education itself is one of the key driving forces for changing attitudes, including adopting new demographic behaviours, like birth control, which are prerequisites for economic progress. Despite some progress, the education systems in the Central Sahel countries remain inadequate and fairly underdeveloped, especially in the context of increasing youth populations. The most rapid youth growth happens in the context of low literacy rates, such as in Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria.

In several of these countries, the gross enrolment ratios at the secondary level remain low (see Figure 1). Also noteworthy is the persistence of significantly lower enrolment rates for

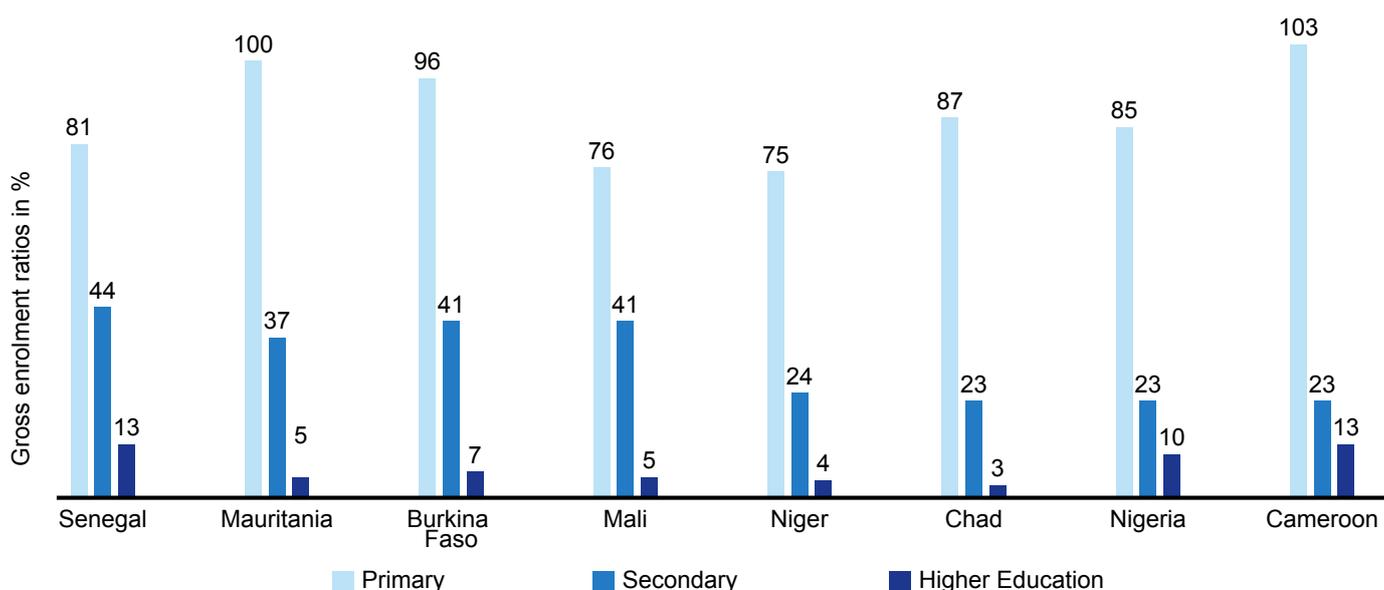


Figure 1: Education growth rate. Source: UNFPA WCARO (2020d)

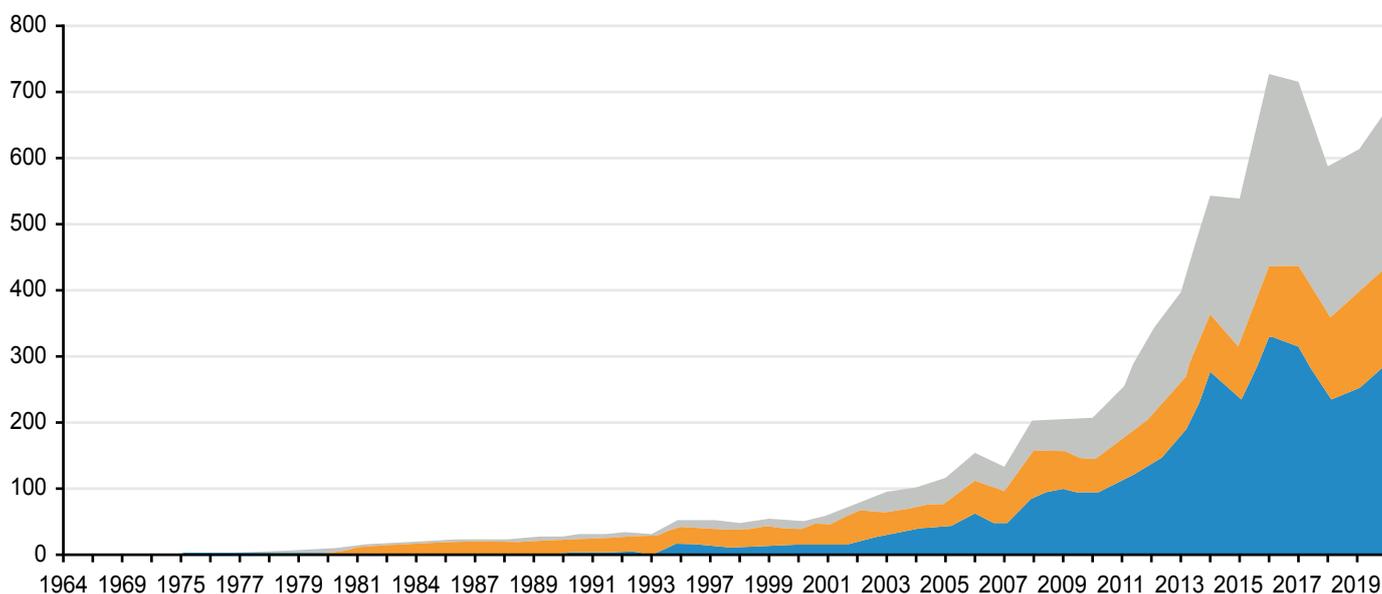


Figure 2: Changes in social and security expenditure from 1964 to 2020 in Niger. Source: UNFPA WCARO (2020a)

girls than boys, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels mainly due to early marriage, unwanted pregnancy and other cultural barriers. Moreover, the massive increase in enrolments in recent years has been to the detriment of the quality of teaching, which has deteriorated sharply. Finally, technical and vocational training are clearly underdeveloped, despite the needs in this area. Given both the low level of employment opportunities and, in part, the inadequacy of the training provided in relation to the realities of the labour market, the Central Sahel states will therefore face considerable challenges in the coming years in terms of improving the quality of their human capital. Not only are they starting from low levels of development, they will also have to meet the needs of an ever growing population of children and young adults.

COMPARATIVE STUDY: NIGER

Like the other Central Sahel states, Niger is experiencing a strong population growth. According to national data from the General Population and Housing Census, in 1988, Niger – a country with one of the world’s highest fertility rates – had

7.3 million inhabitants. In 2020, this population was estimated at 23.2 million. Education is expected to play a major role for the future trajectory of key demographic factors, particularly the fertility rate. At the same time, improvements in human capital largely determine the potential for realizing any demographic dividend. The high population growth continues to hamper the ability of the Nigerien authorities to meet educational needs. As of 2020, the enrolment rate is close to 80% in primary school compared to 30% in secondary school. A major recurring concern pertains to the uneven quality of teaching.

Meanwhile, it is important to note that certain efforts have been made by the Nigerien authorities over the past decades to increase the provision of education. For example, by implementing the Education and Training Sector Programme (PSEF) 2014–2024 and previous education policies, Niger has seen significant progress. Between 2015 and 2017, the number of children enrolled in primary school grew at an average annual rate of 6.4%. Growth rates were even higher in secondary education, with 15.4% annual growth in lower secondary education enrolment and 17.6% in upper secondary

education. Figure 2 shows the trend in budget expenditure allocated to the social sectors – education, health and social action – as well as defence spending from 1964 to 2020. The Y axis displays absolute spending (in CFA francs). All these expenditure categories show an exponentially increasing trend.

Despite this progress, many children in Niger are deprived of their right to quality education. At the private level, this hampers opportunities. At an aggregate level, this represents a considerable challenge to achieving a sustainable level of economic development and realizing the potential of the young demographics. As social needs will continue to increase, further investments in social areas such as education and the creation of decent jobs for young workers will need to remain a priority. As shown in Figure 3, a massive investment in education will produce a considerably smaller total population three decades from now. A more balanced, highly educated population will mean Niger is much better positioned for reaping the demographic dividend, and achieving political stability and sustainable development.

COMPARATIVE STUDY: BURKINA FASO

With the population in Burkina Faso increasing from close to five million in 1960 to 21.5 million in 2020, the current population dynamics do not provide opportunities for the economy to benefit from the demographic dividend. The combination of rapid population growth and increasing trends in political violence has had detrimental impacts on the country's trajectory towards human capital enhancement, particularly in the area of education. In post-primary and secondary education, the gross enrolment ratio increased from 11.4% in 2000/2001 to 38.4% in 2017/2018, but this rate remains low compared to the regional average. Similar to Niger, the gross enrolment rate for girls is significantly lower than that for boys for post-primary and secondary education combined. Demographic change and insecurity have also had a costly effect on financing of the country's education sector. As the security situation continues to

deteriorate, the government has allocated more resources to security-related sectors like defence at the expense of investing more heavily in social sectors.

Nevertheless, Burkina Faso remains committed to achieving Education for All (EFA). To this end, several efforts have been made to develop and implement sustainable education policies. The prioritization of education is also reflected in a recent substantial allocation of resources to implementing educational development programmes. More specifically, the proportion of the state budget targeting education increased from 19.5% in 2005 to 23.7% in 2019. In fact, across the nation, various strategies are either being implemented or envisaged to improve human capital at both local and national levels. For example, the government has implemented Strategic Axis 2 of the current National Plan for Economic and Social Development (PNDES), which focuses on the development of human capital through increasing the supply and improving the quality of education, higher education and vocational training, in line with the needs of the economy. However, these efforts remain inadequate and further investment in education is highly needed.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

A country's economic prosperity is highly dependent on the overall structure health status of its population. Before high dependency ratios are coming down, countries are not able to reach 'demographic windows of opportunity' where the labour force population increases strongly relative to the dependents (young under the age of 15 and old over the age of 65). In order to arrive at this window, fertility has to start declining significantly.

In the Central Sahelian countries, access to reproductive health services remains a key challenge, as the number of children per woman remains high, which partly explains the persistence of high maternal mortality ratio. Many Sahelian women are not able to fully exercise their reproductive rights because of the pressures they face in a social environment that

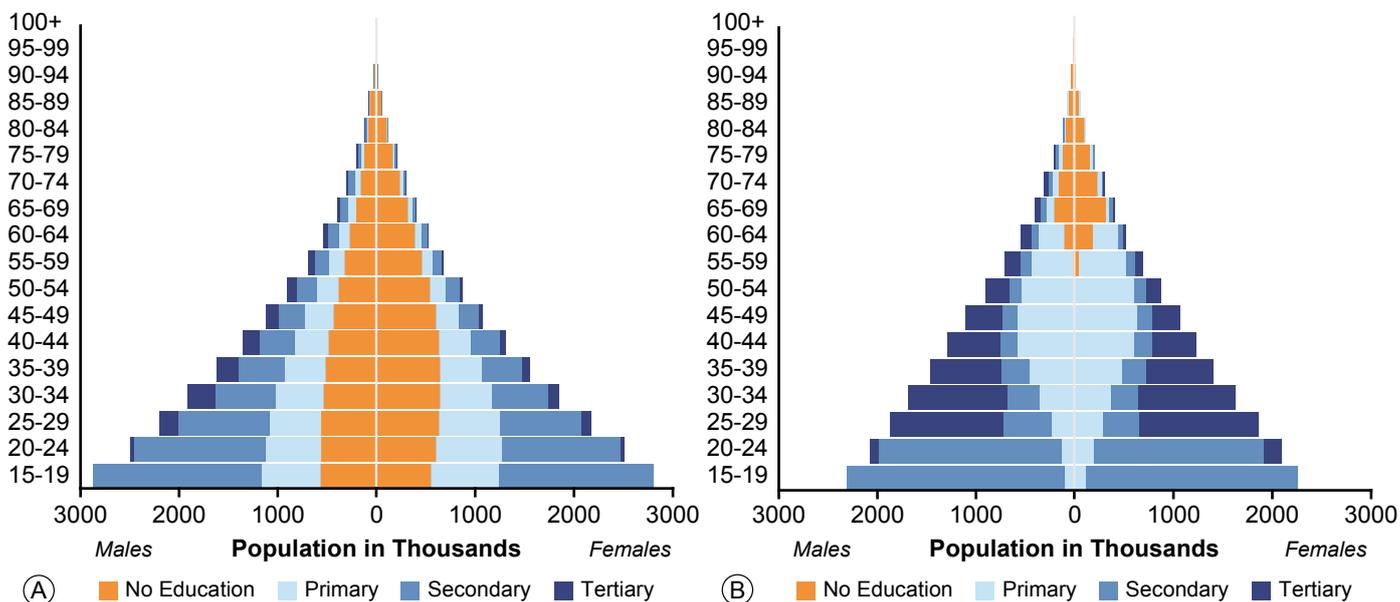


Figure 3: 'The two Nigers': The size and educational composition of the population in Niger in 2050 according to the 'Generalized Education Trends' scenario (A) and the 'Fast Track' scenario (B). Source: Samir, KC et al. (2010)

remains very pro-birth. Other factors driving high fertility in the region are low female autonomy in fertility decisions, few years of schooling among women and low usage of modern contraception. Adolescent fertility has declined somewhat in recent years, but remains high due to the prevalence of early marriage, despite laws prohibiting it. Even though the budget allocated to the health sector has increased significantly in several of the countries, the implications of poor healthcare systems remain evident.

For example, despite the fact that the national budget share allocated to the health sector in Burkina Faso has increased from 7.7% in 2005 to 13.1% in 2019 – an increase of 41.2% – the Burkinabe government is still below its target to allocate 15% of its national budget to the health sector. In Niger, more than half of the population (above 9 million Nigeriens) living in rural areas has no access to drinking water, and about the same number of Nigeriens live in areas where there are no health facilities within a radius of 5 km². Furthermore, although significant positive results have been recorded in terms of maternal, infant and child mortality, the level of

fertility remains relatively high, and the number of children per woman has remained around 7 since independence.

Improving human capital, achieving positive demographic transition and preventing deteriorating security issues will require not only investment in education and high quality vocational training to match the needs of the labour market, but also a robust action to promote reproductive health among women and adolescent girls.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Another key development challenge of Central Sahelian societies concerns the status of women. In this regard, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has calculated a gender index that measures the shortfall in progress resulting from inequalities suffered by women relative to men in the following three areas of human development: 1) reproductive health (maternal mortality rate and adolescent fertility rate), 2) empowerment (percentage of women in parliament and percentage of women who have completed

secondary or higher education), and 3) access to the labour market (female labour force participation rate). Of the 162 countries ranked in 2018, Chad, Mali and Niger were among the 10 countries with the highest gender inequalities, followed by Burkina Faso and Cameroon (ranked 147th and 140th respectively), and Senegal (ranked 125th).

Research has revealed a positive correlation between gender equality, especially in education, and economic development. However, gender inequalities in education, including lower enrolment rates for girls than for boys, remain a challenge faced also by Central Sahelian countries. Focusing on secondary education, Østby, Urdal and Rudolfson affirm that while a state capacity may matter in some specific contexts, gender inequality in education persists primarily due to factors that can be politically altered, pointing more to states' 'unwillingness' as a cause of systematic discrimination and gender inequalities.

In Burkina Faso, out of 100 women aged 15–49, 72 are uneducated, 12 are educated to primary school level and 16 have attended some secondary school or higher. This low level of education is more visible in rural areas, where 84.7% of young people are uneducated compared to 37.5% in urban areas. Mali's National Transfer Accounts (NTA) study shows how the low contribution of women to labour income (22% in comparison to 78% for men) has affected the low ratio of the country's production and consumption levels, which was 43.5% lower than that of countries such as Senegal and Ethiopia. Thus, unless the Central Sahelian states implement economic and social policies aimed at supporting women's access to quality education and the labour market, it will be difficult to harvest any demographic dividend.

IMPROVING FUTURE HUMAN CAPITAL

The Central Sahelian population projections indicate a strong population increase by 2050, even if the states manage to reduce current fertility levels. Consequently, capturing the demographic dividend through the development of human

capital will become a key strategy for achieving prosperous and peaceful societies. Accelerating economic and social transformation in these nations is not only a matter of lowering fertility, but also of continued decline in maternal, child and adult mortality levels. More specifically, the need to significantly improve the healthcare sector and expand education systems and vocational trainings at all levels (for both girls and boys) to meet the demands of the labour market will be key in developing the region's human capital.

Moreover, improved education must be accompanied by structural investments in productive employment for trained young people and the restructuring of the economy by organizing the informal sector, which absorbs surplus labour that cannot find opportunities in the rural and/or modern sectors. The countries of the region must further promote the empowerment of women and combat all discrimination against women and girls across the society while improving women's reproductive health rights. The reduction and eventual elimination of inequalities experienced by women should help create more inclusive societies in Central Sahel.

It is the synergies created between a rapid demographic transition, socio-economic development, human capital investment, job creation and the empowerment of women that will enable the Central Sahelian countries to benefit fully from the demographic dividend and also achieve the desired economic development. As these various social and economic policies remain to be implemented, further context-specific research is thus crucial to support the development of targeted policies to help attain the demographic dividend and human capital improvement, while simultaneously tackling the immense demographic and security challenges faced by the Central Sahelian region.

FURTHER READING

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