



TERRORISED SCHOOLS. THE FUTURE OF SCHOOLS IN AREAS SUBJECT TO TERRORIST THREAT IN NORTH BENIN

INTRODUCTION

Schools¹ are among the institutions most affected by terrorism. When terrorist activities develop in an area, schools are often forced to cease functioning, even if they are not always the object of deadly attacks. If terrorists do not issue explicit orders for schools to close their doors, then their occupants — pupils and teachers — are often forced to abandon them anyway, out of fear, opportunism² or forced relocation. According to data from the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Save the Children, as of June 2023, almost 7,800 primary schools had been closed in the central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger), depriving around 1.4 million children of access to education³.

Although Benin is not yet in such a critical situation, the consequences of the terrorist attacks on the education system are now evident. The purpose of this policy brief is to take into account the situation in the central Sahel in order to alert Benin's leaders to the need to take effective action to promote access to education for all, including children in areas affected by insecurity.

This study focuses on the question *How can access to education be ensured for children in areas affected by terrorist attacks in northern Benin?*

From a methodological point of view, this study focuses specifically on northern Benin, which has been under attack from Sahelian terrorists on a regular basis since the end of 2021, with obvious consequences for national education. This study is based on data from a literature review (official reports, press cuttings) and interviews (face-to-face and telephone), conducted between September 2022 and October 2023 in communes affected by terrorism in northern Benin⁴, by a research team from the Civic Academy for Africa's Future (CiAAF).

¹ For the purposes of this study, the notion of school refers to basic education, in particular nursery, and primary school. It covers both the public and private sectors, including faith schools that are part of the formal education system. Koranic schools are not taken into account, as they are not part of the formal education system. - ² In some places in the north, a certain section of the population does not believe in school and will use any excuse available as a pretext for abandoning schooling. - ³ See data from the NGO Save the Children. '9 septembre. Journée mondiale pour la protection de l'éducation contre les attaques : Les fermetures d'écoles au Sahel ont augmenté de 20 % l'année dernière, avec 200 000 enfants de plus privés de classe', Save the Children Burkina Faso - ⁴ The interviews took place in the two departments of northern Benin affected by the terrorist attacks: Atacora (communes of Matéri and Kérou) and Alibori (communes of Malanville, Banikoara, Karimama).

The results of our research are presented in three parts. First, we give a brief overview of the situation in relation to schools in the areas affected by terrorism in the north of Benin. We then undertake a forward-looking analysis, examining likely short-, medium-, and long-term developments. Finally, we recommend specific actions to be taken.

1 SCHOOLS AFFECTED BY TERRORISM

The terrorist threat affects the education system in several ways. This study specifically highlights three consequences of terrorism for Beninese schools. These are the closure of schools in areas affected by the terrorist threat, pupils dropping out of school, and a shortage of teachers due to their reluctance to work in insecure areas.

1.1 SCHOOL CLOSURES

By the end of the 2022–2023 school year, the security situation had led to the official closure of 11 schools in the communes of Matéri, Kérou (Atacora department), Banikoara and Karimama (Alibori department)⁵. This is an official figure, provided by the public authorities. However, in our interviews, people sometimes referred to other schools, such as faith-based or informal, which are not listed by the public authorities. As it is not possible to provide precise information on these cases, this study draws on data received from official sources, as shown in the table below.

Number of school closures at the end of the 2022–2023 school year:

Department of Atacora		Department of Alibori	
Matéri	Kérou	Karimama	Banikoara
4	4	2	1

At the start of the 2023–2024 school year, the Beninese government reopened some of these schools. According to the testimonies of the stakeholders we interviewed, these schools have taken in fewer pupils than normal. In some cases, pupils have been forced to move with their parents to other localities because of the security situation in their home villages — either as a result of attacks or to protect themselves from possible attacks. While leading to a reduction in the number of pupils in the schools of origin, the relocation of parents has also led to an increase in the number of pupils in the host schools, which have almost doubled in size.

In the commune of Kérou, for example, the Kaobagou Centre state primary school has received pupils from at least three schools that have closed in this arrondissement⁶, where a terrorist attack killed several civilians in May 2023⁷. According to one parent, ‘a Catholic school in Momba, an informal school in Binbeguenni, and a public school in Yansouama have closed their doors and moved to Kaobagou Centre’⁸. This increased the number of pupils to ‘263 in one classroom’⁹.

1.2 PUPILS DROPPING OUT OF CLASS

Some pupils had intended to drop out of school¹⁰ to take up income-generating activities (farm work, running a business, etc.), and did so using the insecurity situation as a pretext. These cases have been observed in the communes of Malanville and Karimama, where some pupils who have benefited from UNICEF school kits have reportedly not returned to classes and those who do attend classes do not attend regularly. A teacher in Malanville told us that ‘the children don’t like to study. So, we’re not working as we should. This week, for example, they didn’t come to class. And we usually only work four days out of five because they skip classes on Wednesdays’¹¹. Another teacher corroborates this by adding: ‘Teachers are not popular throughout the village. They tell us to go home because, they say, they don’t need to go to school to get rich’¹². Insecurity due to the advent of terrorism is used as a pretext by pupils to drop out of school.

Schools that remain open often face frequent disruption. Witnesses report incursions by people identified as belonging to armed terrorist groups. According to the people we interviewed, these individuals intimidate or threaten school headteachers, other teachers, and pupils.

Due to the fear of losing everything and the desire to defend what little they have, some parents refuse to leave villages where the local school has closed. Their children then have no opportunity to continue their education in other establishments and find themselves in a de facto situation of leaving school early.

1.3 RELUCTANT TEACHERS

The terrorist threat has complicated and aggravated an already fragile education situation in these areas of northern Benin, where teachers were already reluctant to travel to remote locations due to precarious working conditions.

It should also be noted that in these areas, where school enrolment rates are the lowest in the country, pupils are easily disposed to dropping out of school¹³. According to testimonies gathered in Karimama, for example, children ‘already didn’t like going to school and took advantage of the situation to drop out [...] So there was this problem and the terrorist phenomenon has been adding to it since last year’¹⁴.

The security situation has now also become an additional reason for teachers’ reluctance to accept postings in the affected areas of the north. The shortage of teachers is already causing management difficulties in these schools, but the risk of existing teachers abandoning their posts could accelerate the rate of early school leaving.

With classes still short of teachers in the 2023–2024 school year, the government has recruited and deployed aspiring teachers to schools. One of them, who took up his post in January 2024 in the Alibori department and was already thinking about giving up after only two weeks on the job, confided in us his feelings of dismay: ‘Some people nearly poked my eye out last time. I was sitting outside the teachers’ residence when they threw mountain rocks at my face. Colleagues gave chase but they managed to escape. The village is not safe’.

⁵ The NGO Changement Social Bénin, ‘Synthèse de plaidoyer - Atelier de réflexion sur les défis liés à l’effectivité des enseignements maternel et primaire dans les zones sous menace terroriste en République du Bénin’, 2023 - ⁶ Interview with a key education stakeholder in Kérou, October 2023. - ⁷ [Benin government website](#). - ⁸ Interview with a parent in Kérou, October 2023. - ⁹ Interview with a key education stakeholder in Kérou, October 2023. - ¹⁰ See Léonce Gamai, ‘Education au Bénin : le paradoxe des classes sans élèves à Karimama’, in [Banouto, Communes frontalières au Bénin : la vie à rude épreuve](#), pp. 27–36 - ¹¹ Interview with teacher A in Malanville, January 2024. - ¹² Interview with teacher B in Malanville, January 2024. - ¹³ In the statistical yearbook of the Ministry of Nursery and Primary Education (2021–2022), the Atacora and Alibori departments have the lowest gross pre-school enrolment rates, with Alibori at 6.5% and Atacora at 7.1%. Older statistics show the consistency of this trend. In 2014, for example, the report on the state of the education system showed that ‘the department of Alibori has the highest proportion of the population not attending school (21.7%), followed by the department of Borgou (15.1%) and the department of Atakora (12.1%)’. - ¹⁴ Interview with an education stakeholder in Karimama, October 2023.

2 SCHOOLS WITH UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS

The closure of schools due to terrorism-related insecurity is a major and complex challenge for local and central communities¹⁵. It can have considerable short-, medium-, and long-term consequences, affecting children's education, as well as their well-being, their future, and the stability of society.

2.1 SHORT- AND MEDIUM-TERM IMPLICATIONS

Forced school closures have harmful consequences. We recommend that the Beninese authorities consider a number of lessons from the Sahel. First, school closures deprive a large number of pupils of their right of access to education. And with teachers potentially finding themselves on forced leave or even unemployed, they often don't return, resulting in large numbers of children leaving school early. Indeed, any period of forced absence from school is detrimental to pupils, who lose certain habits over time and forget the basics of what they have learned already.

An increasingly deteriorating security situation can also add to the existing burden for many economically disadvantaged families of covering the costs associated with their children's schooling, further discouraging a return to school.

In addition, these closures have consequences for society as a whole. School is often a place where families, teachers, and pupils meet and interact; school closures affect the social fabric and isolates communities. In addition to the effects on children¹⁶, young people who are deprived of frameworks likely to occupy them have a greater tendency to be attracted to dangerous or criminal activities or tempted to join terrorist groups¹⁷. Home-grown terrorism may therefore increase, as young people who have left school early and are unemployed, particularly those who have already reached the age of majority (18 in Benin), represent an easy recruitment target for extremist groups.

Finally, in the absence of medium-term solutions, many pupils risk dropping out of education generally, particularly if they cannot return to school safely¹⁸. Dropping out of school can have repercussions for their future. Furthermore, divisions within communities may increase, as some families may choose to move their children to safer areas.

2.2 LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS

If long-term solutions are not implemented, there is a risk that the negative implications of school closures will go beyond the short-term and become structural, affecting the very essence of the State in a lasting way.

Children who have left school early or whose education has been disrupted risk losing out on long-term educational opportunities. It is important to emphasise that leaving school early affects children differently, but being deprived of the opportunity to go to school reinforces social inequalities. Inequalities in education were already a major challenge for Benin's education system, where not all children had the opportunity to go to

school. When pupils at school are therefore forced to drop out, the inequalities are exacerbated. Over time, these inequalities can persist, worsen and lead to the violation of the fundamental constitutional rights to equal opportunities for all children and the right to education¹⁹. Denial of these rights can contribute to perpetuating cycles of inequality and frustration. Available studies show a link between education and the socio-economic status of individuals. The more the right to education is violated²⁰, the more economic rights are violated. Schools therefore are an important tool for socio-economic development. With the closure of schools, this space is disappearing, and the prospects of a rapid return to peace and quiet in northern Benin are uncertain²¹.

During these periods of school closure, the children's occupation and intellectual stimulation depend solely on living conditions at home. And there are also virtually no opportunities for digital learning, further accentuating inequality of opportunity. All this can have an impact on their employability and future prospects.

It should be stressed that a prolonged lack of education and training, in a context of rising violent extremism, allows for young children and teenagers to be increasingly exposed to perceived attractions of extremist and terrorist groups. They could develop the feeling that their precarious situation and lack of gainful activity are the fault of the State. In other words, today's efforts to combat terrorism risk being in vain, as these children and young people who have left school early could become the terrorists of tomorrow.

While we acknowledge that these challenges are complex, we believe it is essential to put in place appropriate solutions to meet them.

¹⁵ See Africa Defense Forum, 'Les terroristes font la guerre à l'éducation dans le Sahel' - ¹⁶ In Benin, 52.5% of children are forced to work, 40% of them in dangerous conditions. Some of Benin's departments are more affected than others, such as Alibori (62%) and Borgou (60%). However, these figures are not necessarily related to early school leaving due to terrorism. Yet the situation could get even worse. - ¹⁷ See Thierry Bidouzo, 'Les implications catégorielles du terrorisme au Bénin', in Thierry Bidouzo & Expédit Ologou (eds.), *Le terrorisme au Bénin. Perceptions, actions et perspectives*, Cotonou, Christon publishing house, FES, 2023, pp. 129–147. - ¹⁸ See Reliou Koubakin, 'Des milliers d'écoles restent encore fermées en Afrique', 11 April 2023. - ¹⁹ The right to education is enshrined in Article 8(2) of the Beninese Constitution of 11th December 1990. - ²⁰ See for example Didier Gelot and Djamel Teskouk, 'Formation professionnelle et changements économiques', in 1971–2021, 2021, pp. 13–45. - ²¹ School is seen as an important tool for equality of opportunity, and therefore for reducing the frustrations associated with inequality. If schools remain closed, with many uncertainties as to when they will reopen, the consequences could be very damaging.

3 IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

Multi-dimensional action is needed to maintain education provision in regions affected by terrorism, ranging from the urgent need to keep all learners in school to strengthening the resilience of the education system.

3.1 RETURNING CHILDREN TO SCHOOLS AND ENSURING LONG-TERM ATTENDANCE

The education authorities and partners in Burkina Faso and Mali have taken exceptional measures to ensure the continuity of education in times of conflict. In the north-west of Burkina Faso, for example, pupils were accompanied back to one school by police officers and teachers wearing fatigues²². In Mali²³ and Burkina Faso²⁴, educational programmes have been broadcast on the radio for pupils unable to attend school because of insecurity. These examples illustrate how decision-makers can guarantee the right to education at all times and in all places. Benin, where insecurity has gripped several regions, can follow these examples. It is essential to reopen schools that were closed for part of the previous school year. And the aim is to go beyond the current back-up solutions, which consist of placing displaced pupils in host schools.

School reopenings must also be accompanied by the creation of conditions that enable them to operate in a safe environment. Placing an armed soldier on guard outside every classroom is impractical and probably utopian even on a temporary basis. However, other more feasible measures can be taken to ensure school safety.

First, it is essential to improve safety in schools that are in areas at risk of terrorist attacks. There is an urgent need to install secure fencing and gates around these schools, in compliance with safety standards. This will make it possible to control access to schools and prevent strangers from entering. It may also be worth considering, depending on the case, rendering schools unidentifiable as schools, so that they are not spotted by armed groups.

Second, it is important to anticipate potential threats by identifying the schools most at risk. This assessment of the vulnerability of schools must be followed by the application of appropriate preventive measures to guarantee their security. These may include emergency plans, simulation exercises and incident response protocols. Teachers can be trained in security measures to improve their vigilance and their ability to spot dangers.

NGOs operating in the Atacora region have reported that training courses have been organised for education professionals in this area. These need to be strengthened and extended to include parents. This is necessary as parents need to be reassured about the safety conditions before they will send their children to school. Raising awareness of safety measures is therefore an important step.

The situation in schools overcrowded with pupils displaced from threatened areas can be improved with the building of

additional classrooms and the assignment of teachers from closed schools.

In addition, exceptional incentives for teachers working in high-risk areas can be offered. These could include financial benefits or guarantees of protection in the event of an incident. The State could then consider the teachers concerned as 'education soldiers' and grant them the same benefits as members of the defence and security forces. Such a consideration would make it possible to include teachers who are particularly exposed to security risks in the list of people covered by Law 2022-28 of 7 December 2022. This governs the care and protection of people killed on official business or their dependants. It should be stressed that this suggestion is not intended to encourage any militarisation of the teaching profession. The suggestion aims to reduce the reluctance of public servants to be posted to regions exposed to security risks by giving them the same benefits, from the provisions set out in the aforementioned law, as soldiers sent to the front.

3.2 STRENGTHENING THE RESILIENCE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Strengthening the resilience of Benin's education system means devising and implementing a long-term action plan. The measures to be taken in this context may fall within the legislative, institutional, and social spheres, and the sphere of international cooperation.

On the legislative front, tools can be put in place to protect schools and guarantee the continuity of school activities in times of crisis. These mechanisms could be part of comprehensive legislation on the prevention of violent extremism and terrorism or the draft national strategy for the prevention of violent extremism in Benin²⁵.

At an institutional level, the aim would be to build up the security capabilities of the bodies responsible for education. Education authorities could work closely with security authorities to develop specific security protocols for schools. Training for school staff (teachers and other staff) should include modules such as crisis management, school safety, and pupil protection. On the subject of violent extremism, training courses could, without limitation, focus on understanding the complex issue of violent extremism, prevention through raising awareness of hate speech or stigmatisation, and promoting constructive and positive actions among young people.

The social component would involve, for example, empowering vulnerable families. Social programmes could be put in place to support parents in their economic activities. The aim is to reduce the economic vulnerability of families who are at risk of having their situation exploited by extremist groups. The development of socio-cultural and sporting activities in schools would also be beneficial for consolidating the social fabric and building dialogue between communities.

Within the framework of cooperation, international organisations and institutions, whether inter-state or not, can play a strategic role in mobilising financial resources to support the

²² Burkina 24 online media 'Rentrée scolaire : Le GARSJ de la gendarmerie et le détachement militaire renforcent le rang des enseignants du primaire dans la Boucle du Mouhoun' - ²³ See United Nations (Mali) 'Au Mali, plus de trois millions d'enfants ont repris le chemin de l'école cette semaine pour la rentrée scolaire 2022-2023' - ²⁴ See Unicef, Le Sahel Central, Note de plaidoyer (Advocacy note), p. 9 October 2020 - ²⁵ It should be noted that there is no specific legislation on violent extremism and terrorism (VTE), apart from Law No. 2018-16 of 04 June 2018 on the Code Pénal [Criminal Code] in the Republic of Benin amending and supplementing Law No. 2012-15 of 18 March 2013 on the Code de Procédure Pénale [Code of Criminal Procedure] and Law No. 2020-25 of 02 September 2020 amending Law No. 2018-17 of 25 July 2018 on the fight against money laundering and terrorist financing in the Republic of Benin.

rehabilitation or even construction of schools, as well as the training of teachers and school staff in localities receiving internally displaced persons. To this end, international cooperation organisations working in the education sector will have to act within a coherent framework set by the State, in order to avoid the dispersal of ineffective parallel initiatives. According to some local administrative managers, the sheer number of interventions and players within the same sector makes achieving the objectives practically impossible.

Taking a forward-looking approach, the State, with the help of its partners, should draw up a genuine contingency and resilience plan for education in the context of a security crisis. The financing of decentralisation in the education sector could feature prominently, as decentralisation has the advantage of bringing decision-making closer to local realities, thus encouraging better adaptation to the specific needs of each region, with the participation of communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We make many important recommendations in this policy brief, of which we would like to highlight the following:

1. Make schools more secure:

Improve the security of existing school infrastructure, including taking into account security when constructing new infrastructure; controlling access and assessing the vulnerability of educational facilities in order to put preventive measures in place.

2. Train and raise awareness:

Raise awareness among those involved in schools and train school staff in security measures, in collaboration with the security authorities; include modules in school curricula on themes such as community dialogue, living together, and preventing radicalisation and violent extremism.

3. Raise teachers' status:

Motivate teachers working in high-risk areas by offering them financial benefits and protection guarantees in order to maintain a stable education workforce despite the security challenges.

4. Reintegrate children:

Design and implement mechanisms for bringing children who have dropped out of school back into the system and provide professional integration, in order to reduce the risk of them joining armed terrorist groups.

5. Support vulnerable parents:

Support the economic activities of families in regions exposed to security risks.

6. Strengthen the legal framework:

Including education in legislation and/or the national strategy to combat violent extremism and terrorism.

7. Create a strategic plan:

Draw up a contingency and resilience plan for education in the wake of the security crisis, with a strengthened role and substantial funding for decentralisation.

8. Mobilise international cooperation:

Mobilise partners to support various actions that support education in a security crisis.

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