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# IMPROVE CHILDREN'S WELLBEING AND LEARNING IN CENTRAL SAHEL

## INCREASING PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN SCHOOLS

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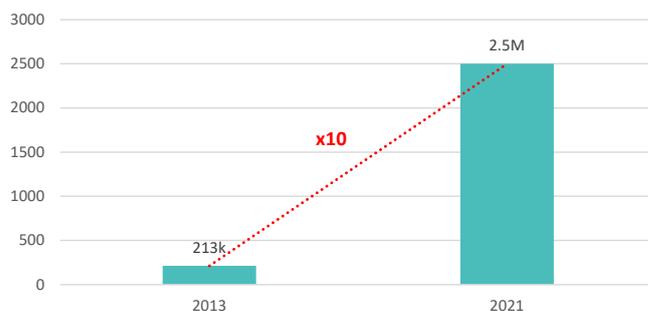


The security crisis on the central Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) has been deteriorating due to an increased number of attacks from non-State armed groups (NSAGs) and inter-communal disputes. From northern Mali, to northern Burkina Faso and western Niger, the crisis has gradually escalated and spread, turning now into a serious security threat for the entire region.

The humanitarian impact of this crisis is worrisome with a number of displaced people multiplied by 10, growing from 213,000 in 2013 to 2.5 million at the end of 2021<sup>1</sup>. Insecurity in the Central Sahel region, combined with extreme poverty, climate change, food insecurity, malnutrition and the COVID-19 pandemic has driven around 3.5 million people among which 1.7 million are children in need of humanitarian assistance.

On top of the general insecurity and increased violence leading to mass displacements, deliberate attacks and threats on schools and against teachers and students, in school or on their way to school, are becoming more

Number of displaced people trend between 2013 and 2021 in Central Sahel



and more common, which further worsens the situation of children and jeopardizes their future. Over 5,500 schools<sup>2</sup> were closed due to insecurity at the end of 2021 and 13 million children out of schools.

Attacks on schools have exacerbated existing structural challenges to education for all (poverty, poor school infrastructure, low attendance rate, insufficient number of well-trained teachers), and, in some cases, have reversed decades of progress.

The impact on displaced children has not only been physical or material but also psychological

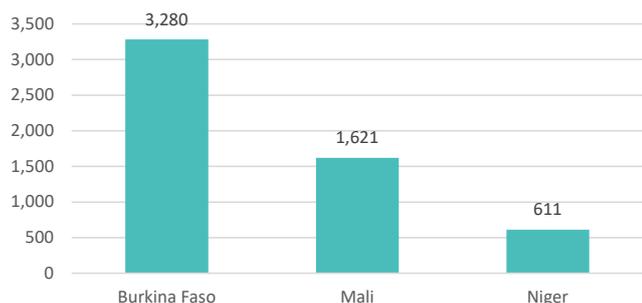
1. Including refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs.

2. 3,280 in Burkina Faso; 1,621 in Mali; 611 in Niger.



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**Number of schools closed**  
(as of december 2021)



Source: Education clusters

and mental as they witnessed violence of all kinds leading to trauma affecting their behaviour and their learning capacities and seriously compromising their future.

To address this situation, improve learning and restore hope of the displaced children in Central Sahel, NRC, UNHCR and UNICEF have been implementing several activities over the past years. In December 2020, NRC launched the Better Learning Program (BLP) implemented by teachers to support children’s recovery from the traumatic events experienced during conflict and displacement. The programme improves conditions for learning through mobilization of a child’s support network of caregivers, teachers and counsellors to assess and address the level of mental and psychological trauma faced by children. In 2021, UNHCR has strengthened the capacity of teachers and members of community structures in refugee and IDP hosting areas of the three countries by organizing training sessions dedicated to the psychosocial support (PSS) of students. Psychosocial support was also provided on an individual basis for cases requiring child protection interventions. UNICEF has broadly taken a multi-sectoral approach to providing

psychosocial support to children in the Sahel, across education, child protection and nutrition activities in particular. Moving forward, there will be an increasing drive to consider this within the broader consideration of mental health as a foundation for resilience and learning.

As part of NRC BLP Program, an assessment has been conducted, in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali<sup>3</sup> aiming to measure promoters and barriers for learning before and after interventions.

The initial results of the assessment conducted from May to September 2021 are quite alarming: **53% of the children don’t feel safe inside the school, 62% of them cannot concentrate when doing schoolwork and 64% of the students have little to no hope in the future.** In addition, **72% of children are in need of additional school support, 67% of children in need of additional support from their family members and 91% of children has low self-regulation skills/awareness.**

Taking a closer look to the results per country, we can highlight the perception of insecurity that is very high in Burkina Faso in conflict-affected areas<sup>4</sup>, with only the **4% of respondents who feel safe at school** or the lack of psychosocial support with only **23% who feel supported by a school staff when they are scared.** Still in Burkina Faso, only the **25% of children appear to have a good level in terms of concentration at school** and only the **17% of have reported to feel always able to do their best at school.** These data are alarming and need urgent

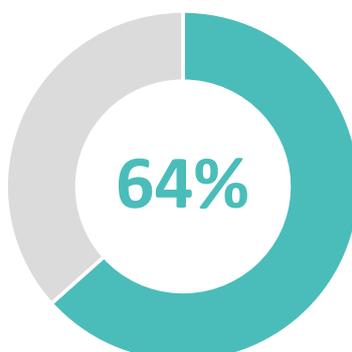
3. A total of 641 children (354 girls and 287 boys) 6 to 14 years old have been assessed between May and September 2021.

4. The assessment was conducted in 3 schools in the area of Barsalogo, Burkina Faso.

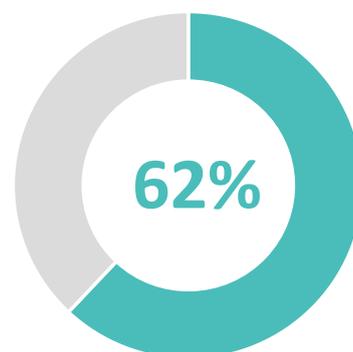
Students who don't feel safe inside the school



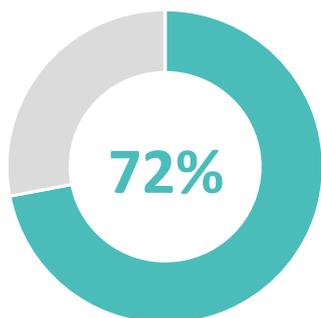
Students who have little to no hope in the future



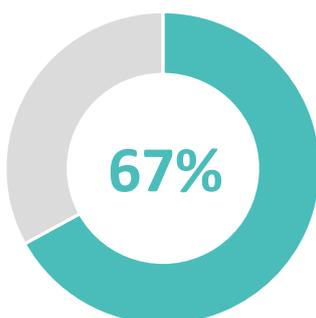
Students who cannot concentrate when doing schoolwork



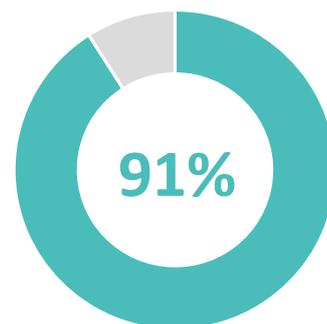
Children in need of additional school support



Children in need of additional support from their family members



Children with low self-regulation skills/awareness



mitigation measures from governments, school administrations and the humanitarian community in order to improve children's ability to continue learning despite all the challenges.

In Niger, the results of the assessment<sup>5</sup> are also concerning with **71% of the respondents that have little to no hope in the future** or **86% of children who feel they need additional school support**. In terms of security and compared with Burkina Faso, the results are more encouraging in Niger with **65% of children feeling safe at school**. Paradoxically, only **38% feel supported by school staff when they are scared** which is clear appeal for school staff to do more to support children after receiving themselves psychosocial support as well as additional capacity building.

In Mali<sup>6</sup>, if the overall data appear more comforting compared with the other countries, there are however, challenges in the areas of

5. The assessment was conducted in 10 schools in the regions of Maradi and Tillabéri, Niger.

6. The assessment was conducted in 6 schools in the region of Mopti, Mali.

self-efficacy and self-regulation. Also, in terms of hope, there is room for improvements with **42% who do not believe they will ever graduate school** and the **47% of them not seeing positive changes happening in the future**. The results are equally mixed in terms of academic functioning with only **49% of the students that reported to have good level of concentration when doing schoolwork**.

Education has been neglected for far too long in humanitarian responses to conflict and displacement. Without appropriate mitigation and immediate response measures this continued exposure to stress and violence in addition to disrupted access to education will have dramatic long-term psychosocial consequences on children. Countries' socio-economic development will also be affected resulting in a whole generation of children falling behind, reduction in quality of education and learning, and challenges in productivity and growth for these countries.

*When Saibata was told she could finally go back to school after a whole year away, she wasn't thrilled, but scared. For this 12-year-old, school was simply not a safe place to be.*





# RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT



## 1. **Governments and international community:**

to place safety and well-being of children at the heart of all education related decisions by supporting and prioritizing the creation of safe and protective learning environments:

- Provide access to appropriate training and ongoing in-service support for teaching and non-teaching staff living in insecure and displacement areas;
- Define clear roles and responsibilities, increase resources and supportive supervision for teachers, to ensure that schools are turned into safe and protective spaces where forcibly displaced children can regain a sense of normalcy following the trauma of displacement;
- Regularly prevent and monitor Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in all learning environments;
- Set-up up quality alternative learning spaces in consultation with affected communities and

relevant stakeholders in areas where formal schools are not considered a safe option and cannot be re-opened.

## 2. **National and international NGOs:**

to increase and strengthen psychosocial and child protection support interventions at multiple levels to students and schools' staff and provide them the tools aiming to enhance their mid and long-term recovery making sure that no child is left behind. Children's general recovery, wellbeing and academic functioning should be monitored and assessed periodically.

## 3. **Schools staff (and family members):**

to involve parents in the recovery process and strengthen a communication channel among parents, teachers and students; and to provide life-saving knowledge and skills to children, helping them build confidence and self-esteem as well as capacity to express themselves through role playing and group discussions.