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The voice of youth in the Sahel

A dialogue between youth organisations and state institutions

Education: a priority for the Sahel region

Youth organisations across the G5 Sahel countries perceive education and vocational training to be neglected drivers of development and youth integration in decision-making processes. Rapid population growth has overwhelmed the region’s educational infrastructure – there have been shortfalls in funding, inadequate training for teachers, ill-adapted curricula that fail to meet the requirements of the job market, recurrent teacher strikes, unsupervised Koranic schools, and school closures as a result of insecurity due to conflicts.

Consequently, a majority of students leave the educational system without formal qualifications, and only a small number are able to find employment. Youth organisations have further criticised the absence of universal free education, which impedes higher rates of youth involvement in civil society while stunting the development of satisfactory healthcare systems for lack of qualified professionals.

In 2017, meetings were organised following the establishment of 25 local and national dialogue frameworks across the G5 Sahel countries. These brought together 1,250 youth organisation delegates and representatives from their respective governments to discuss challenges and solutions to improving education and professional training programmes. Given the intensely debated nature of these themes, youth organisations proposed holding national conferences on education to continue the discussion. In 2018, the delegates decided on initiatives to be launched in each of the G5 Sahel countries in response to four priority issues they identified:

Overhauling school curricula: fostering development in the Sahel region

‘The system produces generalists, with no experience nor qualifications, obliged to join a public administration that is no longer able to recruit them.’

‘We have to encourage schooling that provides practical experiences grounded in science. We have to train Africans to become scientists in order to develop the vast areas of land available for cultivation, in turn transforming this labour into products.’

Youth organisations have called for a complete overhaul of university curricula as well as the development and improvement of vocational



training programmes. The objective is twofold: to facilitate the youth's access to the job market and to train engineers in responding to the region's development challenges. Delegates have recommended reducing the number of generalist courses in favour of technical and scientific courses, especially in the sectors that focus on processing agricultural, pastoral and mining products, distribution, transport, construction, information and communication technologies, and healthcare.

Delegates have also stressed the need for training programmes across the countries to be distributed and tailored to local needs to ensure their relevance. Lastly, delegates encourage their elders, in their capacity as knowledge-holders, to transmit their expertise to the youth in order to support them and thereby reduce generational divide.

Budgetary trade-offs: prioritising education

'It is only by providing quality education and suitable training that we will be able to have an impact on all the other areas of development.'

The overhaul of school curricula will require launching two parallel initiatives: enhancing the attractiveness of the teaching profession and ensuring a better distribution of educational opportunities across entire countries.

To achieve this, youth organisations have called to redesign national budgets that prioritised education, understanding that the return on investment would take several years to materialise. Investing in training teachers and raising teachers' salaries would make the profession more attractive while addressing problems of overcrowded classrooms and poor teaching quality.

Youth organisations have also demanded that new schools be built in areas that have become 'educational deserts', while extra funding be dedicated to the commonly underfunded and delayed building maintenance of existing schools. Rebalancing budgets in favour of education would also mean prioritising the establishment of universal and free primary education.

The creation of 'second-chance' schools

'When I became pregnant, I had to stop school because nobody wanted to help me with my child. Later, my age got in the way of me resuming my studies. I had

to lie about my date of birth just to attend a sewing school, when what I really dreamt about was becoming a doctor.'

One of the most hotly debated issues among meeting participants was the low rate of female school enrolment and their high dropout rate, often following marriage. However, the delegates also stressed that dropout rates increased among boys, too, when they became responsible for a family.

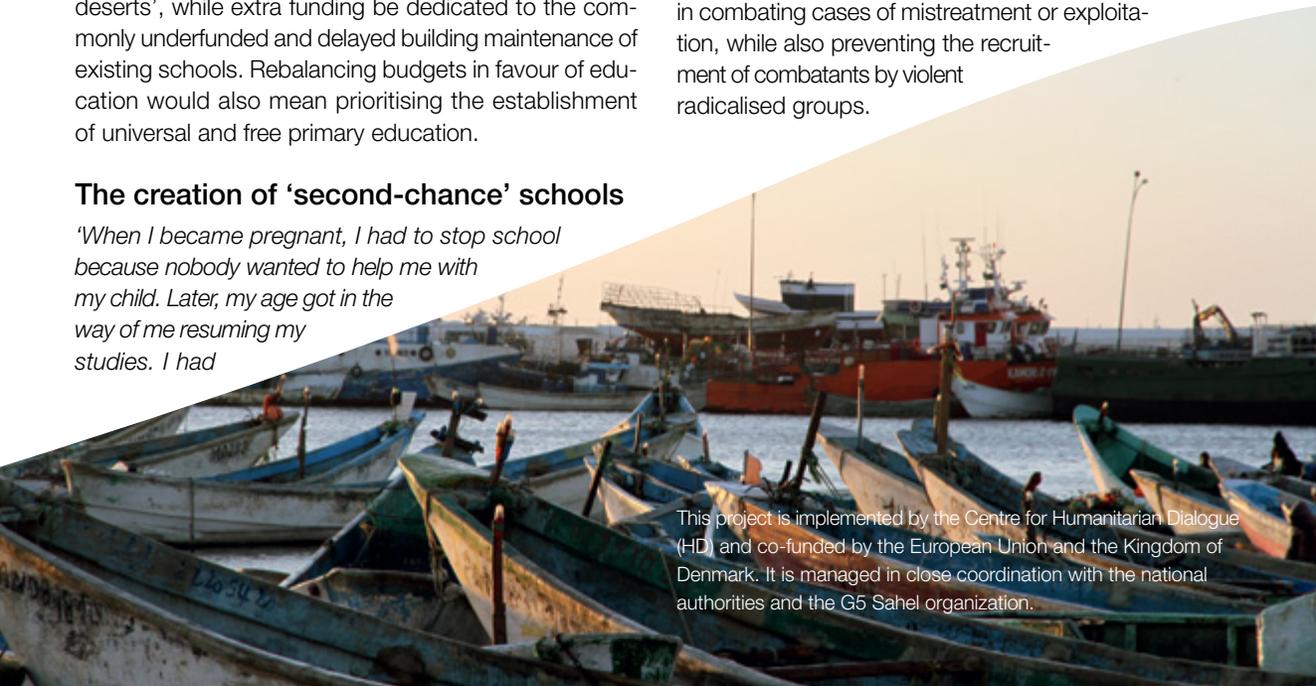
Delegates have recommended the creation of 'second-chance' schools that would allow young people, especially unmarried mothers, to resume their studies. These schools would prioritise vocational training (e.g. hairdressing, carpentry and masonry), including in rural areas.

Towards general education in Koranic schools

'A child enrolled in a poorly organised Koranic school will not become a good citizen and will be excluded.'

Koranic schools provide an alternative to state schools for many families. However, religious education often falls outside of the control of the state and fails to provide general education requirements. Students completing a course of study at these schools may face increased challenges in advancing into higher education or succeeding in the job market.

Youth delegates have recommended that Koranic schools be required to teach basic mathematics and French to enable students to transfer into state school systems or vocational training programmes if they chose to do so. Youth organisations have encouraged parents to be careful when choosing a Koranic school and have also asked state authorities to regulate them more effectively. According to the delegates, these measures would assist in combating cases of mistreatment or exploitation, while also preventing the recruitment of combatants by violent radicalised groups.



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