

A close-up portrait of a young girl with dark skin, wearing a light blue headscarf. She is looking slightly to the left with a serious expression. The background is a blurred, warm-toned outdoor setting.

NEGLECTED CRISIS ADVOCACY BRIEF

JULY 2023

Ahead of the United Nations Security Council's Annual Debate on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), Plan International has produced this brief to shine a light on five crises which for too long have remained neglected: Burkina Faso, Niger, NWSW Cameroon, Mozambique and Haiti. They are all official CAAC Situations of Concern and we are present as a humanitarian organization responding to all of these crises. We call on the UN Security Council and the international community to mobilize to better protect and support children living through these conflicts.





BURKINA FASO

For more than a decade, Non-Identified Armed Groups continue to carry out indiscriminate attacks against civilians and public infrastructure - including schools and health facilities in the Central Sahel. The insecurity in the tri-border area threatens the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are experiencing one of the world's most severe humanitarian and protection crises with over 34.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection - this comprised 45% women, 57% children, and 12% persons with disabilities.¹

As Islamist armed groups began targeting civilians in 2022, the human rights situation in Burkina Faso severely deteriorated. Civilians are caught in the middle of military operations and often pay the heaviest price, attributable to all sides. The political situation remains unstable, with two military coups and frequent changes in the composition of the transitional government.² The insecurity in Burkina Faso has increased the number of hard-to-reach in the past months - making humanitarian access a significant challenge. Thus, the movement of civilians and humanitarian aid workers has been restricted, resulting in increased vulnerability among populations. Those challenges caused 4.65 million people – one in five Burkinabè – to need humanitarian assistance this year,³ an increase from 3.5 million in 2022.

The crisis continues to endanger the lives of many civilians, triggering about 2 million people⁴ to be registered as internally displaced, of whom more than 60% are infants and children. The displacement situation is a major driver of the food insecurity as many farmers abandon their homes in search of refuge – in a country where 4 out of 5 people depend on agriculture for their livelihoods.

The multidimensional crisis driven by insecurity, political instability, climate change and rising food prices also negatively affects Burkina's education system. In April of this year, the number of closed schools was estimated to 6,136.⁵ This represents approximately 24% of schools in Burkina Faso and is affecting the future of an estimated 1,043,490 students (49% girls)⁶ compared to 708,000 in 2022. The closure of schools is affecting girls in particular as child marriage is driven by gender inequality and the belief that women and girls are somehow inferior to men and boys. 52% of girls in Burkina Faso are married before their 18th birthday and 10% are married before the age of 15 compared to 4% boys that get married before the age of 18.⁷

The United Nations has verified in Burkina Faso the killing and maiming of children; recruitment and use; sexual violence, including rape; abduction; denial of humanitarian access; and attacks against hospitals and schools.⁸ The impacts have been devastating, traumatizing an entire generation, and contributing to extensive psychosocial distress.

Plan International's response to the crisis:

Plan International Burkina Faso started operating in 1976. Due to the severity of the Global Hunger Crisis, Plan International has elevated our efforts to respond to our highest internal emergency response level and are mobilizing our entire organization worldwide. In addition, to help the most vulnerable cope with the situation in Burkina Faso, Plan International has been engaged in providing cash transfers, food stuffs, shelter for IDPs, and hygienic kits to the most vulnerable households in the country. We are helping local women and Internally Displaced Women promote peaceful collaboration associated with income generating activities. We are working with local actors, duty-bearers and legitimate government entities to operationalize the humanitarian response. We are also engaged with other INGOs and local NGOs to advocate for actions aiming at facilitating access to food and protection for school children, youth, girls, and women, as well as for acceptance of humanitarian action due to the current context.

Recommendations:

- Engage with the authorities to improve the protection of and provision of basic services to Burkinabe citizens and guarantee humanitarian access to those in need.
- Funding must be increased to scale up the emergency response across Burkina Faso in order to meet the growing and urgent needs of the displaced populations, including the severe hunger crisis, and prevent and protect children and particularly adolescent girls from different forms of gender-based violence. People need more food, more water and better access to healthcare in all the regions currently affected by conflict in Burkina Faso.
- Non-Identified Armed Groups must cease attacks on schools and security forces must stop using schools and universities for any purpose. Ensure that the safety and well-being of children is always put at the center of the decision-making process to reopen schools.
- The international community should support the government of transition to end impunity, and put in place effective policies that address the many needs of the population, as well as to end the proliferation of arms, and to improve local governance.

NIGER

Niger continues to face a complex humanitarian emergency marked by persistent insecurity, endemic poverty and the effects of climate change, with recurrent floods and droughts among its consequences. Since 2015, non-state armed group (NSAG) violence in the Lake Chad Basin has resulted in widespread displacement and disrupted livelihoods in Niger's Diffa Region. Meanwhile, conflicts among armed groups and between communities around Maradi Region and Diffa are also straining food, nutrition, and health services. Similarly, the Liptako-Gourma Region, also known as the tri-border region (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger), has been experiencing insecurity since 2018, which has exacerbated humanitarian conditions and limited access to social services, including schools and health centers particularly in Tahoua and Tillabéri in Niger.

The situation in Niger has engendered a dire humanitarian crisis where about 4.3 million people,⁹ including 2 million children,¹⁰ will need humanitarian assistance in the country - and many of those in need are located in areas that are hard to reach due to insecurity. A Village Assessment Survey led by IOM concluded that an estimated 353,083 people have registered as IDP and 63% are under the age of 18.¹¹ As in many other crises, when poverty and lack of access to livelihoods worsen, families increasingly resort to negative coping mechanisms, including child marriage, dropping out of school or child labor. Girls and women in Niger are no different as they suffer disproportionately from these complex crises due to discrimination based on gender and age. In Niger, 76% of girls are married before their 18th birthday and 28% are married before the age of 15.¹²

Many parts of Niger have experienced heavy rainfall seasons, causing floods and resulting in casualties. In September 2022, Niger experienced its deadliest rainy season in history, leaving 179 people dead and affected more than 241,760 people, according to DGPC/MAH12.¹³ These events have exacerbated the already dire food insecurity, with negative impacts on the nutritional health of children under five, and on malnourished pregnant and breastfeeding mothers. A recent IPC Acute Malnutrition (AMN) analysis, found that 1.9 million children, age 6-59 months, will likely be acutely malnourished and 154,000 pregnant women and lactating mothers are expected to be acutely malnourished in many parts of Niger.¹⁴

The ongoing insecurity in Niger has also prompted the closure of a number of schools, health centers and local markets. Niger's education cluster reported that 878 schools have closed as a result of the conflict in the 4 humanitarian focus regions, affecting 73,864 children, including 35,990 girls, as of December 2022.¹⁵ The United Nations has verified the killing and maiming of children; recruitment and use; sexual violence, including rape; abduction; denial of humanitarian access; and attacks against hospitals and schools – leading the UN Secretary General to list Niger as a CAAC Situation of Concern with immediate effect in his most recent annual report.¹⁶

Plan International's response to the crisis:

Plan International has been working in Niger since 1998 to promote children's rights. Plan has positioned itself as a leading organization on eradicating child marriage and promoting gender equality in the country by investing in young girls and women to become the leaders of social and

and economic change. We also implement programs to strengthen resilience, provide access to quality health services and to support children, especially girls to go to school and gain skills to succeed. Due to the severity of the Global Hunger Crisis, Plan International has elevated its efforts to respond to our highest internal emergency response level and are mobilizing our entire organization worldwide.

Recommendations:

- Non-State Armed Groups must cease attacks on schools and security forces must stop using schools and universities for any purpose. Ensure that the safety and well-being of children is always put at the center of the decision-making process to reopen schools.
- Support the regional led approach by implementing the advice of the High-Level UN Panel on Security, Governance and Development in the Sahel and the African Union.
- Urgently provide funding to respond to the severe hunger crisis and pull millions of people back from the brink of famine.
- While countering violent extremism remains crucial, the militarized approach to the crisis continues to drive vulnerability and insecurity. A military approach alone will not provide a long-term solution to this crisis. The solution requires a comprehensive response from those working in the humanitarian, development and security sectors, as well as addressing the underlying drivers and root causes of the conflict.
- Demand that all parties uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights law (IHRL), allow and facilitate safe, timely, and unimpeded humanitarian access, and engage with the UN to end and prevent grave violations against children; and urge accountability for all perpetrators.



MOZAMBIQUE

Mozambique is experiencing a humanitarian crisis due to intensifying climate crises and an armed insurgency in the northern province of Cabo Delgado that began in 2017. In the last decade, five cyclones and two tropical storms have affected Mozambique, disturbing the lives of a total of 3.8 million people.¹⁷ Massive displacements from districts in the North and Centre to districts in the South of Cabo Delgado have been observed. Families in Cabo Delgado and the nearby provinces have been forced by the conflict to flee their homes to protect themselves and safeguard their lives. Over the years, the conflict has led to an estimated 4,600 fatalities, with approximately 1.1 million civilians internally displaced, around half of which are children.

Due to the impact of ongoing armed conflict, violence and insecurity in the region, 2 million people in northern Mozambique need life-saving and life-sustaining humanitarian assistance and protection in Cabo Delgado, Nampula and Niassa¹⁸ - more than half of them are children and more than 60 percent of adults are women. The conflict in Cabo Delgado is a protection crisis, and one that specifically and disproportionately affects the rights and protections of young children, adolescents and women. 53% of people in need are female-headed households who are faced with specific challenges, making the needs for girls and women a high priority.

Approximately, 834,304 people are still internally displaced in northern Mozambique,¹⁹ including 781,679 alone in Cabo Delgado province. 55% are girls and boys that fled their home to seek refuge - in many cases unaccompanied. The majority of IDPs were staying in host communities, whose already meagre resources were strained by the growing influx of people. The arrival of displaced people has put even more pressure on schools and health facilities. While a significant number of people remain displaced, it is worth mentioning that there is an increasing trend of IDPs returning in northern Mozambique with over 420,200 returnees.²⁰

The conflict continues to significantly affect access to education and health services. The UN verified attacks against schools and hospitals by the non-state armed group, a CAAC grave violation, as well as the use of schools and hospitals by security forces.²¹ According to the Cabo Delgado Provincial Department of Education, 46 schools or a total of 104 classrooms had been destroyed due to attacks just in March 2021.²² Prior to the conflict, close to half of the health facilities in Cabo Delgado lacked access to water, and 85% of schools did not have adequate hygiene facilities. Additionally, a Plan International²³ Rapid Gender Analysis in Cabo Delgado and Nampula provinces found that access to health services is poor, especially sexual and reproductive health services, and access to medicine after consultations and waiting times are still a challenge for those displaced by the conflict.²⁴ This is alarming because an outbreak of cholera has been growing exponentially since December 2022, affecting many districts that had not reported any cases in over five years and where, as a result, the response capacity is limited.²⁵

Plan International is disturbed by the targeting of children in this conflict, and horrific reports of grave violations against children including killing and maiming, abduction, recruitment and use, attacks against schools and hospitals, and sexual violence especially against adolescent girls, including forced marriage.

Plan International's response to the crisis:

Plan International has been operating in Mozambique since 2006. Plan International has so far responded to the more immediate needs of displaced people in northern Mozambique through giving out essential aid such as hygiene kits, soap, reusable diapers, jerry cans, water purifiers, buckets, sleeping mats, blankets, and mosquito nets. We have also implemented education projects involving the construction of temporary learning spaces, teacher training, and providing education materials as well child protection projects, including child-friendly spaces. Plan International also invests in girls and women economic empowerment initiatives through the provision of startup kits for bakery and tailoring as well as the provision of food vouchers. We have also started new humanitarian projects with a focus on education, protection and WASH. We along with NGO and UN colleagues are trying to meet the immense and complex needs but donor funding is still insufficient.



Recommendations:

- Increase funding for the emergency response efforts and support humanitarians to support the population. International donors should recognize the intensifying humanitarian threat accompanying the conflict's escalation and increase their contributions to aid organizations operating in the northern provinces. Humanitarian access must be facilitated without impediment, and the quick turnaround of processing for NGO staff visas is essential.
- Ensure that IDPs have access to information and resources for a dignified and informed existence. The government should also act based on where IDPs want to relocate and if they do at all - taking into account the internationally recognized principles of safety and security and voluntary and informed movement.
- All children, including girls, who have been recruited into armed groups must be treated as victims and immediately identified and released to child protection actors. Reintegration programs for children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups must be funded at least for 2-3 years to ensure adequate support to reintegrate children into communities.
- Engage with authorities to ensure that Mozambique's children are not suffering in the darkness, and support their protection efforts and humanitarian needs by providing both political and financial support. Encourage all parties to armed conflict to immediately cease attacks on education and refrain from using schools and universities for military purposes.
- Focus on addressing the underlying causes of the conflict so that northern Mozambicans can live in dignity, peace, and access opportunities, quality education, livelihoods, and a place in the nation's future. There is a need for the Mozambican government to address Cabo Delgado's economic disparity and political concerns.



NORTH WEST AND SOUTH WEST CAMEROON

In 2016, peaceful protests against marginalization by Anglophone teachers, students and lawyers were met with force by Cameroonian security forces. Consequently, this led to an outbreak of armed conflict with pro-independence fighters seeking to create their own Anglophone state, called Ambazonia. The conflict now involves multiple armed groups fighting Cameroonian security forces, and many civilians are caught in the crossfire. In this time without a visible mediation effort, the NSAGs have also split into numerous factions making the conflict even more complex. Civilians are caught in the crossfire. More than 6,000 people have been killed in the North West and South West regions since 2016. Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) have mobilized, in part, against Cameroon's education system by forcing schools to close and attacking students, teachers, and education facilities, which is a grave violation against children. They have killed and kidnapped civilians while asserting control over large parts of the Anglophone regions.

This year, nine out of ten regions of Cameroon continue to be impacted by three complex humanitarian crises: the North West and South West (NWSW) Crisis, the Lake Chad basin conflict, and the Central African Republic (CAR) refugee crisis – resulting in 4.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.²⁶ Due to the prioritization of the most acute needs, the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan targets 2.8 million people that are mostly living in NWSW Cameroon – where 57% of people are in need of humanitarian assistance. Host communities are also affected by all 3 humanitarian emergencies, as they share their limited resources with the displaced people and face increased demand on basic services.

The 3 humanitarian emergencies, combined with the impacts of the war in Ukraine, which has led to a drastic increase in the prices of basic commodities, has exacerbated food insecurity. 11% of the population or 3 million people mostly living in the far NWSW Cameroon are facing acute food insecurity.²⁷

As civilians continue to be arbitrarily arrested, assaulted, abducted for ransom, and denied basic services, protection remains a major concern. More than 2 million people are on the move in Cameroon as IDPs, returnees or refugees, including 638,421 IDPs in the NWSW²⁸ and 86,000 in Nigeria²⁹. Women and girls make up most of the displaced - 52% of the refugees are girls and women, and 55% are children. 51% of internally displaced persons are children³⁰- making more than half prone to sexual and gender-based violence.

The continuous insecurity and armed violence in the NWSW regions will have terrible consequences on Cameroon's future. While NSAG attacks and the strict lockdowns continue, children have been deprived of an education. In December of last year, only 46% of schools were currently functioning and only 54 % of students were enrolled for the 2022-2023 academic year in the NWSW.³¹ NSAGs continue to abduct, kill, harass, threaten, or harm school students and staff at, or on the way to or from, school in the NWSW regions which constitutes grave violations against children. The targeting of schools has had a particularly malicious impact on girls who are kept at home to help with chores or small trades while boys go to learn.

The current situation in NWSW Cameroon, which began as a political dispute, has evolved into a complex security crisis and humanitarian catastrophe. Conflict dynamics in the north-west and south-west are changing as the crisis becomes more financially profitable, with NSAGs extorting and kidnapping for income. One of the consequences, among others, is that Plan International Cameroon had to momentarily cancel all Child Sponsorship. In May, NSAGs abducted 30 women for protesting against violence and illegal taxes in the restive anglophone region of the country.³²



Plan International's response to the crisis:

Plan International Cameroon has had its presence in the North West region of Cameroon for over 3 decades now, responding to the needs of children including girls affected by the socio-political crises in these regions. Through the reinforcement of protective mechanisms alongside child protection and gender based violence prevention, risk mitigation and response in conflict-affected communities in North West region, Plan International has been bringing assistance to vulnerable households through the distribution of life saving materials such as hygiene kits and dignity kits to girls, safe water and sanitation infrastructures, cholera response kits as well as psychosocial support through child friendly case management and community feedback mechanisms. We have been working with religious and traditional leaders, local community-based organizations and youth groups to address the wide and complex needs of children especially girls in the North West and South West regions. Through the volatile context of these regions, we work with other NGOs alongside UN organizations to promote and protect children's in particular girls' rights. Plan International spoke to girls across the NWSW about their experiences during this conflict, including the high levels of gender-based violence. When the girls were asked how they would describe their safety and protection priorities, they answered with "security, peace, and ceasefire."³³

Recommendations:

- Call on all parties to uphold their human rights and international humanitarian law obligations. Regardless of cultural identity, extrajudicial killings of civilians must cease and human rights must be equally protected for all Cameroonians.
- Non-state armed groups must cease attacks on schools and security forces must stop using schools and universities for any purpose.
- Member states should advocate for Cameroon's government to take a more peaceful approach to resolving these crises by having an inclusive dialogue with parties to the Anglophone crisis. The government must also invest in programs that meaningfully address the root causes of inter-communal violence.
- There is likely no final and sustainable resolution to this conflict without the substantive, meaningful, and well-intentioned support of neighboring governments, the African Union, the United Nations, and the international community. Efforts must increase to prevent further deterioration of this conflict and end the suffering of civilians, including IDPs and refugees from the North West and South West regions.

The situation in Haiti is highly complex as the country is facing multiple crises concurrently and at high risk from natural hazards. Among the causes of the violence, concentrated in Port-au-Prince and the surrounding areas, are political and economic factors, including the decline of agriculture, urban migration, the proliferation of small arms, and a political class that is willing to weaponize Haiti's struggles to maintain power. Lack of law enforcement and the absence of the state means that violence and corruption continue to escalate. Gangs operating in the country have also substantially affected all types of basic infrastructure, such as supply and production chains, transport, clean water and basic sanitation systems, as well as the population's access to essential services such as health and education. Likewise, human rights violations are reported at an alarming rate, with unprecedented levels of kidnappings, killings and incidents of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

The humanitarian situation in Haiti is deteriorating rapidly and humanitarian needs are now higher than at any point since the 2010 earthquake. There is approximately a total of 5.2 million people in need of humanitarian aid, of which 2.8 million are children and 57% are women and girls.³⁴ In the same vein, the latest IPC analysis recorded that 4.7 million people are currently facing acute hunger (IPC 3 and above) and 1.8 million are in Emergency phase (IPC 4).³⁵ These consequences can also be attributed to the low funding of the previous year's Humanitarian Response Plan by the international community.

Cholera re-emerged in the country on 2 October 2022 after more than three years with no presence of the disease reported. Since then, Haiti has recorded 2,678 cholera confirmed cases with 686 deaths.³⁶ Fuel shortages, particularly in urban areas, have made it difficult to maintain essential services like drinking water, which pose a threat to cholera outbreaks. The operational context is expected to become more challenging in the coming months with the waves of life-threatening diseases, such as cholera and COVID-19, as well as the onset of hurricane season which has already caused flooding, rockslides and landslides in various parts of the country.³⁷

Additionally, Haiti has been experiencing a climate of fear for months, especially in the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince, where the movement of people is severely restricted and unsafe due to the control and coercion exercised by gangs and self-defence groups.³⁸ Girls and other vulnerable groups have been caught in the crossfire of violence perpetrated by armed groups. Plan International is disturbed by recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abduction, and denial of humanitarian access in Haiti.³⁹

The spread and intensification of violence continues to displace families and restrict access to schooling for children.⁴⁰ 127,977 Haitians or 28,415 households are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) of which 38% were living in spontaneous-sites and 62% in host communities.⁴¹ The United Nations reported that 72 schools were targeted between October 2022 and February 2023 compared to eight during the same period last year.⁴²

Plan International's response to the crisis:

Due to the severity of the emergency, Plan International has elevated its efforts and commitment to provide life-saving assistance in the south-eastern and north-eastern departments, while actively participating in the humanitarian system wide scale-up activated on 14th April 2023. Plan International has been responding to the hunger crisis in Haiti, supporting more than 25,000 people with

cash transfers so they can buy food, pay school fees and meet their immediate needs. However, funding continues to be challenging for local and international aid organisations, as operating costs remain very high in a context of such volatility.

Recommendations:

- Armed gangs must immediately cease all grave violations against children: recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abduction, and denial of humanitarian access. Recruited children, including girls, must be treated as victims and identified and released to child protection actors immediately. Gang leadership must condemn and prohibit all acts of sexual violence. All efforts must be utilized to protect civilians from harm in Haiti.
- Immediate diplomatic and donor engagement is needed to alleviate the consequences of the worsening crisis and support government authorities to improve protection and basic service delivery to Haitian citizens, while ensuring humanitarian access to those in need and rapid visa processing for INGO staff to be deployed.
- Coordinated diplomacy and engagement must continue with UN Security Council members, key member states, regional organisations, the donor community, and other relevant actors to report on the severity of the security and humanitarian situation in Haiti, as well as to ensure that this crisis receives the attention, and political and financial support it needs. Haiti's Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) currently requires \$720 million, over twice as much as 2022, and is only 23% funded to date.⁴³
- In the event of a potential deployment of an international force to assist the Haitian National Police as reiterated by the United Nations Secretary General on 1st July 2023 in Port au Prince,⁴⁴ Plan International calls on any troop contributing countries to respect their obligations under IHL, to protect civilians and to respect human rights, and be trained on the prevention of and response to gender-based violence.
- Humanitarian aid actions must be complemented by the efforts of development actors to ensure that the underlying causes of the crisis are effectively addressed and resilience capacities are strengthened, especially in view of the hurricane season and new outbreaks of epidemics. A nexus and gender-based approach should continue to be promoted.
- Humanitarian programming needs to ensure that child protection and education interventions are included as priority actions in response plans. UN agencies, INGOs and CSOs need to support the continuity of access to quality and inclusive education that supports children's psychosocial needs, as well the timely referrals to child protection services for all school-aged children.



FOOTNOTES

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