

Annual West African and Sahel Youth Forum

"Employment and Education in Emergencies for Young Women and Men: Building a Peaceful and Secure West Africa and Sahel"

Dakar, Senegal, from 26 to 28 August 2025

DRAFT CONCEPT NOTE

I - Background

In West and Central Africa, over 64% of the population is under 24¹, and nearly 65% in the Sahel is under 30². However, the region faces major challenges in providing decent and productive employment for young people, who often end up in low-productivity sectors like agriculture. Many young people face working poverty, with 71.7% of young workers in Sub-Saharan Africa in insecure jobs. The youth (15-24 years-old) in the majority of West African countries suffer more than the general population with unemployment.³ Additionally, the estimate rate of youth Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) in Africa in 2025 is almost one quarter of the youth population (23.2%)⁴. Gender disparities exacerbate these issues, with young women particularly affected by under-employment, unemployment, and NEET status.

Meanwhile, against the backdrop of persisting security challenges, more than 14,000 schools were closed in West and Central Africa, affecting about 2.8 million children, as per latest available data of September 2024. In Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, about 8,400 schools were closed with about 1.7 million children affected⁵. This situation has continuously affected literacy rates, considering that, already in 2023, about 23.5 million youths in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) were illiterate⁶. From a political and prevention perspective, this comes with the risk of 'losing' a generation, with multifaceted implications for medium and long-term peace and security.

– Young Women and Men Unemployment, Violence and Violent Extremism Nexus

The lack of access to decent employment and education makes youth in the Sahel vulnerable to violence and recruitment by extremist groups. Armed groups exploit the high mobility provided by motorcycles, which are common due to poor infrastructure and economic opportunities. While the motorcycle taxi sector addresses mobility and unemployment issues, it also leads to crime, accidents, and recruitment into criminal groups. During the 2023 Mindelo Youth Forum, participants called for policies linking education, vocational training, and employment to combat youth marginalization and extremism.

¹ UNFPA WACRO, <https://wcaro.unfpa.org/fr/24-heures-en-afrique-de-louest-dans-le-quotidien-des-adolescent-e-s-et-jeunes#>

² La voix des jeunes du Sahel at https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/sahel_gen_fact_sheet_2020_fr_web_09.20.pdf

³ ECA Statistical Data Portal. Available at <https://ecastats.uneca.org/data/data/2627> and <https://ecastats.uneca.org/data/data/6249>

⁴ International Labour Organization, "Share of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) by sex -- ILO modelled estimates, Aug. 2024 (%) -- Annual", ILOSTAT database. Available at <https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer16/?lang=en>

⁵ Data from West and Central Africa Education in Emergencies Working Group.

⁶ See: UNESCO Institute of Statistics Data Browser at <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/>.

In response, the AU Heads of State Assembly adopted the AU/ILO Youth Employment Strategy for Africa (YES-Africa) in spring 2025. This strategy aims to tackle the youth employment crisis by creating productive and decent jobs through structural transformation and sectoral diversification. It integrates labor market policies, skills development, and youth economic empowerment, emphasizing gender equality and inclusivity. YES-Africa aligns with the African Youth Charter, the Continental Strategy for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, and the Youth and Women's Employment Pact, focusing on improving education, promoting entrepreneurship, and creating jobs for young people and women.

The AU Roadmap on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth (2017) and its four pillars — employment and entrepreneurship; education and skills development; health and wellbeing; and rights, governance, and youth empowerment — offer a comprehensive approach to tackling structural barriers to youth development.

This focus on youth development is closely linked to broader continental ambitions. Experts of the AU agree that a truly transformative vision for Africa's integration cannot be achieved without the full involvement of women and young people. In recognition of this, the AU adopted the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, positively reflecting the importance of inclusive policies⁷.

It is also worth mentioning the AU-ILO-IOM-UNECA joint program on Labor Migration Governance for Development and Integration in Africa (JLMP), launched in 2015. This program aims to strengthen labor migration governance across the continent and contributes to several regional and global frameworks on labor migration⁸.

– **Regional Institutions, Youth Employment and Education**

The AU has adopted policies to protect and enhance the welfare of children in conflict situations in Africa, focusing on the right to education as outlined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981). Promoting education is a key aspect of the AU's Agenda 2063 and other policies, including the 2024 Nouakchott Declaration. ECOWAS supports these priorities by promoting youth employment in agro-silvo-pastoral sectors and including youth empowerment in Vision 2050, which aims to create decent jobs and harness youth potential for regional growth. ECOWAS has also integrated education into its frameworks, with its Child Policy and Strategic Plan of Action (2019-2030), which addresses children's rights, education, and challenges of armed conflict and violence.

– **Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda**

UN Security Council Resolutions 2250 (2015), 2419 (2018), and 2535 (2020) highlight the importance of youth in preventing conflict, countering extremism, and promoting peace. They urge Member States to invest in youth as drivers of development and peace. UNOWAS, along with other UN entities⁹ and regional organizations, has integrated youth into peace and security initiatives in West Africa and the Sahel by facilitating dialogue, supporting national governments and other stakeholders, and fostering youth-led actions to promote peace.

UNECA, in collaboration with UNFPA, is supporting the implementation of Budgeting Sensitive to Demographic Dividend (BSDD) approach in several West African countries. This approach aims to align national budget priorities with the needs of growing youth populations by promoting investments in health, education, employment and

⁷UNECA, "The AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade – Africa's blueprint for inclusive trade", UNECA website. Available at <https://www.uneca.org/stories/blog-the-afcfta-protocol-on-women-and-youth-in-trade-%E2%80%93-africa%E2%80%99s-blueprint-for-inclusive>

⁸ Including the First 2023 10-Year Plan of the African Union's Agenda 2063, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) and its 2018-2030 Plan of Action, and the UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).

⁹ Including ILO, UN WOMEN, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNDP, UNODC.

empowerment. The implementation of BSDD is strongly reinforced by global peace and security mandates, particularly the UN Security Council Resolutions on Youth, Peace and Security

– **UN Security Council Resolution 2601 (2021)**

In October 2021, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2601 on the protection of education in conflict zones. Applauded as the first of its kind, the resolution urges conflict parties to immediately safeguard the right to education and underlines the links between education, peace, and security¹⁰, complementing other frameworks on Education in Emergencies (EiE). As part of efforts to promote its implementation, UNOWAS organized, in November 2023 in Senegal, a colloquium on the Resolution, bringing together a broad range of practitioners, who adopted 15 action-oriented recommendations, and developed an action plan to make Education in Emergencies a political priority.

– **The Pact for the Future**

Adopted by world leaders on 22 September 2024, the Pact for the Future, which includes a Global Digital Compact and a Declaration on Future Generations, also puts particular emphasis on the role of youth. The Pact notably foresees action to accelerate the implementation of commitments on youth, peace and security (Action 20) and entails specific commitments on youth and future generations.¹¹ It also contains an explicit decision to “increase access to quality, inclusive education and lifelong learning, including in emergencies, and improve opportunities for decent work for all, universal access to social protection to eradicate poverty and reduce inequalities” (Action 6 b).

II - Objectives of the Forum

The 2025 Annual Youth Forum seeks to bring together key stakeholders to discuss, raise awareness and trigger additional action on youth unemployment issues and education in emergencies in West Africa and the Sahel.

The youth forum’s primary goal is to facilitate and structure the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda as outlined in UN Security Council Resolutions 2250 (2015), 2419 (2018), and 2535 (2020) and of UN Security Council Resolution 2601 (2021) on Education in Emergencies at the sub-regional level. It also promotes the ideals of an “integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa” from the African Union’s Agenda 2063 and ECOWAS’ vision of a borderless, peaceful, and a prosperous West African region.

Specifically, the forum aims to:

- Assess progress on the implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security agenda, focusing on *the Mindelo Call to Action* with a view to delving further into the linkages between employment, conflict resolution and peacebuilding.
- Present and discuss solutions to foster inclusive economic growth, create decent jobs for young people, promote market-driven skills development, including by leveraging the pillars of the AU Roadmap on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend and reviewing Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems to harness demographic dividends.
- Contextualize the AU/ILO Youth Employment Strategy for Africa to countries in West Africa and the Sahel and discuss resource mobilization to scale-up action
- Identify innovative mobility projects for youth.
- Validate a regional youth employment program.

¹⁰ S/RES/2601(2021).

¹¹ Notably Actions 34, 35, 36 and 37.

- Follow up on the outcomes of the 2023 UNOWAS colloquium on Education in Emergencies and the implementation of UNSCR 2601 (2021) with political decision-makers from the sub-region and youths as key agents of change, and
- Prepare for the 2026 International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) by assessing Member States' progress on various GCM Objectives related to youth employment, with a specific focus on Objective 1 (data), 5 (regular pathways), 6 (recruitment and decent work), 7 (reduce vulnerabilities) and 15 (access to basic services).
- Promote the West Africa Business Linkages Platform as a virtual portal to facilitate access to business opportunities, establish B2B partnerships and fully exploit the opportunities offered by the AfCFTA.

This conference will be the fourth edition of the West Africa and Sahel Youth Fora: The first Youth Forum was held in December 2018 in Ouagadougou. Following this, significant work has been done to support youth organizations in creating local peace clubs. ECOWAS has revised its Youth Policy and Strategic Plan of Action. A second forum was held in December 2021 in Abuja, and a third in July 2023 in Mindelo, Cabo Verde, resulting in the Mindelo Call to Action with 38 recommended actions for empowering youth for peace and security. These fora amplify youth voices and create actionable plans for addressing youth employment, peace, and security challenges in the region.

III - Expected outputs

The expected results of the Annual Youth Forum are as follows:

- **Dakar Call to Action** for the actors, especially decision-makers' commitment on the pursuit of decent work, on the implementation of UNSCR 2601 (2021) and innovative solutions to create more inclusive, peaceful, equitable and prosperous societies is adopted;
- **Foundational components of a regional program** for enhancing youth employment in West Africa and the Sahel is adopted;
- Monitoring & Accountability Mechanism is adopted to ensure that the expected outputs are monitored and effectively implemented.

IV - Participants

The annual West African and Sahel youth forum, organized by UNOWAS, in collaboration with the ILO, the UN Network on Migration and other UN agencies, with the support of the Government of Senegal, will bring together 150 participants from political decision-makers, government structures, employers and workers organizations, private sector participants, West Africa and the Sahel young women and men, youth groups, organizations and networks active on youth, employment and Education in Emergencies, youth-led organizations, experts, (sub)regional organizations, UN entities and technical and financial partners.

V - Date and venue

The 2025 annual Youth Forum will be held from 26 to 28 August 2025 in Dakar, Senegal.

VI – Program: See attached

VII - Budget

The estimated budget includes transportation fees, conference facilities and services, operating costs, equipment and furniture. See attached.