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ILO WAEMU Youth Country Briefs

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Youth Labour Market Trends in WAEMU countries: Cross-country overview[1]

Key points

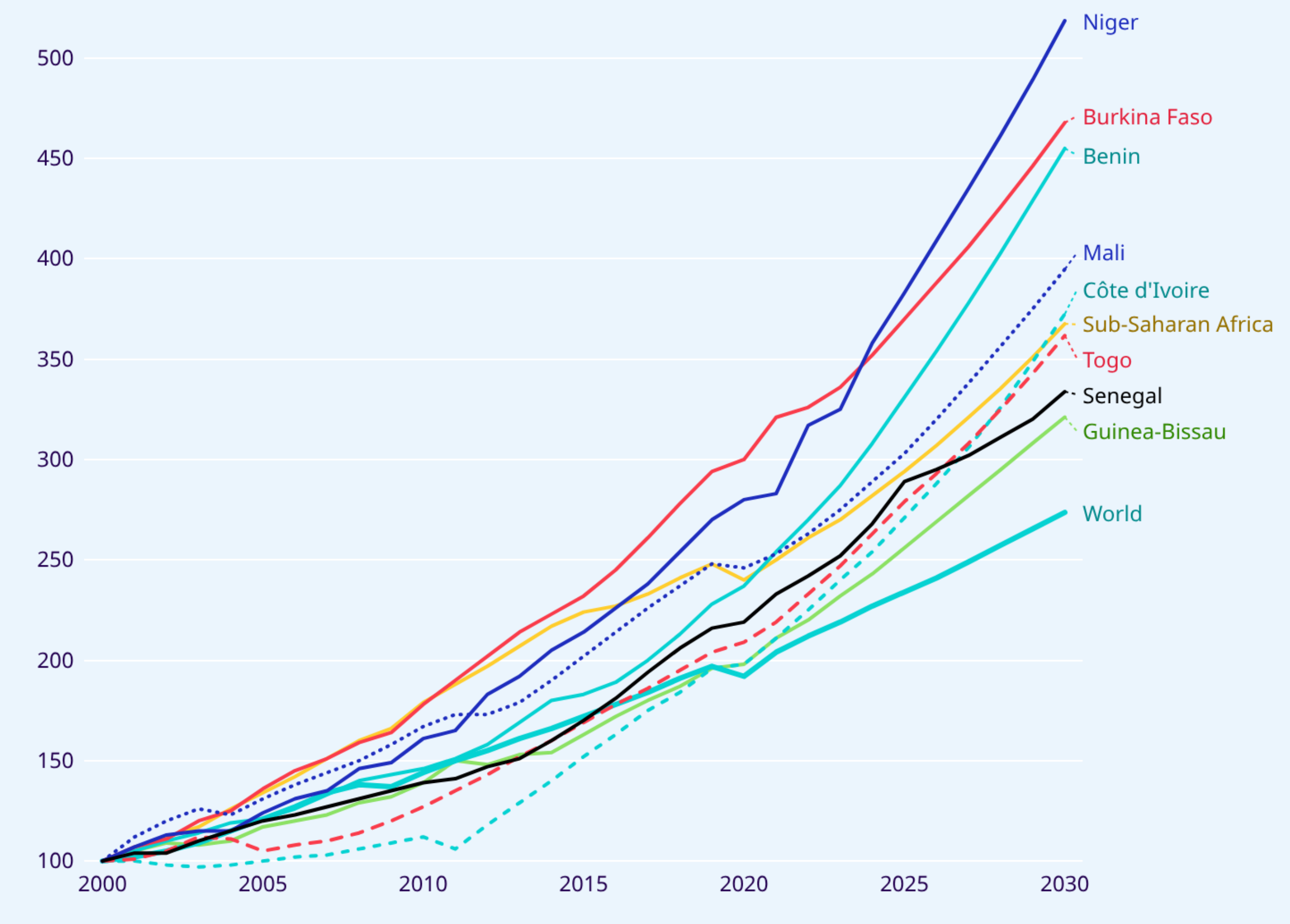
- WAEMU countries have all seen positive economic growth, which has outpaced population growth, with concomitant reductions in working poverty during the new millennium. However, progress has been variable and per capita incomes in the region remain modest. Just three countries, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal are now classified as lower-middle income countries. The other five, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger and Togo remain in the low income country group.
- Female disadvantage in youth labour market outcomes is evident. For example, although there is some variation in the extent of disadvantage across countries, young women face higher NEET rates than young men throughout the region, sometimes much higher. The NEET rates of young women are between one and a half and three times as high as young men's NEET rates. These gender differences in NEET are largely to be attributed to family care responsibilities undertaken by young women.
- Gender disadvantage is also visible, albeit less pronounced, in terms of employment and educational outcomes.
- Vulnerability, as reflected in NEET rate differences, is also apparent when comparing young people with and without disabilities. On average in WAEMU countries, young people with disabilities have NEET rates which are roughly double the NEET rates of young people without disability. In Benin and Niger, they are three times as high.
- In contrast to the global pattern, with the exception of Senegal, NEET rates in WAEMU countries do not decline markedly with higher educational attainment. This points to some concerns with educational mismatch.

[1] This brief was prepared by Niall O'Higgins and Vipasana Karkee (ILO) with AI editorial support managed by Dibyaudh Das (ILO). The authors are grateful for the very helpful comments provided by ILO colleagues as well as those provided by colleagues at the Mastercard Foundation including participants at a webinar organised by MCF on January 27, 2026. For more details on the data used for the country analyses, definitional issues and more generally, the ILO/MCF partnership, the interested reader is directed towards any of the country briefs.

Context

- WAEMU countries have experienced moderate to strong economic growth throughout the new millennium outpacing economic growth rates in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) as a whole over the period, as shown in figure 1. [2] Despite this, in the context of conflict and instability coupled with rapid population growth, average per capita (p.c.) incomes in the region remain modest; in 2025, Niger had a PPP-adjusted GDP p.c. of under US$2000; a further three countries – Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau and Mali – were under US$3000. Only Côte d'Ivoire had a GDP p.c. that exceeded the SSA average of US$5,324.[3]

Figure 1. Real GDP, WAEMU countries, Sub-Saharan Africa and the World, 2000-2030; 2000=100



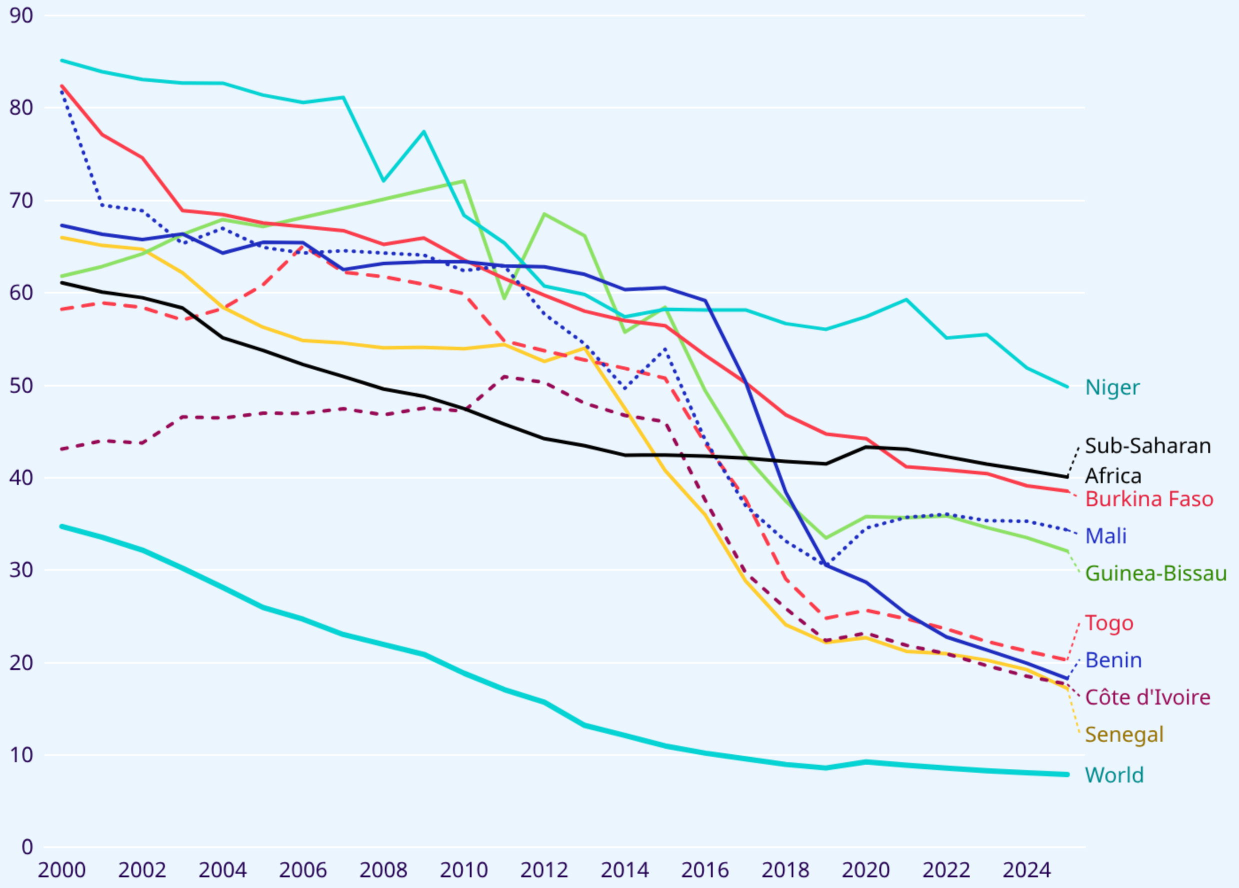
Note: The figure reports indices for real GDP over time, for WAEMU countries, Sub-Saharan African and the world with 2000 = 100
Source: Calculated from the IMF World Economic Outlook April 2026 database.

[2] IMF (2026).

[3] The PPP adjusted GDP p.c. estimates used in this brief are from the IMF April 2026 WEO Database (IMF, 2026). Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) adjusted GDP converts a country's GDP into (usually) USD using exchange rates that equate the cost of a representative basket of goods and services in different countries.

- Still, all countries in the region have made progress, often very significant, in reducing extreme working poverty rates during the new millennium. Only Niger now has an extreme working poverty rate that is above the SSA average, as shown in figure 2[4].

► **Figure 2. Extreme working poverty rates, WAEMU, Sub-Saharan Africa and the World, 2000–2025 (percentage)**



Note: The figure reports extreme working poverty rates of employed persons aged 15 and over, for WAEMU countries, Sub-Saharan Africa and the world.
Source: Based on ILO Modelled estimates (November 2025), https://ilostat.ilo.org/

[4] ILO modelled estimates, November 2025. The working poverty rate is an estimate of the proportion of the employed population living in poverty despite being employed, implying that their employment-related incomes are not sufficient to lift them and their families out of poverty and ensure decent living conditions. Extreme working poverty is defined as the percentage of the employed population living in households with a per capita income of under US$3 PPP per day, https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/working-poverty/. The sharp drop in working poverty observable in the country, especially during the 2016 and 2018 period, may be at least partially attributed to the improvements in public finances and agricultural productivity associated with the implementation of the Government Action Program, 2016–2021 (IMF, 2023).

Conflict and instability

- The region has seen significant conflict and instability in recent years. This issue is discussed in more detail in the individual country briefs; however, table 1 shows that countries in the region display significant variation in terms of the Global Peace Index (GPI)[5] and the Human Development Index (HDI).[6] Specifically, WAEMU countries vary in ranking on the GPI from 69th (Senegal) to 154th (Mali) out of 163 countries worldwide. Similarly, according to the HDI, WAEMU countries range in ranking from 157th (Côte d'Ivoire) to 188th (Mali and Niger) out of 193 countries worldwide. Six out of the eight WAEMU countries – Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Senegal and Togo – improved their HDI ranking from 2015 to 2023; however, during the same period, Benin's ranking dropped by four places while Mali's remained unchanged.

► **Table 1. WAEMU country rankings in the Global Peace Index 2025 and the Human Development Index 2023**

	GPI 2025 ranking	HDI 2023 ranking
Benin	112	173
Burkina Faso	152	186
Cote d' Ivoire	94	157
Guinea-Bissau	101	174
Mali	154	188
Niger	143	188
Senegal	69	169
Togo	126	161

Source: Global Peace Index 2025 by Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP); Human Development Index by UNDP

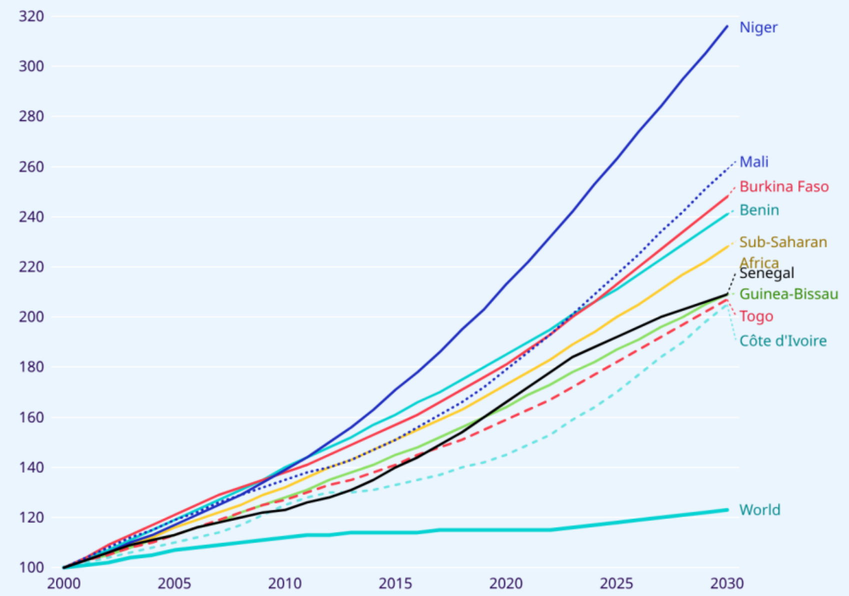
[5] Institute for Economics & Peace (2025) and GPI raw data, 2008-2023.

[6] UNDP (2025). The Human Development Index (HDI) is a broader measure of a country's human development which takes into account also life expectancy and educational attainment, in addition to per capita GDP.

Youth labour market trends

- Africa is a relatively young continent, with a growing youth population that brings both potential and challenges (ILO, 2020a). In the new millennium, WAEMU countries have all seen substantial growth in line with the more general continental trend. Among WAEMU countries, youth population growth rates have been higher in the poorer countries in the region and vice versa, with Niger's youth population growing fastest and Côte d'Ivoire's slowest (figure 3).[7]

Figure 3. Youth (15–29) population in WAEMU countries, Sub-Saharan Africa, Africa and the World, 2000–2030; 2000=100



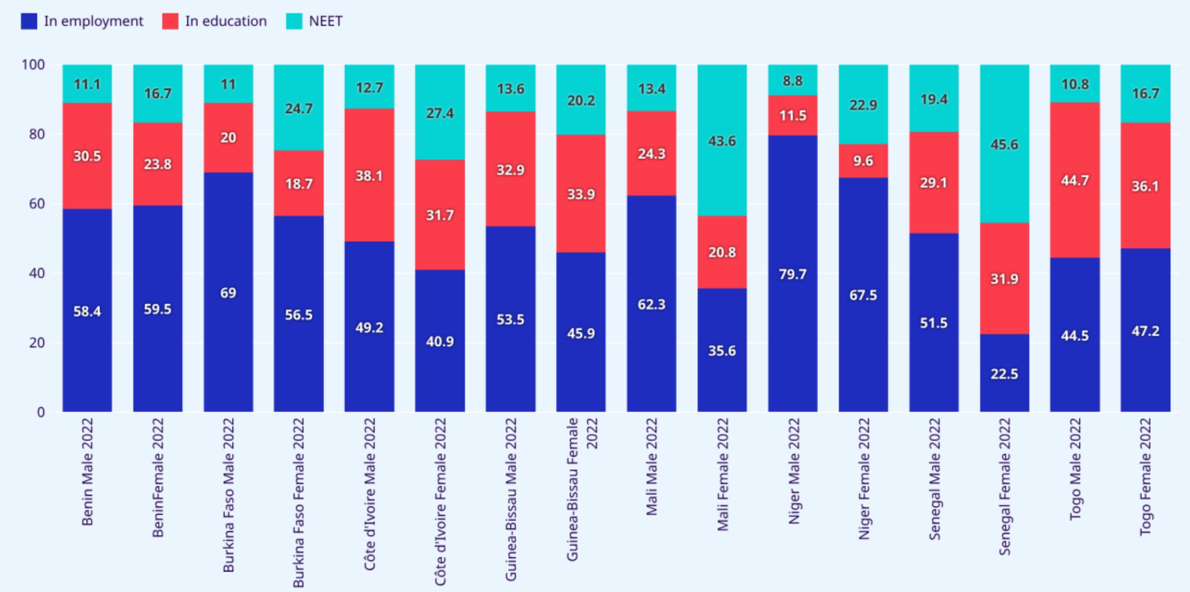
The figure reports indices for the youth population (age 15-29), for WAEMU countries*, Sub-Saharan Africa and the World with 2000 = 100 in each case.*
Source: Population indices are calculated on [UN estimates and projections of population by age and sex](), July 2024 (thousands)

- There are significant cross-country differences and some common trends when we look at young people's status in the WAEMU countries (figure 4).
- The employment-to-population ratios (EPRs) of young people (aged 15–29) in WAEMU vary widely across countries; among young men, EPRs range from 44.5 per cent in Togo to 79.7 per cent in Niger. Even more pronounced, the EPR of young women is as low as 22.5 per cent in Senegal but reaches 67.5 per cent in Niger.

[7] UN estimates and projections, July 2024 (thousands), ILOSTAT

- NEET rates vary across countries too, although a little less so than with EPRs – once gender is factored in. Amongst young men, NEET rates range from 8.8 per cent in Niger to 19.4 per cent in Senegal; the corresponding female rates go from 16.7 per cent in Benin and Togo to 45.6 per cent in Senegal.
- Educational participation also exhibits significant variation across the region; from 9.6 per cent for young women in Niger, to 33.9 per cent amongst young women in Guinea-Bissau. Similarly, male participation varies from 11.5 per cent in Niger to 38.1 per cent in Côte d'Ivoire.

▶ Figure 4. Youth status (age 15–29) in WAEMU countries by sex, 2022 (percentage)



Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), held in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/.

- Across the region, young women clearly do face greater challenges than young men in gaining entry to the labour market and there are major gender differences in all these indicators. This is especially the case for NEET rates which are invariably (much) higher amongst young women than young men; an issue of importance which will be returned to below. Female NEET rates are, at best, around 50 per cent higher than male NEET rates in Benin, Guinea-Bissau and Togo; they are over twice as high in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Senegal, and over three times as high in Mali.
- Employment-to-population ratios also display significant albeit slightly less pronounced gender disparities. Again, the most substantial difference in EPRs is to be found in Mali (62.3 per cent for young men, 35.6 per cent for young women); on the other hand, in Benin and Togo the EPR of young women is slightly higher than the EPR of young men.
- Educational participation rates are also generally, though not always, higher amongst young men than young women. The differences here are much smaller than for the other two indicators.

Youth Employment

- Agriculture dominates youth employment in the region and accounts for between 38.2 per cent (in Togo) and 82.1 per cent (in Niger) youth jobs (table 2). The service sector also employs substantial numbers of young people – indeed in Togo the share of youth jobs in services is around the same as in agriculture. The sector accounts for between 10.8 per cent (in Niger) and 38.4 per cent (in Togo) of youth jobs. Industrial employment takes up the remaining share of accounting for between 7.1 per cent (in Niger) and 25.2 per cent (in Senegal) of youth jobs.

▶ **Table 2. Youth (age 15–29) employment distribution by economic activity and sex, 2022 (percentage)**

	Agriculture	Industry	Services
Benin	45.8	22.4	31.7
Burkina Faso	46.6	21.8	31.5
Cote d'Ivoire	46.4	15.5	38.1
Guinea-Bissau	72.2	8.6	19.2
Mali	70.7	8.8	20.5
Niger	82.1	7.1	10.8
Senegal	40.5	25.2	34.3
Togo	38.2	23.4	38.4
WAEMU (unweighted average)	57.3	15.6	27.1

Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), held in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/ .

- Youth employment is primarily self-employment (table 3), although some countries have seen growth in waged jobs in recent years, as discussed in the individual country briefs.[8] Overall, self-employment accounts for 70.1 per cent of youth jobs in the region; ranging from one-half (49.9 per cent in Senegal) to over four-fifths (82.1 per cent in Niger) of all youth employment in WAEMU countries.
- Almost all youth jobs are informal. Informality accounts for between 96.2 per cent of youth employment in Togo to 99.5 per cent in Niger. In general, informal employment is more prevalent amongst young women than young men. Thus, the quality of youth jobs is clearly also an important issue for the region. More detail and discussion are provided in the individual country briefs.

[8]The ILO status in employment indictor subdivides workers to describe the relationships of their jobs to the workplace. Broadly, the employed are classified as either "employees" or "self-employed". The former are in paid employment (with explicit or implicit contracts) which provide them with basic renumeration, whereas the latter are mainly or wholly reliant on sales and profits. Self-employment is dominated by own-account workers in low quality informal employment and in the past was indeed used as a proxy for informal employment.

▶ **Table 3. Prevalence of self-employment among youth (age 15–29) by sex, 2022 (percentage)**

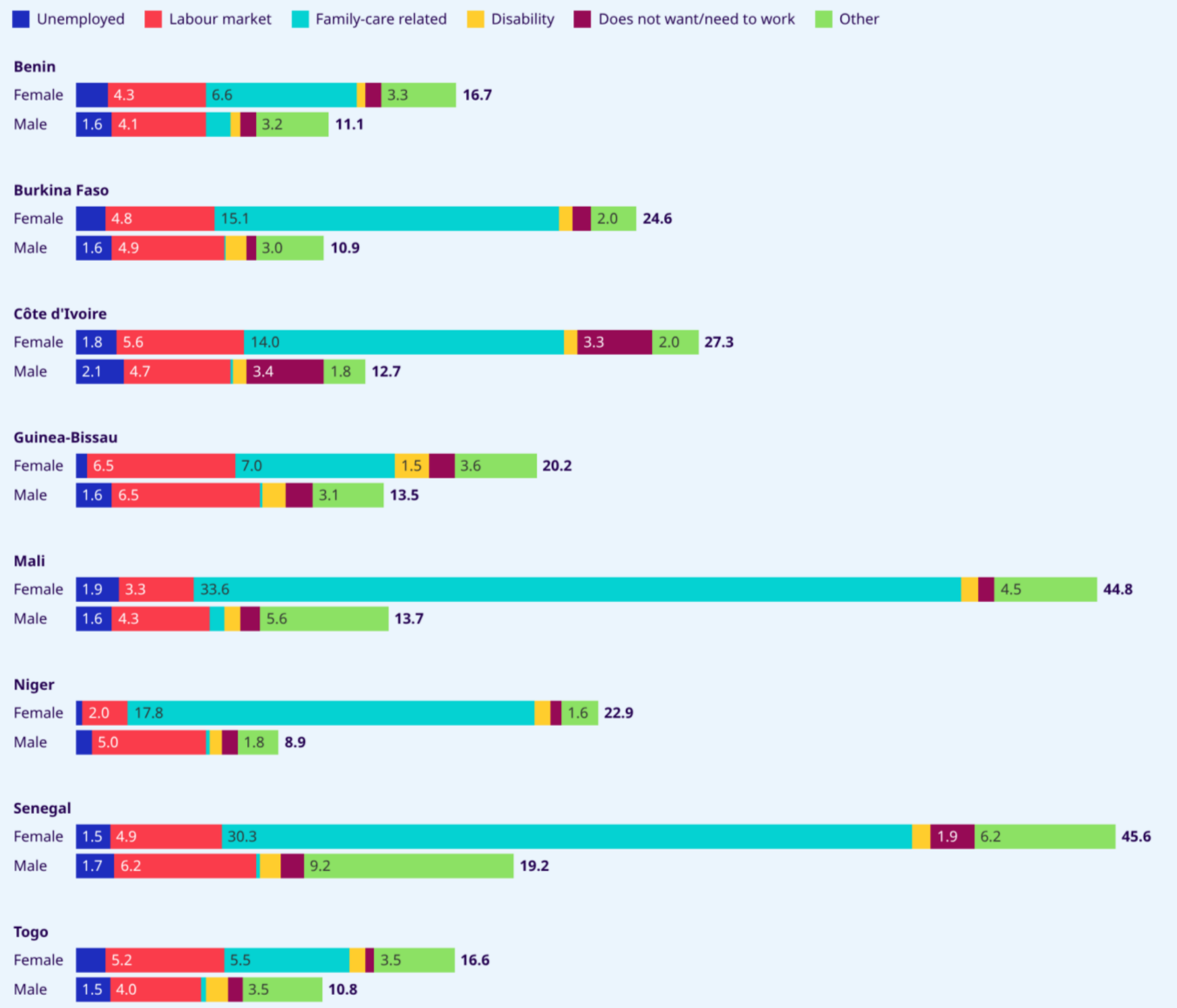
	Female	Male	Total
Benin	70.8	66.9	68.9
Burkina Faso	71.1	52.3	61.3
Cote d'Ivoire	71.3	54.6	62.7
Guinea-Bissau	86.4	71.4	78.5
Mali	79.3	67.1	71.7
Niger	95.3	82.1	89.0
Senegal	61.5	49.9	53.9
Togo	71.8	58.2	65.6
WAEMU (unweighted average)	77.8	63.2	70.1

Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), held in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/ .

Gender & Neet

- An important source of the gender disparities in NEET rates identified above is to be found in the disproportionate engagement of young women in family care responsibilities (figure 5). Decomposing NEET rates by reason for being NEET reveals that 'family-related care' is the main factor underlying the observed gender differences. For the most part, other reasons for being NEET are of much more similar size for young women and men.
- Moreover, one can also see that differences in family care responsibilities also underlie much of the cross-country differences in NEET rates themselves.
- Also of note, the unemployed – that is, young people who are not working but are available and actively seeking work – are a relatively small component of NEET young people as a whole, and comprise a similar proportion of the population across countries with relatively small gender disparities.

▶ **Figure 5. NEET rates of youth (aged 15–29) by sex decomposed by reason for being NEET, 2022 (percentage)**

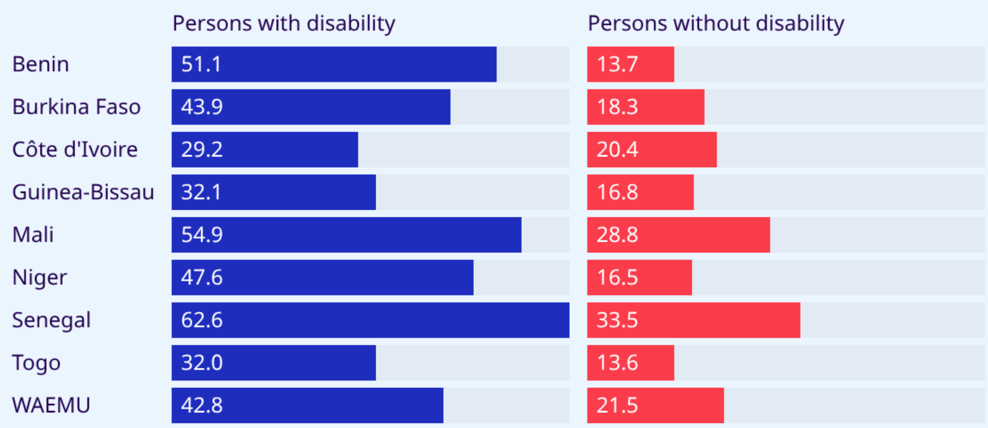


Note: **Unemployed** NEETs are those who are not engaged in employment, education or training but are available and actively looking for employment opportunities**. Labour market related reasons** for being NEET include those associated with discouragement (past failure to find a suitable job, lack of experience, qualifications or jobs matching the person's skills, lack of jobs in the area, considered too young or too old by prospective employers, and does not know how/where to find a job) as well as other labour market reasons (waiting for an answer to an application, and seasonal break). **Family-care related reasons** cover looking after small children and other household and domestic responsibilities; **disability** covers young people who are not seeking a job due to disability or illness; whereas a young NEET who **"does not need/want to work"** may have other sources of income. **Other** is a residual category covering a variety of motivations not covered by the first four categories.
Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), held in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/.

Disability & NEET

- People with disabilities face additional obstacles to their effective participation in labour markets. As pointed out by the 2025 Global Disability Summit in Berlin, young people with disabilities are especially disadvantaged at the global level, facing NEET rates that are twice those of their non-disabled peers. [9]The NEET rates of young people with disabilities in WAEMU countries are no exception. On average in WAEMU countries, young people with disabilities have NEET rates which are roughly double the NEET rates of young people without disability. In Benin and Niger, they are three times as high (figure 6).

Figure 6. NEET rates of young people (aged 15–29) by disability status, 2022 (percentage)



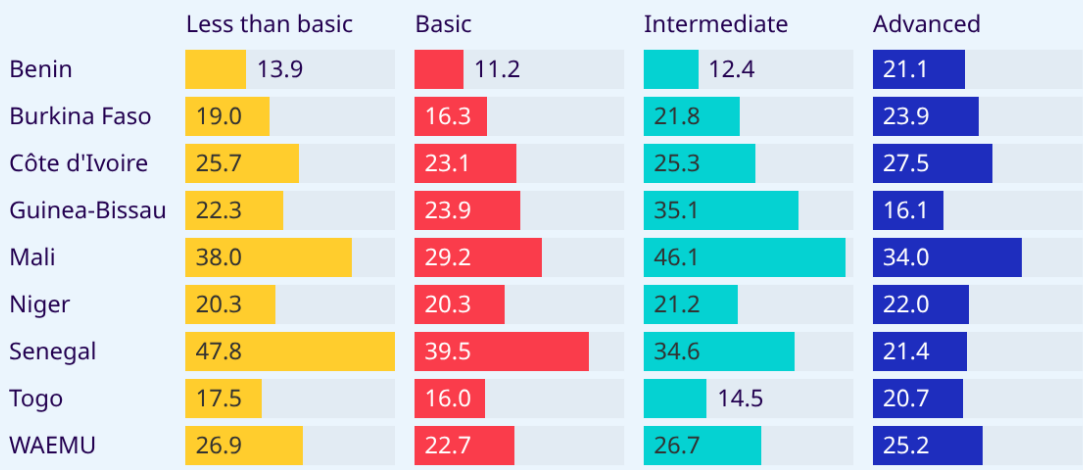
Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), held in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/.

Educational attainment & NEET

- Globally, NEET rates are significantly higher among young people with lower levels of educational attainment (O'Higgins et al. 2023). This relationship, however, tends to be less pronounced in low- and lower-middle-income countries, with considerable variation across countries. In WAEMU, a variety of patterns are found. On average NEET rates are broadly similar across young people attaining different levels of education. As to individual countries, Senegal stands out as conforming fairly closely to the typical global pattern with NEET rates falling sharply as educational attainment increases. In other countries, there are a variety of relationships between NEET and education. NEET rates do not tend to fall as educational attainment rises. Frequently, young people with tertiary educational qualifications are those with the highest NEET rates. This is of concern since it tends to suggest the existence of educational mismatch.

[9] For a more detailed analysis of the disparities in the labour market outcomes faced by people with disabilities, see, for example, Annanian and Dellaferrera (2024).

▶ **Figure 7. NEET rates of young people (aged 25–29) by educational attainment, 2022 (percentage)**

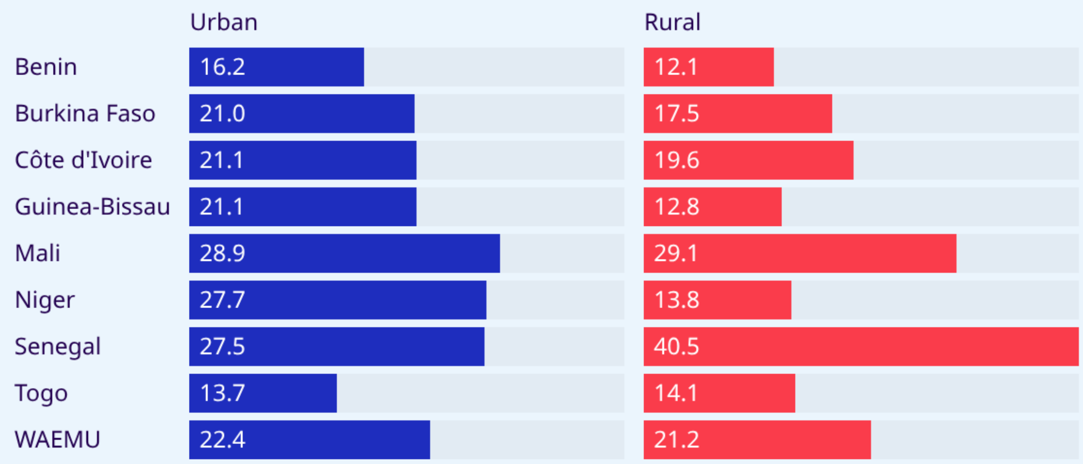


Note: Youth is defined as young people aged 25-29 when analysing educational attainment. Educational attainment is defined here based on the ILO aggregation of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) designed to produce a simple classification of individual educational attainment which is comparable across countries. Broadly speaking: **Basic** educational attainment corresponds to the completion of primary or lower secondary education; **Intermediate**, to the completion of upper secondary education; and **Advanced,** to the completion of tertiary educational studies.
Source: Author's calculations based on the Harmonized Survey of Household Living Conditions (EHCVM), held in the ILO Harmonized Microdata Repository, https://ilostat.ilo.org/.

Location & NEET

- Globally, NEET rates tend to be higher in rural areas than in urban ones. As with NEET and educational attainment, this tendency is more marked in more developed, higher-income countries (O'Higgins et al., 2023). In fact, WAEMU countries display a variety of patterns. In WAEMU countries overall, NEET rates are rather similar in urban and rural areas (figure 8). This is also true in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Togo. In Senegal, NEET rates are significantly higher in rural areas. In contrast, in some of the lower-income countries in the region – Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau and Niger – the opposite is the case, reflecting the greater necessity for young people in rural areas in those countries to engage in subsistence or income-generating activities, rather than remaining NEET.

Figure 8. NEET rates of young people (aged 15–29) by geographical location, 2022 (percentage)



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Key points

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Contact details
International Labour Organization
Route des Morillons 4
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Employment, Labour Markets and Youth Branch
E: emplab@ilo.org
W: www.ilo.org

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