1. Introduction to the Strategy and the Region

Countries in Western and Central Africa (AFW) have made progress in education, but they remain at the bottom of global human capital rankings and have yet to realize the full promise of education. In many of these countries, the education system suffers from chronic underfunding and underperformance, a crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated with school closures, falling household incomes, and strained national budgets. Harsh conditions on multiple fronts further hobble the education system, including widespread social conflict and violence, climate-related vulnerabilities, economic uncertainty and fragility, and the advent of the digital revolution. All countries in the region share a key development challenge: the need to improve learning outcomes and workforce skills through education, specifically in ways that align with and contribute substantively to national agendas for economic growth and poverty reduction. These national agendas, in turn, call for plentiful jobs, higher standards of living, healthier and longer lives, and peace and security at home and abroad. The people of AFW and their leaders have been on this quest for many years and understand that the road ahead remains arduous. They realize that success will require perseverance and continual recommitment, reassessment, and recalibration as opportunities and threats evolve.

To support AFW countries in their quest, this Regional Education Strategy articulates the World Bank’s plan (2021–25) for engagement with the education sector in AFW countries. It is an integral part of the World Bank’s broader support to help transform the economy and foster inclusive growth in the region, as articulated in the World Bank’s (2021d) priorities for AFW for 2021–25. This support envisions four key areas of progress in AFW countries: stronger human capital, more and better jobs, a new social contract, and more climate resilience. Education plays a role in each of these areas and is especially critical in relation to building the region’s human capital.

Informed by consultations with diverse stakeholders, this strategy identifies key challenges and outlines strategic priorities, policy options, and high-impact interventions for improvement. It highlights goals in three specific areas: access to education, learning outcomes, and job-relevant skills. Yet the sharp focus does not exclude effort on other fronts. The strategy identifies interventions for short-term wins as well as long-term impacts. In light of the AFW’s heterogeneity, it recognizes the need to customize the proposed solutions to suit country-specific strategies. In individual countries, achieving tangible outcomes will require critical enabling conditions, including in particular cross-sector collaboration on problem-driven approaches rather than on purely sectoral interventions. Achieving tangible outcomes will also depend on effective partnerships, both within the World Bank across global practices organized along thematic lines and between the World Bank and its country counterparts. These counterparts include stakeholders across government such as national ministers of finance and education as well as members of civil society and development partners.

1.1. The Vision for Education in a Challenging Region

The Regional Education Strategy envisions a bright future for AFW where all girls and boys arrive at school ready to learn, acquire quality learning, and enter the job market with the skills to become productive and fulfilled citizens. Realizing this vision calls for a comprehensive approach, one that addresses challenges across the learning life cycle for students from
preschool through basic and secondary education to tertiary education, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET), as well as training options for those already in the workforce.

The expansive scope of the strategy matches the ambitions of AFW countries for holistic education systems that deliver the human capital needed for sustained economic growth and social development. The strategy supports AFW countries in minimizing learning losses from the COVID-19 pandemic and rebuilding their education systems for greater resilience to future disruptions. It aims to help reorient systems toward new digital and green economic opportunities and to align systems with regional and global initiatives to build human capital. The strategy is an integral part of the World Bank’s (2021d) priorities for AFW for 2021–25. Accordingly, the strategy complements other World Bank institutional initiatives in education and human capital such as the Africa Human Capital Plan, the World Bank’s strategic education policy approach, the commitments of the International Development Association 20th replenishment, and the Digital Economy for Africa Initiative. The strategy is complemented by the Sahel Education White Paper (World Bank 2021e), which highlights and proposes solutions to that subregion’s unique challenges, such as exceptionally low and inequitable access to quality basic education, especially in fragile settings, and pervasive adult illiteracy.

1.2. The Profile of AFW Countries

The AFW region comprises 22 countries with a combined population of half a billion people, which is projected to reach a billion by 2050. Hundreds of local languages are spoken, and official languages include English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic. The geography includes semiarid areas in the Sahel, large coastal zones on the Atlantic Ocean, and lush tropical forests. The region hosts the largest country in Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria, with more than 200 million people, along with small states like Cabo Verde (table 1.1). Half of the countries face situations of fragility, conflict, and violence (FCV), whereas many others enjoy more stability. About 48 percent of the region’s population now reside in cities, a share that is likely to continue growing with rapid urbanization.

Thesconomics of AFW countries are also diverse. Some depend heavily on agriculture, a sector that accounted for 42 percent of employment in the region in 2019. Others depend on natural resources such as oil (Gabon, Nigeria, Republic of Congo); gold (Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso); cocoa (Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana); and cotton (Benin, Burkina Faso). The region saw high economic growth from 2005 to 2015, powered by high commodity prices, but growth rates have slowed down since. The combined gross domestic product (GDP) of the 22 countries in 2019 was an estimated US$711 billion—about one quarter the GDP of the United Kingdom or France.

1.3. Megatrends Affecting Education Outcomes in AFW

Education policies and practices must consider the challenges facing the region. While the region is highly diverse, many of the countries face common challenges and regional megatrends that affect education outcomes.

1.3.1. Extreme Poverty

Across the continent, the share of people living in extreme poverty declined from 54 percent in 1990 to 41 percent in 2015; however, during that same period,
the number of people living in extreme poverty rose from 278 million to 413 million due to high population growth (Beegle and Christiaensen 2019). As extreme poverty rates trend downward globally, Africa’s share of the world’s poor is projected to rise to more than 80 percent by 2023 (Kharas, Hamel, and Hofer 2018). In 2018, Nigeria had the continent’s largest population living in extreme poverty: approximately 87 million people (Y. Kazeem 2018). In addition to Nigeria, 13 other countries in AFW also as of 2018 had more than 30 percent of their population living on less than US$1.90 a day (Y. Kazeem 2018). Many more people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty given the depressed economic conditions the COVID-19 pandemic has caused.

### Poverty in Africa is chronic.
Around 60 percent of the continent’s poor have been poor for several years, and over half of the continent’s poor are below the age of 15 (Beegle and Christiaensen 2019). Extreme poverty contributes to the lagging education outcomes in the region. The poor are least likely to be educated. They often live in rural areas where schools may not be present and tend to have other demographic and socioeconomic or cultural traits, such as disability and malnutrition, associated with fewer years of schooling and with poorer learning outcomes. In addition, households with extreme poverty have no margin for investments in education, which only widens existing gaps.

#### Table 1.1. Countries in Western and Central Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>Lower-middle income</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso*</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>2.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central African Republic*</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Côte d’Ivoire</td>
<td>Lower-middle income</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameroon*</td>
<td>Lower-middle income</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>1.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congo, Rep.*</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>–3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabo Verde</td>
<td>Lower-middle income</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>–4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabon</td>
<td>Upper-middle income</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>–0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Lower-middle income</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambia, The</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea-Bissau*</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equatorial Guinea</td>
<td>Upper-middle income</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>–4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>–6.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali*</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>–1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>Lower-middle income</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niger*</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria*</td>
<td>Lower-middle income</td>
<td>206.1</td>
<td>–0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>Lower-middle income</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>1.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>–1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Togo</td>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>–0.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: GDP = gross domestic product; * denotes the World Bank’s fragile and conflict-affected situation classification in fiscal 2021/22.
A major contributing factor to extreme poverty in the region is the challenging macro-outlook, manifested in low economic growth. In 2020, real GDP in AFW contracted by an estimated 1.1 percent (Zeufack et al. 2021). Although there is considerable variation within the region, this contraction worsened the very slow growth the region had been experiencing in recent years. Furthermore, the gap between per capita incomes in high-income countries and those in AFW countries, as well as other developing countries, has grown steadily. Fifty years ago, the per capita incomes in AFW countries were 8 percent of those of high-income countries; today, they are only 4 percent. The prevalence of extreme poverty affects investments in human capital and, more specifically, education. The macroeconomic situation is further tightening the already limited fiscal space, reducing the public funds available to invest in education.

1.3.2 Resource Dependencies

Many AFW countries are highly resource dependent and face sustainability and governance challenges. In a sense, all AFW countries are “mining” their nonrenewable capital, whether it is hydrocarbons, minerals, or land. Consuming nonrenewable capital, rather than transforming it into human or produced capital, is not sustainable. In addition, agriculture remains a critical part of the region’s economy and provides employment to 82 million people in the region.

Growth based on extraction generates few jobs and increases economic vulnerability to commodity price shocks. For example, oil-rich countries like the Republic of Congo, Gabon, and Nigeria have struggled with drops in global oil prices in recent years. Nigeria in particular is highly dependent on oil exportation. In 2019, 80 percent of the country’s budget revenue was generated by the oil and gas industry (Nwuke 2021). During the collapse of global oil and gas prices between 2014 and 2016, annual real GDP growth plummeted to 2.7 percent in 2015 and −1.6 percent in 2016 from an average of 7 percent during the period 2000–14 (World Bank 2019b). Countries must diversify their economies to guard against unexpected shocks in commodity prices.

In addition to the economic impact of commodity price shocks, the rents generated from extraction are widely perceived to be shared inequitably, which generates grievances that, in turn, often aggravate corruption and insecurity and reduce government accountability. Such resource dependence removes incentives for governments to invest in quality education and discourages citizens from demanding more and better education. The resource dependency also limits the predictability of financing for education.

1.3.3 Demographic Trends

Demographic trends and high population growth put significant pressure on provision of education. The region’s population of 459 million people is growing at an average annual rate of 3 percent, far above the Sub-Saharan Africa average of 2 percent and the global average of 1 percent. The total fertility rate for an average country in the region is 4.63, almost twice the 2.4 global average. The current growth rate is not sustainable given that the population has already quadrupled in the last 50 years and is projected to double by 2050.

Given the high population growth and fertility rate, children and youth make up a large share of the population. Therefore, the region has one of the youngest populations in the world: 12 percent of the population is under the age of 15, and about 64 percent is under the age of 24 (figure 1.1). The young population holds potential for demographic dividend if countries can prevent high youth unemployment rates by ensuring that their young citizens can contribute productively to the economy. In summary, carefully crafted policies could transform the threat of a large unemployed youth population into a demographic dividend.

Young people, no longer satisfied by the opportunities in rural areas, are rapidly migrating into the cities. The region’s cities are likely to become increasingly crowded as urbanization throughout AFW speeds up, with cities already hosting 48 percent of the population. Though rapid urbanization creates economies of scale in cities that enable investment in education, it also isolates those living in rural areas, thereby widening existing gaps. Rapid population growth puts even more strain on quality of education, requiring systems to hire large numbers of teachers, many of whom might lack the necessary qualifications.
1.3.4. Fragility, Conflict, and Violence

The social contract in AFW is breaking down, and violent conflict is on the upswing. Citizens tend to have less trust in states that do not provide security and fail to deliver basic services. The increase in violent conflict includes insurgency movements, community conflict, and interpersonal violence, all of which further undermine trust in government. Of the region’s 22 countries, 11 are now affected by FCV, and almost three-quarters of the region’s population live in the affected countries (figure 1.2). The impact on education has been devastating. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 2 million children were not in school because their schools were either closed or not operating due to insecurity. Since 2010, at least 2,880 events of violence have occurred in and around schools; such events rose from just 39 in 2010 to 559 in 2020 and 440 in the first half of 2021 (figure 1.2). In just the first seven months of 2021, more than 1,037 people in and around educational facilities, mostly students and teachers, were kidnapped.

Moreover, the region currently includes more than 12 million people of concern, among them 7.4 million internally displaced persons (UNHCR 2022). The region has a total of 5 million forcibly displaced children. During the 2020–21 school year, more than half of the refugee children in AFW did not attend school. This problem is particularly acute for secondary school. While 60 percent of refugee children in AFW are enrolled in primary school, only 15 percent are enrolled in secondary, and just 1 percent of refugees 18–24 years old have access to higher education and vocational training. These percentages are not only much lower than the values for non-refugees but also lower than the values for refugees in other parts of the world. For example, globally, 3 percent of refugees are enrolled in higher education (UNHCR 2021c). For those who do access education, the quality of learning environments tends to be very low.

1.3.5. Climate Change

Climate change is adding new challenges. Africa accounts for only 2 to 3 percent of the world’s emissions of carbon dioxide from energy and industrial sources, yet it may nonetheless suffer the greatest impact (Zeufack et al. 2021). This impact is already evident in the Sahel subregion. The increased frequency and severity of climatic shocks threaten livelihoods, exacerbate conflict, and force households into coping strategies that reduce human capital.

The region continues to be affected by incidents of flooding, which have grown more severe year after year. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA 2020) reported that in 2020 alone, 2.7 million people in 18 countries in the region were severely affected by flooding, significantly up from the previous year when 1.1 million people were affected in 11 countries. In addition to floods, coastal degradation is worsening throughout the region. The World Meteorological Organization (2020) estimates that nearly 56 percent of the coastlines in Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, and Senegal are already eroding. These climate conditions damage farmland and affect livelihoods dependent on agriculture, undermining the many economies to which agriculture is essential. These conditions also increase food

---

5 A person of concern is any person whom the UNHCR (2021a) considers a refugee, internally displaced person, asylum seeker, or stateless person, with some additional persons not fitting these criteria.
insecurity, thereby putting learners’ cognitive abilities at risk as learners do not arrive at school ready to learn.

*Other shocks of climate change also affect education outcomes by forcing temporary school closures or permanent relocation of schools and generally making it harder for children to attend classes.* Rising temperatures create heat waves that reduce learning. The Programme for International Student Assessment, a worldwide survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), issued credible causal estimates for 58 countries. The estimates suggest that in the three years preceding the exam, each day above 80 degrees Fahrenheit (26 degrees Celsius) decreased scores by 0.018 standard deviations (Park, Behrer, and Goodman 2021). Similarly, air pollution (Currie et al. 2009; Roth 2017) decreases school attendance and affects current (Ebenstein, Lavy, and Roth 2016) and future learning outcomes (Bharadwaj et al. 2017). Furthermore, the conflicts spurred by climate change compound the threats to education systems. These impacts are higher for the poorest, which exacerbates inequalities.

### 1.3.6. Digital Revolution

The *digital technology revolution is transforming the region*. AFW has been able to leapfrog some technological developments, as demonstrated by the fact that an average country in the region boasts 88 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people. Mobile subscriptions have risen rapidly in the region, with the number of subscriptions 15 times greater in 2015–17 compared with 2010–12, and universal mobile penetration has the potential to increase GDP by 2 percentage points per year and decrease poverty by 1 percentage point per year across the region (Choi, Dutz, and Usman 2020).

Although mobile services are widely accessible, the charges and fees are relatively high for income levels in the region, and mobile networks have poor quality in comparison with other regions (Choi, Dutz, and Usman 2020). Moreover, in an average country in the region, only 23 percent of the population use the internet. One main barrier to full AFW adoption of digital technologies is low access to digital technologies and infrastructure. Notably, 18 of the 20 least wirelessly

---

*Source: Original analysis by World Bank Education team based on the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.*

---

**Figure 1.2. Political Violence in and around Education Facilities, 2010–21**

- Battles
- Explosions/Remote violence
- Protest
- Riots
- Strategic developments
- Violence against civilians

---

24 Western and Central Africa Education Strategy

---
connected countries in the world are in Africa, and the continent has limited access to broadband services for internet and data services (Choi, Dutz, and Usman 2020). Additionally, digital technologies are unaffordable for many people in the region, many of whom lack digital skills.

**Digital technologies provide great opportunities for the region’s development, including in education.** Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, AFW countries have, for example, sought to identify opportunities to incorporate blended learning approaches into the education service delivery. However, the mobile and internet challenges profoundly complicate any efforts in the region to use technology to make education more effective and equitable and weaken the labor force’s ability to compete in the twenty-first century.

### 1.4. Organization of the Report

The Regional Education Strategy draws on data, analyses, and experience relating to education in AFW and elsewhere. These resources are arranged into eight chapters, as follows, in the rest of this report:

- Chapter 2 presents the case for modernizing the learning life cycle in AFW countries. The chapter highlights the nature of the education crisis in AFW and the yet-to-materialize promise of education. It specifies expected outcomes in terms of time-bound quantitative targets for learning outcomes in basic education, girls’ access to education, and the coverage and labor market outcomes of TVET and higher education. The chapter reimagines the prospects for progress through a new conceptual framework with three interconnected parts: an enabling policy environment; high-impact interventions; and stronger capacity for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
- Chapter 3 elaborates on the ideal policy environment and the strategic actions required of top-level policy makers to create and sustain that environment. These actions emphasize political mobilization around shared commitment to national goals for education; effective governance for coherent and effective service delivery; and adequate, efficient, and equitable funding of investment in education.
- Chapter 4 is the first of three chapters (chapters 4, 5, and 6) outlining high-impact interventions to deliver quick wins under the strategy. It highlights the need for critical action aimed at transforming the teaching profession; enhancing students’ readiness to learn; and providing a conducive learning environment, one supplied with books and learning materials, that conducts routine learning assessment.
- Chapter 5 advocates for high-impact interventions to remove both supply- and demand-side barriers to widen learning opportunities across AFW, especially for girls. It highlights barriers such as high direct costs of schooling, long distances to schools, unfavorable social norms, rising insecurity and violence around schools, and vulnerability and unpreparedness against unexpected disruption of services.
- Chapter 6 focuses on high-impact interventions to advance AFW countries’ agenda on building job-relevant skills. It identifies actions to strengthen AFW’s nascent skills-building systems by improving the governance of service provision, dismantling barriers to skills acquisition, managing service delivery for relevance, and fostering sustainability in service provision.
- Chapter 7 highlights the need to strengthen the capacity of education systems in key areas, including public financial management of education budgeting, planning, and budget execution; technical expertise in core education services (such as curriculum development and textbook design); managerial and leadership skills of the heads of schools and other educational institutions; and data systems for informed decision-making in the sector.
- Chapter 8 reflects on the World Bank’s support for education in AFW in the coming years. It takes stock of the World Bank’s operational experience, distills lessons into key principles to guide the design and content of future investments, and proposes a pragmatic approach involving country classifications to enhance the country-specific responsiveness of the World Bank’s support and approach.