

A Fulcrum for the Future

BRIEF

The Time to Act is Now:
Invest in Girls' Education and
Voluntary Family Planning



Undoing the gridlock in the Sahel by focusing on girls' education and voluntary family planning

Poverty, food insecurity, violent extremism, climate crises, and displacement are wreaking havoc in the Sahel and causing unimaginable human suffering. At the same time, the Sahel has been deprioritized as other crises have taken center stage at the global level. Against this backdrop, one additional factor threatens to exacerbate the region's other challenges to the point of insolubility. That factor is the region's population growth rate, which is the highest in the world.

The demographic window is an opportune moment when a country's age structure, paired with the right policies, can enable more favorable economic and social conditions.

Education and FP are human rights-based approaches that promote women's full engagement in society while also slowing population growth. Research shows that better educated and more autonomous women are more likely to marry and start childbearing later in life, and often choose to have smaller families. These conditions are necessary to shift current demographic trends, and set the Sahel on the path toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Increasing access to family planning (FP) and education are strategic, mutually reinforcing interventions that dramatically enhance women's autonomy and open the "demographic window."

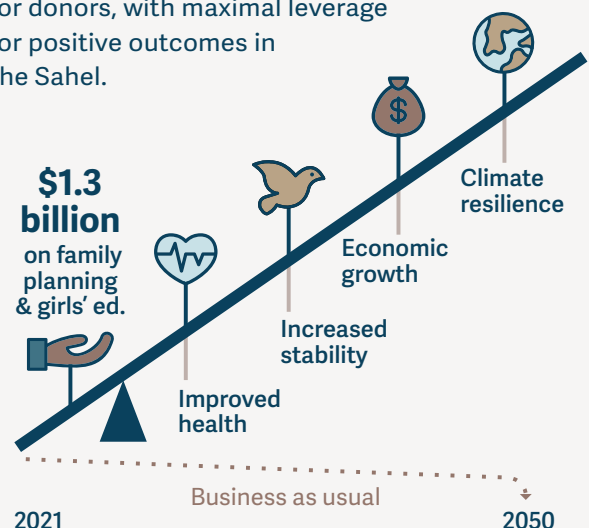
Importantly, **greater access to education and FP catalyzes progress in other sectors, making Sahel communities healthier, more resilient, better resourced, more prosperous, and more stable and secure.** (Figure 1)

Girls' education and FP offer a vital investment opportunity for Sahel countries and donors to enable the Sahel to overcome the current impasse, reduce human suffering in the region and capitalize on the region's great potential.

FIGURE 1: LEVERAGING POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Investing in family planning and girls' education is mutually reinforcing.

Together they offer the best value for donors, with maximal leverage for positive outcomes in the Sahel.



Rapid population growth jeopardizes progress made in improving women and girls' autonomy

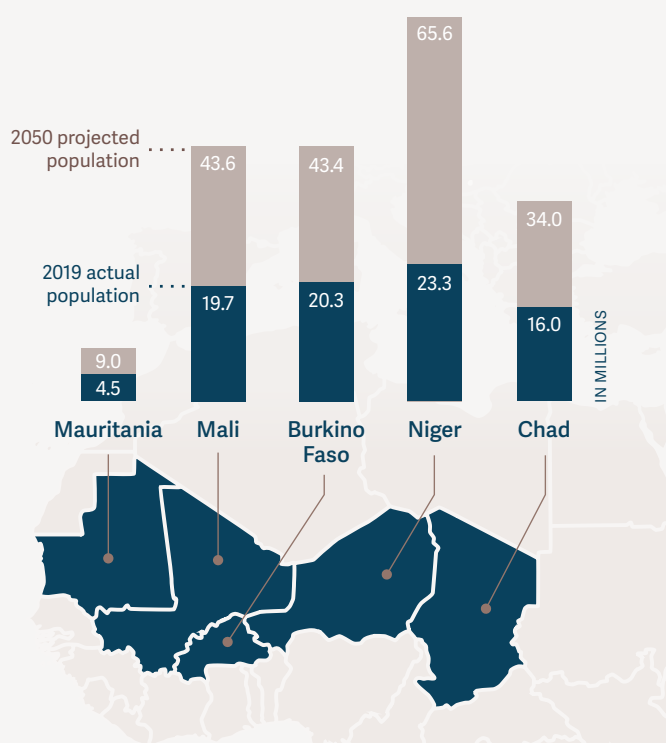
The population of the G5 Sahel countries — Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger — has doubled in the last 20 years, reaching 84 million people. The population will likely double again in the coming decades, surpassing 200 million by 2050 (Figure 2).¹ The Sahel's population is also among the youngest in the world. According to UNFPA, young people aged between 10 and 24 represent 52% of the population in the Sahel, or around 53 million people.² And this number is going to increase.

In these circumstances, maintaining (let alone improving) the current per capita GDP, school enrollment rates, and health care access would require an 11% annual GDP growth— which is unfortunately beyond the realm of possibility. According to Toby Lanzer, former UN Assistant Secretary-General, “Unless the Sahel countries tackle this demographic challenge which faces them, the countries will get poorer, and the communities will suffer more . . . which could result in a tempest of incalculable proportions.”³

Avoiding this fate hinges on both donor and Sahel countries' support to the girls and women in the region, who face insurmountable challenges to meet their reproductive health and educational needs.

In Niger, Chad, and Mali, for example, the median age of marriage is sixteen, and about 40% of women become mothers before age eighteen. The region's fertility rates are among the highest in the world (ranging from 4.4 in Mauritania to 6.7 in Niger), despite genuine interest among women to manage their fertility.⁴

FIGURE 2: 2050 SAHEL POPULATION PROJECTION

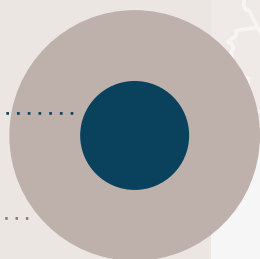


The population of the G5 Sahel region is expected to more than double from

85 million

to nearly

200 million.



Roughly one in four married women in the Sahel have an unmet need for FP, which means they do not want to become pregnant but are not using contraception.

Educational attainment unlocks a virtuous cycle of human development as it tracks with delaying marriage and childbirth, lower fertility rates, and improved preventative health behaviors. It also breaks intergenerational cycles of poverty, and aids socio-economic development.⁵ This is precisely why much greater investment is urgently needed.

The Sahel is ground zero of the girls' education crisis. In Niger and Mali, over 50% of primary school girls never make it to secondary school and only one percent of girls in Burkina Faso graduate from secondary school.⁶ Between 2017 and 2019, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso faced a six-fold increase in school closures.⁷ Covid-19 and insecurity linked closure have forced 3.8 million children in Mali, 5.1 million in Burkina Faso and 3.8 million in Niger out of school. This is a total of 12.8 million children.⁸

SOURCE: UN World Population Prospects 2019.

Investments in education and voluntary FP will pay off at all levels, but are increasingly under threat

The Copenhagen Consensus Center analyzed the cost-benefit relationships for investments in all SDG areas. It found that spending on universal access to FP had the second-highest return on investment, yielding \$120 of annual social, economic, and environmental benefits for every \$1 spent (Figure 3).⁹ Investing the recommended additional \$107 million in FP could leverage over \$12 billion in returns. As such, FP is the single most impactful investment donors can make.

Funding FP and girls' education in the Sahel are high-yield investments in human capital and in the region's future. The cost of investing in these two areas is within reach: an additional \$1.3 billion for girls' education and \$107 million for FP are needed annually.¹⁰

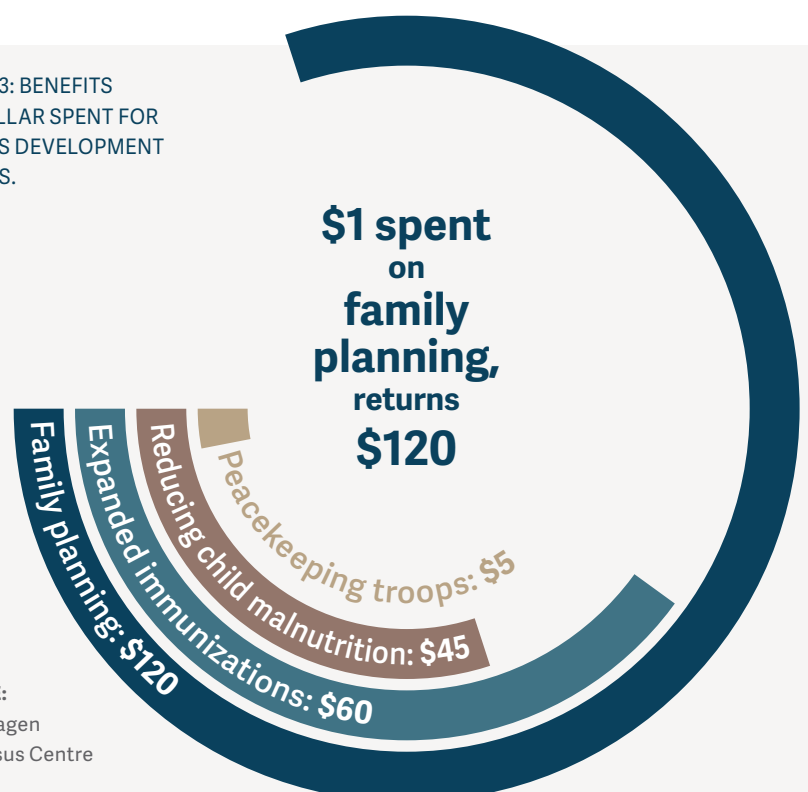
Nevertheless, funding for FP and education is under threat. Defense spending has increased astronomically over the past decade — the five Sahel countries spend between 17 and 30% of their budgets on military and security.¹¹ This past decade, military expenditure in Mali rose by 339%, Niger by 388%, and Burkina Faso by 238%.¹² This spending undermines the ability of local policymakers to make other investments to support the population's well-being. Climate change mitigation spending has further decreased public funding available for health and education, and will increasingly do so.¹³ In addition, global crises outside of the region have deprioritized the Sahel on the international agenda, as funding has been directed elsewhere.

There is an urgent need to recalibrate the funding envelopes. New commitments need to reflect the long-term impacts that family planning and girls' education will have on security, humanitarian efforts, climate adaptation, and population resilience. Investments in these two areas are mutually reinforcing. They are in line with national policy commitments of the G-5 countries, and together they offer the best value for donors, with maximal leverage for positive outcomes in the region.¹⁴

"Fighting inequality is well within our reach. This is about massive reinvestment in high-quality social policies that benefit everyone, and the international community has a crucial role to play. Today, my country mobilizes precious resources to finance our security, often at the detriment of our schools and hospitals, which are just as precious and important as security."

— **Adam Dicko**, Youth Association for Active Citizenship and Democracy (AJCAD)

FIGURE 3: BENEFITS PER DOLLAR SPENT FOR VARIOUS DEVELOPMENT TARGETS.



SOURCE:
Copenhagen
Consensus Centre

Regional and cross-sectoral action is needed

Focusing on one issue alone will not solve the enormous challenges the Sahel currently faces. The crises and the solutions are closely interconnected. The education, reproductive health, social justice, security, and climate sectors need to join forces to alter the current trajectory into a future that offers greater regional stability and prosperity for all.

It is important to focus on the Sahel as a region because climate disruption, terrorism, rapid population growth, and poverty know no borders. While the specific contexts of the Sahel countries must be taken into account, close-knit regional collaboration and investment in girls' and women's potential and autonomy are essential across the Sahel.

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The solutions are known; the time to step up is now

Demographic conditions in the Sahel — especially rapid population growth and women's lack of autonomy — shackle the Sahel's development and exacerbate its humanitarian and security challenges. But to contradict Auguste Comte, demography is not destiny.¹⁵ Historical demographic trends in the Sahel

need not determine its future. Small shifts in fertility trends (e.g., reducing average family size by one child) have a major effect on future population size. Improving the autonomy of women and girls in the Sahel will abate the current crisis and pave the way for a more stable future for the region and beyond.

Given the exceptional contribution they can make, voluntary FP and girls' education in the Sahel warrant much greater strategic and financial attention. We urgently call on donors and national governments to close the finance gap for FP and girls' education by investing in effective programming, policies and interventions across sectors; and by developing instruments to increase the alignment between global, regional and national initiatives. Aid is only as effective as the conditions under which it is granted, and all efforts need to happen in close partnership with civil society and local government.

To read the full white paper, go to:
oasissahel.org/resources/a-fulcrum-for-the-future

To contact OASIS:
info@oasissahel.org

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