

Education in the WAEMU: Current Situation and the Way Forward

Can Sever

SIP/2025/074

IMF Selected Issues Papers are prepared by IMF staff as background documentation for periodic consultations with member countries. It is based on the information available at the time it was completed on April 17, 2025. This paper is also published separately as IMF Country Report No 25/111.

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Education in the WAEMU: Current Situation and the Way Forward
Prepared by Can Sever

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ABSTRACT: This paper makes the case for prioritizing the education sector in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) by taking stock of the outcomes and documenting its macroeconomic relevance. Education outcomes across the WAEMU region remain relatively weak, while empirical estimates indicate that improvements could lead to large income gains. Given a young population and high fertility rate, ramping up the progress in education remains critical, including by exploring options to enhance quality, safeguarding related spending, closing gender gaps, and improving the resilience of the education systems to climate and health shocks. Beyond national efforts, regional coordination and cooperation have a crucial role in achieving better education outcomes.

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SELECTED ISSUES PAPERS

Education in the WAEMU: Current Situation and the Way Forward

Prepared by Can Sever¹

¹ I thank Luca Ricci, Lawrence Norton, Andrew Tiffin, Michele Fornino, Nour Tawk and my colleagues in the WAEMU country teams at the IMF African Department for extremely useful suggestions and inputs. I also thank the WAEMU's regional authorities for valuable feedback; and Christine Hofmann, Karim Toumi, Halsey Rogers, Alison Marie Grimsland and Pamela Mulet for helpful discussions.



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CONTENTS

EDUCATION IN THE WAEMU: CURRENT SITUATION AND THE WAY FORWARD __ 2

A. Importance of Education in Economic Growth and Development	2
B. Education Outcomes and Potential GDP Gains	4
C. Education Spending and Outcomes	8
D. Ongoing Policy Efforts	10
E. Quality of Education and Related Policy Options	12
F. Other Regional Policy Options	13
G. Conclusion	15

FIGURES

1. Education and Economic Development	3
2. Young population and Fertility Rate	4
3. Education Outcomes	6
4. Education Outcomes (concluded)	7
5. Education Spending and School Facilities	9
6. Correlation with Education Spending	9

TABLES

1. Estimated Macroeconomic Gains	8
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References	17
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EDUCATION IN THE WAEMU: CURRENT SITUATION AND THE WAY FORWARD¹

This paper makes the case for prioritizing the education sector in the WAEMU by taking stock of the outcomes and documenting its macroeconomic relevance. Education outcomes across the region remain relatively weak, while empirical estimates indicate that improvements could lead to large income gains. Given a young population and high fertility rate, ramping up the progress in education remains critical, including by exploring options to enhance quality, safeguarding related spending, closing gender gaps, and improving the resilience of the education systems to climate and health shocks. Beyond national efforts, regional coordination and cooperation have a crucial role in achieving better education outcomes.

A. Importance of Education in Economic Growth and Development

1. Education is a critical cog in the engine of sustainable economic growth. It can boost economic growth through various channels. For instance, education is a major determinant of human capital in the labor force, thereby contributing to labor productivity and longer term economic growth (e.g., Mankiw et al. 1992). In addition, it can accelerate productivity growth by unlocking the innovative capacity of the economy (e.g., Lucas 1988, Romer 1990, Aghion and Howitt 1998). Extensive empirical evidence shows that education is one of the most important drivers of higher economic growth, including in low-income countries and sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Sala-i Martin et al. 2004, Gyimah-Brempong et al. 2006, Vandenbussche et al. 2006, Hawkes and Ugur 2012, Bloom et al. 2014, Glawe and Wagner 2022, IMF 2024a).² Cross-country data also show that years of schooling are positively associated with per capita GDP, and the WAEMU member states, with relatively low years of schooling and lower levels of economic development, are not an exception to this relationship (Figure 1).

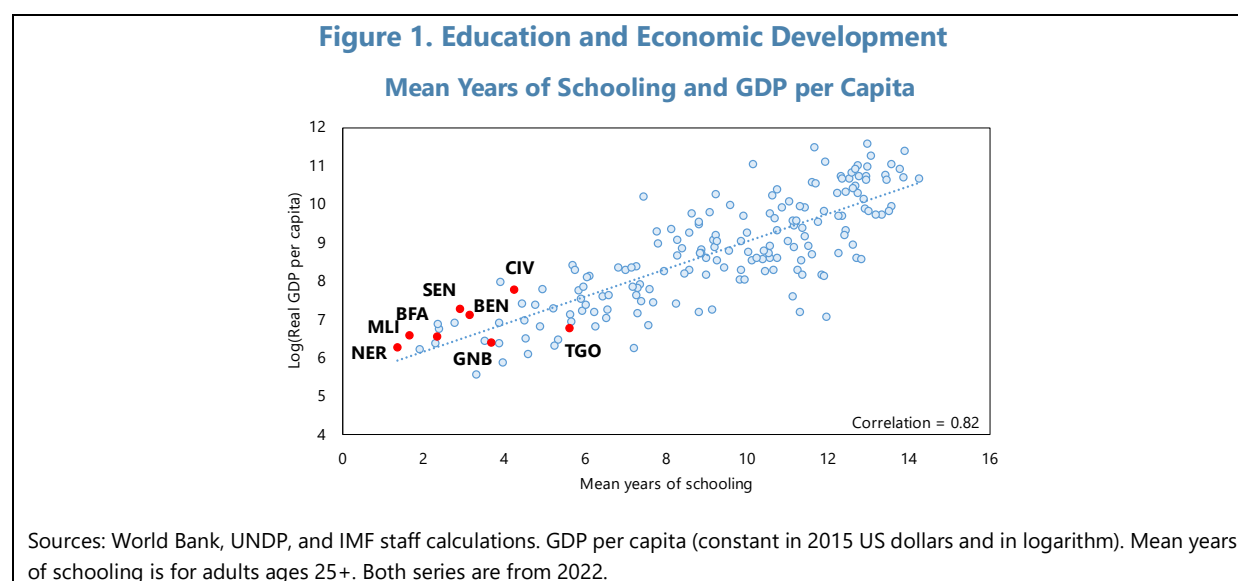
2. Education also plays a pivotal role in development and social outcomes. As education develops skills and knowledge that are associated with higher earnings, countries with higher levels of education face lower poverty rates (e.g., Appleton 2000, Tilak 2002, Kuepie et al. 2009). Better-educated societies experience better health outcomes and lower malnutrition, due to higher earnings and the change in health behaviors, further catalyzing the accumulation of human capital (Cutler and Lleras-Muney 2006, 2012, Raghupathi and Raghupathi 2020). Education also contributes to inclusiveness and social capital by mitigating social tensions, fostering social cohesion, and increasing trust in institutions (e.g., Heyneman 2000, Salmi 2003, Moiseyenko 2005, Easterly et al. 2006). Relatedly, higher societal educational levels improve political stability and decrease the likelihood of armed conflicts, since, for instance, the opportunity cost of rebellion and fighting is

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² See Hanushek and Woessmann (2010) for a review of the literature.

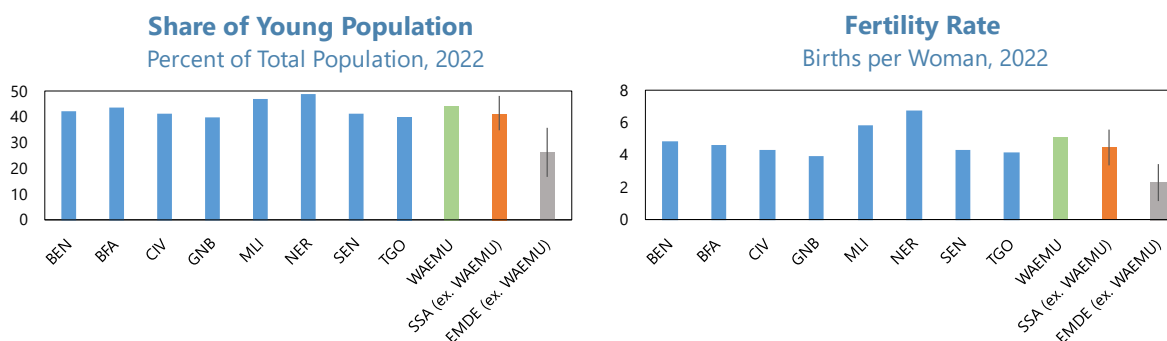
higher for better-educated people (e.g., Collier and Hoeffler 2004, Thyne 2006, Barakat and Urdal 2009, Ostby and Urdal 2011, Ostby et al. 2019, Rohner and Saia 2019).³

3. Thus, education remains a central issue in the policy debate, particularly for developing economies. At the global stage, fostering education outcomes by securing high-quality learning opportunities for all has been set as one of the priorities in the development agenda, including the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development (UN 2015, World Bank 2018, 2023a).



4. Education continues to be of even greater importance for the WAEMU, given the large share of young population and high fertility rates. The WAEMU stands out in the share of young population and fertility rates, compared to the rest of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and other emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs). The young population (ages 0 to 14) amounts to 44 percent of the WAEMU's total population (i.e., around 63 million people), with this percentage being close to 50 percent in Mali and Niger (Figure 2). This share is about 42 percent in SSA, and only around 26 percent in EMDEs. Fertility rates are also high in the WAEMU, with an average of 5.1 births per woman (where Niger is leading with a rate close to 7), while this rate is 4.5 in SSA and 2.3 in EMDEs. A young, dynamic population and a growing talent pool offer an opportunity for a demographic dividend, but only if member states can capitalize on this potential by ensuring widespread and high-quality educational opportunities for the youth, equipping them with the skills required by the key growth sectors.

³ There is a long literature showing that armed conflicts are associated with persistently lower economic growth, e.g., see Sever (2024a) for evidence and a review of the literature. With a regional perspective, high risk of political instability and violence in some member states likely affect growth outcomes in other countries as well (e.g., Sever 2018).

Figure 2. Young Population and Fertility Rate

Sources: World Bank, and IMF staff calculations. Share of young population represents population ages 0-14 (in percent of total population). Fertility rate is the number of births per woman. Both series are from 2022. Group averages are weighted by population. Vertical black lines indicate one standard deviation interval.

B. Education Outcomes and Potential GDP Gains

5. Although education outcomes have improved in the WAEMU since the 1990s, the pace of progress was relatively slow, widening the gap between the member states and their peers.

For instance, mean years of schooling (i.e., average years of schooling for adults ages 25 or above) increased from 2.1 to 2.8 years over the period of 1990-2022, during which Benin and Togo achieved the largest improvements by more than doubling this measure (Figure 3). The progress is notable, nonetheless, the pace was slow, compared to the rest of SSA and EMDEs, where mean years of schooling increased from 3.8 to 6.2 years in SSA, and from 4.3 to 7.6 years in EMDEs. As a result, the gaps between the WAEMU and those comparator groups increased over the last three decades. The gaps in mean years of schooling also translate into lower literacy rates in the region. Adult (youth) literacy rate stays about 52 (64) percent of population in the WAEMU, whereas it is 77 (85) and 86 (95) percent in SSA and EMDEs, respectively.⁴

6. The WAEMU faces challenges in ensuring the transition of students to higher levels of education and preventing dropouts, while also maintaining the quality of education.

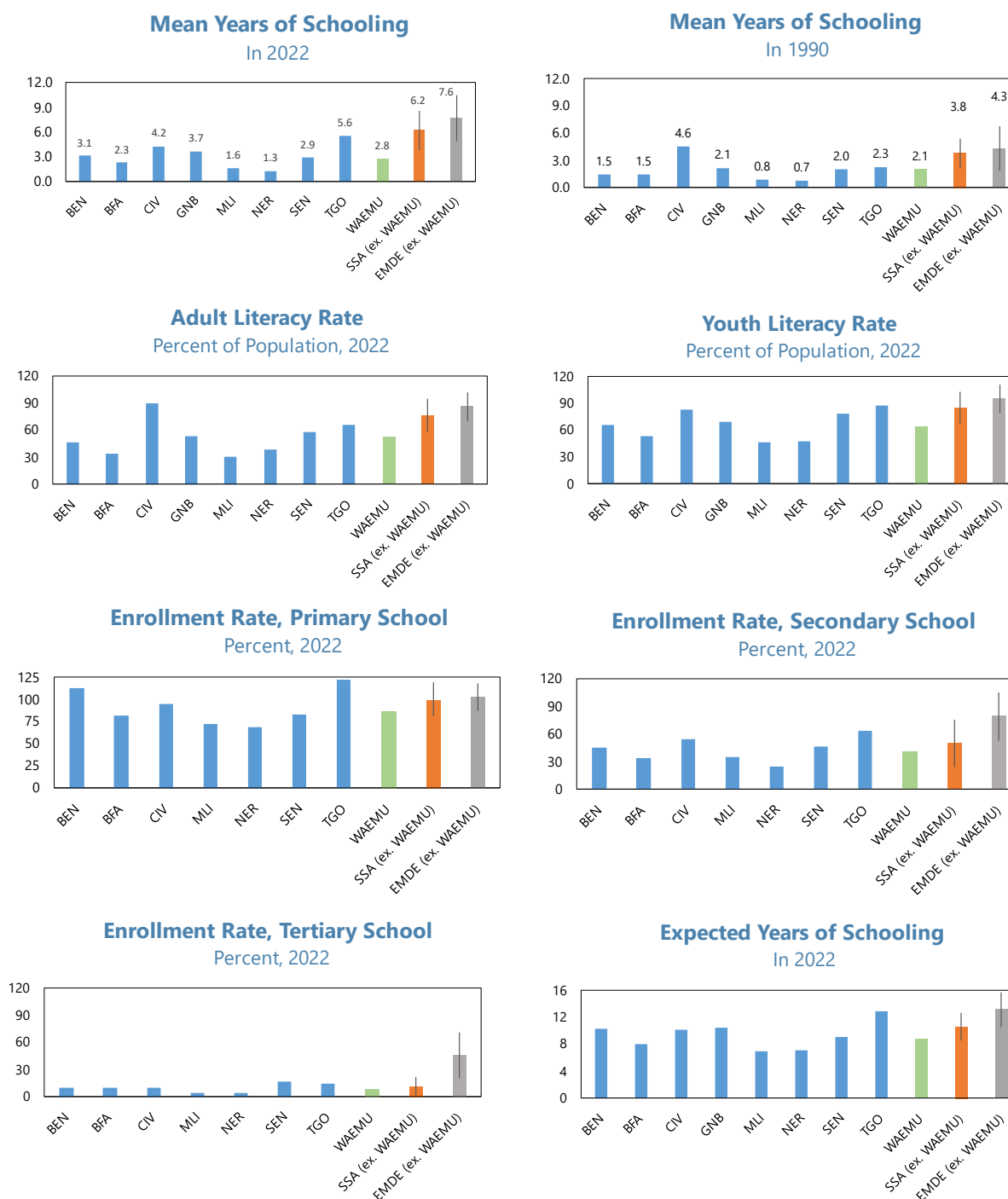
The WAEMU lags both SSA and EMDEs in school enrollment rates, with the gap being particularly large for higher levels of education. The enrollment rate in primary school level stays about 86 percent in the WAEMU, while it is 100 and 103 percent in SSA and EMDEs, respectively (Figure 3).⁵ When it comes to the transition into secondary level education, this rate becomes 41 percent in the WAEMU, remaining 9 and 38 percentage points lower than SSA and EMDEs, respectively. The enrollment rate in the tertiary level education is only 9 percent in the WAEMU, while it is 12 percent in SSA and 46 percent in EMDEs. In addition to relatively low enrollment rates particularly in higher levels of

⁴ Also see Diallo et al. (2023).

⁵ Enrollment rates are gross. Gross enrollment rates can be above 100 percent, since the definition is regardless of age. Specifically, gross enrollment rate for a level of education includes students who are older or younger than the official age group corresponding to that level of education, including the students who repeat a grade and enroll later than the official age (hence, are older than their classmates), or advance quickly (thus, are younger than their classmates). These can make the gross enrolment rate to be above the population which corresponds to that particular level of education.

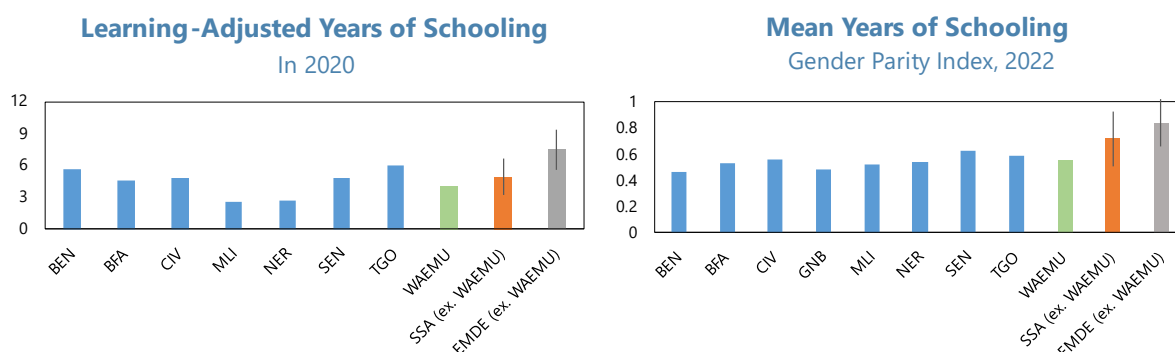
education, there is a notable disconnect between enrollment and completion rates within the same level of education in the WAEMU (Agbidinoukoun et al. 2023, UNESCO 2023). These patterns are also reflected in expected years of schooling for children of school-entering age (a somewhat forward-looking measure of years of schooling accounting for the enrollment trends for different levels of schooling), which remains at 8.8 years in the WAEMU, while it is 10.6 and 13.2 years in SSA and EMDEs, respectively. Moreover, learning-adjusted years of schooling (a measure combining quality and quantity of education) is lower the WAEMU (4.2 years) compared to SSA (5 years) and EMDEs (7.5 years) (Figure 4).

7. Gender gaps in education outcomes are a driver of relative underperformance. The gender parity index in mean years of schooling (the ratio of years of schooling for females to that of males) remains about 0.55 in the WAEMU, where years of schooling stay at 3.7 and 2 for females and males (Figure 4). In other words, on average, for each additional year of schooling that males receive, females receive about half. This ratio stays about 0.72 in SSA and 0.84 in EMDEs. Such a significant gender disparity in education is a drag on overall education outcomes, but it also offers an opportunity going forward. For instance, fully closing the existing gender gap in mean years of schooling can boost this measure to 3.7 years from the current level of 2.8 years. Besides being a direct driver of weaker schooling outcomes, gender gaps in education in the region, particularly in higher levels of education, translate into gender imbalances in the labor market outcomes, which can further hamper the accumulation of human capital (see Sever 2024b).

Figure 3. Education Outcomes

Sources: World Bank, UNDP, and IMF staff calculations. Mean years of schooling is for adults ages 25+. For the chart representing the values in 1990, it is adopted from 1999 for Burkina Faso, and 2005 for Guinea-Bissau, due to missing data in earlier years. Enrollment rates are gross. Due to missing data in 2021, the primary school enrollment rate is from 2021 for Mali; secondary school enrollment rates are from 2021 for Togo, 2020 for Mali, and 2017 for Niger; tertiary school enrollment rates are from 2021 for Benin, 2020 for Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Togo, and 2019 for Mali. Expected years of schooling is for children of school-entering age. Literacy rate for adults (youth) are for ages 15+ (15-24), and in percent of the corresponding population. Literacy rates are from 2020 for Mali, and 2019 for Côte d'Ivoire and Togo. In each enrollment and literacy indicator, the non-WAEMU sample is constructed based on the corresponding time span for the WAEMU, as noted. Group averages are weighted by population. Vertical black lines indicate one standard deviation interval.

Figure 4: Education Outcomes
(concluded)



Sources: World Bank, UNDP, Filmer et al. (2020), and IMF staff calculations. Mean years of schooling is for adults ages 25+. Gender parity is the ratio of the years of females to males. Learning-adjusted years of schooling is a measure combining the quantity and quality of education. Group averages are weighted by population. Vertical black lines indicate one standard deviation interval.

8. Previous analyses from the IMF point to large growth and trade gains from improving education in the WAEMU. Earlier estimates suggest that differences in years of schooling can explain 0.3 to 0.5 percentage points of the WAEMU's per capita income growth rate shortfall compared to several African and Asian benchmark countries (IMF 2019). With a specific focus on the role of education in competitiveness, fostering the quality of education in the region to levels in those benchmark countries is estimated to boost trade flows by 10 to 16 percent.

9. Empirical estimates as presented by this study suggest that over a decade, per capita income in the WAEMU could increase by as much as 13 percent if member states achieve the EMDEs average in years of schooling. Regression-based estimates using global data over the last three decades suggest that a 1 percentage point increase in the growth rate of years of schooling translates into almost 0.1 percentage points higher growth in per capita GDP, on average. Using a one standard deviation confidence interval around the point estimate, the average annual boost to the regional GDP per capita growth rate ranges from 0.6 to 1.3 percentage points as member states make a steady progress to reach the level of years of schooling in EMDEs over a decade (Table 1, Panel A). Cumulatively, per capita income in the WAEMU becomes 6.3 to 13.4 percent higher at the end of the period needed to achieve this objective (i.e., 10-year period in this exercise), with these gains being particularly large in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (Table 1, Panel B).⁶

⁶ While this is an ambitious goal, it is worth noting that there are eight countries from the rest of SSA in which mean years of schooling already surpass the average level in the rest of EMDEs as of 2022. It is also important to note that, a slower progress toward this objective in the WAEMU (instead of reaching this target in a decade) will translate into lower annual per capita GDP growth gains on average, but the cumulative per capita GDP gains (at the end of the correspond period during which mean years of schooling in the WAEMU catch up with EMDEs) will remain similar to the ones illustrated in Table 1 (Panel B).

Table 1. Estimated Macroeconomic Gains

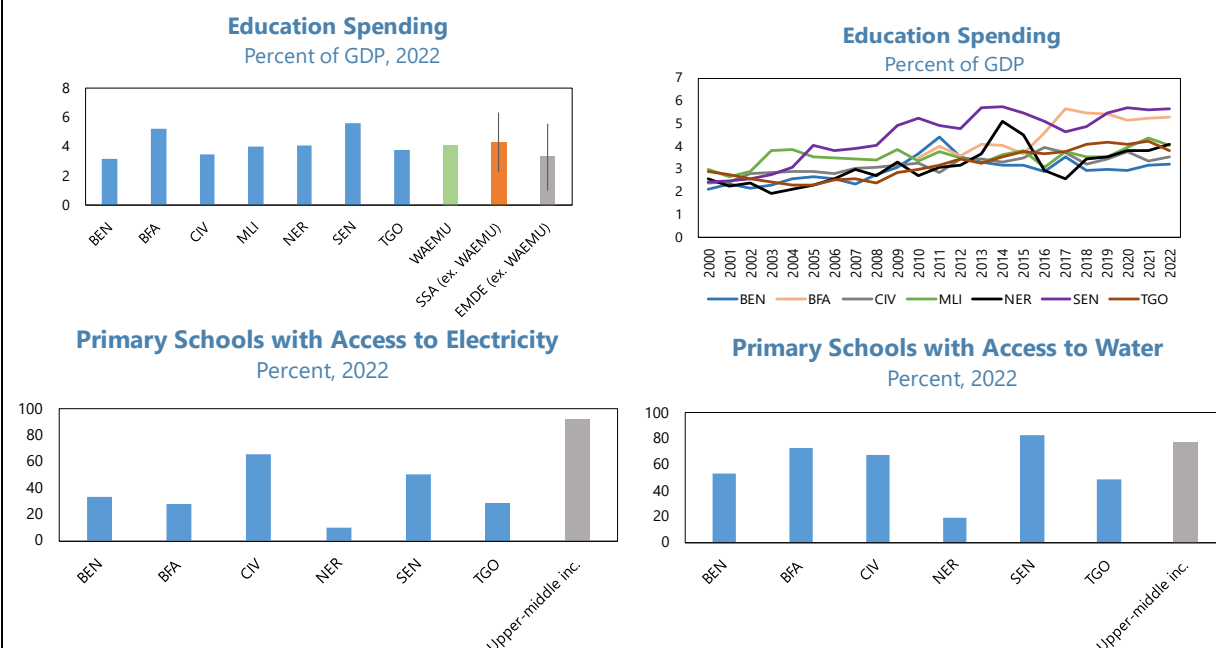
Country	A. Average per capita GDP growth gains per annum (percentage points)		B. Cumulative per capita GDP gains over the decade (percent of per capita GDP)	
	Lower bound	Upper bound	Lower bound	Upper bound
BEN	0.6	1.2	5.9	12.6
BFA	0.8	1.6	8.2	17.5
CIV	0.4	0.8	3.9	8.1
GNB	0.5	1.0	4.8	10.2
MLI	1.0	2.1	10.9	23.6
NER	1.2	2.4	12.5	27.2
SEN	0.6	1.3	6.5	13.9
TGO	0.2	0.4	2.0	4.2
WAEMU	0.6	1.3	6.3	13.4

Sources: World Bank, UNDP, IMF staff estimates and calculations. The results are based on the following regression: $\Delta \log(\text{GDP per capita})_{c,t} = \beta \times \Delta \text{Mean years of schooling}_{c,t} + \alpha \times \log(\text{GDP per capita})_{c,t-1} + \theta_c + \theta_t + \epsilon_{c,t}$ where c and t stand for country and year, respectively. $\Delta \log(\text{GDP per capita})_{c,t}$ is the percent change of per capita GDP constant in 2015 US dollars (log change), and $\Delta \text{Mean years of schooling}_{c,t}$ is the percent change in years of schooling. θ_c and θ_t are country and year fixed effects, respectively. Variables are winsorized at the 1st and 99th percentiles. Standard errors are robust to heteroskedasticity. All available data (1990–2022) is used. β is estimated to be 0.095 with a standard error of 0.033 (statistically significant at the 1 percent level). The calculations on annual growth gains assume that the progress in years of schooling is steady over a decade. The table presents the lower and upper bounds for growth and level gains using one standard error interval around the point estimate.

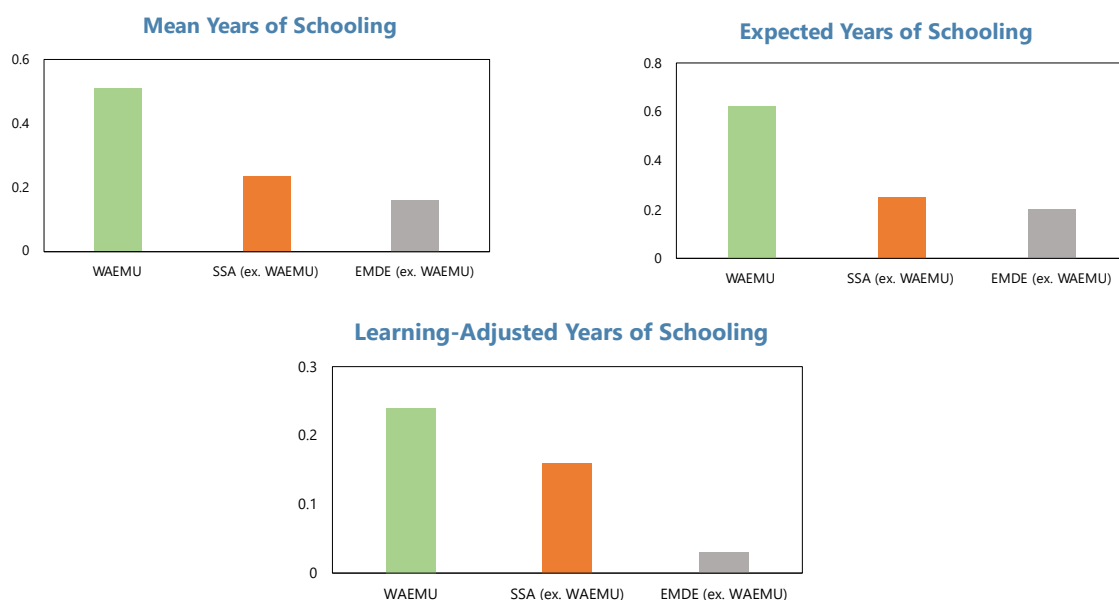
C. Education Spending and Outcomes

10. Education spending in the WAEMU has shown significant progress since the 2000s and continues to be crucial. Despite the periods of setbacks, education spending has been on an upward trend in almost all member states since the 2000s (Figure 5). It reached 4.1 percent of the regional GDP as of 2022, from 2.5 percent of the regional GDP in 2000. While this surpasses the average in EMDEs by about 0.8 percentage points of GDP, it is worth noting that a younger population and high fertility rates in the WAEMU underscore the importance of investment in education. Moreover, the fact that the member states lag upper-middle income countries regarding basic facilities in schools (such as access to electricity and drinking water) call for prioritizing spending to improve school infrastructures.

11. Although spending more does not automatically lead to better outcomes, data show that it yields positive results. Education spending is positively associated with years of schooling, including forward-looking or quality-adjusted measures, particularly in the country groups with lower levels of education to start with, e.g., the WAEMU (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Education Spending and School Facilities

Sources: World Bank, UNDP, UNESCO, and IMF staff calculations. Education spending is in percent of GDP (and is from 2022 in the left-hand side chart). Group averages are weighted by GDP. Vertical black lines indicate one standard deviation interval. Group estimates for the charts in the second row are adopted by UNESCO. Data on school facilities are from 2021 for Niger, due to missing data in 2022.

Figure 6. Correlation with Education Spending

Sources: World Bank, UNDP, Filmer et al. (2020), and IMF staff calculations. Mean years of schooling is for adults ages 25+. Expected years of schooling is for children of school-entering age. Learning-adjusted years of schooling is a measure combining the quantity and quality of education. Education spending is in percent of GDP. All years with available data are used. After the contemporaneous correlation for each country over time is calculated, the mean values in each sample are illustrated.

D. Ongoing Policy Efforts

12. The member states view inclusive, equitable, and quality education as a cornerstone of their development strategies and are committed to improving educational outcomes.⁷

Commitments in national education strategies or development plans signal that the member states recognize the need for achieving universal high-quality education. These commitments include, but are not limited to, revising institutional and legal frameworks to align them with international best practices; expanding free education and bridging gender gaps to ensure inclusiveness; launching training programs for teachers and management staff while also assessing competencies, qualifications, requirements and working conditions to improve the quality of teaching professionals; enhancing data collection and management while introducing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track outcome targets; integrating IT solutions and digitalization into the education systems to improve efficiency; revising and revamping the teaching content to equip the youth with the skills required for the jobs of the future as well as entrepreneurial skills; supporting disadvantaged children and improving school environment and infrastructures to improve attendance and decrease dropouts; and seeking to improve the efficiency of funds, in collaboration with development partners.

13. Some examples of ongoing policies towards those objectives are the followings:⁸

- In Benin, education spending has been focusing accessibility and resilience, through school canteen programs, free schooling at the primary level, provision of books, free schooling for girls in secondary school, scholarships for students in technical and vocational high schools and colleges, construction and equipment of educational infrastructures in different levels of education, scholarships for the training of trainers, reinforcement of social infrastructures. As a particular example, the school feeding program, a joint effort with the World Food Programme, supported almost 6,000 schools since 2022 (about 75 percent of public primary schools) and 1.4 million students (46 percent of which are girls).
- In Burkina Faso, efforts focusing on the quality and accessibility of education include improving the curricula in different levels of education to integrate language education, developing training curricula and syllabuses for various progression at lower- and upper-level secondary schools, while plans to recruit teachers and building classrooms to improve education outcomes in rural areas are in place.
- In Côte d'Ivoire, spending has been targeted to expand widespread education, via school cafeteria programs, acquisition and distribution of school kits, textbooks and educational kits, support for the payment of school fees in various schools. In addition, efforts are under way in the context of the National Development Plan and the Government Social Program to expand technical and vocational education and skills training programs.

⁷ National commitments and policies can be found online in the UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa's [Education Country Briefs](#) website (together with the links for official publications and other documents). Also see ADEA (2019) for examples of national policies in the member states to improve education outcomes.

⁸ This is not a comprehensive list, rather a selection of recent and/or ongoing efforts at national level in some member states.

- In Niger, the authorities focus on the provision of education infrastructures, the quality of teachers and inclusiveness of the education system, for example, by converting large numbers of contractual teachers to civil servants, launching the “zero straw hut classrooms” program and working on improving classroom facilities, integrating children affected by violence into the education system, and supporting girls’ education (e.g., via scholarships, construction of boarding schools for girls, implementation of the national strategy to accelerate education and training for girls and women).
- In Senegal, subsidies were implemented to reduce the cost of education, and awareness campaigns and supportive measures to increase the transition of girls from elementary to secondary education (also addressing barriers to girls’ education, e.g., in some specialized scientific and technical fields at the secondary and higher education levels) are under consideration. Several measures have been taken to reduce dropout rates among girls, particularly due to pregnancy (such as introducing temporary pause periods or financial support for adolescent mothers to acquire vocational training).
- In Togo, education sector reforms are aimed at providing quality education to a broad audience in alignment with labor market needs. Key efforts to achieve this include the construction of 15,000 classrooms with access to water and electricity, training at least 90 percent of teachers, and ensuring that 80 percent of vocational students enter the job market by 2025 aligned with the 2020-25 Government Roadmap. A public-private partnership strategy is being implemented for building and equipping school infrastructures, while a new education management information system has been operationalized to enhance student tracking. Additionally, a national policy for school and career guidance is under development, and a pilot phase for integrating local languages into vocational training is underway. Togo also launched a digital platform to monitor graduates and improve training based on labor market feedback. Furthermore, in higher education, efforts are focused on quality assurance and curriculum harmonization, alongside financial support for students in several priority fields.

14. Cognizant of the role of regional policies in achieving better education outcomes, the regional authorities have created various initiatives targeting both in-school and out-of-school learning.

- In 2017, ministries in charge of employment established a platform for promoting regional cooperation in vocational training to share experience, information and tools, and to achieve harmonization of skills trainings across the region ([Plateforme de Mutualisation des Outils et Ressources de la Formation Professionnelle](#)).⁹ The platform has been working on implementing training programs and establishing reference training documents for different sectors.
- The WAEMU Commission has been working on improving the efficiency and quality of higher education and vocational training. It has been developing guidelines for teachers’ trainings and curricula for vocational training in key sectors (while also assisting the national authorities and

⁹ The member states have also been exchanging experiences and sharing knowledge through various other initiatives, such as the Association for the Development of Education in Africa ([ADEA 2023](#)).

the private sector regarding the strategic areas for vocational training). The Commission also aims to improve mobility of students in higher education via scholarships and supporting programs, which will facilitate migration across the member states and contribute to the quality of universities.

- In the context of the 2018 Gender Strategy, the WAEMU Commission has also been working with the national authorities to ensure effective implementation of policies toward gender equality including in education outcomes, particularly focusing on girls' school enrollment and retention rates.
- As part of efforts to implement the regional financial inclusion strategy, work by BCEAO on the regional financial education program has been ongoing. The strategy aims to equip the education systems of the member states with the required skills for financial literacy. BCEAO has been organizing regional financial education workshops for the public officials and the private sector representatives to share experiences, supporting national efforts to improve financial education, and designing financial education courses and training modules (BCEAO 2019, 2022).

15. Going forward, better outcomes can be more effectively achieved, as national and regional endeavors toward achieving universal high-quality education complement each other. While national policies have a central role in revamping the education systems, the regional authorities have a very important role, as regional coordination and cooperation can catalyze national policies and foster their effectiveness.

E. Quality of Education and Related Policy Options

16. Improvements in the quality of education in the WAEMU require a focus on the underlying causes of weak performance. The quality of education is a major determining factor in the catalyst role of education in growth (e.g., Hanushek and Kimko 2000, Barro 2001, World Bank 2009, Hanushek Woessmann 2007, 2010). In the WAEMU, apart from relatively low years of schooling and enrollment rates, various indicators point to weak quality outcomes. For instance, children in schools, even at higher levels of education, exhibit poor learning outcomes, e.g., limited literacy and numeracy (e.g., World Bank 2018, 2022, UNESCO 2021, 2023). Low education levels of teachers, misalignments between teacher trainings and curricula, and limited competency requirements for teaching professionals are important issues contributing to this outcome (e.g., World Bank 2021, INSEAD 2023, UNESCO 2023).^{10, 11} These can be a drag on the efficiency of education spending across the region, particularly considering that spending on teachers typically account for a large share of education expenditure (Agbidinokoun et al. 2023, World Bank 2023b).

17. Policies supportive of high-quality education should concentrate on strengthening teacher capacity and quality, which can be fostered at the regional level. The quality of instruction is key for student achievement, making the capacity and quality of teachers a central

¹⁰ Looking at the broader picture, it is also worth noting that the quality of education system is affected by the quality of the overall institutional environment, as the latter can influence how the resources are used (e.g., Fomba et al. 2023).

¹¹ In general, large classroom sizes and low teacher to student ratios are also important factors affecting the quality of learning opportunities, but data limitation for the WAEMU does not allow a comparison on these aspects.

policy issue as a cost-effective tool to ensure high-quality education. In this regard, to support and harmonize national efforts, launching regional frameworks and standards for (i) minimum requirements for teaching, (ii) teacher standards and competencies, (iii) teacher education and training programs (both in pre- and in-service), (iv) career paths for teachers, (v) working conditions and well-being of teaching professionals, and (vi) professionalization of teaching, can be considered.¹² The preparation of those reference documents should be in coordination with the national authorities, and through participatory processes, including contributions from teachers, communities and other stakeholders.

18. These efforts can benefit from international and regional best practices. Regional frameworks and standards, aimed at improving the capacity and quality of teachers, should be benchmarked against international and regional best practices, including the Global Framework of Professional Teaching Standards (UNESCO and Education International 2019) and the set of policy suggestions tailored to the member states by UNESCO (2022); regional instruments, e.g., the African Continental Framework of Standards and Competencies for the Teaching Profession, African Continental Teacher Qualification Framework, and African Continental Guidelines for the Teaching Profession (African Union Commission 2019a, 2019b, 2019c); and the referential frameworks from the ECOWAS (2003, 2010, 2017a, 2017b). Moreover, as a first step, regional training programs for high-level education officials and policy makers, e.g., in the relevant ministries, can be launched to ensure that they become familiarized with those frameworks (UNESCO 2023).

19. Regional efforts to enhance education systems can also be useful to achieve quality assurance in different levels of education, ultimately aiming for mutual recognition of qualifications and competencies. Working on regional standards for educational quality assurance (to be benchmarked against international best practices), alongside prioritizing the skills needs across the region can help education systems become more competitive worldwide. These efforts can allow mutual recognition of diplomas, qualifications, and learning years, as the member states comply with the regionally set standards (e.g., see ECOWAS 2010, 2017a, and [the process in the European Union](#)). Since student mobility is a driver of the quality of education, these can ultimately help enhance the quality of the education systems across the region, while offering new opportunities for students and incentivizing staying in schools longer (e.g., Bista et al. 2018).

F. Other Regional Policy Options

20. Accelerating and expanding regional efforts will be important to ensure progress in education outcomes across member states. As a first step, a stock-taking exercise of education systems can be useful to identify common challenges and set the stage for coordination and cooperation across the national authorities on how to address them. Setting regional outcome targets with clear timelines, aligned with the member states' national development strategies, and continuously monitoring and evaluating the regional progress can guide those efforts. In this regard, the regional authorities can also benefit from international practices, e.g., the European Union has

¹² These efforts can also mitigate relatively high attrition and absenteeism rates among teachers in some member states, which can lead to poor learning outcomes and learning disruptions for students (World Bank 2018, UNESCO 2023).

set out [a regional education strategy](#) with concrete policies and measurable targets (e.g., on early school leavers, gender balance in various disciplines, completion of upper education, low achievers in literacy, lifelong learning, and student mobility) (European Union 2003). Overall, regional efforts should be aimed at supporting national education systems and helping the member states collectively address enduring challenges.

21. Prioritizing education spending and exploring ways to continue increasing it are crucial. While the level of education spending (as a share of GDP) in the WAEMU on average surpasses the average of EMDEs recently,¹³ high share of young population and fertility rates urge the member states to safeguard, sustain and increase education spending, for instance, by improving domestic revenue mobilization or tapping into upcoming natural resource revenues in some countries.¹⁴ It is also crucial for some member states (such as Benin and Côte d'Ivoire) to boost spending and catch up with the rest of the region. At the regional level, a comprehensive study to evaluate the effectiveness of past education spending by benchmarking it against the peers and facilitating peer-learning, and to assess the needs over the short- and medium-term in the region can help inform spending decisions going forward.

22. Addressing gender disparities in education is crucial to better and more inclusive education outcomes. Prevalent gender gaps in education outcomes pose a bottleneck to improving education outcomes and hinder inclusiveness of the education system. While the policy priorities can change across the member states to bridge gender gaps, national policies ultimately need to be aimed at keeping girls in schools longer.¹⁵ Regional initiatives, such as an effective implementation of the Gender Strategy by the WAEMU Commission and an acceleration of activities supporting women under the financial inclusion strategy by BCEAO, are also important (Sever 2024b).

23. It is also timely to accelerate efforts in building resilience in the education system to ensure sustainability and inclusiveness, amid frequent shocks in the region. Climate-related disasters, health shocks (such as the Covid-19 pandemic), and security incidences have become more relevant in recent years across the region (Sever 2024c). These events result in disruptions in education and learning losses, due to displaced persons and school closures.¹⁶ The efforts can focus on several areas, including building climate-resilient school infrastructures, investing in the resilience of network sectors (e.g., electricity and internet), training teachers for distance teaching while also providing them with the needed equipment, coordinating with development partners, and exchanging experiences across the member states (e.g., UNESCO 2021). In this context, the regional authorities can also play an important role by assessing the cross-cutting priority needs, developing regional response plans (e.g., in response to climate disasters or pandemics), introducing directives

¹³ It is also worth noting that lower GDP levels in the WAEMU, compared to more developed EMDEs with similar populations, imply a relatively low education expenditure per kid.

¹⁴ For a broader discussion on fiscal sustainability of social spending, see IMF (2024b).

¹⁵ To bridge gender gaps in education and reap associated economic gains, a holistic approach is needed, for instance, together with steps toward a full and effective participation of women in the workforce, where a level playing for women and men with an equal treatment under the law becomes crucial (e.g., Sever 2022, 2023, Bertay et al. 2025).

¹⁶ For instance, see Ganum and Sever (2025).

for regional infrastructures (e.g., to facilitate digitalization in education), and promoting information exchange and experience sharing across the member states.

24. Policy options to decrease educational costs, improve accessibility, and incentivize more years of education should be explored. Policies can focus on children from poorer families¹⁷ and rural areas and include expanding in-kind transfers for school needs and school feeding programs, subsidizing families which keep their children in schools (e.g., in the form of cash transfers or child allowances), enforcing penalties against child labor, tackling child marriages, and prioritizing expenditure for related infrastructure (e.g., building safe roads and improving public/school transportation). Moreover, continuously evaluating the needs of the labor markets (e.g., via sectoral skills needs assessments, as proposed by the [ILO framework](#)) and revising the curriculum, including in higher education and for schools outside the formal education systems,¹⁸ to adapt to the changing needs of the labor markets would boost returns to education and incentivize families to keep kids in schools longer. Expanding accessible literacy education for young adults and vocational trainings (e.g., apprenticeship programs) can go hand in hand. An evidence-based approach, for instance, to better understand the root causes of dropouts, alongside monitoring and evaluation of outcomes (e.g., regarding learning quality), needs to guide these efforts, where data collection is a first step. Regional directives, guidelines, and benchmarking frameworks (e.g., on vocational training standards, regional skills needs assessments, data collection and monitoring) can coordinate and guide national efforts along these lines.

G. Conclusion

25. Besides being a human right, education is key for sustainable and inclusive economic growth, and a powerful tool for reducing poverty, improving health, and achieving stability.

26. The WAEMU's future prosperity will largely depend on how effectively it can tap into its enormous demographic dividend by continuously equipping the youth with the needs of future's jobs. The demographic wave is calling for prompt actions to expedite investments in human capital. However, this will need continued political will and determination, since the required efforts and associated costs are immediate, while gains will take time and fully realize only when a holistic approach is followed, e.g., when complemented with policies conducive of private sector-led growth.¹⁹

27. Development partners and donors should also ramp up efforts, including for financing and capacity development. High-quality education is a global public good. Thus, the international

¹⁷ Besides limited access of children from poorer families to schools, learning outcomes (reading and numeracy) for those children are significantly lower compared to the ones from richer families, where malnutrition can be one of the causes (e.g., Glick and Sahn 2010, World Bank 2018).

¹⁸ Renovating the schools out of the formal education system, focusing on both in terms of the curricula and teacher standards and quality, is important, given that a significant share of children out of formal education goes to those schools (World Bank 2021).

¹⁹ To fully harness the desired macroeconomic outcomes from educating people, policies to promote the private sector and create high-quality jobs for the youth should go hand in hand with the efforts on the education sector. See IMF (2024c) for an analysis on the urgent need for creating jobs in sub-Saharan Africa.

community should expand education funding support. Moreover, expanding capacity development can be useful to deploy international best practices to improve the efficiency of education spending and quality of education (IMF 2024a).

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