



Norwegian Ministry  
of Foreign Affairs



## REPORT

# Workshop on Implementing the Safe Schools Declaration in West and Central Africa

5-7 December 2023, Hotel Saly Princess, Senegal

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## **Acronyms and abbreviations**

**ICRC:** International Committee of the Red Cross

**NRC:** Norwegian Refugee Council

**CSSF:** Comprehensive School Safety Framework

**SSD:** Safe Schools Declaration

**NSAG:** Non-state armed groups

**GCPEA:** Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack

**GADRRRES:** Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in the Education Sector

***Guidelines:*** Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict

**UNESCO:** United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization

**UNHCR:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees;

**UNICEF:** United Nations Children's Fund;

**UNOWAS:** United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel.

## **I. Context and Justification**

The impact of armed conflict on education presents urgent humanitarian, development and wider social challenges. Schools and universities worldwide have been bombed, destroyed or burned down, and children, students, teachers and educators have been killed, maimed, abducted or arbitrarily detained. Educational facilities have been used by parties to armed conflict as bases, barracks or detention centres, putting students and educators at risk, denying large numbers of children and students their right to education, and depriving entire communities of a foundation on which to build their futures. In many countries, armed conflict continues to destroy not only the school infrastructure, but the hopes and ambitions of a whole generation of children.

According to the GCPEA's report *Education under Attack 2022*, the Central and West Africa region was one of the most affected by attacks on education in 2020 and 2021, with conflicts involving non-state armed groups spilling over beyond national borders. In Burkina Faso, there were over 250 reports of actual or threatened attacks on teachers, and in Niger, GCPEA identified over 40 reported incidents of attacks on schools in 2020 and 2021, with the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions being most affected. According to Save the Children, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo were among the top four countries with the highest incidence of attacks on schools. Attacks on education, and the military use of schools and universities, can cause death and irreparable harm to students and teachers. The disruption of education caused by such attacks can put children at greater risk of gender-based violence, forced marriage, early pregnancy, child labour and recruitment into armed groups.

This is the context within which the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), Senegal and Norway hosted this workshop on implementing the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) in West and Central Africa, co-sponsored by Spain, the Regional Working Group on Education in Emergencies, and Education Cannot Wait. The workshop took place in Saly, Senegal, on 5, 6 and 7 December 2023.

The workshop was planned in the framework of Norway's State-led Implementation Network on the Safe Schools Declaration and was a follow-up to the Network's regional consultation hosted by Mali and Norway in 2021, which included participants from Central and West Africa. During this online consultation, states expressed a need for increased capacity-building to implement the Declaration's commitments at national and regional level. The Workshop provided advanced training on the Declaration to participants from the governments of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, and Senegal. Members of civil society supporting the implementation of the Declaration in this region were also invited to participate.

## **II. Objectives and Expected Outcomes**

### **II.1 Objectives**

The workshop's main objective was to discuss the protection of education from attack amid the conflicts in West and Central Africa, through implementing the Safe Schools Declaration and the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* (the *Guidelines*).

More specifically, the workshop aimed to:

- Discuss the scale and impact of attacks on education in the West and Central Africa region, with particular attention to gender-based attacks, with the aim of improving prevention and response;

- Explore concrete ways of implementing the SSD in this region in a deeper, more gender-responsive way, including advocating for the adoption of specific policies and legislation to improve prevention of, and response to, attacks on education;
- Develop more robust plans to deter military use of educational facilities, build more capacity for collecting data related to attacks, and strengthen the relevant legislation.
- Learn more about government actions to prevent such attacks and mitigate their impact on education, and about the challenges of ensuring a safe education environment, by bringing together relevant ministries to share good practice and coordinate responses at national level;
- Encourage stronger regional cooperation and incorporate regional practices into international response systems; and
- Look at ways of engaging in dialogue with non-state armed groups to ensure safe education, and explore existing good practice within these groups by drawing on the experiences of partner organisations.

## II.2 Expected Outcomes

The outcomes expected from this workshop were:

- ✓ That all participants assimilate and understand the SSD;
- ✓ That all invited countries effectively implement the SSD and *Guidelines* at national level;
- ✓ Improved coordination between parties tasked with protecting education in implementing the SSD, including those from civil society.

## III. Participants

Around fifty participants from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Niger and Senegal took part in the workshop, alongside stakeholders from the United Nations (UNICEF, UNESCO and UNHCR); also civil society (including GCPEA, CNR, Plan International, the Education Cluster, Watchlist, Save the Children and ICRC) and ministerial delegations from the governments of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali and Senegal comprising representatives from the ministries for foreign affairs, education, interior, defence and justice.

## IV. Format

### IV.1 Opening Ceremony

The official opening ceremony featured addresses by the organisers and their various partners, providing an opportunity to reflect on the importance of the event and set out the common objectives of this multi-stakeholder meeting.



**From left to right:** *Ms Michela Ranieri* (Implementation Network Consultant for the Safe Schools Declaration, GCPEA), **Ms Aminata Dieyna** (Representative of the Ministry of National Education, Technical Advisor, Government of Senegal) **Mme Mariam Touré** (Workshop Moderator, Member of the Steering Committee of the Global Coalition for Protecting Education from Attack (GCPEA) and Regional Humanitarian Advocacy Advisor for Save the Children.)

In her welcome speech, Ms Michela Ranieri thanked participants for attending, and GCPEA's technical and financial partners for their support in organising the event.

Ms Mariam Touré then provided details of the topics to be discussed. She spoke of how the upsurge in attacks in the region was having a detrimental effect on education, reiterated the importance of the Safe Schools Declaration, and urged stakeholders and country representatives to take good note of the discussions, which were, in effect, the quintessence of the event.

Ms Aminata Dieyna, representing the Ministry of Education of Senegal, began by offering her congratulations to the event organisers, then thanked participants for attending. Referring to the GCPEA's report, she went on to speak about the effects of attacks on education in 2022, pointing out that West and Central Africa was one of the regions most affected. Ms Dieyna then called on stakeholders to recognise that schools and universities should be safe, secure learning environments, and reaffirmed the Senegalese Ministry of Education's commitment to this worthwhile cause.

Mr Javier Vega, a representative of the Spanish Cooperation Agency (AECID) and General Coordinator of the Technical Cooperation Bureau in Senegal, spoke about the various external activities put in place by the Spanish cooperation. He emphasised how the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was systematically integrating a humanitarian perspective into its work on protecting civilians. Speaking on behalf of AECID, Mr Vega urged participants to respect the commitments made by states during the workshops, adding that these must

be translated into concrete measures, and should take into account the different ways in which attacks and military use of educational facilities affect women and girls.

## IV. 2. Review of Modules

The workshop took place over two full days, encouraged participation and interaction between attendees, and used practical exercises to promote a deeper understanding of the content. Content and activities were specifically geared towards the Sahel region, giving participants an opportunity to learn through concrete examples as well as scenarios and tasks linked to each specific theme. The event was broken down into five modules:

### IV.2.1 The scale and impact of attacks on education in situations of conflict and insecurity, and the Safe Schools Declaration as a protective tool

The first module focused on:

- Learning about national and regional trends in attacks on education;
- Gaining an understanding of what constitutes an attack on education and military use of educational facilities;
- Discussing the impact of such attacks – including specific effects related to gender – on students and teachers, and their long-term consequences;
- Gaining further in-depth knowledge about the commitments made in the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) and the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflict*, including examples where the SSD has been implemented; and
- Exchanging good practices at national level, highlighting existing national technical committees and SSD action plans as a stimulus for other countries, discussing common issues, and encouraging inter-ministerial cooperation.

#### Part 1: The scale and impact of attacks on education in West and Central Africa

##### ➤ Summary of presentations

The latest data published by the Regional Working Group on Education in Emergencies indicates that in the 3rd quarter of 2023, West and Central Africa was the region most affected by attacks on education; 11,841 schools were closed, with 2.3 million children impacted to date.

Focusing specifically on schools closed due to insecurity in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Senegal, and the children affected there, UNICEF's Education in Emergencies and Resilience Specialist, *Mr Barnaby Rooke*, cited the following figures:

- **Senegal** remains unaffected, with no school closures and no children impacted.
- **Niger:** 987 schools closed and 85,500 children impacted.
- **Mali:** 1,722 schools closed and 516,600 children impacted.
- **Cameroon:** 2,362 schools closed and 356,700 children impacted.
- **Burkina Faso:** 5,723 schools closed and 888,800 children impacted.

This makes a total of 10,794 schools closed, affecting 1.8 million children in the central Sahel countries, Cameroon and Senegal.

Next, *Ms Fabiola Mizero*, Regional Manager for Gender and Inclusion at Plan International, revealed in her presentation that a study conducted in 2021 by Plan International of adolescent girls, their families and communities in the Sahel countries of Burkina Faso and Mali, found that adolescent girls lived in constant fear due to widespread insecurity affecting every aspect of their lives, including education, health, food and livelihood. In addition, their fear of armed men was compounded by violence in their own homes and the community as a whole. Education was seen as the most effective way to protect them. UNESCO's 2015 Global Monitoring Report 'Education for All' also highlighted that in conflict-affected countries "**girls are almost two and a half times more likely to be out of school**".

The final speakers for this session were *Mr Georges Bissiongol Wakelak*, Education Officer at UNICEF Cameroon, and *Ms Emmaculate Ikome Nanyongo*, Education Specialist at Plan International Cameroon, who spoke on the same subject, providing an effective comparison with a country where implementation of the SSD is in its early stages. The available data indicates that there were 15 attacks on education in Cameroon from January to June 2023, leaving 1,222,459 children in need of humanitarian assistance and 2,362 schools in the Northwest and Southwest regions (out of 6,557) non-operational due to security issues. Meanwhile, 19 primary schools in the Extreme North Region continued to be used by the Cameroon armed forces.

In terms of good practice in implementing the SSD, Cameroon

- ✓ Endorsed the SSD in 2018;
- ✓ Implemented the Education Cluster Strategy for the Northwest & Southwest regions of Cameroon 2023-2025, which is aligned with the SSD;
- ✓ Advocated for respect of the SSD by: sending a letter from the Ministry of Education to uniformed military teaching staff, issuing memos from humanitarian organisations, raising awareness of the SSD among stakeholders, and developing a road map for the future (currently in the drafting phase);
- ✓ Set up an SSD committee in the Mayo Tsanaga department;
- ✓ Trained a military command;
- ✓ Incorporated a resilience component into the SSEF.

➤ **Questions and Answers, and additional contributions arising from the presentations**

We learned from the various presentations that the decrease in attacks on schools in Mali is thanks partly to actions by humanitarian organisations, and partly to the efforts of local and national committees. Community meetings also played a decisive part in helping re-open closed schools, but it should be noted that non-state armed groups imposed a number of conditions, to be met before schools could re-open; for example, Koranic teaching for all children.

**Part 2: How is the Safe Schools Declaration implemented at national level?**

➤ **Summary of presentations relating to implementing the Safe Schools Declaration at national level.**

*Dr Marika Tsolakis*, specialist in Education in Emergencies opened this section of the workshop with a presentation on the work of the GCPEA, the Safe Schools Declaration and how to implement it. GCPEA was founded in 2010 by humanitarian and human rights organisations concerned about the growing number of attacks on schools, students and teachers in countries affected by conflict and insecurity.

The Declaration aims to mitigate the effects of armed conflict on education by encouraging governments and partners to foster an environment where education is protected in fragile contexts. Since its launch in 2015, 17 of the 27 countries of West and Central Africa have signed the Declaration, while a total of 118 countries worldwide have signed to date, 36 of them members of the African Union. By endorsing and



adhering to the *Guidelines*, these countries commit to introducing the structures and policies needed to implement the Declaration, including setting up national steering committees to oversee implementation, report attacks on education, and integrate the Declaration into the national legal framework.

This was followed by a presentation from *Ms Mariam Touré*, Regional Humanitarian Advocacy Advisor for Save the Children on the work of civil society organizations in the region to support the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration.

In terms of good practice in implementing the SSD, practical measures have been introduced at various levels. One of the main initiatives in this arena focuses on two lines of approach:

- ✓ Supporting countries in strengthening their institutional and legal framework, which translates as giving practical support by setting up national committees tasked with implementing the SSD, and developing action plans to help the various countries' legal frameworks adapt to the Declaration;
- ✓ Ensuring civil society and local communities are involved in the process.

There are, however, a number of issues which can make it difficult to implement the SSD, in particular:

- Lack of funding in the education sector;
- Disruption caused by administrative and organisational changes within governments, which can cause delays in processing paperwork; and
- Lack of coordination between NGOs, which may prevent them from effectively leveraging efforts already in place as part of the implementation process.

#### ➤ **Guided discussion on the work of Education Ministries in implementing the SSD**

For the purposes of this discussion, a representative from the Ministry of Education from each participating country was invited to outline work carried out at national level to implement the Declaration, focusing on national technical committees, action plans, and other examples of good practice.

#### ❖ *Mr Pone Paulin Zombre / Burkina Faso, Technical Secretary for Education in Emergencies, Ministry of National Education, Literacy and the Promotion of National Languages*

In Burkina Faso, the SSD is being implemented via a number of measures, including setting up committees in educational institutions, introducing a mechanism for collecting data on education in emergencies structured around two key pillars, and the analysis and use of the data collected.

However, despite the mechanisms already being in place, there are still a number of challenges, notably the absence of data relating to the physical and mental health of teachers and students who have fallen victim to terrorist attack, which would help identify the interventions needed to ensure their well-being. There is also insufficient data on out-of-school children.

#### ❖ *Mr Joseph Evang Assembe / Cameroon, Inspector of Pedagogy in Charge of Primary Education, SSD Expert, Ministry of Basic Education*

Cameroon's response to the situation has been two-fold: firstly restoring and protecting educational facilities, and secondly, ensuring continuity of education even in situations of crisis and conflict. Cameroon's Ministry of Education has taken political, strategic and legislative action as follows:

- On a political level, Cameroon endorsed the SSD in 2018.
- On a strategic level, the roadmap for implementation of the Declaration is being finalised; and

- On a legislative level, a framework law on education is in place, and a special unit has been created, tasked with protecting universities and schools. It should also be noted that a large number of defence force personnel are undertaking teacher training at designated colleges.

❖ ***Mr Mamadou Kanté / Mali, Deputy National Director of Basic Education, Chair of the SSD Technical Follow-up Committee, Ministry of National Education.***

Mali has implemented a wide range of response actions, such as creating a Ministry for Humanitarian Action, setting up a range of clusters (including the one for education), and endorsing the SSD.

To achieve the desired outcomes, a plan of action has been put in place based on a variety of good practices, notably:

- ✓ Effective coordination of activities, which has led to the introduction of nine regional technical committees, four local technical committees and twenty-two school watch committees;
- ✓ Capacity-strengthening for stakeholders, including training workshops, consultation days, community consultations and awareness-raising caravans, which in turn have inspired decision-makers to initiate a study of the regulations surrounding the protection of education, and to prepare draft legislation on the protection of schools during armed conflict;
- ✓ The conditional reopening of certain schools, following agreements between communities and armed groups/militias. Conditions include separation of boys' and girls' seating in classrooms, using Arabic as a teaching language, operating traditional schools alongside Koranic schools, opening restored Koranic schools and changing traditional schools to Koranic ones.

❖ ***Mr Assoumane Bori / Niger, Education Specialist, Plan International Niger***

Niger has been hit by a humanitarian crisis which is compounded by the ongoing security situation, and this is having a profound impact on social services, notably education. 966 schools are closed, affecting 80,798 pupils (40,750 of them girls) and around 1,600 teachers. The four regions impacted are Diffa, Maradi, Tahoua and Tillabéri.

Action taken by the Niger government includes endorsing the SSD (on 25 June 2015), setting up a Safe Schools Committee within the Education Cluster, raising awareness of the Declaration and its *Guidelines* in schools (translated into 3 local languages, Hausa, Kanuri and Fulfulde) in an effort to protect schools against attack and military occupation, and mapping at-risk schools in emergency zones.

❖ ***Dr Saliou Sène, Senegal, Technical Advisor, Ministry of National Education***

Senegal has not been affected by attacks on schools by armed groups, so Dr Saliou Sène gave a brief outline of the country's socio-economic background: out of a population of 18.3 million (50.3% female, 49.7% male), the literacy rate among children aged 15 and over is 51.8%.

As a preventive measure, the Senegalese government has introduced systems to manage incidents of violence, including, notably, a protocol for managing cases of violence, UNICEF's digital platform incident.sn, and UNESCO's training manual on addressing SRGBV.

In the discussion that followed, one of the key points to emerge, and one voiced by all countries present, was the need to establish a single, universally accepted definition of non-state armed groups. Some attendees were also particularly interested to hear about Mali's good practices in negotiating with these groups, and the results they achieved.

## IV.2.2 Strengthening the monitoring and reporting of attacks on education

The second module gave participants the opportunity to:

- Understand the fundamental importance of data collection in preventing and responding to attacks on education;
- Discover the range of tools and methods used to collect and share accurate, timely data relating to attacks on education;
- Learn the correct way to collect and analyse data relating to attacks on education, using GCPEA's Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education;

### **Part 1: Introducing the importance of improved monitoring and reporting of attacks on education**

#### ➤ **Summary of Presentations**

##### ❖ *Ms Saly Mbaye, Cameroon, UNICEF, Focal Point for MRM*

Attacks on education have long been a phenomenon, and over the years, a range of measures has been implemented in response, notably the UN Security Council's adoption in October 2021 of Resolution 2601 on protecting education in situations of armed conflict. This includes the following recommendations:

- ✓ To address the immediate needs of children affected;
- ✓ To take special measures to protect children and improve their situation;
- ✓ To prevent new violations;
- ✓ To hold accountable those responsible for such violations;
- ✓ To consider new initiatives to increase accountability, including advocacy, dialogue and engagement with parties to the conflict;
- ✓ To consider a programmatic response for children, including direct services, reintegration programmes, etc.

Cameroon has seen 15 attacks on schools since January 2023. 2,362 schools out of 6,557 are non-functional due to insecurity, with around 356,662 children denied their right to education, while 19 mixed primary schools are being used by Cameroon's armed forces in the Extreme North – hence the importance and usefulness of accurate reporting. Reporting reveals patterns in violations and can help identify parties and hold them to account, while the child victims can be referred to support services. The investigation report then triggers action by the Security Council and other bodies, and this can also prevent further violations.

##### ❖ *Ms Adèle Rutsobe, Specialist in Child Protection in Emergency Situations, UNICEF, WCARO*

Although UNICEF's main objective is to protect children affected by armed conflict, their first reaction in this situation was to call for increased accountability among parties to the conflict, reduce the frequency of serious violations of children's rights through increased engagement, and respond appropriately to violations, whether through advocacy or via a political or programmatic response.

It is worth mentioning that all monitoring and reporting data undergoes rigorous scrutiny to check for accuracy, and is verified by the United Nations, by qualified members of the CTFMR or their equivalent. The information must be accurate, objective and reliable.

Examples of the MRM's main achievements related to the schools' situation included:

- School attacks which were successfully documented and verified to provide a comprehensive picture;
- Increased awareness of attacks on schools and military use of schools in conflict zones through accurate, timely reporting;
- Advocating for political agreements and interventions, such as the SSD, on both a national and international level, alongside the education sector and other key stakeholders;
- Engaging in humanitarian dialogue with all parties to conflict, advocating for the prevention of attacks on schools, against military use of schools, and for the re-opening of closed schools.

❖ ***Mr Assoumane Bori, Education Specialist, Niger, Ms Racha El Masri, Education Cluster Coordinator, Burkina Faso, and Mr Patrick Likele, Education Cluster Coordinator, Mali***

This presentation gave an overview of the Education Cluster and how it works, with a focus on monitoring and reporting in Burkina Faso and Mali; this was followed by information on how the Education Cluster disseminates and supports the SSD. Notable activities have included:

- Setting up an inter-ministerial committee in November 2023 to re-open 787 closed schools;
- Incorporating the SSD into the national strategy for reducing the vulnerability of Niger's education system to natural disasters and conflicts;
- Personal communication with the authorities regarding the SSD, including broadcasting a clip of an SSD video on national television;
- Child-led research on Safe Schools in the Tillabéri region;
- Disseminating the SSD and *Guidelines* on safety in schools, translated into three local languages, in an effort to protect schools from attack or military occupation;
- Celebrating International Day to Protect Education from Attack 2022 and 2023.

Despite all this, however, the SSD still faces challenges. These include:

- The fact non-state actors feel attacks on schools are a sensitive issue;
- The failure of official bodies to monitor implementation of the SSD; and
- The inaccessibility of certain areas, which has an impact on implementing further activities.

❖ ***Ms Aurélie Acoca, Data Analyst, UNESCO***

To give attendees a comparison with a different region, Ms Acoca spoke in this session about the data ecosystem for education in emergency situations in Nigeria, where she has conducted national consultations a wide range of data producers and consumers, focusing on four key aspects of the methodology used to collect and process data relating to attacks on education. The topics under discussion included data collection procedures, mechanisms to verify data, the standards used, and the accessibility of data. The consultations highlighted a number of challenges, but also some encouraging practices in both the collection and monitoring of this type of data. Of the six countries chosen for the study (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and The Democratic Republic of Congo), visits have already been made to two, namely Niger and Nigeria.

Again, despite many good practices, difficulties remain. Until recently, for example, collecting and sharing data on attacks on education was considered taboo in some countries. In Nigeria, although collection efforts have started, data remains highly sensitive. Even when partners have the data, and where it could help with verification, they are still reluctant to share it; access to data is a further challenge, even official data at national level. In addition, there is a lack of information about the causes of school closures, and the fact that data is not published simply because no one knows who is authorised to publish it.

In an effort to improve data collection on attacks on education at a national level, a number of recommendations have been made, including,

- ✓ Reviewing mandates for all actors, and establishing close cooperation and national coordination to avoid duplication of effort;
- ✓ Ensuring dedicated funding is available;
- ✓ Taking ownership of all actions relating to the SSD.

The presentations took the form of suggestions and recommendations, the most salient being firstly to put a stop to disinformation, and secondly to ensure data is collected on a regular basis to help monitor the re-opening of schools.

### **Part 2: Practical exercise on monitoring and reporting using GCPEA’s Toolkit for Collecting and Analyzing Data on Attacks on Education**

The second part of this module took the form of a practical exercise, where participants learned the basic principles of identifying, monitoring and reporting attacks on education, using common scenario types and a standard monitoring form. Participants completed a form tracking an attack on education, using details from the incident reports provided. They then presented a mock report of an attack on education or military use of a school.

Participants were able to:

- Develop their ability to differentiate between different types of attacks on education;
- Improve accuracy in recording information such as the duration of military use, the number of pupils affected etc.
- Recognise the value of recording and sharing disaggregated data, including damage, school days lost etc.
- Learn the importance of analysing trends, and how monitoring and reporting can help with prevention, mitigation and accountability.
- Understand some of the gaps in evidence and data collection systems relating to the impact of conflicts and violence on education.

### **IV.2.3 Preventing and responding to military use of educational facilities**

The aims of this module were to help participants:

- Understand what can be done to deter and prevent military use of educational facilities;
- Understand how governments can incorporate the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* into domestic legislation, military doctrine and training, in order to prevent and mitigate the impact of military use of educational facilities;
- Share information on how the *Guidelines* are implemented in national contexts.

### **Part 1: Military use of educational institutions and the States’ responsibilities in its prevention**

This section was presented by *Dr Ezequiel Heffes*, Executive Director, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. Participants were given an overview of the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict*, including definitions of what is meant by military use of educational institutions. The *Guidelines* urge parties to armed conflict ‘**not to use schools and universities**

**for any purpose in support of their military effort. While it is acknowledged that certain uses would not be contrary to the law of armed conflict, all parties should endeavour to avoid impinging on students' safety and education, using the following six Guidelines as a guide to responsible practice.'**

➤ **Summary of Presentations**

Although international humanitarian law (IHL), otherwise known as the law of armed conflict, seeks to protect persons who are not or are no longer participating in hostilities, and restricts the means and methods of warfare, our focus was on finding out how IHL can help protect education in conflict situations. We learned from the response given by *Ms Elvina Pothelet*, ICRC's Regional Legal Adviser, that where there is international armed conflict, IHL facilitates access to education for children under the age of fifteen, who are orphaned or separated from their families (GCIV art. 24) and applies during occupation or in the case of evacuation. IHL also applies in non-international armed conflict, where its mission is to ensure children continue to receive education, and to urge all parties to conflict to provide continuity of education in the territories under their control. Parties to conflict are also bound by customary law: rule 135, for example, states that **'Children affected by armed conflict are entitled to special respect and protection.'**

➤ **Guided discussion on the work of Defence Ministries in implementing the SSD.**

For the purposes of this discussion, representatives from Mali and Burkina Faso's Ministries of Defence highlighted the work being done at national level to implement the Safe Schools Declaration and its *Guidelines*.

❖ *Mr François Sawadogo / Burkina Faso, Provincial Director of the Kadiogo National Police, Ministry of Territorial Administration, Decentralisation and Security*

Burkina Faso incorporated the SSD into its legal framework through Decree No. 2016-926/PRES/PM/MATDSI/MJDHPC/MINEFID/MENA dated 3 October 2016 on the protection of education, modified by Decree No. 2020-0259/PRES/PM/MATDC/MSECU/MJ/MINEFID/MENAPLN dated 7 April 2020. Article 5 of this decree states that **'education is inviolable'**.

❖ *Lieutenant-Colonel Moussa Macalou / Mali, Ministry of Defence and Veterans (MDAC)*

Mali has been suffering a multidimensional crisis since 2012, severely impacting security. Insecurity has caused the closure of many educational institutions, mainly in the North (in the Kidal and Ménaka Regions) and the Centre, in the Mopti Region. Data published in the Education Cluster report of October 2023 indicate that over 1,772 schools have been closed, with 516,000 children deprived of their right to education. This has prompted the Ministry of Defence to assess the overall situation in educational institutions, and the following actions have been taken:

- **Training in IHL:** Capacity-building for military personnel, to familiarise them with the rules and principles governing armed conflict;
- **Raising awareness through continuous training;**
- **Raising awareness through pre-deployment training in theatres of operation,** taking into account community policing, IHL, and understanding directives regarding protected areas such as schools, hospitals etc.

The presentations clearly explained that the ICRC seeks to promote and disseminate IHL among all parties to armed conflict, distributing manuals on urban warfare to non-state armed groups and, where direct

communication is not possible, deploying a variety of strategies including enlisting help from third parties such as religious or community groups.

## **Part 2: Practical Exercise on using the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict***

For this exercise, attendees were presented with a range of scenarios highlighting the need for cooperation between ministries, the UN, NGOs, and local stakeholders, explaining their individual roles and responsibilities in preventing the military use of educational facilities.

The scenarios were specially designed to help attendees see how the *Guidelines* can be applied in practice, then discuss how they can be used to improve the protection of education. In particular, they addressed issues such as the precautions potentially needed to prevent the destruction of educational establishments, the risks associated with schools and other educational facilities being used for military operational purposes, and existing measures to tackle threats or attacks on teaching staff and students. Attendees were encouraged to take on a variety of roles, helping them to understand how the issues may be perceived by their colleagues from different agencies, and the parameters within which they need to respond.

The exercise also explored the dangers associated with schools being used for military purposes, namely that they can become targets for opposing forces and cause collateral damage to teachers and pupils. It explained how, if an educational establishment has to be used by armed forces as a last resort, there are certain conditions to be met:

- ✓ The premises may only be used for the minimum amount of time necessary;
- ✓ The situation should be carefully assessed to limit damage;
- ✓ Damage should be kept to a minimum;
- ✓ The space and buildings may only be used within reasonable boundaries;
- ✓ The premises should be completely cleared on withdrawal, removing all traces;
- ✓ Civilians in the area should be informed and requested to evacuate;
- ✓ The military should be urged to respect international law;
- ✓ Checkpoints should be set up around the school's entrances/exits.

The exercise then looked at assessing the priorities and risks inherent in each situation, from the point of view of the District Council, the military, the Peacekeeping Forces and the Ministry of Education. Attendees learned that stakeholders needed to:

- ✓ Inform others about the incident;
- ✓ Collect data on the source of the information, the motive for the incident, and who is responsible;
- ✓ Examine the army's proposals before placing military personnel onto school premises;
- ✓ Look for possible solutions to uphold the inviolability of school premises and those who work there, by assessing the priorities and risks associated with implementing those solutions.

Finally, to identify potential strategies for involving other stakeholders, or to determine what assistance may be needed, attendees suggested the following steps:

- ✓ Raise awareness among education officials, so that they take up the issue of protecting schools against attack and the risks to children with welfare authorities;
- ✓ Urge central government officials to disseminate the SSD and *Guidelines* among all stakeholders;
- ✓ Keep attention focused on the topic by discussing only schools protection and issues relating to it, in an effort to lead parties to abandon the idea of occupying schools;

- ✓ Refer any other concerns to the relevant local and administrative bodies;
- ✓ Involve all stakeholders documented in the report.

In addition to their learnings from the practical exercise, this module gave participants a better understanding of what measures can be taken to deter or prevent military use of educational facilities, and how their governments can incorporate *the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict* into national legislation, military doctrine and training in order to prevent and mitigate the impact of educational facilities being used by the military.

### *The practical exercises*



## **IV.2.4 How to successfully engage in dialogue with Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG) to refrain from attacking education**

In this module, participants learned about the work of partner organisations and governments to engage with non-state armed groups to ensure safe education.

### ➤ **Summary of Presentations**

#### ❖ *Mr Moussa Waerzaren, Programme Head, Geneva Call Burkina Faso and Regional Office*

Humanitarian engagement is defined as a process of sustained, constructive interaction with non-state armed groups, for humanitarian purposes. It serves to reach and protect the civilian population and promotes respect among armed groups for international law and humanitarian norms – in this case, access to and protection of education.

Given recent trends such as the proliferation of existing groups, the emergence of new groups, increasing attacks on education, and opposition from groups based on the content of the programmes delivered, it was considered essential to share existing good practice for engaging in dialogue with such groups. This included:

- ✓ Prior analysis of national regulations, and working with state authorities to gain acceptance from the groups;



- ✓ Drawing on local values and norms in protecting education;
- ✓ Engaging with groups to develop a series of short-, medium- and long-term measures;
- ✓ Taking into account that humanitarian engagement with armed groups is non-linear.

❖ *Mr Alzouneidi Ag Sidi Lamine, Access Adviser, Norwegian Refugee Council*

In his presentation, NRC's Access Adviser spoke of the work being done to implement the SSD, and on good practices for engaging with non-state armed groups. 15 representatives from groups that have signed peace agreements with the State, including the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), the Movement Platform of 14 June 2014, and the Coordination des mouvements de l'inclusivité (CMI) were trained on the Safe Schools Declaration in June 2023.

After describing the lessons learned from this situation – participants had notably learned that no school should be occupied by an armed actor, and had committed to protecting the school environment going forward – suggestions and recommendations were shared as follows:

- ✓ Members of armed groups still require broader awareness of the SSD, but grouping all three groups in the same room should be avoided;
- ✓ The public need to be made aware of the risk of explosives remnants of war and improvised explosive devices/mines.

❖ *Dr Ezequiel Heffes, Executive Director, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict*

According to ICRC data for the last five years, there are 450 non-state armed groups worldwide, 38% of which are in Africa. It is important to note that of these 450 groups, around 100 are parties to international armed conflict, i.e. they have international obligations. However, the majority of armed groups still violate IHL. When asked why this might be, the responses pointed to ignorance of IHL, lack of knowledge about children's rights, and unwillingness – or even refusal – on the part of some armed groups to abide by the rules of IHL.

Solutions in place to address these issues include:

- ✓ Communication: talking and sharing information with members of armed groups;
- ✓ Raising awareness among armed groups, sometimes through community or religious actors;
- ✓ Helping armed groups with IHL compliance;
- ✓ Taking into account the changing nature of armed groups, which do not remain static over time, and engaging them in discussion or negotiation.

Among the many contributions made by participants, the most notable was the suggestion that IHL should be translated into local languages to promote better understanding, this working towards solving the problem of the armed groups' lack of IHL knowledge.

#### **IV.2.5 The way forward – strengthening regional cooperation and building a common roadmap for protecting education from attack in the Sahel**

This module gave participants the opportunity to:

- Showcase work already undertaken at regional level, including by UNOWAS;
- Encourage the strengthening of regional cooperation and integrate measures taken at national level into regional response mechanisms;

- Discuss what else can be done to protect education from attack, identify any remaining gaps and design a common, coherent regional approach to protecting education from attack;
- Link the discussion on regional initiatives to broader, ongoing efforts worldwide by the state-led implementation network.

### **Part 1: Presentations and discussions on actions undertaken at regional level**

#### **❖ *Ms Eleonora Meli Messineo, Political Affairs Advisor, UNOWAS***

The purpose of this presentation was to outline the findings of the UNOWAS annual conference on the implementation of UN SCR 2601 (2021) in West and Central Africa, and to give the regional political context. The theme of the conference was access to education and governance in the central Sahel and West Africa, and its main aim was to advocate for education insecurity to be made a priority for political decision-makers.

The event brought together a range of participants including NGOs, international organisations, ministries of defence, education and finance, regional organisations, civil society, experts, and representatives from local communities, who demonstrated considerable awareness and admirable commitment to the resolution, working tirelessly and never abandoning the communities affected.

The conference made a number of recommendations, which included:

- ✓ Going beyond strictly security-based measures and adopting a more holistic approach incorporating socio-economic measures, and tackling the root causes of insecurity through inclusive governance, sound management and equitable distribution of resources;
- ✓ Working together to develop synergies between national stakeholders, local communities, decentralised administrations and other partners.
- ✓ Developing strategies to secure resources.

### **Part 2: Building a road map to protect education from attack**

For this practical exercise, participants were divided into small groups by country (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali and Senegal), and were given three activities. The objectives were to look at the challenges faced by each country, to identify where regional cooperation was possible, and to develop a national roadmap to protect education from attack.

#### **Activity 1: Analysing the problem tree**

When defining the problem, it was important participants were able to distinguish between the problem itself and its causes and consequences. This activity helped the group understand the interdependent root causes of the problem and its consequences, and to identify its principal victims. The information mapped in the tree helped clarify which aspects of the problem they needed to address, and the types of strategy required.

Following some lively discussion, the groups successfully identified the causes, both direct and indirect, and consequences of attacks. Among the causes cited were:

- Lack of knowledge regarding IHL;
- Distrust of state authority, creating a situation where the state itself is called into question;
- A desire to punish the people, as the majority of citizens are perceived to be on the side of the State;
- Concerns about the Western education model;

- Social inequality, with social injustice being one of the main arguments advanced by armed groups;
- The promotion of different cultural and religious ideologies.

Consequences included:

- The closure of schools, leading to children dropping out of education;
- Antisocial behaviour;
- Loss of authority by the State;
- Destruction of infrastructure;
- Psychological imbalance;
- Displacement of local communities;
- Increased enrolment into militias;
- Drug abuse;
- Early marriage;
- Early, unwanted, and high-risk pregnancies.

### **Activity 2: Stakeholder mapping exercise**

This part of the exercise helped participants identify all actors who needed to be involved in addressing the issue of attacks on education at local, national, regional and international level.

- **At local level:** local administrative bodies, religious, political and customary authorities, local communities, educational actors, financial and technical partners, security forces, the local SSD monitoring committee, etc.;
- **At national level:** elected representatives, the Executive (Education Ministry, Justice Ministry), the Legislators, NGOs actively involved in education and child protection, UN agencies;
- **At regional level:** bodies such as ECOWAS, the SSD/Sahel platform, regional working groups, civil society actors, Joining Forces (an alliance of 6 NGOs involved in child protection), UNOWAS and the African Union;
- **At international level:** state, humanitarian and diplomatic communities, GCPEA, Watchlist.

### **Activity 3: Identifying solutions to the problem of attacks on education**

The aim of this activity was to design a road map for protecting education from attack, by finding potential solutions to the problems identified in Activity 1, including the roles of all stakeholders identified in Activity 2, and taking into account the impact of each solution in the field. Participants were asked to consider what solutions might be appropriate for their own countries, based on their own national contexts, priorities and existing capacities.

The solutions suggested by each of the participating countries (**Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali and Senegal**) centred around the following individual considerations:

- For **Burkina Faso**, the need was identified to create a framework for dialogue and consultation within communities, to activate the existing SSD committee by providing financial support for its plan of action, to hold regional and local conferences on religious,

political, ideological and community tolerance, to disseminate the Declaration, and to build capacity in the defence and security forces;

- For **Cameroon**, the main solutions focused on broadening the normative framework by adding regulations and legislation relating to the SSD, increasing dissemination and awareness of the SSD using national languages, and improving steering mechanisms for implementing the SSD along with improved monitoring and reporting;
- For **Mali**, it was considered vital to continue raising awareness of the SSD. This could be done via open days, by organising consultation events on the reopening of schools, and by translating the SSD and *Guidelines* into local languages. Further solutions included capacity-building for stakeholders (security forces, non-state armed groups etc.), introducing a plan to prevent and manage risk in schools, and closely monitoring the adoption of a bill for the protection of education during armed conflict.
- Finally, for **Senegal**, it was deemed essential to join the Norwegian State-led network for implementing the Declaration with a view to improving monitoring, to set up a multi-sector committee responsible for implementing the Declaration, and to draw up a plan of action, complete with dissemination plan, to support the committee's activities.

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### V.1 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is essential to recognise that significant progress has already been made in implementing the Safe Schools Declaration in West and Central Africa, supported by this workshop. The combined efforts of governments, international organisations, education communities and other stakeholders have played a key part in improving security in the region's educational establishments.

However, it is also crucial to stress that problems remain, and that continued action is needed. Threats to school security can evolve and change, and it is vital to adapt existing strategies to tackle new challenges as they emerge. Continued commitment, alongside additional funding, is required to meet future needs and ensure a safe, supportive educational environment.

The workshop highlighted the fact that regional collaboration plays a pivotal role in the success of safe schools initiatives in this region. Encouraging parties to exchange good practice and share expertise, and improving coordination between the region's countries, are key to improving the effectiveness of measures already in place, while nurturing and enhancing regional cooperation is essential if problems are to be tackled collectively. In the closing ceremony, Mr Svein Michelsen, Director of Humanitarian Affairs at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stressed the importance of effective implementation of the SSD, particularly in conflict zones. This is why Norway, having measured the impact effective implementation of the Declaration can have, has chosen to focus on two specific areas: providing education for young refugees, and protecting educational institutions from military use.

The conclusion of this report highlights the importance of continued commitment from key actors, including governments, regional organisations, international partners, schools, parents and all other stakeholders.

### V.2 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

**States are encouraged to:**

- Work closely together, taking ownership of the SSD and implementing it through national steering committees led by states;

- Develop the infrastructure and inclusive school programmes needed to help reintegrate children affected by armed conflict;
- Mobilise all stakeholders to implement the commitments set out in the SSD and *Guidelines*, either within the framework of existing structures or by introducing new ones;
- Amend or develop new legislation to better protect education from attack;
- Include women and girls in conversations to better understand their specific needs and the measures required to respond appropriately to gender-based sexual violence;
- Increase the number of actors involved in child protection, particularly those with expertise in case management, psychosocial care and the support of children affected by armed groups;
- Ensure that any mechanisms introduced have appropriate, sustainable funding.

**Financial and technical partners should:**

- Provide more resources to fund local initiatives to re-open schools and action plans drawn up by national monitoring committees, and encourage the exchange of good practice between countries to improve adoption and implementation of the SSD;
- Support the SSD implementation framework to include refugees, displaced persons and host communities in decision-making and community initiatives, inclusively and without discrimination, taking into account community diversity;
- Support the SSD implementation framework to support parents in parenting in situation of pressure, making them better able to support their children's schooling even in difficult times;

**INGOs should:**

- Strengthen coordination between humanitarian actors and improve data collection, disaggregating data by age, gender and disability.