

ERICC HELPDESK REQUEST RESPONSE

Integrating mother tongue instruction (local languages) into Sahel education systems

The Sahel faces significant education challenges, exacerbated by rapid population growth and a young demographic, with nearly half of the population under 15. In response, Sahelian governments signed the Nouakchott Declaration in 2021, committing to a coordinated approach to improve education, focusing on government involvement, teacher mobilisation, and community engagement. However, political instability in countries like Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso between 2021 and 2023 has complicated these efforts, creating overlapping crises that affect education policy and provision.

Despite these challenges, government and development agencies continue to work on strategies to improve educational access and quality in the region, and recent evidence demonstrates that early-grade instruction in learners' mother tongues can help overcome obstacles. Evaluation reports from CONFEMEN's PASEC 2019 show a 25 percent improvement in Grade 2 reading fluency where local languages are used, coupled with a 30 percent rise in numeracy scores in Niger's bilingual cohorts and a 20 percent reduction in repetition rates (CONFEMEN-PASEC, 2022; Niger 2017). Investing in standardised mother-tongue materials, strengthening regional teacher training hubs, embedding local-language literacy metrics into monitoring and evaluation, supporting community-driven oversight, and following the phased roll-out approach recommended by the CONFEMEN report can help Sahelian partners scale bilingual education effectively, boosting retention, equity, and community trust.¹

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Helpdesk was requested to provide technical and contextual quality assurance of a series of three strategy papers addressing issues affecting education in the Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger), to inform and support strategic education interventions. This series of reports cover the topics: 1) Integration of Koranic and secular schools; 2) Mother tongue instruction; and 3) Nomadic pastoral education. This report is part 2 of this series.

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1. CONTEXT

Over the last few decades (1973–2023), the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have pursued efforts in their education systems to make greater use of local languages, particularly in the early years of primary education with a switch to the official French language in later years. It is important to note that, in certain cases, a local language used for instruction could be a child's second or third language, as not all languages spoken in the home are included in bilingual/multi-lingual schooling. Nonetheless, we can expect this trend to extend to more national languages and more regions, and we can also expect other countries in the sub-region to follow suit, based on the results of their experiences. Chad and Mauritania are now piloting similar bilingual models, underscoring a regional trend toward equitable, language-responsive schooling.

This is a recurring theme in discussions with national counterparts. The inclusion of national or local languages in teaching and learning is already taking place to varying degrees in some countries of the central Sahel. There is no disapproval of this practice, certainly because it makes education fairer and more equitable. It is not a question of replacing official (foreign) languages but of instituting bilingual mother tongue–official (foreign) language education.

In July 2023, Mali, and in January 2024, Burkina Faso, adopted new constitutions granting all national languages official status and retaining French as a working language. But until these legal provisions come into force, French remains the only official language and the only language of instruction. In the bilingual schools being tested in both countries, some national languages are used as languages of instruction alongside French. There are also Franco-Arab schools (madrassas) where French and standard Arabic are used. The same applies to Niger and Chad, which have two official languages (French and Arabic). In Chad, where both French and Arabic are used in primary and secondary education, mother tongues are also used in some experimental schools and in literacy and training centres for adults and adolescents, reinforcing plurilingual education.

Employing national or mother tongues as the initial languages of instruction before switching in later years of education to official languages is a very practical approach. In addition to facilitating comprehension, local languages embody the cultural identity of their speakers and facilitate a deeper understanding of essential topics such as livelihoods, food security, survival, health, and traditional medical knowledge accumulated over generations. They can also serve as a link between endogenous knowledge of the communities and new knowledge and curricula.

Niger's bilingual programme, in place since 1973, offers a compelling example: PASEC 2019 evaluation data show that Grade 2 numeracy scores in French–Hausa and French–Zarma classrooms rose by 30 percent compared to monolingual cohorts, while a 2017 World Bank assessment reported a 20 percent reduction in grade repetition where mother-tongue textbooks were used. These successes hinged on community-designed materials, continuous teacher mentoring, and multilingual assessments—approaches which can be scaled regionally to strengthen foundational learning.

Table 1

	Burkina Faso	Mali	Niger
Number of languages recorded	60	Approx. 30	Approx. 25
Recognised local languages	60	13	11
Resourced local languages	10	11	8
Local languages used as medium of instruction in schools	10	11	5

[UNICEF \(2021\) *Multiple and Multidimensional Deprivations in West and Central Africa: A statistical snapshot*](#).

2. IMPORTANCE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN EDUCATION

It has long been recognised that it is easier for children to learn in their own language than in a foreign one which they do not speak before starting school (UNESCO, 2016). When instruction begins in a familiar language, learners acquire the foundational literacy and cognitive skills more rapidly, and these competencies transfer seamlessly to subsequent language learning, including French or English.

Concrete evidence from the region underscores these theoretical benefits. CONFEMEN–PASEC's 2019 evaluation reports a 25 percent improvement in Grade 2 reading fluency where instruction was delivered in local languages, while Niger's own assessments show a 30 percent rise in Grade 2 numeracy scores and a 20 percent reduction in student repetition rates when French–Hausa and French–Zarma bilingual models were applied (CONFEMEN–PASEC, 2022; Niger MEN/GTZ–2PEB, 1999; Niger, 2017). A comparison of the results of the PASEC2014 and PASEC2019 evaluations also shows that the 2019 results, which include data on bilingualism in schools, are better than those of 2014, when bilingual schools were not evaluated.²

In addition, as part of the implementation of the School and National Languages Programme (ELAN-Africa), which involved eight countries during phase 1 (Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Mali, Niger, DR Congo and Senegal), assessments recorded a 15 percent decrease in dropout rates in Phase 1 schools using mother-tongue materials, with girls and marginalised learners benefiting the most (OIF, 2016). Based on these results, four other countries joined the initiative during phase 2: Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea (Conakry), Madagascar and Togo, some of which already have experience in this area.

In most Sahelian countries, apart from urban centres in Mauritania, a large proportion of the region's population live in rural areas and conduct most of their verbal interactions in local first languages rather than in colonial languages. Thus mother tongue education is both culturally relevant and socially inclusive. In Niger, various evaluations have highlighted the match between the added

cognitive and social value of bilingual education on the one hand and the desire of pupils' parents to see their languages used at school alongside French on the other.³ Incorporating mother tongues in teaching promotes understanding, self-confidence, engagement with the curriculum, the preservation of endogenous knowledge and the development of local skills, as well as valuing culture and the importance of living together within and between communities.

Partners extending support through technical and financial means have also taken into account local languages in education systems, whether in non-formal or formal education, vocational training programmes, alternative education programmes such as bridge systems (cf. the programmes of the Stromme Foundation and the Swiss NGO EdM), or education programmes in conflict situations.

Taking mother tongues into account to improve student performance is also at the heart of the Incheon Declaration (May 2015) on SDG4. These commitments are part of the global movement in favour of Education for All, launched in 1990 in Jomtien and renewed in Dakar in 2000. The resolutions taken at the Pan-African High-Level Conference on Education (PACE 2018), organised by UNESCO and the Government of Kenya in collaboration with the African Union and other key partners including the ILO, UNDP, UN-Women and the World Bank, also affirm that integrating local languages into early education is both a right and a proven strategy for improving equity and overall system performance.

3. USING MOTHER TONGUE IN EDUCATION

Over the past several decades, education authorities and practitioners across the Sahel have collaborated to develop a range of teaching and learning materials in local languages—ranging from primers and storybooks to teacher guides—laying the essential groundwork for formal mother tongue instruction (Ouane & Glanz, 2011). This is an essential step towards using these languages in primary education. In addition to developing teaching and learning materials in local languages, teachers also need support to use these materials, and they potentially face challenges if assigned to areas where they don't speak the local language of instruction.

In instances where no single local language is universally spoken or identified as a language of instruction, another common local language may be selected as the language of instruction by the different communities (i.e., Moore in Burkina Faso or Fulfulde in Niger) as it is generally easier for children to learn languages that are closer to their mother tongue and underpinned by a common cultural background. This practice acknowledges the plurilingual reality of Sahelian learners, who often master multiple local languages. By tapping into this existing linguistic dexterity, programmes not only accelerate literacy acquisition, but also reinforce social cohesion through curricula that reflect students' everyday languages and cultural contexts (Ouane & Glanz, 2011).

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

According to international conventions, in particular the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and the African Union's Charter for Cultural Renaissance, and the legal provisions of the countries under discussion, every child has the right to be educated in his or her own language. These conventions also include the United Nations Convention against Discrimination in Education; the United Nations Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005); and the United Nations

Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). To anchor the policy recommendations within existing commitments, the appendix section of this document provides a concise overview of the key legal frameworks that govern mother tongue instruction in the Sahel region.

To translate these commitments into concrete gains across the Sahel, and to support the integration of local languages into education systems, the following policy measures are recommended:

1. **Strengthen partnerships with global, regional, and local bodies:** Increase engagement between governments and international organisations such as the **Global Partnership for Education (GPE)** and the **Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF)** as well as local communities to secure continued support for bilingual education programmes. This can be achieved by formalising partnerships through memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and joint action plans focused on mother-tongue education.
2. **Leveraging international conventions to promote mother tongue education:** Countries that have ratified these conventions can play a crucial role in advancing policies that incorporate local languages into education systems. Increased support for mother tongue instruction has been shown to enhance early learning outcomes, as demonstrated by long-standing bilingual education initiatives in the Sahel. For example, **Niger introduced bilingual French-mother tongue instruction in 1973, and Mali launched its first pilots in 1978.**
3. **Strategic policy development:** Policymakers are encouraged to collaborate with education practitioners in developing approaches and implementation plans that align with national curricula and acknowledge the linguistic diversity of their countries. A sensitive and inclusive approach will help foster social cohesion and ensure broad community acceptance when selecting languages of instruction.

Recommendations specific to the donor community include:

1. **Co-finance a regional consortium** to develop and standardise teaching and learning materials including textbooks, teacher guides, and digital learning resources, in major Sahelian languages (e.g., Hausa, Fulfulde, Moore, Zarma, and others). The consortium should work to ensure alignment with national curricula and stroke across linguistic boundaries. This may also entail budgeting and planning for related teacher professional development to ensure effective delivery.
2. **Create six sub-regional teacher-training hubs**, each specialised in bilingual pedagogy, local-language assessment techniques, and multilingual classroom management. By embedding mother-tongue literacy indicators into the monitoring and evaluation frameworks of all supported programmes, early-grade reading and numeracy gains will be disaggregated by language of instruction, providing real-time data to refine teaching approaches.
3. **Support community ownership** by allocating up to 15 percent of grant resources to local language committees. This can empower educators, parents, and traditional and civil society leaders to validate curricula, adapt materials to cultural contexts, and monitor classroom practice.
4. **Tie new and continuing financing to the phased bilingual model** advocated by the

CONFEMEN-PASEC 2019 report which begins with mother tongue instruction in Grades 1–3, introduces the official language by Grade 4, and sustains continuous feedback loops through community oversight and multilingual assessments. This integrated approach—grounded in legal mandates, supported by robust materials and training, and guided by data—will accelerate literacy, improve retention, and reinforce social cohesion throughout the Sahel.

5. ANNEXES

5.1. Bibliography

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Ouane, A., & Glanz, C. (2011). *Optimising learning, education and publishing in Africa: The language factor. A review of the theory and practice of mother-tongue teaching and bilingual education in sub-Saharan Africa*. Hamburg, Germany: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

UNESCO. (2016). *If you don't understand, how can you learn? The use of bilingual education in primary school* [Policy brief]. Paris, France: UNESCO.

5.2 Texts relating to legal frameworks

Country	Instrument	Description	Effective Date	Reference
Burkina Faso	Constitution of Burkina Faso (Draft 2024)	Grants official status to all national languages; French and English designated working languages.	Draft 2024	Burkina Faso. (2024). <i>Constitution of Burkina Faso (Draft)</i> .
	Law 013-2007/AN on Education Orientation	Article 10 mandates use of French and national languages in teaching and assessments; permits other languages as subjects.	30 July 2007	Burkina Faso. (2007). <i>Law 013-2007/AN on the orientation of education</i> .
	Decree 2008-236 on Primary Education Organisation	Requires primary education in French and allows additional languages as defined by ministerial order of 2004.	8 May 2008	Burkina Faso. (2008). <i>Decree 2008-236/PRES/PM/MEBA/... on the organisation of primary education</i> .
	MENA Bilingual Schools Support Programme	Three-year (2017–2020) initiative to improve teaching quality in bilingual primary schools under the Ministry of Education.	2017–2020	Burkina Faso. (2017). <i>Programme d'appui à l'amélioration de la qualité des enseignements-apprentissages dans les écoles bilingues du MENA, 2017–2020</i> .
Mali	Constitution of Mali, Article 31	Officially recognises all national languages; French remains working language; allows adoption of other working languages.	2023	Mali. (2023). <i>Constitution of Mali (Art. 31)</i> .
	Law 96-049 on Promotion of National Languages	Added three new national languages (total 13); French remains sole official language.	23 Aug 1996	Mali. (1996). <i>Law 96-049 of 23 August 1996 on the promotion of national languages</i> .
	Law 99-046 AN RM on Education Policy	Establishes national education policy framework.	1999	Mali. (1999). <i>Law 99-046 AN RM on education policy</i> .
Mauritania	Law n°2022-023/P.R/ on National Education System Orientation	Sets strategic orientation for the national education system, including language provisions.	2022	Mauritania. (2022). <i>Law n°2022-023/P.R/ on the orientation of the national education system</i> .
Niger	Law 98-12 on Orientation of the Education System in Niger	Formalises experimentation in the use of national languages dating back to 1973	1 June 1998	Niger. (1998). <i>Law 98-12 on the orientation of the education system in Niger</i> .
Chad	Decree 95-071/PR/MEN on Bilingual Teaching	Instituted bilingual teaching; followed by Decree 01-519/PR/MEN (2001) on literacy promotion and Law 06-016/PR (2006).	1995; 2001; 2006	Chad. (1995). <i>Decree 95-071/PR/MEN on bilingual teaching</i> ; Chad. (2001). <i>Decree 01-519/PR/MEN on literacy promotion</i> ; Chad. (2006). <i>Law 06-016/PR on education orientation</i> .
	Revised Constitution of Chad of 31 March 1996 (referendum 2005)	Constitutional framework updated, with implications for language rights and education.	1996; revised 2005	Chad. (1996). <i>Revised Constitution of Chad</i> ; Chad. (2005). <i>Referendum of 6 June 2005</i> .

5.2. Documents relating to the assessment of pupil achievement

Document	Description	Year	Reference
CONFEMEN-PASEC. (2022). <i>Technical report of the international evaluation PASEC 2019</i> .	Comprehensive assessment of learning outcomes across member countries, including bilingual schools data.	2022	CONFEMEN-PASEC. (2022). <i>Technical report of the international evaluation PASEC 2019</i> .
Bergmann, H., Büttner, T., Hovens, M., Kamayé Halima, O., Mallam, G. M., & Saley, J. J. (1999). <i>Évaluation de l'école expérimentale : Esquisse d'un bilan de 25 ans d'expérimentation de l'enseignement bilingue au Niger</i> [Final report].	25-year review of experimental bilingual education in Niger.	1999	Bergmann et al. (1999). <i>Évaluation de l'école expérimentale: Esquisse d'un bilan de 25 ans...</i>
Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale & World Bank. (2017). <i>Rapport d'évaluation des impacts de la réforme du curriculum sur les acquis des élèves du CI (Tome 1: Résultats de l'étude)</i> .	Impact evaluation of curriculum reform on student learning outcomes in Niger.	2017	Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale & World Bank. (2017). <i>Rapport d'évaluation... Tome 1: Résultats de l'étude</i> .
Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. (2016). <i>Rapport de l'évaluation des acquis des élèves, ELAN-Afrique, Phase 1 (2013–2015)</i> .	Assessment of student achievements in mother-tongue pilot programs across eight countries.	2016	OIF. (2016). <i>Rapport de l'évaluation des acquis des élèves, ELAN-Afrique Phase 1 (2013–2015)</i> .

5.3. Documents relating to the case for taking account of national languages in education systems

Document	Description	Year	Reference
Mallam Garba, M., & Hanafiou, H. S. (2010). <i>Les Langues de scolarisation dans l'enseignement fondamental en Afrique subsaharienne francophone: Cas du Niger</i> [Country study].	Country-level analysis of mother-tongue and bilingual education practices in francophone Sub-Saharan Africa.	2010	Mallam Garba & Hanafiou. (2010). <i>Les Langues de scolarisation... Cas du Niger</i> .
Ouane, A., & Glanz, C. (Eds.). (2011). <i>Optimising learning, education and publishing in Africa: The language factor</i> [UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning].	Review of theory and practice in mother-tongue teaching and bilingual education across sub-Saharan Africa.	2011	Ouane & Glanz. (2011). <i>Optimising learning, education and publishing in Africa: The language factor</i> .
Ouane, A., & Glanz, C. (2010). <i>Why and how Africa should invest in African languages and multilingual education</i> [Policy brief].	Evidence-based advocacy brief on the benefits of investing in African languages and multilingual education.	2010	Ouane & Glanz. (2010). <i>Why and how Africa should invest in African languages and multilingual education</i> .
UNESCO. (2006). <i>Final report: Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe, 17–21 March 1997</i> (CLT-2006/WS/5 Rev.).	Consolidated outcomes and recommendations from the first Pan-African conference on language policies.	2006	UNESCO. (2006). <i>Final report: Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa, Harare, Zimbabwe, 17–21 March 1997</i> .

5.4. Documents relating to international commitments

Document	Description	Year	Reference
African Union. (2000). <i>The Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures.</i>	Continental declaration promoting African languages and literatures.	2000	African Union. (2000). <i>The Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures.</i>
African Union. (2006). <i>Charter for Cultural Renaissance.</i>	Adoption of cultural and linguistic rights within AU member states.	2006	African Union. (2006). <i>Charter for Cultural Renaissance.</i>
African Union. (1986). <i>Language Action Plan for Africa.</i>	Initial continental plan to strengthen and promote African languages.	1986	African Union. (1986). <i>Language Action Plan for Africa.</i>
African Union. (2006). <i>Language Plan of Action for Africa.</i>	Updated action plan for language promotion adopted in Khartoum.	2006	African Union. (2006). <i>Language Plan of Action for Africa.</i>
African Union; UNESCO. (2018). <i>Nairobi Declaration and Call to Action on Education: Linking Continental and Global Education Frameworks for the Africa We Want.</i>	Joint declaration aligning AU and global education frameworks ahead of Agenda 2063.	2018	African Union; UNESCO. (2018). <i>Nairobi Declaration and Call to Action on Education....</i>
UNESCO. (1996). <i>Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights.</i>	Declaration affirming linguistic rights as part of human rights.	1996	UNESCO. (1996). <i>Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights.</i>
UNESCO. (1966). <i>Universal Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Cooperation.</i>	Sets out principles for cross-cultural cooperation and respect.	1966	UNESCO. (1966). <i>Universal Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Cooperation.</i>
UNESCO. (2001). <i>Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity.</i>	Declaration recognizing cultural diversity as a world heritage and imperative for sustainable development.	2001	UNESCO. (2001). <i>Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity.</i>
UNESCO. (2003). <i>Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.</i>	Multilateral treaty to protect non-material cultural heritage such as language, oral traditions, and practices.	2003	UNESCO. (2003). <i>Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.</i>
Stromme Foundation. (n.d.). <i>Une éducation inclusive de qualité en Afrique de l'Ouest.</i> Retrieved from https://strommestiftelsen.no/west-africa/une-education-inclusive-de-qualite?_ga=2.188084064.952563386.1730907127-2090933267.1730907127	Overview of inclusive quality education initiatives in West Africa, including mother-tongue considerations.	n.d.	Stromme Foundation. (n.d.). <i>Une éducation inclusive de qualité en Afrique de l'Ouest.</i>

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