
**A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT
AND THE SECURITY CRISIS ON MALIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM IN
DOUENTZA REGION**

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ABSTRAIT

Mali has been plagued by prolonged armed violence and a persistent security crisis since 2012, severely compromising the education system, particularly in the central region of the country, including Douentza. This study aims to systematically examine the effects of armed violence and insecurity on schooling in Mali, paying particular attention to the specific local characteristics of these heavily affected regions. It is based on a systematic literature review, conducted according to the PRISMA protocol, and including scientific articles, institutional reports, and grey literature published between 2013 and 2024. The results reveal major and common negative effects, such as prolonged school closures, attacks on educational institutions, school dropout rates, and refusal to lead schools, as well as the increased vulnerability of teachers, students, and school administrators. The Douentza department exhibits heightened vulnerabilities linked to insecurity and weak capacities. The study also highlights significant methodological limitations in previous work, particularly that based on disaggregated local data. These findings underscore the importance of developing the resilience of education systems and directing public policy and research toward educational responses tailored to the context of conflict.

KEYWORDS: armed conflict, security crisis, education, Mali, Douentza.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since 2012, Mali has been plagued by a protracted armed conflict and structural instability, marked by the proliferation of non-state armed groups, a resurgence of intercommunal violence, and the progressive erosion of the state's institutional capacities (United Nations, 2024; ACLED, 2024). Important recent studies highlight that this deeply entrenched insecurity has severely disrupted essential social services, particularly the education sector, due to widespread school closures, population displacements, and increased exposure of students and teachers to security risks (UNICEF, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

These consequences are particularly pronounced in the central region of the country, notably in Douentza: several studies have highlighted the significant educational vulnerability of this area as a result of the armed conflict. In emergency and conflict situations, education is increasingly seen as a key strategic sector, not only vulnerable to security shocks but also vital for the resilience of affected societies (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Large-scale studies demonstrate that prolonged disruption of education during conflict multiplies the risks of permanent school dropout, child labor, early marriage, and recruitment into armed forces, while also compromising long-term human capital (UNICEF, 2024).

In Mali, this fragility is particularly acute in areas of persistent insecurity and violence, where the safety and continuity of education constitute one of the most urgent challenges – Douentza being one such area, plagued by the same security crisis that has affected school infrastructure, teaching staff, and student numbers.

1.1. Problem Statement

However, to date, comprehensive research on the impact of armed conflict-related violence on education in Mali is lacking. Analysis of available work reveals a highly fragmented subject, with very few systematic studies. These are mainly limited to humanitarian literature, specific case studies, and scattered sectoral analyses, often focused on a particular period or area (UNICEF, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). While this research provides valuable information on school closures, dropout rates, and insecurity, it often lacks methodological coherence and does not allow for a comprehensive and comparative understanding of the impact of the conflict on Malian education as a whole (World Bank, 2023; GCPEA, 2023).

Furthermore, important recent studies highlight the lack of scientific syntheses specifically focused on severely affected geographic areas, particularly certain regions in central Mali (e.g., Douentza), which are often underrepresented or, in many cases, included in national

analyses (United Nations, 2024). This absence of a targeted systematic review hinders a nuanced understanding of local dynamics, impedes the development of context-appropriate education policies, and underscores the importance of a rigorous synthesis to consolidate, compare, and interpret the findings of previous studies on the effects of armed conflict and security crises on education in this region.

1.2. Importance of the Study

This research is particularly important in the context of increasingly fragmented and unevenly documented knowledge production on the Malian education system, as it offers a systematic scientific synthesis of previous studies on the effects of armed conflict and security crises on this system. By focusing on the Douentza region, which is among the most unstable areas yet the least considered in national analyses, this study helps fill a significant gap in the literature and provides evidence that can be used to inform education policies and programs in emergency contexts and serve as a basis for future research on education in conflict contexts.

1.3. Research Objectives

- To search for, select, and synthesize the results of existing studies concerning the effects of armed conflict/security crises on the Malian education system.
- Identify the consequences of conflict and insecurity on access to education, continuity of schooling, infrastructure, and education sector actors, as described in the literature.
- Analyze the specific characteristics of the Douentza region to highlight local dynamics and the lack of previous research.

1.4 Research Questions

- What are the main effects of armed conflict and the security crisis on the Malian education system, as described or reported in the literature?
- What are the implications of armed conflict and insecurity for the establishment of an appropriate learning environment (ALE) in terms of access to education, school retention, infrastructure, and education sector actors in Mali?
- What local details and nuances regarding the impact of conflict on education are addressed in the studies analyzed here, which focus on the Douentza region? What are the main gaps in the research?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Theories of Education in Emergencies

Theories of education in emergencies view education as a fundamental right and a socio-political intervention tool for protection, social stabilization, and resilience building in armed conflicts and protracted crises. From this perspective, education is a crucial mechanism for mitigating the vulnerability of children exposed to violence by providing them with a safe environment, socio-psychosocial continuity, and a structured framework for addressing conflict-related trauma (UNESCO, 2023; INEE, 2022). These theories have also highlighted the need to reform education in insecure contexts by promoting flexible learning methods and emergency teaching and training modules, community-based education, and integrating psychosocial support into school curricula (UNICEF, 2024).

In these contexts of protracted conflict, several new conceptual models have proposed that, to help children learn in situations of insecurity and crisis, emergency education must focus more on strengthening the resilience of education systems and ensuring continued access to education for all children (World Bank, 2023). Indeed, these approaches emphasize the need for educational responses tailored to local dynamics, particularly in areas where communities are especially affected, such as the Douentza region (where education must effectively meet immediate needs while contributing to social harmony and long-term reconstruction in a context of violence and insecurity).

2.2. Resilience Theory of Education Systems

Based on the resilience theory of education systems in situations of armed conflict, this approach recognizes that education systems may need to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to various forms of shocks related to insecurity, while maintaining, or even expanding, learning opportunities for learners from all backgrounds. Recent work also emphasizes that this resilience relies on interdependent components: flexible educational governance, diversified pedagogies, the protection of school infrastructure, and psychosocial support for children and teachers (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). From this perspective, education should not only be a service to be preserved, but also a pillar of social stability and post-conflict recovery (UNICEF, 2024).

Large-scale international studies demonstrate that strengthening educational resilience is imperative during protracted crises, when repeated disruptions are likely to lead to lasting breaks in educational pathways (INEE, 2022). In regions hardest hit by insecurity, such as Douentza, this conceptual framework allows for an analysis of how local education systems

leverage survival strategies community schools, alternative learning modalities, and humanitarian collaborations to preserve access to education and strengthen collective resilience in the face of the insecurity crisis.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A systematic literature review was conducted to rigorously examine existing studies on the impact of armed conflict and security crises on the education system in Mali, with a particular focus on the Douentza region. This review was based on a systematic and transparent process of selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing existing scientific literature (and other types of institutional publications) to ensure the reliability of the results and to obtain an analytical synthesis that sheds light on educational dynamics in situations of armed conflict.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

3.2.1 Inclusion Criteria

- **Study Type:** Systematic Literature Review
- **Target Population:** Regional education directors, directors of educational resource centers, teachers, school management committees, local authorities, and NGOs working in emergency school management.
- **Area of study:** Research explicitly focusing on the impact of armed conflict and security crises on the Malian education system: a case study in Douentza.
- **Geographic coverage:** The research was conducted in the sub-region and in Mali, establishing an explicit link between the consequences of armed conflict and the security crisis on the Malian education system.
- **Language:** Articles in English or French.
- **Publication date:** From late December 2013 to the present, in order to document the impact of this conflict on education.

3.2.2 Exclusion Criteria

- **Type of study:** Non-empirical commentary, thesis, or report.
- **Specialization:** Research on education in the Malian context is peripheral or ancillary to the research questions and does not present a clear analytical framework or discernible results concerning the Malian education system.
- **Geographic Coverage:** Articles conducted outside the sub-region and Mali.

- **Language:** Articles published in all languages except English and French.
- **Publication Date:** Studies published up to 2012.

3.3. Research Strategy

The research strategies are intended to be systematic and reproducible, enabling the identification of relevant studies on the effects of armed conflict and security crises on the Malian education system, particularly in Douenza. Searches were conducted in international scientific databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ERIC) and in grey literature, including reports from international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government agencies.

The search queries combined keywords and Boolean operators related to armed conflict (armed conflict, insecurity, security crisis), education (education system, access to education, education in emergencies), and the geographical context of the study (Douenza central regions of Mali). The searches were predefined in French and English for a specific period to identify the most recent and relevant publications. All results were then rigorously selected using a structured process, adhering to predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria, in accordance with methodological recommendations for systematic reviews.

3.4. Data Analysis Methodology

The results were analyzed thematically using aggregated data from all included studies to identify, group, and interpret recurring trends (themes) concerning the impact of armed conflict and the security crisis on education in Mali. This qualitative approach involved analyzing the study results using predefined analytical frameworks. The categories analyzed included access to education, school closures, the safety of education personnel, continuity of learning, and resilience mechanisms in conflict situations. We focused particularly on the results related to the Douenza region to characterize the local dynamics described in the literature.

The results of the analyzed studies were then integrated and compared through a narrative synthesis, taking into account the diversity of analyses, contexts, and methodological approaches. This methodology not only allowed for the organization of results into key themes, but also for comparisons between studies and the drawing of general conclusions on the effects of conflict and insecurity on education in Mali. This narrative synthesis thus offers a structured and contextualized analysis of the available data, enabling an understanding of the effects of conflict on education within a broader body of literature. It also informs the

resulting conclusions regarding effective interventions and their implications, drawing on the best available global evidence.

3.5. Ethics and Conflict of Interest Declaration

This study is recognized as a systematic review, adhering to the principles of scientific transparency, academic integrity, and methodological rigor. Conflict of interest declaration: No potential conflicts of interest have been declared by the authors. The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article or its content. All sources used were selected and examined independently, according to predefined methodological criteria, in order to avoid redundancies and thus ensure the balance of the research, in particular to analyze the consequences of the armed conflict and the security crisis on the Malian education system, especially in the Douentza region.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Description of Included Studies

The systematic reviews covered publications from 2013 to the present, including peer-reviewed scientific articles and institutional reports. Most of these studies focus on the northern and central regions, particularly Mopti, Gao, and Timbuktu. In contrast, the Douentza region is rarely studied directly but is instead integrated into broader regional analyses. Methodologically, the studies primarily employ qualitative methods (such as interviews and case or document analyses), supplemented by some quantitative surveys or mixed methods. This reflects the challenges of conducting research in a conflict context and justifies the choice of a narrative synthesis for analyzing the results (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

4.2 Main Impacts of Crises on Education in Mali

School closures are among the most widely documented consequences of the armed conflict and security crisis in Mali. Recent reports indicate that persistent insecurity, direct threats from armed groups, and a lack of security guarantees have forced thousands of schools to remain closed for extended periods, primarily in the northern and central regions of the country (UNICEF, 2024; World Bank, 2023). These closures severely disrupt the continuity of learning and contribute significantly to educational inequalities between conflict-free and affected areas, such as Douentza.

Attacks on educational infrastructure are another major factor disrupting education in Mali. Schools are frequently targeted, occupied, or destroyed during armed conflicts, or used for military purposes, compromising their educational and protective role (GCPEA, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). This is a significant source of material damage, but it is not the only one: public confidence in the safety of schools is also beginning to decline, leading to a further drop in school attendance.

Finally, war is one of the main drivers of school dropout; it particularly affects children in rural areas and displaced children. New studies show that forced displacement, insecurity on the way to school, and precarious living conditions lead many children to leave school, either temporarily or permanently (UNICEF, 2024). This situation increases the risks of child labor, early marriage, and social exclusion, with consequences for human capital development and the future stability of the education system in Mali (World Bank, 2023).

4.3 Impacts on Education Sector Actors

The effects of the security crisis and armed conflict are, moreover, far more severe for teachers, who face direct threats, displacement, and difficult working conditions. Recent assessments indicate that insecurity is leading to a shortage of teachers and school services in the region, as teachers leave safer areas or are no longer being recruited. The content and continuity of education are consequently affected, particularly in central Mali, such as in Douentza (World Bank, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

Students are among the most vulnerable groups in situations of armed conflict: their access to education is constantly disrupted, they suffer trauma, and they are more exposed to violence. Insecurity not only restricts physical access to school, but also undermines learning ability and academic motivation, resulting in higher dropout rates (particularly among girls and displaced children) (UNESCO, 2023; GCPEA, 2023). These effects on educational pathways and investments in human capital have long-term consequences.

School administrations are also subject to the dire security situation, which compromises the governance, planning, and monitoring of the education system. Research indicates that “instability complicates the operational management of institutions, resource allocation, and the implementation of education policies, leading to increased reliance on humanitarian aid and emergency interventions” (United Nations, 2024). Such a situation limits the capacity of local education authorities to ensure the equitable and continuous functioning of the education system in conflict-affected areas.

4.4 Specific Impacts in the Douentza Regions

The Douentza areas are particularly vulnerable due to their strategic location, inadequate social infrastructure, and the strong presence of armed groups, all of which exacerbate the impact of the crisis on education. Recent research indicates that chronic insecurity has led to prolonged school closures, reduced teacher mobility, and increased student exposure to violence, thereby increasing dropout and absenteeism rates (UNICEF, 2024; United Nations, 2024). These vulnerabilities are compounded by systemic poverty and the lack of effective local education protection systems.

A large-scale comparison with other conflict-affected regions of Mali, such as Gao, Timbuktu, and parts of Mopti, suggests that the adverse effects on education are widespread throughout the country, but tend to be more persistent and severe in Douentza due to less effective humanitarian action and ongoing instability (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Unlike some urban areas that benefit from alternative learning programs, Douentza suffers from low local resilience, which exacerbates inequalities in access to education in this conflict-affected area.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation of Results

A critical analysis of the identified impacts reveals that the repercussions of armed conflict and the security crisis on education in Mali are not merely temporary disruptions, but rather long-term structural failures that affect the very foundations of the education system. Recent important reports highlight how prolonged school closures, school dropout rates, and the erosion of the role of education sector actors create a vicious cycle in which insecurity fuels poverty, which in turn fuels the degradation of institutions (World Bank 2023; UNICEF 2024), with disastrous consequences for vulnerable areas like Douentza. These circumstances underscore the weaknesses of responses primarily focused on humanitarian aid and education, and strengthen the case for integrated programming that considers security, education governance, and long-term resilience measures.

5.2 Comparison with International Literature

The findings of this review show that the consequences of armed conflict and security crises on education in Mali are very similar to those observed in other contexts affected by armed conflict, particularly in the Sahel and Middle East, as well as in some regions of sub-Saharan Africa. International studies highlight a series of common dynamics: for example, prolonged

school closures, attacks on educational infrastructure, teacher shortages, and an increase in the number of students dropping out of school, especially in rural and marginalized areas (UNESCO, 2023; GCPEA, 2023). Similar results in Douentza also suggest that the impact of conflict on education is part of broader structural processes that characterize fragile contexts, where insecurity systematically disrupts equitable and sustainable access to education (World Bank, 2023).

5.3 Implications for Research and Public Policy

What to do: Strengthening education systems in conflict-affected countries is a strategic priority to address the lasting impact of insecurity on education in Mali. Recent research in the country also indicates that it is time to move beyond ad hoc emergency education responses and adopt integrated approaches that encompass school security, local education governance, teacher support, and the collection of disaggregated data to inform decision-making (Ministry of National Education of Mali, 2023; UNICEF Mali, 2024). In severely affected areas such as Douentza, recommendations suggest mechanisms for institutional resilience and enhanced cooperation among stakeholders.

5.4 Links between security, conflict, and access to education

Institutional analyses examine the link between security, conflict, and access to education through the lens of state involvement, public policies, and educational governance systems in fragile contexts. Several recent studies clearly demonstrate that armed insecurity weakens institutional capacities, undermines educational planning, and limits the delivery of basic services by forcing the closure or relocation of schools and teachers, thereby increasing dependence on humanitarian aid (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). In contexts of protracted conflict, access to education is therefore closely linked to the capacity of institutions to manage security challenges, implement appropriate educational responses, and protect schools from attack (GCPEA, 2023).

Socio-educational approaches, for their part, emphasize the impact of conflict on educational pathways, as well as on community relations and social exclusion from education. Recent literature highlights the inextricable link between education and conflict: insecurity exacerbates educational inequalities, with children in rural and marginalized areas being more vulnerable to dropping out of school due to child labor or early marriage (UNICEF, 2024). In crisis zones, such as Douentza, these perspectives offer a better understanding of how social,

cultural, and economic conditions are linked to insecurity and concretely shape actual access to education beyond formal institutional structures.

5.5 Limitations of Existing Studies

Previous studies on the effects of armed conflict and security crises on the Malian education system have significant methodological weaknesses, notably a heavy reliance on institutional and humanitarian reports produced in emergency situations. These studies are generally descriptive and cross-sectional, and rarely employ rigorous quantitative methods or longitudinal approaches to explore the medium- and long-term impacts of conflict on education. National reports also highlight the diversity of data collection instruments and the lack of consistent analytical frameworks, which complicates the comparability of results and their generalization to the entire Malian territory (Ministry of National Education of Mali, 2023; Education Cluster Mali, 2023).

More recent analyses also reveal a persistent lack of disaggregated local data, particularly in areas like Douentza where insecurity is high. Several studies conducted in Mali show that these regions are often represented in large-scale regional reports rather than by data specifically collected to reflect local school dynamics, community responses, and the differentiated needs or specificities of educational actors (UNICEF Mali, 2024). The lack of empirical data at the local level limits the ability of policymakers to design contextualized educational interventions adapted to the areas most affected by the conflict.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Malian government, the results of this systematic review underscore the need to sustainably strengthen educational governance in conflict contexts by integrating school security, educational continuity, and institutional resilience into public policies. In this regard, the decentralization process of educational services initiated after the 2013 crisis must be consolidated, particularly in heavily affected areas such as Douentza (Ministry of National Education of Mali, 2023). Improved coordination between educational policies, security strategies, and humanitarian action is essential to reducing territorial disparities in access to education.

From the perspective of donors and technical partners, recent research in Mali recommends increasing support for educational interventions that combine emergency measures and development actions to prevent prolonged disruptions to schooling in insecure contexts. This implies financial and technical support for flexible approaches (community schools,

alternative learning, psychosocial support), as well as strengthened coordination with national and local authorities to ensure the sustainability of implemented practices (UNICEF Mali, 2024; Education Cluster Mali, 2023). Particular attention must be paid to the production and use of high-quality educational data to guide interventions.

From a research perspective, this review highlights the importance of conducting more grounded and comprehensive empirical work, based on mixed methodologies and disaggregated local data, to better understand educational dynamics in conflict contexts in Mali. Future research should prioritize field analyses, longitudinal approaches, and the study of educational resilience mechanisms, particularly in the central areas of the country, which are still poorly documented (National Institute of Statistics of Mali, 2023). This work is essential to inform public policy and improve the effectiveness of educational responses to insecurity.

7. CONCLUSION

This systematic review highlights that armed conflict and the security crisis have direct and lasting implications for the Malian education system, disrupting access to school, continuity of educational pathways, and institutional stability. The research findings show that prolonged school closures, attacks on educational infrastructure, and the increased exposure of education stakeholders constitute structural rather than cyclical impacts. These dynamics are particularly pronounced in the central region of the country, notably in Douentza, where insecurity and institutional weakness exacerbate territorial disparities. The review also highlights significant gaps in the literature, including the lack of disaggregated local data and longitudinal studies. These findings underscore the need to strengthen the resilience of education systems through integrated, evidence-based policies adapted to conflict contexts, in order to ensure the sustainability of education in insecure areas of Mali.

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