

Cross-Country Research on Youth and Women Employment in Conflict-Affected Regions: Insights from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Jordan, and Sudan

Country Case Study Burkina Faso

Introduction and context

Burkina Faso, the "land of honest men," is a democratic and secular republic in West Africa with French as its official language. Since 2015, the country has faced escalating insecurity driven by the expansion of violent extremist groups, primarily linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. These Unidentified Armed Groups (GANI) have intensified their attacks on security forces, government institutions, and civilians, particularly in the northern and eastern regions, including Sahel, Centre-Nord, Est, and Boucle du Mouhoun. The conflict has been fueled by a combination of weak state presence in remote areas, local grievances, intercommunal tensions, and competition over scarce resources, such as land and water.

As violence has spread, more than two million people have been displaced, with entire communities forced to flee rural areas for the relative safety of urban centers. Schools, health facilities, and public services have been disrupted or shut down in conflict-affected regions, leaving millions without access to essential services. The worsening security situation has also deepened food insecurity, as farmers abandon their fields due to fear of attacks, leading to decreased agricultural production and rising prices. Additionally, restrictions on movement and trade imposed by armed groups have further strained local economies, exacerbating poverty and instability. At the beginning of the year 2025, the government reached 1,000,000 people re-installed in their villages with the needed accommodations. This could show that the security challenge is gradually decreasing. Life conditions have been severely restricted, and many people lost their economic activities.

The conducted research investigates the complex challenges faced by women and youth in conflict-affected regions. The study, conducted in Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Jordan, and Sudan, explores actionable strategies to enhance economic engagement and highlights solutions that can be adapted to other fragile contexts. The research process employed a participatory approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data from diverse stakeholders. Key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys were conducted. All details can be found in Annex 1 and 2 of the full report.

The study is structured around two core pillars, each exploring critical aspects of employment ecosystems and development programming in fragile contexts. **Pillar A** focuses on the role of private sector SMEs in fostering job creation and building sustainable employment ecosystems for youth and women. **Pillar B** investigates how economic development and employment creation programs, including interventions of the Challenge Fund of Youth Employment (CFYE), function in conflict-affected zones and adapt to the barriers imposed by such settings.

Key demographics Burkina Faso

The country's demographic growth (2.93% between 2006 and 2019)¹ has several consequences. Firstly it is a source of growing pressure on natural resources with a major risk of accelerated degradation of the environment in a context of recurring climatic hazards. Secondly, increasing social demand in the areas of training and employment and lastly, migration of populations with the consequence of an increase in conflicts in the area reception.

¹ <https://www.insd.bf/>

The security crisis has harmed the enrolment rate of **Internally Displaced Children** at all levels of education. Overall, 41% of internally displaced children have access to an educational establishment, with major disparities between regions, with the highest access rates recorded in the Centre-North and Sahel regions and the lowest in the Centre and North regions².

Economic growth is projected at **4.1%** in 2024 and **4.3%** in 2025, underpinned by increased extractive and agricultural production³. An improvement in the security situation could boost the economic outlook. The budget deficit has been reduced from 10.4% of GDP in 2022 to 6.9% in 2023. At the sectoral level, the need for financing is concentrated primarily on the transport infrastructure sector, followed by education and energy.

Burkina Faso's National Development Plan (2021-2025) **recognises the role of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)** in the structural transformation of its economy⁴. MSMEs generate between 35% and 40% of the country's gross domestic product and employ a considerable proportion of the workforce. Businesses in Burkina Faso have also been affected by the security crisis. Cash flow pressures, the risk of closure or staff cuts - the challenges are enormous for private companies, which must reinvent themselves to overcome these various difficulties.

According to the most recent national survey on employment and the informal sector⁵ 95.5% of employed workers carry out their main activity in the **informal sector**. This observation is more pronounced in rural areas (99.3%) than in urban areas (81.2%). 61% of the working-age population is young, but their level of employability remains generally low: low rate of professional training as well as the inadequacy of the training received with the needs of the job market. Only 4.5% of the population aged 16 to 64 has benefited from technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Employment in urban areas is predominantly informal and is growing rapidly, absorbing more than 12% of the country's workforce and 70% of the urban active population. This makes their jobs vulnerable.

Most of these jobs are in **agriculture**, although a significant proportion are in the service sector, particularly trade and industry. Most informal jobs are vulnerable because of low productivity and pay. A baseline study carried out by CIDS Burkina (2024) for NGO Tanager, which implemented the program CarrOppS in Burkina Faso, showed that **37%** of households surveyed have a monthly income of less than XOF 50,000. The low-income rate is highest in Bama (57%), Dori (44%) and Dedougou (42%). These three areas face significant security challenges and are home to most internally displaced people.

Key findings of the research

"From my modest point of view, it's clear that the security challenge is one of the first challenges we face because mobility is already quite limited in the country to sell our goods, to go to our customers who are in other localities. When it comes to the attractiveness of Burkina Faso, it's clear that people are a little scared. But I tell myself that we're at a turning

²<https://www.undp.org/fr/burkina-faso/publications/effets-de-la-crise-securitaire-sur-le-developpement-humain-au-burkina-faso>

³https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/new_version_afdb_rapport_pays_2024_burkina_faso_impulsions_la_transformation_structurale_du_burkina_faso_par_la_reforme_de_larchitecture_financiere_mondiale.pdf

⁴https://www.intracen.org/sites/default/files/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Publications/Burkina_Faso_SME_FR_v1.3_20210923_webpages.pdf

⁵ Regional Integrated Employment and Informal Sector Survey, 2028 (RIESIS 2018)

point, with some major choices we've made that we must face up to, and that time will prove us right.” - Norah Kafando, company director and member of the employers' association

The security situation has also led to a **decline in market activity**, as conflict severely affected transportation networks, supply chains, and access to markets. These logistical constraints make it difficult to transport goods or access necessary materials for production. The lack of reliable infrastructure investment further compounds these challenges, making it harder for businesses to expand, generate employment, and contribute to long-term economic recovery. In conflict zones, economic activity has come to a near standstill, cutting off access to customers and forcing many businesses to suspend operations. Overall it creates an environment of uncertainty that discourages investment.

Women are disproportionately affected by these barriers, as cultural expectations often confine them to informal, lower-paying roles and limit their ability to access financial resources. Conflict has further exacerbated these inequalities, with men often prioritized for job opportunities while women are left to secure stable employment. To mitigate food insecurity and promote economic self-sufficiency, local authorities in Korsimoro donated land for **nutritious gardens**, enabling communities to cultivate essential crops and strengthen local food supply chains. This initiative not only supports food security but also provides income-generating opportunities for women and youth, who are often excluded from formal job markets.

Vocational training programs are limited, and **formal education does not always align with industry needs**, leaving a gap between available jobs and the capabilities of the workforce. Without access to targeted skill development programs, youth are often left unemployed or working in low-paying, informal jobs with little opportunity for upward mobility. To address these employment challenges, efforts have been made to partner with Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions and community organizations to equip youth and women with **practical skills** that meet labor market demands. Training programs have been designed to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and industry needs, ensuring that job seekers are better prepared for sustainable employment.

Recognizing the importance of **agriculture and livestock farming** as viable economic sectors, efforts have been made to encourage youth and women to pursue careers in these industries. Training programs and financial incentives have been introduced to help individuals build sustainable livelihoods in agribusiness, ensuring long-term economic stability despite the challenges posed by insecurity.

The introduction of **digital platforms and mobile applications** has provided new ways to support economic resilience. For example, the G50 approach, which groups 50 households or individuals, allows community members to collaborate through ECOACH, a digital application that facilitates remote monitoring, skill-sharing, and financial tracking. This initiative helps create stronger social cohesion and community support structures, enabling small businesses and entrepreneurs to access guidance and resources even in conflict-affected areas.

To reduce the risks associated with financing and encourage more women and youth to engage in entrepreneurship, **flexible loan systems** have been introduced. These models focus on lowering entry barriers by offering microloans, group financing schemes, and repayment structures tailored to small business owners' needs. Digital finance tools have also been implemented to help entrepreneurs access credit and expand their businesses without relying on traditional banking institutions.

Community awareness campaigns have been launched to **reframe women's participation** in the economy as a benefit to family welfare, rather than a deviation from tradition. By working with local leaders, religious figures, and community influencers, these initiatives aim to break cultural stereotypes and increase acceptance of women in non-traditional economic roles.

As conflict disrupts economic activity in certain areas, programs have been introduced to help displaced entrepreneurs **relocate their businesses** to more stable regions. This not only allows them to rebuild their enterprises but also brings new economic opportunities to host communities. Additionally, impact-driven investment models have been promoted, with a focus on **high-potential sectors like agriculture, infrastructure, and small-scale manufacturing**. These investments prioritize long-term economic resilience over short-term profits, ensuring that vulnerable communities have the necessary support to recover and grow.

Recommendations

The findings from this research highlight the pressing need for a **holistic approach** to address Burkina Faso's labor market challenges. Below are recommendations for key stakeholders to create a more inclusive and resilient employment ecosystem.

To drive employment and economic resilience in Burkina Faso, relevant stakeholders must continue to **collaborate** in focused sectors including agriculture, renewable energy, water and sanitation, small-scale manufacturing, tourism, and essential services such as healthcare and education. These industries align with the country's economic structure and have the potential to generate sustainable employment while addressing fundamental community needs.

For these collaborations to be effective, **technical and vocational training infrastructures** must be expanded across all communes to bridge the skill gap and provide hands-on experience, particularly for young people in informal sectors. By integrating non-academic training within existing businesses, it can facilitate smoother transitions from learning to employment, ensuring that young workers acquire both technical and soft skills needed for professional growth.

To maximise outcomes the key recommendations are:

- Invest in vocational training programs to equip youth with job-ready skills;
- Expand entrepreneurship promotion through mentorship and financial support;
- Expand ICT access to connect rural youth to job markets;
- Assure partnerships with private sector stakeholders to strengthen the facilitation of internships and job placements;
- Invest in infrastructure and transportation to improve access to markets;
- Explore social protection programs, including cash transfers and healthcare, to reduce economic vulnerabilities, allowing youth to focus on skill development and career growth.

To ensure success, communication tools in **local languages** should be developed. With these, youth are provided with clear guidance on navigating national and regional economic opportunities. Furthermore, projects that adopt a regional development approach should be prioritized, supporting companies in strategic sectors. By aligning these businesses with national and sub-regional market demands, young entrepreneurs can see firsthand the opportunities available in their region, reinforcing the idea that economic success is attainable **within their local communities**.

In conclusion, Burkina Faso's fragile economic and security environment presents significant challenges for employment, SME growth, and financial inclusion, particularly for women and youth. However, **targeted** interventions in workforce development, financial innovation, and community-based economic models have provided pathways to overcoming these barriers. By leveraging digital tools, vocational training, and alternative financing mechanisms, stakeholders are working to create a more resilient and inclusive economy despite the ongoing conflict. For example, one Implementing Partner pivoted to grouping participants together and offering tablets to these groups, so that program staff did not need to travel to unsafe areas of the country. This did not only allow the program to continue despite the logistical challenges of traveling, it also cultivated social cohesion, as these groups of individuals got together every week to consult the information made available to them.