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Mali, Child labor, and Access to Education

Child Labor, Education, and the Fight for Mali's Future

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In the year 2024, the International Labour Organization profiled a fifteen year old boy whose name was Tahirou Sanogo. Tahirou came from Mali's Sikasso region, spending his early adolescence working in cotton fields and as a bus apprentice rather than attending school. "Before enrolling in school", he recalled "I used to work in the cotton fields"(ILO UNICEF 2025). Through a targeted school reintegration project, he eventually enrolled and was able to read and write. In Mali, 30.4 percent of children between the ages five and fourteen (this being roughly 1.9 million children), are engaged in child labor, and only about half of the children in that age range attend school at all (U.S Department of Labour 2024). This is a predictable outcome of poverty that inherently comes from an education system that cannot reach the children who need it most. Mali, a landlocked nation in West Africa and one of the poorest countries on earth, sits at the very convergence of several crises that reinforce one another. When children work instead of learning and growing out of the privation they're living in, they grow into adults who cannot lift their households out of poverty, and the cycle will repeat with each generation. This paper argues that child labour in Mali is rooted most fundamentally in a crisis of educational access and affordability, one that is structural rather than cultural, and that the single most evidence backed intervention available to Mali today is the expansion of it's existing national unconditional cash transfer program, Jigisémèjiri*, into the districts and households in which child labor is most concentrated.*

BACKGROUND ON MALI : ITS DEMOGRAPHICS, SOCIETY, AND ITS ECONOMIC STATE:

Mali is home to approximately 24.5 million people, the majority of whom live in the rural communities where agriculture and livestock herding make up the foundation of daily survival (World Bank 2024). The country itself borders the following seven nations : Algeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Senegal, and Mauritania. Its geography is divided between the Sahara Desert in the northern regions, and the more fertile Sahel and savanna regions in the South, where cotton, millet, and sorghum sustain both households and the national economy. Mali's GDP per capita is around 1,000 to 1,100 US dollars, among the lowest in the world, and a large share of the population lives below the poverty line of 2.15 US dollars per day (World Bank 2024). A typical meal consists of millet or corn with a peanut or vegetable sauce, and common livelihood include fishing along the Niger river, animal herding, and ultimately artisan crafting. Formal wage employment remains highly inaccessible to most Malian households.

Mali's vulnerability has deepened after the 2020 and 2021 military coups, which destabilized governance, disrupted international aid flows, and intensified armed conflict within the northern regions, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians (Human Rights Watch 2023). By January of 2024, ongoing insecurity and attacks on schools had forced the closure of as many as 1,657 schools nationwide and non-state armed groups continued to forcibly recruit children in northern areas where the state had little presence (US Department of Labor 2024). This lack of stability is the environment in which any proposed solution must be designed to function. A program that adopts a stable, and fully governed state will not survive contact with Mali's reality.

THE CRISIS: CHILD LABOR AS AN EDUCATIONAL FAILURE

According to the international Labour Organization, work can be damaging to a child's intellectual, physical, social or ethical development, as it limits their opportunities to attend school, forcing them to quit school before finishing, or by requiring children to work and study concurrently (ILO 2023). Nearly 97 percent of Malian child labour occurs in agriculture with cotton and rice production being it's biggest offenders, though child labor is seen in other sectors like artisanal gold mining or domestic and street drudgery (US Department of Labor 2024). An estimated 45,753 children work in artisanal gold mining, and face mercury exposure and the hazards of unregulated mining pits (US Department of Labor 2024). Regarding Mali, only 19.1 percent of children are able to combine schooling with work, proving how this lifestyle is not and should not have to be sustainable for any child, especially in those conditions (US Department of Labor, Education 2024).

The gender gap is another factor that highly compounds this crisis. UNICEF reports that only 73.8 percent of Malian girls are enrolled in primary, basic education; this compared to 85.8 percent of boys, and that girls are disproportionately pulled into unpaid domestic labor or removed from school for marriage, a practice that reduces the financial burden of many households. Over half of Malians ages fifteen to twenty four are illiterate (UNICEF 2024). The World Bank estimates that each additional year of quality education has the outlook to raise an individual's lifetime earnings by around 8 to 10 percent (World Bank 2021).

The root causes of this crisis are structural rather than cultural. Even where school is nominally free under Malis 2023 Constitution, families are still expected to pay for students' registrations, uniforms, and even "tips" for teachers. These costs create a barrier for families who live at subsistence levels (US Department of Labor 2024). The long distances between villages and schools, lack of teachers, clean water, and bathrooms at the schools particularly discourage girls from attending school. When a parent is forced to decide between an underfunded school and their child's immediate contribution to the family's food security, the end result is pure desperation, not indifference. It is not just to blame individual families for the crises resulting

from the Malian Government's failure to invest in education and other structural systems and the subsequent extreme political breakdown.

THE RESOLUTION: EXPANDING MALI'S JIGISÉMÈJIRI CONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFER PROGRAM.

The most direct way to interrupt the economic logic that guides children to labor is to make school more financially viable than labor itself. This paper recommends expanding Jigisémèjiri, Mali's national safety net program that was released in 2013 in collaboration with the World Bank International Development Association financing (World Bank 2025).The program matches quarterly household cash transfers with its respective measures promoting girls' schooling and a nutrition package for those under 5 and pregnant women (Hidrobo and Roy 2019). It already reaches more than 103,000 households across six regions and Bamako, backef by $122.4 million in IDA financing (World Bank Blogs 2025).

This isn't theoretical, a randomized evaluation designed with the International Food Policy Reasearch Institute found significant gains in girls' schooling, driven by reduced time in agricultural and domestic work, the same pathway that is pulling children from school present day (Sessou et al. 2022). A separate sstudy found increasing savings and productive assets particularly livestock, strengthening resilience against the shocks that take families into pulling children from school (Jigisémèjiri evaluation 2023). Mali is not in need of a pilot, it needs to expan a program with its own evidence base into the districts where child labor concentrates.

Program and Design Feasibility

Expansion should prioritize Sikasso, Koulikoro and Mopti, the regions that were originally used in the evaluation and most reliant on cotton and rice, the crops which are most familiarized with child labor (Sessou et al 2022, UD DOL 2024). Since agriculture absorbs 96.9 percent of Malian child labor, targeting should focus on households with school age children active during planting and harvesting seasons, when the opportunity cost of attendance is at its peak. Delivery is already proven under stress: in 2021, Jigisémèjiri piloted mobile cashe transfers to about 3,000 Mopti households after realizing in person collection became a security risk, and found it was the faster, safer and more sustainable way (World Bank Blogs 2025). A mobile transfer simply requires a phone signal and an existing network, which are both already demonstrated, unlike interventions requiring physical access to contested territory.

Funding:

As of July 1, 2025, the USAID no longer exists. Its functions were either absorbed by or transferred to the State Department, which saw the cancellation of approximately 83 to 90

percent of its contracts. (Congressional Research Service, 2025; NPR, 2025; Deseret News, 2026). Alternative funding will come from more generous World Bank IDA grants for which Mali is still an eligible least developed country, the Global Partnership for Education for which Mali is eligible as a fragile state, and for the enforcement component below, the State Department's foreign assistance programs.

Supporting Component : Legal Enforcement:

Cash transfers do not reach artisanal gold mining operations in Kayes or hereditary slavery cases, which fall outside the usual scope of poverty metrics. At least Mali has ratified the ILO Conventions No. 138 and No.182, and has set the minimum working age at 15 (Article 326, Labor Code). Enforcement, however, remains very weak, and the government has estimated that it requires at least 162 labor inspectors for its 6.5 million person workforce. This number has yet to be met (U.S. DOL, 2024). To address these situations, funds go hand-in-hand with specific training for labor inspectors in agricultural and mining sectors and support for Mali's National Committee to Fight Against Child Labor (U.S. DOL, 2024). This is intended as focused support for these specific cases and should not be considered a complementary or competitive alternative.

Limitations:

There are caveats to this recommendation. Jigisémèjiri has the most impact in promoting girls' education; the same evaluation showed no significant effect for boys. This recommendation will not resolve boys' concentrated labor in mining and herding on its own. Attendance at the accompanying measures sessions has also been low among women, with a 30 to 38 percent non-attendance rate, so a dedicated outreach budget will be necessary for implementation. The highest-risk northern areas are also the most challenging to monitor, so implementation should first prioritize Sikasso, Koulikoro, and Mopti. Political instability in Mali since 2020 has created an uncertain long-term funding environment; the existing World Bank IDA relationship helps reduce, though not eliminate, this risk.

Monitoring:

New data collected during the expansion should be comparable to the program's existing data, using the same indicators Jigisémèjiri already uses in its evaluations. These include primary and secondary school enrollment and attendance across both sexes and all regions; separate tracking of weekly agricultural and domestic labor hours for boys and girls; household savings and productive asset ownership, an indicator the program has already shown moves with the intervention; attendance at accompanying measures sessions, to address the existing 30 to 38 percent non attendance gap; and, for the enforcement component, the number of active, trained

labor inspectors against the government’s target of 162. Quarterly county and regional dashboards, reconciled against household registers, would let the Ministry of Social Affairs and its partners identify underperforming districts and reallocate outreach resources before a full evaluation cycle is complete.

CONCLUSION:

Mali's child labor problem doesn't stem from cultural inheritance or irresponsible parenting. It's easier to understand once the household economy is taken into account: unreliable access to formal education makes a child's labor a household necessity. Mali's Jigisémèjiri program, an unconditional cash transfer paired with accompanying measures, shows that girls' school attendance can improve, along with hours spent on domestic work. The program also operates through mobile money frameworks and strengthens households against the economic shocks that lead them to pull children from the classroom. Scaling this single, studied program into Mali's cotton and rice producing regions, alongside stronger inspection of the forms of child labor income alone cannot touch, is an approach already proven to work. Tahirou Sanogo left the cotton fields for a classroom because a targeted program reached him, proof that intervention, not inevitability, decides a child's path. The evidence suggests Jigisémèjiri can extend that same chance to the 1.9 million Malian children still waiting for it. The only task left for the rest of the world is to fund the program Mali has already proven can work.

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