

A Strategy for Reducing Inequalities in West Africa

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PITCH

Reducing economic and social inequalities in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger, and Senegal requires a set of policies clearly focused on the most remote areas of these countries and the particular challenges facing women, young people, and minority groups. New research on inequalities across six dimensions in West Africa – life and health; education; living conditions; financial autonomy and dignified work; political participation; and personal and legal security – reveals the significant roles played by location, income, education, and gender. In general, women living in rural areas with low incomes and low levels of education are the most disadvantaged; contrasting with men in urban areas with high incomes and high levels of education.

MOTIVATION

West Africa has been the African region with the highest average economic growth in recent years. But there is growing concern that the

benefits have not been inclusive and shared equitably. The combination of high economic growth and stubbornly high rates of income inequality remains a puzzle. It has been the focus of regional bodies in West Africa that seek to foster integration and human development through regional policies, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the West African Economic and Monetary Union.

In an effort to inform policy-making and bridge the gap between research, policy, and practice, the new study takes a multidimensional perspective to understanding inequalities in the region, identifying potential causes, and exploring a policy approach for tackling them.

METHODS

The study analyzes secondary data and existing research evidence, using the Oxfam and LSE Multidimensional Inequality Framework¹, which identifies inequalities in seven areas or domains of life, such as health,

education, and living conditions. Each domain has a number of sub-domains and a set of indicators and measures, disaggregated by at least two or three relevant dimensions – gender, location, income or age – which make it possible to look at horizontal inequalities (those between different groups of people), vertical inequalities (those between individuals by economic level), and spatial inequalities (those between people in different geographical areas).

The selection of domains, sub-domains, indicators, and relevant horizontal dimensions for disaggregation was done in consultation with experts, and also determined by data availability. The analysis of indicators and disaggregations, as well as the analysis of critical drivers, were discussed and validated in a workshop with experts from academia, development institutions, and civil society organizations.

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Geography West Africa

Find out more about this project: <https://www.afd.fr/en/carte-des-projets/analysing-multidimensional-inequality-and-impacts-regional-policy-inequality>

Key words Inequality, multidimensional inequality, policy drivers, rural areas, health, education, West Africa.

Themes Inequality, Gender, Social link.

RESULTS

The results show first that, as in most parts of the developing world, gender inequalities in West Africa are present in all domains. These inequalities also reinforce other disadvantages. Gender often compounds disadvantages related to socio-economic status, ethnicity, location, religion, disability, age, and race. The double exclusion that comes from gender and poverty means, for example, that only a quarter of the poorest girls in low-income countries complete primary school.

Second, the greatest inequalities are spatial, notably between urban areas and rural areas, where, for the latter, public services are practically absent in all countries in the region. Although there are very few data on inequalities between different districts or provinces within countries, urban/rural disaggregation provides proxies for inequalities between the coast and the interior in Ghana and Senegal, between southern and northern provinces in Mali and Niger, and between the central region and the rest in Burkina Faso. In Burkina Faso, there are notable investments gaps in education, health, and infrastructure between the west and central regions, and between the east and north/Sahel regions.

Third, individual and household incomes clearly express the disadvantages facing those with

Figure 1 Inequalities in West Africa: Expressions, drivers and policy proposals



lower incomes, and they generally overlap with other variables such as location and gender. People at the bottom of the income distribution are also the most exposed to multidimensional inequalities. This is often expressed in differences in education and job conditions, with those with the lowest skills and little education gathered at the bottom. Education appears to be both an expression and a driver of inequalities, deeply interlinked with other domains. Age appears to be especially relevant in the domain related to working conditions, linked to unemployment. It also plays a role in the domain of political participation.

Ethnic group and religion are relevant variables for inequalities related to health, education, living conditions, security, participation, and social life. But it is difficult to find disaggregated data here.

Each of these characteristics of inequality overlaps. For example, women living in rural areas, with very low income and from an ethnic

minority, are the most disadvantaged due to the overlap of inequalities.

As a partial explanation of these inequalities, the research identifies three structural drivers and four policy drivers. The first two structural drivers are the historical context, and the set of traditional, cultural, and religious social norms in the region. Closely related to these two are the dynamics of political capture by a few powerful groups in society, and the lack of participation in public decision-making by large segments of the population.

The four policy drivers are: first, inadequate investment in essential services, including education, health, and social protection; second, inadequate investment in smallholder agriculture; third, a dual labor market structure, with large informal sectors and very limited formal employment, which is monopolized by a labor elite; and fourth, regressive taxes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Reducing inequality in West African countries requires a set of policies clearly targeted at the most remote rural areas to correct for spatial inequalities, and towards women, young people, and other minorities and marginal groups. The policy package should include elements of citizen participation, transparency, and social accountability.
- ▶ Regional institutions, national governments, and international development institutions should implement a policy package focused on providing essential services, supporting agriculture, ensuring opportunities for dignified work for all, and launching progressive fiscal reforms.
- ▶ Investment in the production of reliable disaggregated data and statistics in the different areas related to multidimensional inequalities at the national and regional level is key to revealing who is being left behind and what can be done.

¹ www.inequalitytoolkit.org