

On education inequality in Burkina Faso: Additional evidence from the COVID-19 containment measures

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1. Introduction

Although approximately 80% of the Burkinabè people do not speak French, it is the sole language of instruction in schools in Burkina Faso. In areas where French is not spoken (e.g., rural areas), children must spend the first 6 years of their schooling mastering the language. Consequently, they have fewer learning opportunities compared to those who live in cities or those who start their schooling with a basic knowledge of French. According to many authors (e.g., Sawadogo 2004, Some 2017), in Burkina Faso, many children experience confusion in their first contact with French in school because they are born and raised in a family that is illiterate and unfamiliar with the French language and culture. In many instances, the confusion experienced by children regarding their first contact with French in their schools forces them to drop out of schools without completing their primary education. On the other hand, children living in cities or whose parents speak French fluently face fewer problems in their initial days of schooling, generally completing their primary education. Accordingly, the language of instruction in schools in the country has created a disparity between the education of children living in rural areas and that of those living in cities. This disparity is worsened by the unequal distribution of the investment in education by the government of Burkina Faso throughout the country. In reality, although the government claims to be investing in education for all children, the investment is observed to be mainly concentrated in cities. The education investment in villages, where approximately 70% of the country's population resides, seems to be neglected. This is evidenced by the rural-urban education inequality observed during the COVID-19 containment measures implemented by the government. Many rural areas in Burkina Faso do not have access to stable Internet connectivity, electricity, and online learning devices. Despite this, the Ministry of Education closed all schools during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic and decided to establish a distance learning program through radio broadcasting, television shows, and online classes. The implementation of this measure raises the following questions:

- (1) How will the children in rural areas receive the same education and learning opportunities as those living in cities in Burkina Faso?
- (2) What influence does education inequality have on the development of the country?

In this paper, I demonstrate how the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed education inequality in the country and argue that it could be partially mitigated if children are allowed to study in the native language of the majority of the Burkinabè people.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I examine the linguistic situation and education system in Burkina Faso. In Section 3, I argue that education inequality in Burkina Faso is partially due to the language policy of the country. In Section 4, I discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education of the children in rural and urban areas. In this section, I demonstrate how the COVID-19 containment measures have revealed and worsened education inequality in the country. In Section 5, I argue that education inequality is responsible for most of the problems observed in the country and that mitigating this issue will greatly contribute to the development of Burkina Faso. Finally, In Section 6, I offer the concluding remarks.

2. The linguistic situation and education system of Burkina Faso

2.1. The linguistic situation of Burkina Faso

There are approximately 70 distinct languages spoken in Burkina Faso. Among them, three (Mooré, Dioula, and Fulfuldé) are symbolically adopted as national languages. Although they are considered to be national languages, they are not school subjects or used as a medium of instruction in schools. According to Napon (2003), Mooré, Dioula, and Fulfuldé are (symbolically) promoted to the status of national languages for the following three reasons: (1) Approximately 70% of the Burkinabè people could speak one of these three languages at the time the decision of choosing the national languages was taken. (2) Each of the three languages is dominant in one or two regions of the country. Mooré is the dominant language in the Central and the Eastern regions of the country. Fulfuldé is the dominant language in the Northern region of the country. Dioula is the major language in the Western and Southwestern regions of the country. (3) There have been many linguistic studies of the three languages.

It is important to note that there is no consensus regarding the estimated number of speakers of each language in Burkina Faso. Many researchers claim that Mooré is the most widely spoken language in the country (Kone 2010, Maiga et al. 2015). However, researchers such as Lejeal et al. (2002) and Lingani (2015) assume that the number of Dioula speakers in Burkina Faso cannot be easily estimated. This is because it is spoken in all regions of the country due to its status being the language of trade and business throughout Burkina Faso and West Africa. According to them, Dioula is likely to be the most spoken language in the country because it is spoken throughout the country and is the lingua franca in West Africa.

Burkina Faso consists of 45 provinces, each of which has a dominant language and minority languages. For example, Ioba province includes more native speakers of Dagara than other languages. Tuy province includes more native speakers of Bwamu than other languages. The majority of people living in Fada province speak Goumantchema as their first

language. Kadiogo province includes more native speakers of Mooré, while Seno province is mainly occupied by native speakers of Fulfuldé.

Additionally, French is spoken by a small part of the country's population (approximately 20% according to Geraldine 2007, Hien and Giroux 2012, Kone 2010). French was introduced in the country during colonization by the French to train some Burkinabè to help the colonizers implement their colonial projects. Although these French colonizers banned the use of the native Burkinabè languages in institutions and public places, they did not succeed in imposing French on all the people in Burkina Faso. Consequently, two varieties of French are spoken in the country: the variety of French spoken by people with a university or a high school education and the variety spoken by people with no schooling. The French variety spoken by people with no school education contains many neologisms and grammatical and semantic patterns of the native Burkinabè languages; it is not recognized even within the African continent.

2.2. The education system of Burkina Faso

According to *ReliefWeb*, the education system of Burkina Faso is considered to be one of most inefficient and problematic education systems in the world. Ki-Zerbo (1990) argued that the education system of Burkina Faso is weak because it is based on foreign pedagogical principles and requirements. According to him, the education system of Burkina Faso should be endogenous and beneficial to the people of the country. Ki-Zerbo's criticism of Burkina Faso's education system is easily understood when considering the structure of the school system as well as the school curriculum in the country. The school system of Burkina Faso is divided into five stages. The first stage, the pre-primary education, targets children aged 3–6 years. This education stage is optional and is not accessible to children living in rural areas or children whose parents are not wealthy. The second stage is the primary education. This stage of education concerns children aged 6–11 years. The third stage of education in Burkina Faso is termed as the post-primary education. It is accessible to children aged 11–16 years. These three stages of education have been combined and referred to as the basic education stage since the adoption of the new Education Orientation Law in 2007. The fourth stage includes secondary education that concerns students aged 16–19 years. The last stage of education is university education, also called as superior education. This last stage corresponds to undergraduate and graduate education in Western and Asian countries. The transitions from primary school education to post-primary school education, from post-primary school education to secondary school education, and from secondary school education to the university are facilitated by national examinations held throughout the country. A score of at least 10 out of 20 is required to be admitted to the next education stage.

It should be mentioned that the structure of the education system in Burkina Faso is not a factor that contributes to the ineffectiveness of this system. Rather, it is the content and

means of instruction that do so. Although many subjects about Europe, America, and Asia are included in the school curriculum of Burkina Faso, very few subjects that provide knowledge about Africa and Burkina Faso are included in the curriculum of all stages. Accordingly, Burkinabè students have limited knowledge about the history, culture, and geography of their country and other countries in Africa. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, although French is spoken by a very small portion of the population, it is the only language of instruction in schools throughout the country. Children are forced to learn all school subjects from primary school to university in French as no other language of instruction is employed. In rural areas, where French is not spoken widely, children spend their primary education years learning the language. Their admission to junior high school for post-primary education is permitted based on how well they master French. Students who are unable to speak French fluently at the end of their primary education are retained at that stage until their French proficiency level is deemed sufficient. Until 2007, when students' French proficiency levels were judged insufficient twice, they were expelled from school. Although those students could repeat the same school year in a different school, they usually dropped out of school. Currently, the number of school dropouts in Burkina Faso is skyrocketing. Many students I talked to in 2019 in Guéguéré, a rural area situated in the Southwestern region of Burkina Faso, claimed that schooling is unimportant to their development in the 21st century as it deprives them of an income. They went on to claim that schooling was completely useless (see Figure 1. The pictures used in this study were taken by the author in Burkina Faso in November 2019).

Picture 1: School dropouts looking for gold in a rural area of Burkina Faso



This confirms Ki-Zerbo's argument that the current school system in Burkina Faso does not contribute anything to Burkinabè society or the personal development of the Burkinabè children (see Ki-Zerbo 1990). With a growing number of unemployed graduates in the country, it is almost impossible to convince a child to attend school in Burkina Faso. Additionally, many parents in rural and semi-urban areas, considering school as a place to only learn French, prefer to keep their children at home to teach them local cultures, traditions, and skills that are essential for manual labor that are not included in the school curriculum (e.g., agriculture, animal husbandry, masonry, sewing, etc.). Thus, the education system of Burkina Faso, based on the promotion of the French language and civilization, does not meet the needs of the local people and is currently being neglected in rural areas.

Considering that education is the main engine for the development of a country, one may wonder why there is no reform of the entire education system to meet the demands of the people of Burkina Faso. According to many authors (e.g., Kouraogo and Dianda 2008, Geraldine 2007), there have been some education reform projects since the country gained its independence, although these projects were not implemented successfully. Indeed, researchers have mentioned three major education reform projects that were initiated in the country. However, none of them were successful.

The first attempt to reform the country's education system was from 1979 to 1984. The project was initiated by the government of President Sangoulé Lamizana and was ended by the revolutionary regime led by Captain Thomas Isidore Sankara due to its unsatisfactory results. This project aimed to reform the entire education system of the country following the needs of the local people. Three local languages (i.e., Mooré, Dioula, and Fulfuldé) were supposed to be used as mediums of instruction at school. The teaching content was supposed to include subjects about Burkina Faso (Upper Volta at that time). However, the implementation of the project was not well planned, and the initial results were disappointing. The country was divided into three main zones: The Mooréphone, Dioulaphone, and Fulaphone zones. Children were supposed to be educated in Mooré, Dioula, and Fulfuldé in the Mooréphone, Dioulaphone, and Fulaphone zones, respectively. This division proved to be an obstacle for implementing the project successfully, as it undermined the unity of the people.

The second attempt to reform the entire education system in Burkina Faso was during the revolution led by Thomas Isidore Sankara (1984–1987). The reform of the education system was part of Sankara's anti-imperialist policies. He claimed that the contents of the lessons taught to children in Burkina Faso do not include significant information about Burkina Faso and should be replaced to get rid of the influence of imperialism completely. Accordingly, he decided to reform the entire education system by implementing the following program: *“l'école nouvelle Burkinabè: une école par le peuple et pour le peuple; une école au service des masses populaires”* (The new Burkinabè school: school by the people and for the people, a school to serve the masses). Through this program, Sankara

envisioned a system in which children would start school where the medium of instruction was a local language, and the teaching would focus more on the needs of the Burkinabè people. The reformed school system was supposed to be accessible to all the Burkinabè people, focusing on the personal development of the child as well as the development of the child's community. Although the project was very promising, it was never implemented. Many researchers claim that socio-political problems assailing Burkina Faso at the time prevented the implementation of this project (Azoh et al. 2009, Bianchini 2004, Madiega and Nao 2003). Among them, we can cite the assassination of Sankara and the over-valorization of the French language and the existing education system at the time by the Burkinabè elites as they feared losing their elite status due the changes in the country.

The third attempt to reform the education system of Burkina Faso was in 2007 after the adoption of the new Education Orientation Law (Kouraogo and Dianda 2008). The new Education Orientation Law stipulates that universal compulsory free basic education is to be introduced in all 45 provinces of the country. Additionally, this law stipulates the implementation of a bilingual education system. In other words, the law stipulates that children should be instructed in their mother tongue in the early years of schooling before switching later to instruction in French. This decision was taken after the results of an experiment conducted by a Swiss NGO showed that children who start school in their mother tongue learn more successfully than those who start their schooling in French. However, it is important to note that the project of universal compulsory free basic education and bilingual education is not effective currently. Although public primary and post-primary schools (i.e., basic education institutions) are supposed to be free, parents must still pay a fee called "the contribution" to the Association of Students' Parents. The amount varies from one school to another. Students whose parents fail to pay such a fee are sometimes sent out of the classroom, although it is against the new Education Orientation Law (this usually happens in rural areas where laws are not enforced). The bilingual education project is not currently effective because of the diversity of students' linguistic backgrounds. For example, a typical classroom in a city in Burkina Faso consists of native speakers of many languages (Mooré, Dioula, Fulfuldé, Dagara, Bissa, Gourmantchema, Gourounsi, Bwamou, etc.). Thus, it is impossible to teach children in such a classroom due to the dissimilar mother tongues of the children.

3. Education inequality in Burkina Faso

3.1. The rural-urban education inequality due to French

Walker et al. (2019) argue that inequality is deliberately created by policies made by governments and international institutions. In Burkina Faso, the language policy adopted by the government since attaining independence from France has created education inequality that affects national development. As mentioned above, although French is not spoken by the majority of the Burkinabè, it is the only medium of instruction at schools nationwide. This

language policy gives fewer learning opportunities to children living in rural areas or whose parents do not speak French as compared to children who live in cities or whose parents speak French. In reality, children whose parents speak French are usually fluent in French by their first year in elementary school. They can understand the information taught in French and are able to interact with teachers or ask questions in class. These children usually live in cities, where Internet connectivity, electricity, TV, and radio channels, and many language immersion programs are available.¹ Accordingly, they have many opportunities of getting involved in extracurricular activities to improve their French proficiency level and consequently, their learning ability. Conversely, children in rural areas are born in a family in which no one speaks French and are unfamiliar with the language. They do not have access to pre-schooling, unlike those living in cities, and have no means to learn French and acquire a basic proficiency level by the time they go to school. Since these children cannot speak French at all, their first six years at school are spent in learning French. Simultaneously, other subjects are introduced to them in French, though they do not understand the language, affecting their overall knowledge acquisition. According to the International Organization of the Francophonie, 71% of children living in Francophone African countries do not have a satisfactory French proficiency level needed to understand the information taught in French from the second year of primary education.

Since the colonial period, many strategies have been used to force students to master French quickly in Burkina Faso. Some of these strategies are delineated below:

(i) The punishment via a monkey skull necklace

Until the early 21st century, students in Burkina Faso were asked to wear a monkey skull around their neck for 24 hours whenever they used their mother tongue at school. Parents were also persuaded by the school administration that a child punished in this way did not have a satisfactory academic performance and that the punishment was for the child's own good, ensuring their success in their later life. Subsequently, the parents would cooperate with the school teachers to enforce the punishment by making the child wear the monkey skull even at home. Additionally, children would be beaten at school with a motorcycle drive belt (see Picture 2) for not using French or for not being able to understand information in French.

¹ Most people living in rural areas in Burkina Faso earn less than \$1 per day because their activities are based on subsistence farming. Since a 1-month Internet connection costs approximately \$33, it is impossible for them to access the Internet. Additionally, along with the lack of electrification, the telecommunications network in rural areas is generally very weak. This prevents people from using TV sets for distance learning.

Picture 2: A motorcycle drive belt used to flog students in Burkina Faso



This method of forcing students to master French in rural areas increased the number of school dropouts in those areas. Currently, eight out of 10 young Burkinabè children in rural areas of Burkina Faso drop out of school before completing their primary education. In contrast, most children in cities complete their primary education.

(ii) French proficiency as an important employment requirement.

Another strategy used to force children to learn French is the adoption of French proficiency as one of the most important requirements for civil service employment. Indeed, being a member of the civil service of Burkina Faso, the only employment opportunity in the country for the moment, is based on mastering the French language. People without any knowledge of the French language and Western cultures and history are deemed to be ineligible to be employed by the government of Burkina Faso. This phenomenon has created a gap between students living in rural areas and those living in cities. Since students living in rural areas are less fluent in French than those living in cities, they are less likely to be hired by the government—subsequently, this increases their chances of not being able to obtain stable employment. On the other hand, students in cities are more likely to be employed by the government as they usually become very fluent in French by the end of their post-primary education.

Besides, there is another rural-urban education inequality that can be perceived in education infrastructure allotted to rural and urban areas. In cities, public schools are well-built and well-equipped. On the other hand, in many rural areas, children are educated in straw-hut schools (see Figure 3). These schools usually have no tables or chairs for students. Classes are interrupted whenever it is raining. Also, there is usually no learning equipment in these schools.

Picture 3: A school in a rural area of Burkina Faso



Although the current government claims that straw-hut schools are being replaced by concrete buildings, many incidents indicate that straw-hut schools may be safer for children than the newly constructed schools. In one instance, most of the newly constructed schools were found to be destroyed by a 4-hour rainfall because their construction was affected by corruption (see Picture 3). Among those incidents, we can refer to the case of Dandé, a rural area where a school fell on students while they were having classes inside it. One student died and many were injured (many similar cases were reported on BF1 TV on May 28, 2021). Following the defective condition of school buildings in rural areas, parents are concerned about the safety of their children during the rainy season. Note that this kind of incident rarely occurs in cities because of the high quality of construction of the school buildings. Accordingly, while children in cities can study even when it is raining, those in rural areas cannot. Despite this disparity, they are evaluated on the same basis.

3.2. The rural-urban education inequality evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the rural-urban education inequality observed throughout the country, as children living in rural areas, unlike those living in cities, were deprived of education for months. On March 9, 2020, the Ministry of Health of Burkina Faso announced the first case of COVID-19 in the country. A week later, the government decided to close all schools as one of the pandemic containment measures. Subsequently, from March 12, 2020, to October 1, 2020, all schools were closed. Students who were supposed to sit for national exams returned to school on July 1, 2020 to prepare for their exams. As mentioned earlier, students must sit for a national examination at the end of their elementary education, post-primary education, and secondary education to qualify for the next stage of education. These students returned to school on July 1, 2020. The other students stayed home until October 1, 2020. To give students a chance to continue their education at

home, the government of Burkina Faso decided to establish a distance learning program through radio broadcasting, television shows, and online classes. In other words, classes were conducted through TV and radio channels, and students had to attend them by watching TV or listening to radios from their respective house. On April 23, 2020, the Minister of National Education, Literacy, and the Promotion of National Languages of Burkina Faso, Stanislas Ouaro, officially launched the distance teaching and learning program. According to him, the broadcast of the courses would start on May 9, 2020, and was supposed to be executed by five local public and private radio stations (Cf. announcement of The Ministry of National Education, Literacy, and Promotion of National Languages on May 08, 2020). This program was initially designed for children living in areas where schools were closed due to insecurity. To contain the COVID-19 virus, the program was extended to all provinces of the country as an alternative to providing education to children.

Although this distance learning program was supposed to offer a solution to the education crisis created by terrorism and the COVID-19 pandemic, its implementation worsened the rural-urban education inequality. Indeed, the radio stations selected to broadcast the program are based in cities and the respective radio frequencies are difficult to access in some rural areas. Considering the lack of Internet connectivity, electricity, learning devices (e.g., computers, TV sets, radio), and TV/radio channels in rural areas, one could argue that this distance learning program was designed for children living in cities. It is also important to note that children living in rural areas have less knowledge regarding the technology implemented for distance learning since their parents cannot afford to buy a simple tablet for them. Since the majority of children in rural areas do not listen to radio or never watch TV, such a learning program did not help them at all. In reality, those children did not even know the existence of this online learning program. Although the government adopted a budget to provide children with radio sets, many children in rural areas did not get them. Additionally, since parents in rural areas have no knowledge of the French language, they could not become involved in the school education of their children. In general, most parents learn about the difficulties their children face at school the day the children are expelled from school. Following the absence of learning devices (e.g., radio and TV sets) and zero parental involvement in school education in rural areas, children living in these areas could not access the distance teaching and learning program implemented by the government. Although they were unable to access the program, at the end of the school year, they were evaluated on the same basis as those living in cities, despite the latter group having uninterrupted access to the program.

It should also be mentioned that after the government's decision to close schools was rescinded, many children, especially those in rural areas, did not return to school. Some children joined mining sites in the quest for money and did not return to their parents' houses by the time the schools were reopened. In the Northern region of Burkina Faso, many children were kidnapped by terrorist groups to assist them in carrying out their attacks (see some

parents' statements given to *Le Journal d'Afrique_ France 24* on August 5, 2021). This usually happened after parents left the children home to go to work. Additionally, children who returned to school after the government's decision was rescinded could not follow the virus containment measures such as social distancing and sanitary measures, due to the overcrowding of classrooms in many schools (see Rfi 05/10//2020, iMMAP 2020). There were very few or no sanitary equipment in some schools, especially in rural areas.

Also note that the COVID-19 pandemic did not affect only the students; it also affected the teachers. For example, many teachers (120000 teachers according to iMMAP 2020) could no longer receive their teaching training or attend meetings that helped them improve their teaching ability because movement within the country was limited. Although many teachers and schools moved teaching, teacher training, and other professional meetings to online platforms such as Zoom and Google meet in Japan, Western countries, and many other countries, this was not the case in Burkina Faso. All meetings or training programs were suspended until the government's decision of closing schools was rescinded. This is because the telecommunications network is very weak in many areas of the country. Besides, many teachers do not have any knowledge of online platforms such as Zoom and Google meet or cannot use a computer. The lack of electricity in many rural areas also made it difficult for teachers to learn online during the pandemic.

5. Solving education inequality in Burkina Faso

Education inequality has created many problems that impede the national development of Burkina Faso. As mentioned above, the use of French as the sole language of instruction forces many children in rural areas to drop out of school, as they consider themselves unable to acquire French quickly, a necessity to continue their school education. Since obtaining the traditional school education is a prerequisite for becoming an employee of the government of Burkina Faso, school dropouts are doomed to be jobless and live in poverty for the rest of their lives. Since 2016, early school dropouts and those who were denied the right to education for some reason have been used by Islamic extremists to perpetrate terrorist attacks throughout the country. This was also highlighted in *Le Journal d'Afrique_ France 24* on August 5, 2021, and *Radio Television du Burkina* (RTB) on August 22, 2021. Although no study has supported this claim, the Solhan attack clearly indicates that school dropouts and children who do not have access to quality education in Burkina Faso are being used by religious extremists. Indeed, on June 5, 2021, a group of gunmen attacked a village situated in the Northern region of Burkina Faso, killing more than a 100 people, according to the government of Burkina Faso (Cf *RTB*, June 6, 2021). The Minister of Communication of Burkina Faso stated that most of the terrorists were aged between 12 and 14 years old (*Le Journal d'Afrique_ France 24* on August 5, 2021). As one Burkinabè stated on *Radio France 24*, these children, with no access to education, are hopeless about their future (also RTB

22/8/ 2021). They see the proposals from religious extremists outside the country (e.g., Al-Qaeda leaders) as opportunities to make money and have a bright future, similar to the people who have the chance to get a quality education. The fact that young Burkinabè have been the major perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the country makes it very difficult for the Burkina Faso government to prevent these attacks as those children acting as terrorists cannot be easily identified. Following these problems caused by education inequality in the country, one wonders what prevents the local authorities from giving every child an opportunity to be educated properly.

I propose that the adoption of a Burkinabè language as a new official language and the language of instruction throughout the country could allow all children in Burkina Faso to learn equally. As mentioned in Hien (2020), one national language and a provincial language can be introduced into the education system of the country simultaneously. Children could learn how to write and read in the national official language and the provincial official language from their early years of schooling. Additionally, all school subjects could be taught in both national and provincial languages. For instance, some subjects could be taught in the national official language and other subjects could be taught in the provincial official language. French, on the other hand, should be learned as a school subject, just like any other foreign language. By having a national official language (i.e., a language spoken by the majority of the Burkinabè people) and a provincial language, it is unlikely that children will face any language-related problems in any part of the country. Also, social problems such as corruption, inter-ethnic and religious clashes, social incivility, and, more importantly, poverty and ignorance, that are the root causes of terrorism and underdevelopment, could be easily addressed. For this new language policy to be implemented successfully, a massive campaign of explication of this policy to the local population of Burkina Faso must be carried out. The explication of the reform to the population will facilitate its implementation since parents of school-going children, if they agree to the policy, can get involved in its implementation.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic also shows the importance of collaboration between the government and the citizens. Governments must make decisions that are necessary for the containment of the virus and effectively communicate them to their citizens. The citizens, in turn, must respect these decisions. In Burkina Faso, communication between the government and the citizens is not effective, as it is always carried out in French. The new language policy mentioned here (see Hien 2020 for details) will facilitate effective communication between the government and the citizens and strengthen their collaboration.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the education inequality observed in Burkina Faso is first caused by the adoption of French as the sole language of instruction throughout the country

and second, by the lack of the local authorities' will to invest adequately in education in rural areas. Although the existence of the rural-urban education inequality has never been mentioned by the authorities of Burkina Faso, it became visible when the government implemented its COVID-19 containment measures. This paper has also argued that improving education for all could be a way to address problems such as poverty, terrorism, social incivility, etc. in Burkina Faso and that this could be achieved by allowing children to be educated in Burkinabè languages.

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Important web-sites

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