



United Nations
Office on Drugs and Crime

Building Resilience through Youth and Civil Society Engagement to Prevent Violent Extremism

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Introduction

Your Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues, and friends, good morning.

It is an honor to be here with you at a moment when the question of resilience, what it means, who builds it, and how it is sustained, has never been more consequential for our region. The crisis in the Lake Chad Basin is not solely a security challenge; it is a crisis of livelihoods, of social cohesion, and of trust between communities and the institutions that serve them. Left unaddressed, these fractures become the entry points for violent extremist ideologies. Address them, and we breathe new life into peace and national security of Nigeria.

Allow me to open with two simple facts that frame both the urgency and the possibility before us. First: the Lake Chad Basin, spanning Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, holds an estimated 21 million people who live under the strain of poverty and insecurity. Second: in Nigeria, roughly 70 percent of the population is under 30. These numbers are not abstractions. They describe a region where many citizens are young, aspirational, vulnerable, and therefore, crucial to the solution.



1 The Social, Local, and Generational Nature of Resilience

If there is one central truth from our work on the ground, it is this: resilience is social, economic, local, and generational. It is built by neighbors, by teachers, by mothers and fathers, and increasingly by young people themselves. Community-led dialogues by youth, in markets, mosques, radio stations, and town halls, have proven to be a powerful source of durable resilience. When young people are given a voice, training, and platforms, they do not merely resist extremist narratives; they offer tangible alternatives: livelihoods, civic leadership, narrative change, and, critically, reintegration for those who were once drawn into violent groups.

In my over two decades of experience with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), including roles focused on criminal justice reform, prison management, and countering organized crime across various contexts, I have witnessed how empowering local actors transforms abstract policies into lived realities. For instance, in prison reform initiatives in Nigeria's northeastern states like Adamawa, Borno, and Gombe, where we marked the 10th anniversary of the Mandela Rules by reaffirming commitments to humane corrections, we have seen how integrating community voices, particularly youth and civil society, into rehabilitation processes reduces recidivism and fosters social acceptance. This mirrors broader lessons from UNODC's global efforts, where youth engagement has turned potential flashpoints into opportunities for healing.

2 Practical Examples of UNODC's Resilience-Building Implementation in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin

Let me be concrete about what that looks like in practice, drawing directly from UNODC's ongoing projects in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, as well as our broader partnerships with youth and civil society organizations (CSOs) to prevent and counter crime, drugs, and violent extremism.



Under the EU-funded STRIVE Juvenile initiative, implemented by UNODC in partnership with Nigeria's Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) and other stakeholders, we have focused on protecting children from terrorism and preventing violent extremism through youth-centered approaches. This project, part of the broader EU-Nigeria-UNODC-CTED Partnership Project III on criminal justice responses to terrorism, selected and trained Youth Peace Champions, men and women between 18 and 30, from communities in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states. These champions, part of UNODC's Network of Youth Peace Champions launched in North-East Nigeria, underwent specialized training in producing art, animation, tailored social media content, mediation, and advocacy that resonates with local languages and idioms. They established peace clubs in schools, convened inter-generational dialogues, and created radio segments that demystified the experiences of children associated with armed groups. The outcomes have been transformative: not only increased awareness but a genuine shift in community perceptions, positioning youth as agents of change rather than suspects. As one champion shared, the training served as "a beacon of hope...a way to illuminate alternative narratives that transcend the shadows of conflict." Quantitatively, the initiative has reached thousands, with evaluations showing reduced stigma toward reintegrated youth and improved community cohesion.

Building on this, UNODC's Youth-Led Action initiative empowers youth-led organizations to prevent and respond to terrorism and violent extremism at the community level using evidence-based strategies and providing resources for implementation. In Nigeria, this aligns with our support for Nigeria's Policy Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, which prioritizes a whole-of-society approach. Here, CSOs and youth groups have been central to implementing community-based interventions. For instance, in collaboration with local NGOs and faith-based groups, we have facilitated psychosocial support programs that combine mental health services with vocational training for at-risk youth in the Lake Chad Basin.



UNODC also engages youth globally through the Youth Initiative, which connects young people to advocate for substance use prevention and health promotion, enabling them to become active in their schools and communities. This program fosters peer-led efforts that build resilience against drug-related vulnerabilities, which often intersect with violent extremism in fragile regions like the Lake Chad Basin.

Another cornerstone is our sports-based prevention efforts via the "Line Up Live Up" curriculum, which uses sport to teach life skills, build resilience against violence, prevent drug use, and curb crime among youth, particularly in marginalized settings. In Nigeria, this has been rolled out in communities like Bayelsa State, where it empowers youth to choose positive pathways over conflict. Capacity-building and mentorship are integral, offering vocational skills training, mentorship, and platforms for youth to implement local campaigns and develop leadership abilities, elements we've integrated into Youth Peace Champions programs to sustain long-term impact.

Beyond Nigeria, UNODC's Sahel Programme has supported Mauritania in localizing a compelling model known as Mourchidate, which originated as a home-grown initiative in North Africa and could be adapted to contexts like Northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. The concept began in Algeria in 1993 as a state-sponsored program by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, emerging during the height of the Algerian Civil War (1991–2002), a period of intense Islamist insurgency and violence where radical groups like the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) killed tens of thousands in the name of Islam. The first mourchidate (singular form, meaning female guide) was licensed that year to teach and guide women, with the program expanding thereafter to reach around 300 to 500 mourchidates by 2015, aimed at combating Islamist radicalization by steering women away from extremist preachers and promoting a tolerant, moderate interpretation of Islam.

Building on this regional approach, the Mourchidate programme was further developed and structured in Morocco in 2005 as a state-sponsored initiative under King Mohammed VI, who ascended to the throne in 1999. It was established in direct response to the 2003



Casablanca terrorist bombings, which killed 45 people and injured many others, prompting reforms to combat religious extremism and promote gender equality in the religious sphere. The first cohort of 50 mourchidates graduated in May 2006 after a 12-month training program, and in 2015, the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Murshidin, and Murshidat was inaugurated in Rabat to formalize and expand the training. The programme has since trained over 1,200 women, with an annual intake of about 100, aiming for 2,000 by 2030, as part of broader post-2003 counter-terrorism strategies that align with Morocco's transnational religious policy to position the country as a leader in moderate Islam.

With UNODC's assistance through the Sahel Programme, Mauritania adopted and adapted this successful Moroccan model, where the Mourchidates initiative, comprising a network of women religious leaders, has been instrumental in promoting moderate interpretations of Islam to counter extremist ideologies. These women, trained in theology, counseling, and community engagement, provide guidance in mosques, schools, prisons, and local associations, combining spiritual and social outreach through teaching, mediating, and addressing issues such as domestic violence, early marriage, and youth vulnerability to extremist propaganda. In practice, mourchidates like Zeinabou Maata have spearheaded local campaigns to prevent radicalization by tackling grievances linked to exclusion and poverty.

From these projects, key lessons emerge. **First**, youth and CSOs excel when given ownership, UNODC's approach emphasizes participatory design, where beneficiaries co-create content and strategies. **Second**, integration is key: combining counter-narratives with practical support like livelihoods reduces vulnerability. **Third**, monitoring must capture behavioral changes, not just outputs; in STRIVE Juvenile, mixed-method evaluations revealed a 20-30% drop in reported community tensions in pilot areas.

UNODC's partnership and work with non-governmental stakeholders is carried out especially through the Civil Society Unit (CSU) in UNODC HQ, which serves as the main



point of contact for NGOs, academia, and the private sector, coordinating their involvement in UNODC's mandate areas on drugs and crime. The CSU supports CSOs in participating in intergovernmental meetings and provides training, online courses, and webinars to inform their work. Additionally, UNODC offers small grants to CSOs, particularly those using sport for youth development and crime prevention in marginalized communities, enabling scalable initiatives. CSOs collaborate with UNODC on advocacy and awareness-raising about the dangers of drug use, violence, and crime, while advocating for policies that protect young people, and thousands of Nigerian NGOs have contributed to UNODC's intergovernmental processes through these activities. At the regional level, many Nigerian NGOs are members of the Africa Regional Civil Society Network, which is the main mechanism for UNODC to engaging civil society in the region.

3 Why Local Initiatives Matter for Policy and the Role of CSOs

Why do these local initiatives matter for policy? Because violent extremist groups do not recruit ideas in a vacuum. They recruit grievances: exclusion, trauma, poverty, humiliation. They recruit on the margins where formal institutions do not reach. And so, our response must work where recruitment happens. This is why civil society organizations, faith groups, women's associations, local NGOs, and community structures such as traditional councils, market associations, and school clubs must be core partners in prevention. A joint ICCT–ONSA study reminded us that CSOs have the local knowledge, trust, and access that national or external actors often lack. In short: CSOs and youth are not accessories to policy. They are policy's implementation engine.

We also know that local dialogue works best when it is inclusive and continuous. Community dialogue structures that bring elders, youth, women, local officials, and security actors into the same room create early warning mechanisms and reintegration pathways. They create a place to surface tension before it becomes a crisis. In Nigeria earlier this year, the Office of the National Security Adviser, in collaboration with UN partners, convened a National Youth Policy Dialogue that brought 22 young leaders into



conversation with policymakers. That event, modest as it may sound, signaled a vital shift: young leaders must have a seat at the table, they must be part of the policy process, not merely recipients of policy. That sentiment needs to be translated from words into budgets, programs, and regional cooperation.

4 Complementing State Responsibilities and Evidence-Based Approaches

Let us be clear: youth-led and CSO-led initiatives cannot replace state responsibility. They complement it. Governments remain the duty-bearers for security, justice, education, and social protection. What youth groups and CSOs provide is proximity and legitimacy. When the Ministry of Women Affairs in a state endorses a community dialogue or a theatre campaign, it shifts risk from grassroots activists to institutional structures and strengthens the sustainability of the outcomes.

This brings me to the shape of an evidence-based, scalable approach. The research and practice from our region are consistent: multi-dimensional, locally anchored interventions work better than isolated, top-down ones. Psychosocial support must be accompanied by education and livelihood opportunities. Counter-narratives must be paired with media literacy and civic education. Reintegration must include mentoring, family counselling, and economic pathways. In short: resilience is a package that blends protection, development, and governance.

Drawing from my professional experiences, including overseeing UNODC's efforts in marking the 10th anniversary of the Mandela Rules in Nigeria, where we emphasized humane corrections and community reintegration, I have seen how these holistic packages prevent cycles of violence. In contexts beyond Nigeria, such as broader West African prison reform projects, integrating youth mentors has similarly reduced recidivism by fostering trust and skills.



5 Recommendations: Replicating and Expanding Approaches Across West Africa and the Sahel

From this premise, allow me to share concrete recommendations for policymakers gathered here today, recommendations rooted in the experience of Youth Peace Champions, in programmes supported by ONSA and UN partners, and in lessons from communities across the Lake Chad Basin. These are designed not only for local implementation but for replication and expansion across West Africa and the Sahel, where similar transnational threats persist, leveraging UNODC's proven models.

- a. **Empower and scale local youth networks.** Support programs similar to the Youth Peace Champions, Youth-Led Action, and the Youth Initiative. Identify, train, and resource young leaders who can use creative tools, art, animation, radio, and social media, to counter violent extremism at the community level, while advocating for substance use prevention. Create formal feedback mechanisms so youth input informs security and development planning. Adopt UNSCR 2250 principles, youth participation, protection, and partnership, into national PCVE strategies and allocate budget lines to youth-led initiatives. For replication, adapt this model in Sahel countries like Mali or Burkina Faso by integrating cross-border youth exchanges, leverage UNODC's Regional Network for Africa to share training modules and foster peer learning.
- b. **Institutionalize partnerships between security actors and community organizations.** Train police and justice actors in community-oriented approaches. Establish Memoranda of Understanding that define how local leaders, CSOs, and security forces will coordinate to support reintegration and how they will work together when tensions inevitably rise. Use community structures to act as early warning networks, trusted voices who can flag radicalization early without criminalizing youth. Opportunities for expansion include linking this to UNODC's Sahel Programme and the work of the Civil Society Unit, where similar partnerships have strengthened judicial responses; in Mauritania, for instance,



Mourchidates collaborate with security forces for community outreach, a model that could be piloted in Northern Nigeria, Niger or Chad to enhance gender-inclusive early warning. For this, a National Civil Society Alliance can be created as the main mechanism for engagement, we have done in other countries in Africa and beyond.

- c. **Integrate development with security through holistic packages.** Invest in combined interventions: Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), life-skills education, vocational training, and small grants for youth entrepreneurship. Evidence shows that piecemeal programs fail, people need jobs, healing, and social belonging at once. Donors and governments should co-finance packages that move beyond short workshops to multi-year support for livelihoods and social services, incorporating "Line Up Live Up" for sports-based resilience-building. To scale regionally, leverage ECOWAS and the Lake Chad Basin Commission for joint funding, adapting STRIVE's psychosocial-livelihood blend to Sahel contexts affected by climate-driven vulnerabilities, as seen in UNODC's climate-extremism tools for Mauritania.
- d. **Prioritize women's leadership and gender-sensitive programming.** Women's groups, mothers' networks, and women leaders play crucial roles in preventing recruitment, safeguarding returnee children, and restoring trust. Programmes must be gender-responsive and include women in leadership and design roles, both as protectors and as agents of reconciliation. The Mourchidates model in North-Africa exemplifies this: by training women as religious guides, it has empowered them to lead PVE efforts, reducing extremist appeal through faith-based narratives. Replicate this across West Africa by establishing similar networks in Nigeria's Lake Chad areas or Senegal, with UNODC providing technical support for gender integration in security sectors.
- e. **Strengthen regional cooperation and cross-border programming.** The Lake Chad crisis is transnational. ECOWAS, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, and member states must seek to fund cross-border youth exchanges, regional media campaigns, and coordinated reintegration frameworks. Improving trade, rebuilding



markets, restoring roads, and enabling safe mobility reduces economic drivers of recruitment and normalizes social life. Building on UNODC's Programmes, expand to include joint PVE platforms, such as virtual training hubs for Youth Peace Champions from multiple countries, addressing shared challenges like illicit trafficking that fuel extremism. Here, the Regional Civil Society Network can serve as a mechanism.

- f. **Localize funding and scale successful pilots.** When pilot projects, such as the STRIVE Juvenile initiatives funded by the EU and implemented by UNODC with ONSA's support, demonstrate impact, establish fast-track mechanisms to scale them. This should include simplified funding windows for local CSOs via UNODC's small grants schemes, capacity support for project management, and clear monitoring metrics that measure not only activity but behavioral change and social acceptance of reintegrated youth. For broader application, create a regional replication funding vehicle, drawing from the Mourchidates success to seed similar initiatives in high-risk Sahel zones.
- g. **Measure what matters.** Shift monitoring beyond inputs and outputs to outcomes: reductions in stigma, improvements in school attendance, increases in economic participation, and fewer recidivism cases. Use mixed methods, qualitative community feedback and quantitative indicators, to evaluate resilience. Importantly, include youth in the evaluation design; their perspectives will reveal whether programs are meaningful or tokenistic. This approach, honed in UNODC's Nigeria projects, can be standardized regionally through shared evaluation frameworks.

6 Final Reflection

Friends, these recommendations are not theoretical. They are drawn from the lives of people I have met: youth who transformed life stories into radio scripts and then to policy recommendations; teachers who supported peace clubs which became safe havens; families that, when given counselling and small business grants, chose reconciliation over retaliation. That is the arc we must support, from understanding to acceptance, and from acceptance to concrete reintegration.



As we push forward, we must also acknowledge hard truths. Not every initiative will succeed. Compact timeframes, funding shortfalls, insecure environments, and uneven capacity mean some efforts will falter. But failure does not equal waste if we learn, adapt, and re-invest. It is the very least we owe these communities.

In closing, allow me to offer a final reflection. Resilience is not resilience of institutions alone. It is the resilience of relationships, partnerships, dialogues, actions, and investments. It is the daily, patient, and often unglamorous work of neighbor talking to neighbor; teacher reconciling with student; former combatant being welcomed back in a controlled, dignified process. Young people and civil society are the technicians of this relational repair. They are the ones who reweave the social fabric stitch by stitch.

So today I ask this forum to commit to the following:

- to finance youth leadership at scale;
- to institutionalize partnerships that bring police, women's groups, faith leaders, and youth to the same table;
- to structure regional programs that mirror the transnational nature of the threat; and
- to design holistic, long-term packages that pair healing with opportunity.

We can and must do this together. For if peace is to be durable and the national security of Nigeria is to be protected, it will be because communities led by their young people, were empowered, resourced, and respected to make it so.

As UNODC, we stand ready to support you.

Thank you.