UNODC AND NIGERIA JOIN HANDS TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM TERRORISM
Background

Children are often among the casualties of acts of terrorism. They are victims of abduction, trafficking, and sexual and gender-based violence and are deliberately recruited and exploited by terrorist groups. This is not a new phenomenon but technological advances, and the specific strategic objectives of terrorist groups, have made instances of recruitment increasingly difficult to detect; recruitment campaigns broader in their reach; and children associated with such groups more vulnerable to stigma and discrimination.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram has abducted, recruited and exploited thousands of children since the group began attacks around the Lake Chad Basin in 2009. From 2017 to 2019, the UN verified that 1,385 children had been recruited and used by Boko Haram, although this number is likely to be far higher in reality. Children are exploited by Boko Haram in fighting and support roles, they are sexually abused and forcibly married.

Stakeholders who share responsibilities for the treatment of these children face enormous challenges; operating in a context of humanitarian crisis and ongoing conflict; and high levels of internal displacement that disrupt children’s enjoyment of their rights to education, food, health, shelter, water and sanitation. For over ten years, the Nigerian Government has worked to counter the threat of terrorism, including under the Policy Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, which prioritizes a whole of society and whole of government approach.

Based on its mandates in the areas of violence against children and counter-terrorism, UNODC has provided tailored technical assistance to Nigeria to address the phenomenon of child association with terrorist and violent extremist groups since 2018, including under the EU-funded STRIVE Juvenile project.

Long-term UNODC - Nigeria partnership to protect children from terrorism

Since 2015, UNODC has provided assistance to over 35 countries that face the phenomenon of child association with terrorist and violent extremist groups. Nigeria has been a key partner in this process.

01 Nigeria support for UNODC launch of dedicated technical manuals

In 2017, UNODC produced a handbook to provide legal and policy guidance to Member States facing this complex phenomenon. In 2018, the Permanent Representative of Nigeria in Vienna joined UNODC in presenting the Handbook to 48 countries, stressing the need to recognize the impact of children’s victimization at the hands of these groups. Over the following years, the Handbook provided the basis for the development of a full UNODC training package and the ‘UNODC Roadmap on the Treatment of children associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups’ which was published in 2019 to disseminate UNODC’s strategic vision.

02 UNODC and Nigeria build the basis for joint cooperation at national level

Since 2019, UNODC has cooperated with national stakeholders, guided by the leadership of the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA). A scoping mission was held to identify priorities for action at national level; and capacity building activities were organized, to foster multi-stakeholder approaches to this phenomenon.

03 Nigeria joins UNODC in global advocacy for better protection of children

In March 2021, UNODC organized a high-level event during the Crime Congress in Kyoto, to discuss the legacy of the UNODC Roadmap and raise awareness on the role of key actors in promoting better protection of children from terrorism. Rear Admiral Yaminu Musa (now pioneer Coordinator of the National Counterterrorism Centre) contributed to the event, stressing the need to address the root causes of child recruitment practices.
The added-value of STRIVE Juvenile action

In 2021, UNODC, in partnership and under the lead of ONSA, joined hands with the European Union and started the implementation of the Project STRIVE Juvenile. STRIVE Juvenile extends to end 2023 in Nigeria and aims to address child association with terrorist and violent extremist groups and its consequences for the lives of children and society at large. The project delivers activities at the global level and in three partner countries: Indonesia, Iraq, and Nigeria, pursuing two interconnected objectives:

1. Strengthening government strategies, policies and mechanisms related to child association with terrorist groups.
2. Increasing the resilience of children and their environment against violent extremist and terrorist agendas.

Intervention under the STRIVE Juvenile project pursues an integrated approach, which recognizes that child rights and security interests are complementary objectives. This approach is built on three cornerstones:

01 Choosing to invest in children as agents

The project acknowledges that children can be extremely vulnerable to terrorist tactics whilst - most importantly - recognizing that they have the power to transform societal dynamics. STRIVE Juvenile strongly advocates for the primary recognition of children who become associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups as victims and provides assistance that is focused on addressing their victimization. At the same time, the project aims to move beyond the myopic dichotomy between victim and perpetrator. STRIVE Juvenile invests in children first, advocating for their active participation in rehabilitation and reintegration processes and the building of peaceful societies.

02 Building partnerships with national counterparts

The three partner countries selected to take part in STRIVE Juvenile were chosen for their willingness to confront the situation of children who become associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups, as well as for their influence on regional and global agendas. The effectiveness of the project is maximized through activities that are relevant to national contexts and driven by local stakeholders. The project prioritizes national ownership throughout its planning and implementation by means of: i) the selection of a lead coordination agency or key lead partners in each country; ii) in-depth consultations with a broad range of stakeholders during the inception phase; iii) involvement of national stakeholders in the ongoing development of the project through its national project coordination committees.

03 Fostering a participatory and whole-of-society approach

The treatment of children associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups is the shared responsibility of a broad array of actors. A multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder framework is therefore a key requirement for the success of STRIVE Juvenile. The project brings together the security, justice and child protection sectors with a view to overcoming the perceived conflict between security interests and child protection. The prevention of recruitment and exploitation of children by terrorist and violent extremist groups and the rehabilitation and reintegration of children formerly associated with these groups are both crucial to the curtailment of terrorist tactics. In addition, the project aims to favour initiatives that involve both governmental and non-governmental actors, recognizing that civil society and community-based organizations (CSOs and CBOs) are key to supporting the resiliency of children and their environments.
STRIVE Juvenile achievements in Nigeria

Between January 2021 and June 2023, STRIVE Juvenile Nigeria reached multiple objectives, from collecting and analyzing new evidence; to producing specific tools; to strengthening the skills and capacities of practitioners; to identifying and mentoring youth ambassadors. These achievements, combined, have contributed to the creation of an integrated approach to fostering the rehabilitation and reintegration of children associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups in Nigeria.

**Creation of a multi-stakeholder coordination platform:** in order to provide strategic guidance with regard to the implementation of the STRIVE Juvenile project, UNODC and ONSA have set up a national steering committee, to provide strategic guidance for the implementation of the STRIVE Juvenile project. Under the leadership of ONSA, the work of the steering committee fosters multi-stakeholder coordination; promotes dialogue on the situation of children among national counterparts; and consistently monitors project activities, ensuring their alignment with national priorities.

**Launch of the Nigeria Call for Action:** following a multi-stakeholder national consultation process, led by ONSA, the government of Nigeria adopted and launched the Nigeria Call for Action in December 2022. UNODC provided input and legal advice on the elaboration of the document and relevant international law. This declaration recognizes the priority of protecting children from the threats associated with terrorism; prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration as key priorities; and the complementarity of security and child rights in any efforts to tackle the phenomenon. Importantly, the Call for Action recognizes that child recruitment should be criminalized, regardless of the designation of armed, criminal or terrorist groups and that any child who has been associated with these groups should be considered and treated primarily as a victim, thus bridging the gap between the security and humanitarian agenda.

**Collection and analysis of new evidence on child association and exit from terrorist groups:** the STRIVE Juvenile project started with the undertaking of an in-depth situation analysis, based on desk review and comprehensive consultations with all national counterparts involved in the protection of children from terrorism. The Situation Analysis served to collect all existing evidence on this phenomenon in Nigeria, identifying priorities for action and gaps in policy and practice. Then, the project launched an ambitious research programme on children’s trajectories in and out of terrorist and violent extremist groups. The final research report (forthcoming 2023) presents a detailed picture of this phenomenon in Nigeria, contributing to better understanding of the perspectives of children, their families and communities; their reintegration journeys, as well as the specific strategies mobilized by terrorist groups for their recruitment and exploitation.

**Elaboration of policy-guidance and operational recommendations for implementation:** in consultation with Nigerian professionals, UNODC elaborates specialized guidance tools to support the appropriate treatment of children associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups. Specifically, STRIVE Juvenile produced a Guidance Note the treatment of children associated with Terrorist Groups in Nigeria and is currently developing a Guidance Note on psychosocial support to child victims of recruitment and other grave violations. These tools function as repositories of relevant international and national law; provide operational guidance on procedures and authorities; and include strategies for strengthening practice and coordination among different stakeholders.

**Development of capacities and skills of professionals:** legal and operational guidance is meaningless if policy-makers and professionals are not empowered to apply innovative strategies. Accordingly, the STRIVE Juvenile project couples the development of specialized guidance with the design and delivery of tailored capacity development activities. Over three years, the project has organized and delivered training to policy-makers and practitioners from law enforcement, correctional institutions, judiciary, security sector, child protection, social affairs, administrative authorities and civil society organizations. Training activities have focused on: treatment of child victims and witnesses; prosecution of grave violations against children; and rehabilitation and reintegration strategies and measures, with a focus on psychosocial assessment.

**Support to the rehabilitation and reintegration of children associated with terrorist and violent extremist groups in the context of reconciliation initiatives:** in accordance with national counterparts, STRIVE Juvenile has prioritized work to promote rehabilitation and reintegration of children associated with terrorist groups, in the context of reconciliation efforts in the Borno State. Based on the evidence collected by the project, intervention in this area focuses on: mechanisms for coordination among the different stakeholders involved in the treatment of these children; local platforms to enhance dialogues between national authorities and communities; and outreach and awareness raising among affected children and communities in Borno.

**Mentoring of youth peace champions to fight violent extremist agendas:** children and youth can play a key role in their own protection from violent extremism, when empowered to do so in a safe way. For this reason, STRIVE Juvenile has partnered with the Youth Sounding Board in Nigeria, to identify, train and mentor youth ambassadors to support outreach activities in the affected communities, fostering a culture of dialogue and peace.
Bringing together 37 national governmental and non-gov stakeholders.

Mobilizing cross-sectoral political engagement for better protection of child victims of recruitment and exploitation through the Nigeria Call for Action.

Collecting and disseminating new evidence on the phenomenon of child association with terrorist and violent extremist groups.

Providing operational guidance for Nigerian professionals, tailored to the national context and available in English, Hausa and Kanuri.

Enhancing the skills of national experts and fostering knowledge growth in a sustainable way.

*Based on results to 30 June 2023*
16 YOUTH PEACE CHAMPIONS SELECTED (8m, 8w)
Supporting young people to contribute to peacebuilding and reconciliation in Borno State.

80 YOUNG PEOPLE REACHED THROUGH 2 WORKSHOPS AT EYE 2023
Young Nigerians inspiring young Europeans to become agents of protection from terrorism at the European Youth Event (EYE) 2023.
UN Building, Central Business District, Abuja, FCT, Nigeria

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Thank you for taking the time to read this factsheet. If you have any questions or would like to discuss further, please do not hesitate to reach out to us.