**General information:**

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Social media has played a significant role in Nigerian conflict history. With an estimated 108.75 million internet and social media users, Nigeria claims the title of the largest online space in Africa.[[1]](#footnote-1) Considering the threat posed by terrorist groups like Boko Haram and Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), which exploit social media for engagement with violence and the recruitment of children and young people, the **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), through the Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE) Juvenile project** in partnership with the European Union, focuses on preventing and responding to violence against children by armed groups, including those designated as terrorist organizations. The project supports Nigerian young people in protecting children and becoming agents of change in their protection.

UNODC approaches prevention in a developmental approach, where each age of development necessitates specific milestones to be attained in a healthy and safe way. The milestones are influenced by individual characteristics as well as through the influential ecological faculties surrounding the child (the family, the school, the community and the peers), accounting of course for the larger macro-context the child or the ecological faculties are in (conflict, social inequalities, displacement, community violence, etc...).

In such a model of prevention , particularly when addressing children and youth, social media can carry a positive or a negative influence. Social media ensure a large reach particularly in the young population and seemingly different platforms are differentially influential by gender. Normative belief for instance is a key developmental milestone. Moreover close to 60% of mental health symptoms start to occur within the adolescence period. Social media can play an important role in mediating the social and emotional learning and educational skills needed at the critical age of initiation of risky behaviours (including substance use and beyond) in adolescence. It could also be misused either in amplifying misinformation that is challenged by the wrong normative belief and poor cognitive and critical thinking skills of adolescence and young adulthood, or by inadvertantly (or in some instances purposively) promoting negative behaviours.

Digital education however is much broader than social media platforms and can be more direct in terms of use and reach to support either the individual directly in reaching his/her milestones needs of social, emotional or cognitive competencies needed at a specific age, or indirectly through availing the institutions around the individual with the necessary knowledge and skills to support the child within his/her age of development.

**Specific questions:**

**1) Based on your work, what are the main challenges that young people face in accessing digital education? Please consider the specific situation of marginalized young people and those in vulnerable situations in your response.**

Based on the capacity-building work undertaken by **UNODC** **STRIVE Juvenile project** to train, mentor and empower its Youth Peace Champions on the use of social media, art, and animation for peacebuilding, the project team have identified certain challenges faced by young people in accessing digital education.

Foremost among these challenges is the reality that marginalized young individuals, particularly those residing in remote or underserved areas, often lack access to reliable internet connectivity and digital devices. The **absence of essential infrastructure and resources not only hinders their participation in digital education programmes but also restrains their ability to access online learning materials.** This systemic barrier not only **limits opportunities** but also **hinders their involvement in decision-making processes**, leading to a **widespread disparity in data** and **impeding the establishment of informed, inclusive decisions**.

Additionally, the project team observed **lack basic digital literacy skills, including proficiency in using computers, navigating online platforms, and discerning credible information from misinformation among marginalized youth**. Limited exposure to technology and formal education exacerbates these literacy barriers, making it challenging for them to fully engage in digital education initiatives.

**Economic facto**rs further compound the challenges faced by marginalized young people. **Poverty and financial** instability loom large, acting as a substantial **barrier to entry into the realm of digital education**. The **high costs** associated with purchasing **digital devices, securing internet subscriptions**, and obtaining **relevant software** constitute daunting obstacles, preventing these individuals from fully harnessing the transformative potential of online learning opportunities.

Marginalized populations require a **selective means of prevention** given the unique vulnerability they are facing at their age of development and as such **universal prevention messaging through digital education platforms might not be matching the circumstances they are facing**.

Access to digital education as well is a further impediment to marginalized populations

**2) Based on your work, can you share examples of good practices to ensure that digital education is accessible and promoted among young people? Please provide examples of specific laws and regulations, measures, policies, and programmes directed at ensuring young people’s universal access to digital education.**

During the implementation of the **UNODC STRIVE Juvenile project**, the project team aimed to meaningfully involve young people through a youth-led awareness-raising campaign in Nigeria. The objective was to foster community acceptance and contribute to reducing the stigmatization of reintegrated children associated with armed groups, including terrorist groups, contributing to overall reconciliation efforts. The project initiated an online call for applications, receiving 459 submissions from young people aspiring to become Youth Peace Champions (YPC). The selection process involved assessing each applicant based on specified criteria included in the application and scoring them accordingly, resulting in the selection of 16 young individuals to serve as YPC.

Driven by a mandate to protect children in the context of armed conflict and promote peaceful coexistence in their communities, these champions played a significant role. Despite the challenging circumstances posed by the Boko Haram insurgency, which severely limited economic opportunities for young people, the selected YPC adopted a comprehensive approach. The YPC utilized both online and offline channels for the selection process, ensuring active participation from even those in underprivileged communities. This strategic inclusivity addressed not only internet accessibility concerns but also embraced a diverse range of voices, amplifying the initiative's impact on a broader scale.

In 2023 alone, UNODC Youth Peace Champions drove change through various channels, including social media platforms, a video documentary, and local radio sessions, reaching over 9 million people with messages of hope and reconciliation.

During UNODC work in prevention , COVID19 despite its challenges was an opportunity to intensify our digital implementation component to overcome travel restrictions as well as social distancing policies that have impeded the implementation of interactive in person sessions of prevention. The vulnerabilities families, the educational sectors, further to the new individual vulnerabilities in youth generated through the COVID19 related stressors also necessitated revising the contents embedded in our prevention tools.

Post COVID19, other crises (conflict as well as natural disasters – earthquakes, floods), also necessitated digitalizing many of the tools we have for quicker access for addressing iminent needs for families on the move.

We digitalized the tools that train facilitators who engage with families, to overcome travel restrictions. This was much more feasible than digitalizing interactive caregiving tools that by design need to be interactive. **Learning skills through online modality is not as easy**. We have **used digital tools to complement the in-person family skills tools** so far. We have documented this experience in a peer reviewed journal ([Why do we Need to go Digital? Process of Developing an Online Facilitator Training Platform for a Global Family Skills Programme for Drug Use Prevention | Journal of Prevention (springer.com))](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10935-023-00754-y)

The educational sector was different, because of the forced movement to remote teaching during COVID19 combined with the new vulnerabilities and stressors young students are going through, several teachers (despite their challenges in educating on line) pleaded for availing social and emotional learning sessions during their engagement to support their students as well as support the educational sessions online. We have documented this experience in a peer reviewed journal as well. ([Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence implementation during COVID-19 challenges in Croatia - PubMed (nih.gov))](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32496105/)

**3) Based on your work, can you share examples of good practices to ensure that young people can realize their human rights online in a safe, empowering, and inclusive way?**

The **UNODC STRIVE Juvenile project** has implemented comprehensive digital media and online safety training programs for its 16 UNODC Youth Peace Champions. The focus is on **building critical thinking skills, promoting responsible media use, and raising awareness about online risks and threats**. Additionally, the project offers educational materials to empower the YPC to navigate the digital landscape safely, recognizing and reporting online abuse and exploitation, as well as protecting their privacy and personal information.

**4) Based on your work, what are the main gaps and challenges to young people’s protection from online threats in law, policy, and practice and the impacts on young people’s human rights? Please consider the specific situation of marginalized young people and those in vulnerable situations in your response.**

Many countries, including Nigeria where the **UNODC STRIVE Juvenile project** is implemented, are still dealing with **the absence of comprehensive laws and regulations specifically addressing online threats and cybercrimes**. This leaves young people **vulnerable to various forms of online abuse, harassment, and exploitation.**

Despite the existence of certain policies and regulations from the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), **enforcement mechanisms may be weak or ineffective**. This allows **perpetrators of online threats to act with impunity**, leaving young people and children **without adequate recourse or protection**.

A significant challenge is that many young people, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds, are **unaware of the risks and dangers posed by online threats such as cyberbullying, grooming, and sexting**. This lack of awareness makes them more susceptible to victimization. Moreover, many of these **young people lack trust** in law enforcement agencies, child protection services, and other authorities to effectively address online threats and protect their rights. Consequently, there is **underreporting and underrepresentation of their experiences**.

**5) Based on your work, can you share examples of good practices to ensure that young people are protected from online threats? Please provide examples of specific laws and regulations, measures, policies, and programmes.**

**6) Can you provide information on any programs or activities your organization has implemented regarding solutions to protect digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats?**

Through the **UNODC STRIVE Juvenile project**, 16 young people from Borno state were trained on strategies to protect themselves and children in their environment from online threats, including engagement with violence (radicalization), cyberbullying, and data exploitation. The training covered topics such as privacy settings, safe browsing habits, and recognizing/reporting harmful content. Additionally, it included **critical media literacy skills to help participants identify and analyze misinformation, hate speech, and extremist propaganda online**. This **empowerment** aimed at enabling them to **critically evaluate the credibility of online sources** and distinguish between **fact and fiction**.

The project, through its capacity-building training, also supported the development and dissemination of positive and inclusive narratives countering extremist ideologies propagated by terrorist groups. It also encouraged young people in the region to create and share content promoting peace, tolerance, and resilience, fostering a sense of belonging and community cohesion.

By investing in digital safety training that prioritizes online safety, critical thinking, and positive narratives, the UNODC STRIVE Juvenile Project has empowered young people in Borno, Nigeria to navigate the digital landscape responsibly, resist violent extremist influences, and contribute to children's protection, building resilient communities.

**In 2023, UNODC launched the Toolkit on Mainstreaming Gender and Human Rights in the implementation of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The purpose of the Toolkit is to support the mainstreaming of intersectional gender and human rights considerations into laws, policies and strategies against organized, in line with UNTOC and other relevant international instruments. The publication recognises age as an important characteristic that can shape a person's experience with organised crime and subsequent policies and legislation that aim to prevent and counter the phenomenon. For this reason the Toolkit emphasises the importance of recognising youth as key stakeholders in the development of legislation and policies, designing policies that address the needs and experiences of young people and the development of targeted advocacy material.**

**7) Please provide any relevant statistical or disaggregated data based on age, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity, migration status, or other categories.**

1. [Internet usage in Nigeria - statistics & facts | Statista](https://www.statista.com/topics/7199/internet-usage-in-nigeria/#topicOverview) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)