



Observation & Monitoring Centre,
Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security.

CONCEPT NOTE

**A REGIONAL APPROACH TO SUPPORT THE ERADICATION OF THE SYNDROME OF
'CHILDREN ON THE STREET' IN WEST AFRICA**

I. Background:

1. Early Warning and Response Mandate

In December 1999 a mechanism for collective security and peace to be known as the "Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-keeping and Security" was established within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) by the *Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-keeping and Security*. Article 23 of this Protocol established an Observation and Monitoring Centre that is responsible for data collection and analyses and preparation of reports for the use of the Executive Secretariat. This Protocol also provided for the founding of a sub-regional peace and security observation system, subsequently dubbed ECOWARN (ECOWAS Warning and Response Network), for the purposes of conflict prevention and in accordance with Article 58 of the Revised Treaty.

Article 25 of the Protocol stipulates that the Mechanism shall be applied in cases of aggression or conflict in any Member State or threat thereof; in case of conflict between two or several Member States; in case of internal conflict that threatens to trigger a humanitarian disaster, or that poses a serious threat to peace and security in the sub-region; in event of serious and massive violation of human rights and the rule of law; in the event of an overthrow or attempted overthrow of a democratically elected government; and any other situation as may be decided by the Mediation and Security Council. This range of applications suggests a broadly conceived, human security orientation for ECOWARN. Indeed, the breadth of ECOWARN's mandate is expansive and includes social, cultural, economic, political and environmental indicators having an impact on the peace and security of the zone and the sub-region.

After 10 years of operation, the ECOWARN system has identified its greatest challenge as being bridging the gap between alert and response. The situation is further exacerbated by the increased security and vulnerability risks associated with emerging threats.

A study has just been concluded by the Early Warning directorate highlighting the risks and vulnerabilities of the region. Despite the considerable progress made in development and peace consolidation in some parts of the region (and in some instances the notable democratic and socioeconomic advances), it seems that there are apparent structural deficiencies which have made much of the region particularly susceptible to the emerging threats. The vulnerabilities have been identified as weak border control systems (leading to porous territorial boundaries), the inability of criminal justice systems to ensure effective operation of the rule of law and inadequate coordination and information-sharing among relevant national agencies, as well as limited institutional cooperation across borders with neighbouring countries. As a consequence, the emerging security threats identified in the region include:

- Drug/Human Trafficking and Organised Crime
- Children on the streets
- Terrorism (Boko Haram, MUJAO, ANSAR DINE, etc.)
- Challenges to Democratic Governance (The Conundrum of Democratic Elections based on "Winner Takes All", Principle Renewed Propensity to Unconstitutional Changes of Government, democracy and 'the street' syndrome)
- Piracy (Benin-Nigeria – Togo - Ghana-Cote d'Ivoire axes)
- The Ebola+ Syndrome
- Climate change related menaces (coastal erosion, flooding, bush fires and desertification which has caused an increase in conflict between nomadic cattle breeders and local farmers all over the Region)

To tackle the above, ECOWARN needs to steam up capacity as it is said if early warning is better practiced, it is likely we have a more stable and peaceful environment to live.

2. Resolving the gap between Alert and Response

Research has identified two ways of practicing early warning, as 1) collecting, disseminating, analysing data and raising alerts where necessary, or 2) empowering local populations to better prepare for and respond to threats to themselves and their community. Whereas ECOWARN for its 10 years of operation has solely practiced the former, it is being recognized as in CEWARN that an appropriate way of linking early warning to rapid response resides at the community level. The concept, which is termed 'proximity policing', tends to deploy early warning and response at the grassroots level through the inexhaustible networks of Government and civil society peace actors. In a critical sense, the above derives from the larger concept of social protection, as defined by the United Nations Research Institute For Social Development, which is concerned with preventing, managing, and overcoming situations that adversely affect people's wellbeing.

It is in this context that ECOWARN intends to deploy at the national level with the setting up of national centers for the coordination of the response mechanism and as a first strategy, with YOUTHS as its central concern, a regional attempt is initiated to support Member States in the eradication of the dreaded syndrome of 'Children on the streets'.

II. The 'Children on the Street' syndrome

1. Concept

The definition of street children is largely debated, but many practitioners and policymakers use UNICEF's concept of boys and girls, aged less than eighteen years, for whom "the street" (including unoccupied dwellings and wasteland) has become home and/or their source of livelihood, and who are inadequately protected or supervised.

'Street children' is used as a catch-all term, but covers children in a wide variety of circumstances and with a wide variety of characteristics. Street children can be found in a large majority of the world's cities, with the phenomenon more prevalent in densely populated urban hubs of developing or economically unstable regions, particularly on the African continent.

According to a report from the Consortium for Street Children, a United Kingdom-based consortium of related non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UNICEF estimates that 100 million children are growing up on urban streets around the world.

The causes of this phenomenon are varied, but are often related to domestic, economic, or social disruption; including, but not limited to, poverty, breakdown of homes and/or families, political unrest, sexual, physical or emotional abuse, domestic violence, mental health problems and substance abuse. Children may also end up on the streets due to cultural or religious factors. In the ECOWAS region, some children in the far Northern parts of Nigeria (referred to as the almajiris) are forced to leave their homes by indenturing under a mallam (Islamic religious teacher) in order to understand the teachings of the Holy Quran. During the period of indenture, these children are forced to the streets in search for their daily livelihoods through alms begging. These children are also in most circumstances compelled to make returns from their daily proceeds to the mallam and failure to do so may lead to severe conditions.

In Senegal, there are over 50 thousand Street Children in Dakar alone and over 100 thousand in other cities of Senegal, according to UNICEF. These Children are mainly 'Talibes', boys between the ages of six and twelve whom are entrusted by their families to Muslim leaders known as 'marabouts' to teach them the Koran.

In Sierra Leone, these children are close to 50,000 relying upon the streets for their survival, a portion of them living full-time on the streets. There are also an estimated 300,000 children in Sierra Leone without access to education. Often neglected rural areas – of which there are many – offer little or no opportunity for children to break from the existing cycle of poverty.

2. Socio –economic and security impact

While street children are generally viewed as a social pathology that requires social solution through welfare programmes such as rehabilitation and reintegration back into their families, there is also a very critical yet often overlooked security dimension. Nigeria is a case in point. In Lagos, the OPC mayhem between 1999 and 2001 involved a lot of Street Children as foot soldiers. During the series of major ethno-religious conflicts in Jos, Street Children were used by both sides to perpetrate violence.

There is certainly a link between street children and security and the exponential rise in the number of street children in West Africa could spell a security disaster, as these kids become foot soldiers and terror elements during ethno- religious conflagrations.

Furthermore, Street Children are not given the educational opportunities, which would allow them to garner the requisite skills to compete in the labour market. As a result, there is a potential loss of manpower and its attendant socio-economic gains, for every Member state where this syndrome exists.

It is however disheartening to note that despite overwhelming legislation from both international and local frameworks for the protection of the rights of children, the phenomenon has remained the most resistant in the history of the region.

3. Legislation against the syndrome

At the international level, there exist a number of important international conventions related to child protection and children education:

- **Art. 18 - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**
- **Art. 13(4) - International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**
- **Art. 11,21,36 - Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**
- **Article 29.2 - Charte Africaine des droits et du bien-être de l'enfant**

Locally, Member States have enacted several laws and conventions, and at the same time Government, UN agencies, the international community at large, NGOs, CSOs, the public and sector, community and religious leaders, all after decades of investment in all forms of human endeavor into the matter, hare today at a crossroad with a multitude of ways, but no one knows which direction to take again.

The present attempt intends not to provide for studies over the syndrome, but looking from a regional approach to engineer the support local actors need to eradicate the phenomenon in about two years.

III. Strategic Approach

One of the provisions of the ECOWAS Vision 2020, is that: "*The ECOWAS region, its member states and citizens enjoy a secure and peaceful environment, promoting and creating the necessary state and human security preconditions for a sustained socio-economic development and improved living standards of the population*". In the same vein, one of the basic principles of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child is that every child must be protected against all forms of exploitation and indecent or degrading treatment. Furthermore, article 27 of the UN Convention on Child Rights states that 'every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for his or her physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Parents have the primary responsibility to ensure that the child has an adequate standard of living. The States duty is to ensure that this responsibility can be, and is fulfilled'. Thus the strategic objective of the Regional Approach for the eradication of the syndrome Children on the Street is premised on the attainment of the ECOWAS vision 2020 and the UN Child's Right Convention.

IV. Objectives of the project

Given the huge negative impact of this phenomenon on socio-economic development of the ECOWAS region, the project is to fashion out a multi-pronged, holistic approach with strong systems and support structures towards the eradication of the syndrome in the ECOWAS region and creates a protective environment for vulnerable children. The project will propose a strategy for tackling the problem of street children, employing a delicate balancing act, as the syndrome is tied up with misconceived religious and traditional acts. It will also look at ways of enforcing existing legislation on child protection, child labour and trafficking and enacting new legislation where necessary. Six strategic priorities (or Action Areas) have been indentified which are intended to assess the problem and address them through the enactment and implementation of requisite legislation; there are:

1. Formulation of a Strategy for the eradication of the syndrome of Children on the street
2. Assessment of existing legislation and initiatives in all Member States
3. Formulation and Validation of a Regional Policy on the eradication of Children on the Street syndrome
4. Sensitization in Member States on the Regional Policy for the eradication of the syndrome of Children on the Street
5. Establishment of a National action plan for the domestication and implementation of the Regional Policy on the eradication of Children on the Street Syndrome
6. Implementation at the national level

V. Participation

1. *Member States*
2. *Observation & Monitoring Centre (Early Warning), Abuja*
3. *Gender & Social Affairs, Abuja*
4. *Court of Justice, Abuja*
5. *Parliament, Abuja*
6. *UNICEF*
7. *Children of the Street (UK)*
8. *International Crisis Group*
9. *Human rights Watch*
10. *Amnesty International*
11. *WACSOF, Abuja*
12. *WANEP, Accra*
13. *ECOWAS Women Network, Dakar*
14. *UNOWA, Dakar*
15. *OHCHR, Dakar*
16. *OSIWA, Dakar*
17. *USAid, Accra*
18. *RADDHO, Senegal*
19. *GIZ, Abuja*