



# The UNDP's Own Playbook: Policy Recommendations From the 2023 Extremism Study

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## BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) own 2023 research shows that state failure and security force abuses, not religion, drive violent extremist recruitment across Africa. Despite this evidence, the same report finds that funding for prevention and peacebuilding has plateaued at roughly two percent of relevant development spending while governments and donors keep investing in militarized counter-terrorism (UNDP 2023, 135). UNDP's own recommendations therefore call for human rights oversight of security forces, long-term community-led programming, and governance and economic reform, not additional security deployment (UNDP 2023, 133-135). Preventing violent extremism (PVE) donors and regional bodies already running counter-terrorism programs in the Lake Chad Basin should audit their portfolios against this playbook, since the gap between UNDP's own evidence and current spending patterns is UNDP's own finding, not an outside critique.

## AT A GLANCE

- UNDP's 2023 Journey to Extremism in Africa report places its core policy recommendations in Chapter 5, “Implications for Programming and Policy” (UNDP 2023, 124-135).
- Only 17 percent of voluntary recruits cited religion as a key driver in 2023, down from 40 percent in the 2017 edition of the same study (UNDP 2023, 128, 130).
- Sixty-two percent of voluntary recruits reported little or no trust in police before joining (UNDP 2023, 17).
- Seventy-one percent cited government action, often involving rights abuses, as the final trigger that pushed them to join (UNDP 2023, 131).
- Funding for peacebuilding and prevention has plateaued at approximately two percent of relevant development spending (UNDP 2023, 135).
- UNDP recommends challenging violent extremist groups' role as proto-state competitors for authority and legitimacy, rather than relying on militarized responses alone (UNDP 2023, 134).

## CONTEXT

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published the first Journey to Extremism in Africa report in 2017 and followed it with an expanded 2023 edition, based on 2,196 interviews with voluntary recruits, abductees, and a reference group across eight countries, including Nigeria (UNDP 2023, 18). This second edition more than doubles the first study's scope, deepening its evidence base on what pulls people toward violent extremism and what pulls them away from it (UNDP 2023, 18). The study also interviewed a reference group who did not join extremist groups despite similar backgrounds, to isolate which factors actually distinguish recruits from non-recruits (UNDP 2023, 18).

The report treats radicalization as a journey rather than a single decision, tracing drivers from childhood through a final tipping point into recruitment (UNDP 2023, 131). In the Lake Chad Basin specifically, it documents how groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have exploited gaps in state service delivery to build what it calls proto-state authority, in some areas holding what it terms a quasi-monopoly over coercive force (UNDP 2023, 50).

Chapter 5, “Implications for Programming and Policy,” translates these continent-wide findings into recommendations organized by theme rather than by country, covering upbringing and education, religion, economic factors, state and citizenship, the recruitment process, disengagement, and counter-terrorism policy



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(UNDP 2023, 124-135). The chapter does not single out Nigeria or the Lake Chad Basin by name, applying the same framework across all eight study countries (UNDP 2023, 124-135).

## ANALYSIS

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UNDP's own evidence undercuts the security-first assumption still shaping most counter-terrorism spending. Only 17 percent of voluntary recruits in the 2023 sample cited religion as a key reason for joining, down sharply from 40 percent in the 2017 edition, while not perceiving one's religion as under threat reduced the likelihood of voluntary recruitment by 48 to 50 percent (UNDP 2023, 128, 130). Religion functions as a vehicle for grievance in the report's own framing, not as its primary cause.

State conduct, not ideology, drives the critical tipping point into recruitment. Seventy-one percent of voluntary recruits cited government action, frequently involving rights abuses, as the final trigger that pushed them to join, and 62 percent reported little or no trust in police beforehand (UNDP 2023, 17, 131). The report describes this pattern as evidence of a much more fractured social contract between citizens and the state (UNDP 2023, 128).

Economic grievance compounds this fracture. One quarter of voluntary recruits cited employment as their primary driver, and 73 percent expressed frustration with government job provision (UNDP 2023, 17). The report's recommendation is specific. It calls for investment in economic regeneration and gender-sensitive livelihood programs, rather than treating unemployment as a side effect of insecurity to be solved only after security is restored (UNDP 2023, 131).

In the Lake Chad Basin, these drivers combine with a documented governance vacuum. The report finds that groups including Boko Haram and ISWAP have built proto-state authority by exploiting gaps in state service delivery, in some areas holding what it terms a quasi-monopoly over coercive force (UNDP 2023, 50). Chapter 5's recommendation to challenge the emergence of violent extremist groups as proto-state competitors for authority and legitimacy directly answers this finding, reusing its own language from earlier in the report (UNDP 2023, 134).

The report's clearest policy indictment concerns counter-terrorism funding itself. Spending on prevention and peacebuilding has plateaued at approximately two percent of relevant development assistance, even though the report cites a sixteen-to-one return on peacebuilding investment elsewhere in the same document (UNDP 2023, 7, 135). UNDP's own recommendation is to recalibrate investment toward root causes and to resist rebranding and conflating prevention work with militarized counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism efforts, which it warns risks securitizing aid (UNDP 2023, 135).

Human rights oversight of security forces is treated as a programming requirement, not an afterthought. The report calls for strengthened, independent oversight of militarized counter-terrorism responses and regular review of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, citing the 62 percent distrust figure directly as justification (UNDP 2023, 17, 133). It further warns that international support to state security forces risks reinforcing exclusive and predatory power structures without conflict-sensitive safeguards (UNDP 2023, 134).

Community-based programming, not top-down security deployment, receives the report's strongest institutional endorsement. Religious and community leaders enjoy far higher public trust than security actors, and the report recommends sustained, long-term funding for localized, community-led prevention rather than short-term, top-down projects (UNDP 2023, 129, 134-135). Disengagement follows the same logic. Rebuilding social bonds and offering non-violent alternative identities matter more than punitive handling of former recruits, since the longer someone remains inside a violent extremist group, the less likely they are to leave voluntarily (UNDP 2023, 133).

### **CASE EXAMPLE: THE PROTO-STATE LANGUAGE, IN UNDP'S OWN WORDS**

On page 50, UNDP's 2023 report describes Boko Haram and ISWAP in the Lake Chad Basin as having built governance structures so complete in some areas that they hold what the report calls a quasi-monopoly over coercive force, a textbook proto-state. On page 134, Chapter 5's own



recommendation uses the identical phrase, calling on policy actors to challenge violent extremist groups' emergence as proto-state competitors for authority and legitimacy. The repetition is not accidental. UNDP's recommendations chapter is built to answer the specific regional findings documented earlier in the same report, not a generic template applied afterward.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Preventing violent extremism (PVE) donors: Reallocate counter-terrorism budgets toward the root-cause programming UNDP's own evidence supports, since prevention and peacebuilding spending remains near two percent of relevant development assistance despite a cited sixteen-to-one return on investment (UNDP 2023, 7, 135).
2. Nigerian federal and Lake Chad Basin state governments: Strengthen independent civilian oversight of security forces operating against Boko Haram and ISWAP, since 62 percent of voluntary recruits in UNDP's sample reported little or no trust in police before joining (UNDP 2023, 17, 133).
3. Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF): Build conflict-sensitive safeguards into support for state security forces, since UNDP warns that such support risks reinforcing exclusive and predatory power structures where those safeguards are absent (UNDP 2023, 134).
4. United Nations agencies and the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy review process: Treat community and religious leaders, who hold far higher public trust than security actors, as primary programming partners for sustained, long-term prevention funding rather than short-term pilot projects (UNDP 2023, 129, 134-135).
5. Embassies and PVE program designers: Separate prevention and peacebuilding programming from militarized counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism branding, since UNDP explicitly warns that conflating the two risks securitizing aid that should address root causes (UNDP 2023, 135).

## **RISK OUTLOOK**

UNDP's own data suggest the drivers of recruitment are shifting, not disappearing. Religion's share of stated motivations fell from 40 percent to 17 percent between the 2017 and 2023 editions, but government action and distrust of security services remain dominant triggers, meaning militarized responses without governance reform are likely to keep generating new recruits even as old grievances fade (UNDP 2023, 128, 130-131).

In the Lake Chad Basin specifically, the proto-state dynamics UNDP documents are structural, not incidental, since groups that exploit state absence to deliver services and coercive order are unlikely to lose local relevance through security operations alone (UNDP 2023, 50). If prevention and peacebuilding funding remains near two percent of relevant spending, UNDP's own framework implies that the current trajectory, rising recruitment pools shaped by unmet governance and economic expectations, continues regardless of battlefield outcomes against any single group (UNDP 2023, 135).

## **METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES**

This brief draws exclusively on the United Nations Development Programme's Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement (UNDP, 2023), primarily Chapter 5, "Implications for Programming and Policy" (pp. 124-135), supplemented by the report's Lake Chad Basin case material (pp. 49-52) and its executive summary data (pp. 7, 16-18, 128-131). No other uploaded source was used, since this brief specifically examines UNDP's own recommendations rather than comparative literature. Where relevant, the 2017 first edition of the same study is referenced only as UNDP 2023 itself cites it internally, not as an independently reviewed source.

## **ABOUT SAHEL CONSULTING SOLUTIONS**



## SAHEL CONSULTING SOLUTIONS

*Comparative Conflict Analysis & Political Risk*

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