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United Nations
Interregional Crime and Justice
Research Institute

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

**Practical Guidelines for Civil Society
Engagement in Addressing the Nexus
between Terrorism and Criminal
Economies in West Africa**

UNICRI PUBLICATIONS

Published in October 2026

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Communities affected by the crime–terror nexus in West Africa are often viewed primarily through a security lens. As a result, prevention efforts may overlook the economic, governance and social factors that shape vulnerability, as well as the capacities communities already possess to strengthen their own resilience. Civil society organizations (CSOs) working in these contexts face a common challenge: translating research and policy recommendations into practical, locally appropriate action, while navigating limited opportunities to shape policy and ensure community perspectives inform decision-making.

To explore this challenge, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) convened a Regional Workshop on *Strengthening Community Resilience against the Nexus between Terrorism and Criminal Activities in West Africa*, bringing together CSOs, researchers and practitioners from Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria. The workshop was held from 30 June to 2 July 2026 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

Building on the operational experiences, case studies and discussions shared during the workshop, and complemented by relevant research on the crime–terror nexus in Africa, this guide identifies practical approaches that CSOs can adopt to strengthen community resilience.

Five overarching lessons emerged. First, effective prevention begins with a thorough understanding of local contexts. Programmes should be based on participatory assessments that identify not only vulnerabilities but also existing community capacities, allowing interventions to respond to locally identified priorities rather than externally defined assumptions.

Second, prevention programmes should address the realities of local economies. Engagement in illicit economies is often shaped by a range of factors beyond poverty, and livelihood interventions are unlikely to succeed unless they provide realistic, economically viable alternatives that can compete with the immediacy, accessibility and benefits offered by illicit markets.

Third, sustainable prevention depends on strengthening existing community capacities rather than creating parallel structures. Women's associations, youth groups, traditional and religious leaders, savings groups and other local networks often already play an important role in building resilience functions and should be recognized as implementation partners.

Fourth, community engagement should be conflict-sensitive and grounded in trust. Discussions on terrorism and crime are often more productive when they begin with locally identified concerns, while programmes should avoid stigmatizing communities or treating proximity to illicit economies as evidence of complicity.

Finally, strengthening community resilience requires sustained partnerships between CSOs, national institutions and international partners. This includes recognizing CSOs as strategic partners, integrating community perspectives into policy and providing longer-term, flexible support that enables locally led prevention efforts to adapt to changing contexts.



Poster designed by Resilience for Peace

Communities across West Africa are increasingly affected by the complex interactions between terrorism, crime and illicit economies. These dynamics often intersect with governance challenges, socio-economic vulnerabilities, informal livelihood systems and local conflict dynamics, creating challenging operating environments for civil society organizations (CSOs) engaged in prevention, peacebuilding and community resilience.

In many affected areas, illicit economies are embedded in local economic and social systems. They may provide livelihoods, services or forms of protection where legitimate alternatives and state presence are limited.

Through its research on the nexus between terrorism and criminal activities in Africa, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) has sought to strengthen understanding of how communities perceive insecurity, navigate livelihood pressures and respond to changing governance environments. As part of this effort, UNICRI convened a *Regional Workshop on Strengthening Community Resilience against the Nexus between Terrorism and Criminal Activities in West Africa*,¹ bringing together CSOs, researchers and practitioners from Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria to exchange experiences, identify good practices and discuss locally grounded approaches to prevention. The workshop was held from 30 June to 2 July 2026 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

Discussions explored how economic incentives, governance gaps, environmental pressures and insecurity interact. They also highlighted the importance of strengthening connections between research, policy and practice. Participants also emphasized the need for practical guidance that helps CSOs translate research findings into programmes that respond to the realities they face on the ground.

Building on these discussions, this guide serves as an operational companion to existing analytical work, including UNICRI's *Dangerous Liaisons: Assessing the Nexus between Terrorism and Criminal Activities in Africa*² and relevant publications of the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate.³ Rather than presenting new analysis, it translates existing evidence, research findings, field observations and practitioner experiences into practical guidance to support CSOs in designing, implementing and adapting community-based prevention and resilience initiatives.

WHY THIS GUIDE?

Over the past decade, research has significantly advanced understanding of the evolving relationships between terrorism, criminal activities and illicit economies across West Africa. However, translating these insights into practical programming

1 United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), *Turning Research into Action: UNICRI Convenes a Regional Workshop on the Nexus Between Terrorism and Criminal Activities in West Africa*, UNICRI, 2 July 2026.

2 UNICRI, *Dangerous Liaisons: Assessing the Nexus between Terrorism and Criminal Activities in Africa*, UNICRI, April 2026.

3 United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), *Civil Society Perspectives: Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in West Africa*, CTED, April 2026.

remains a challenge, especially when research is disseminated in technical language or through forums that are not readily accessible to CSOs. In addition, CSOs often operate in environments where illicit economies offer communities immediate economic opportunities, social connections, or services that legitimate alternatives struggle to match. Effective prevention therefore requires approaches that take into account not only vulnerabilities but also the incentives that sustain participation in illicit systems.

CSOs are uniquely positioned to respond to these dynamics. Their long-term presence within communities, established relationships with community members, local leaders and stakeholders, and understanding of local contexts mean they are often better placed to build trust, facilitate dialogue and identify emerging risks. At the same time, their engagement in these contexts can raise security concerns, requiring conflict-sensitive and risk-informed approaches.

This guide seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice by translating evidence into practical, context-sensitive guidance that CSOs can adapt to their own operational environments.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This guide is intended as a practical resource for CSOs, community-based organizations and practitioners working to strengthen community agency and support locally-led prevention approaches in contexts affected by the crime–terror nexus in West Africa. It may also serve as a reference for local authorities, development partners and organizations supporting community-based prevention and peacebuilding initiatives.

This guide is not a security doctrine or a counter-terrorism manual. Instead, it translates research findings, field observations and practitioner experiences into practical guidance to help CSOs analyze local contexts, engage communities, strengthen prevention initiatives and manage operational risks. The recommendations should be adapted to local contexts rather than applied as prescriptive models.

METHODOLOGY

This guide draws on multiple sources of evidence and practitioner knowledge, including:

- ▶ UNICRI research on the nexus between terrorism and criminal activities in Africa
- ▶ discussions, presentations, participatory exercises and operational experiences shared during the *Regional Workshop on Strengthening Community Resilience against the Nexus between Terrorism and Criminal Activities in West Africa*
- ▶ relevant literature and policy guidance on the crime–terror nexus, community resilience and prevention

Unless otherwise indicated, the lessons learned and examples presented in this guide are drawn from presentations and discussions held during the workshop mentioned above. Where a specific practice or example originates from a participating CSO, this is indicated in an accompanying footnote.⁴

⁴ Within the framework of the project *Assessing and Addressing the Nexus between Organized Crime and Terrorism in Africa*, UNICRI is partnering with the following nine organizations: Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria (CCFN); Center for Child Care and Human Development (C3HD); Climate and Sustainable Development Network (CSDDevNet); Dignité et Droits pour les Enfants en Côte d'Ivoire (DDE-CI); Jeunes Volontaires pour l'Environnement Côte d'Ivoire; ONG Busola; GBEWA "Enfin le bonheur"; Promotion Jeunesse Unie pour le Développement Benin (PJUD-BENIN ONG); and Society for the Rights of the Excluded and Disempowered, Nigeria.

This part provides the conceptual and contextual grounding for the guide. It examines how the relationship between terrorism, criminal activities and illicit economies manifests across West Africa, with particular attention to its implications for communities, livelihoods and prevention efforts. It also highlights key considerations for understanding local vulnerabilities, enabling factors and existing resilience capacities, as well as the diverse ways in which communities experience and respond to insecurity.

Understanding the Terrorism-Crime Nexus in West Africa

DEFINING THE NEXUS



Poster designed by Resilience for Peace

The relationship between terrorism and illicit, informal and illegal economies has become an increasingly important feature of insecurity across West Africa. Rather than existing as separate phenomena, terrorist groups, criminal networks and other armed groups often interact in ways that are fluid, context-specific and shaped by local political, economic and governance conditions. These relationships may take

different forms, including cooperation, competition, coexistence or convergence,⁵ and can evolve over time in response to changing opportunities and pressures.

Interactions between terrorist groups and criminal economies are often transactional and opportunistic. The nature of these relationships depends on the groups involved, the local political and economic environment, and the specific criminal markets in which they operate. At the community level, experiences of insecurity often do not fall into separate categories of terrorism and crime, but instead reflect interconnected challenges affecting livelihoods, safety, mobility, access to services and trust in institutions.

Across West Africa, communities may experience the effects of different illicit activities, including cattle theft, illegal mining, fuel and timber trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, smuggling and other forms of illicit trade. These activities do not all contribute to insecurity in the same way, nor do they necessarily involve violent extremist groups. Understanding which illicit economies operate locally, who is involved, how they function and how communities perceive them is essential for effective prevention programming.

In some contexts, illicit activities may directly generate resources for violent extremist groups, while in others they may create conditions that increase vulnerability to exploitation or recruitment without involving direct collaboration.⁶ Distinguishing between these different forms of interaction is critical for accurate context analysis.

Community knowledge can provide important insights into how insecurity, criminal activity and armed groups interact.⁷ At the same time, such information should be examined alongside other sources of evidence to distinguish between confirmed links, enabling environments and assumptions.

CONCEPTUAL GROUNDING

The idea that terrorism and organized crime interact along a continuum – rather than as fixed, separate categories – is well established in academic literature. In 1998, Williams⁸ first distinguished between convergence, cooperation and transformation as distinct modes of interaction between criminal and terrorist groups. Makarenko⁹ built on this with the crime–terror continuum, showing how groups can move dynamically between criminal and ideological behaviours depending on environmental pressures, including in weak-governance settings where hybrid organizations can consolidate power. Shelley and Picarelli¹⁰ further refined this into a terror–

5 UNICRI, *Dangerous Liaisons: Assessing the Nexus between Terrorism and Criminal Activities in Africa*, UNICRI, April 2026.

6 Résilience pour la Paix, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.

7 Promotion Jeunesse Unie pour le Développement (PJUD) reported that communities in the W–Arly–Pendjari (WAP) Complex – a transboundary protected area spanning Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger – had reported perceived connections between armed groups and elephant trafficking, including through shared smuggling networks, reduced surveillance and the exploitation of insecurity.

8 Phil Williams, 'Terrorism and Organized Crime: Convergence, Nexus or Transformation?', in *FOA Report on Terrorism*, ed. Jervas (Stockholm: Defence Research Establishment, 1998), pp. 69–92.

9 Tamara Makarenko, 'The Crime–Terror Continuum: Tracing the Interplay between Transnational Organised Crime and Terrorism', *Global Crime*, 6(1), 2004, pp.132–135.

10 Louise I. Shelley and John T. Picarelli, 'Methods and Motives: Exploring Links between Transnational Organized Crime & International Terrorism', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 9(2), Winter 2005.



crime interaction spectrum, emphasizing that movement between categories is non-linear and shaped by shifting incentives and constraints.

Some scholars challenge the idea of a systematic link. Paoli and Fijnaut,¹¹ for example, argue that connections are generally not inherent. Instead, they put forward a tripartite typology consisting of interaction, transformation or imitation, and similarities, while cautioning against the inflation of perceived threats. After 9/11, as attention shifted towards individual- and network-level dynamics, scholars¹² increasingly emphasized shared social milieux and criminal backgrounds among recruits, rather than formal organizational alliances.

More recent African-focused research¹³ finds that interactions on the continent are predominantly transactional and service-for-hire, with factors such as porous borders, weak institutions and corruption, serving as enabling conditions. Overall, the relationship between terrorism and organized crime is best understood as a context-dependent continuum – typically transactional, occasionally hybrid and only rarely transformative.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES AND PREVENTION

Vulnerability to illicit economies and violent extremist recruitment rarely results from a single factor. Economic insecurity, limited livelihood opportunities, weak services, social exclusion and governance challenges may interact in ways that increase exposure to exploitation or recruitment. Prevention approaches should therefore avoid reducing recruitment risks to poverty alone and instead examine the broader conditions shaping community resilience.¹⁴

Communities affected by the crime–terror nexus often experience forms of insecurity that extend beyond direct acts of violence. Criminal and armed groups may pursue primarily economic objectives while using violence, intimidation and coercion to control populations, access resources or regulate illicit markets.

Workshop discussions highlighted the importance of distinguishing between different forms of insecurity. For example, economically motivated banditry in north-west Nigeria may overlap with broader insecurity dynamics while remaining distinct from ideologically motivated violent extremist movements. Similarly, local communities may experience pressures linked to criminal economies, environmental degradation or weak governance without these dynamics necessarily involving terrorist groups.

11 Letizia Paoli and Cyrille Fijnaut (eds.), *The Nexus between Organized Crime and Terrorism*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022.

12 Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, 'Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime–Terror Nexus', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(6), 2016, pp. 25–40; Magnus Ranstorp, 'Microfinancing the Caliphate: How the Islamic State is Unlocking the Assets of European Recruits', *CTC Sentinel*, 9(5), 2016, pp. 11–15.

13 Anouar Boukhars and Catherine Lena Kelly, 'Comparative Perspectives on Linkages between Violent Extremism and Organized Crime in Africa', *African Security*, 15(1), 2022, pp. 26–50; James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, 'Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a "Banditization" of Jihad?', *CTC Sentinel*, 15(1), 2022; UNICRI, *Dangerous Liaisons: Assessing the Nexus between Terrorism and Criminal Activities in Africa*, Turin: UNICRI, 2026.

14 CSDDevNet, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.

Understanding these distinctions is important because different forms of insecurity require different responses. Treating all forms of violence, criminal activity or social grievances as part of the same phenomenon risks overlooking the specific drivers and dynamics shaping each context.

INFORMAL ECONOMIES AND LIVELIHOODS

Across many border regions of West Africa, informal economic activities constitute essential livelihood strategies rather than inherently criminal enterprises. Cross-border trade, livestock movements and informal markets often support household survival and community resilience. However, informal activities may become intertwined with illicit economies or exploited by criminal and violent extremist groups, especially where governance is limited and economic opportunities are constrained.

Understanding these distinctions is essential for designing prevention initiatives that strengthen livelihoods without criminalizing communities or undermining legitimate coping strategies. Analyzing local economic systems is therefore a critical step in identifying both vulnerabilities and sources of resilience.

Certain illicit activities may create environments that increase vulnerability to exploitation by violent extremist groups. For example, illegal gold mining may attract economically vulnerable populations, generate informal systems of governance and create opportunities for criminal and extremist groups to exploit existing grievances. Engagement in illicit activities is often shaped by a combination of factors, including limited livelihood opportunities, weak state presence, social marginalization, perceived injustice and the immediate availability of alternative economic opportunities.

Finally, illicit economies are frequently embedded within wider local economic ecosystems. Activities such as artisanal and informal gold mining may provide livelihoods not only for miners but also for wider networks of service providers, traders, transporters and households. Consequently, efforts to tackle illicit economies must consider their broader social and economic role within communities.

Disrupting illicit economies without considering the livelihoods they support may negatively affect communities and increase resistance to interventions. Effective prevention requires understanding the economic systems surrounding illicit activities, including who depends on them, who benefits from them and how these activities are perceived within communities.

COUNTRY SNAPSHOTS: HOW THE NEXUS MANIFESTS

While the crime–terror nexus shares common features across Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria, including porous borders, weak state presence and the exploitation of economic vulnerability, its manifestations vary considerably between countries. Workshop discussions with practitioners from the three countries identified the sectors most exploited by criminal and violent extremist groups, the local conditions that enable this exploitation, its consequences for communities, and the respective roles CSOs and the State currently play or could play in response. The table below summarizes these country-specific findings, as discussed during the workshop, illustrating how the same underlying dynamics produce different local realities.



Sectors or markets vulnerable to violent extremist groups



Wildlife trafficking; commodities; migrant smuggling; fuel; food products



Livestock; natural resources; gold mining; transport; cross-border trade and smuggling; fuel; food products



Livestock; commodities; illegal taxation; arms trafficking; human trafficking; fuel

Enabling factors



Border closures and porosity; regional security crisis and weak cooperation; lack of opportunities or employment; poverty; limited state presence; farmer–herder conflict; low education levels



Porous borders; poor governance crisis or lack of trust in government; regional instability and weak cooperation; corruption; poverty; lack of opportunities; marginalization; illiteracy



Porous borders; weak governance; religious extremism; access to illicit markets; intergenerational banditry as a livelihood strategy; high unemployment; climate change and environmental degradation; poverty

Consequences for communities



Displacement; social fragmentation; disappearance of entire villages; youth radicalization; declining attractiveness and biodiversity of protected areas; impoverishment



Reduced income and trade due to insecurity; fear; community fragmentation and youth's sense of abandonment; restricted mobility (also due to checkpoints and corruption); water contamination from mining; loss of agricultural land



School and market closures; displacement; loss of life and livelihoods; stigmatization; gender-based violence; psychological trauma; greater scope for violent extremism; and new opportunities and expanded roles for women in community resilience

Key takeaway: The same structural drivers – including porous borders, weak governance and limited economic opportunities – manifest differently across the three countries. Prevention strategies calibrated to one context (for example, Nigeria's emphasis on non-kinetic, cross-border approaches to religious extremism) may not transfer directly to another (for example, in Côte d'Ivoire, where the economic incentives of illicit and criminal markets appear to outweigh ideological drivers). This reinforces the case for context-specific rather than standardized programming.

Key Considerations for Prevention Design

The following factors inform dynamics at the local level and should be considered when designing inclusive and more context-sensitive prevention approaches:

STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITIES

Structural vulnerabilities, including limited access to education, public services and legitimate livelihood opportunities, can increase exposure to exploitation and harmful coping strategies.

While these conditions do not automatically lead individuals or communities towards criminal or extremist activity, they shape the broader environment in which people make decisions and develop strategies for survival.

In some contexts, climate-related pressures may intensify existing challenges by affecting livelihoods, access to natural resources and economic security. Environmental pressures interact with insecurity by increasing competition over resources, contributing to displacement or encouraging reliance on informal and sometimes illicit economic activities.¹⁵

DIVERSIFIED EXPERIENCE OF THE CRIME-TERROR NEXUS

Communities affected by criminal violence and terrorism experience insecurity in diverse ways. Age, gender, displacement status, occupation, livelihood strategies and social position all influence how individuals experience insecurity and the strategies they adopt to cope.

The impacts of insecurity are not felt uniformly. Women and girls may face specific challenges, including displacement, loss of livelihoods and exposure to gender-based violence, while other groups – including boys, men and pastoralist communities – may also experience distinct forms of vulnerability that are often overlooked.¹⁶

Community protection analysis should consider not only external armed groups but also internal power dynamics and risks within host communities, including, for example, exploitation or abuse within communities providing refuge to displaced populations.

¹⁵ CSDevNet, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.

¹⁶ Caritas, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.



GENDER AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

Beyond experiencing insecurity differently, women frequently play an under-recognized role in sustaining community resilience, including through informal support networks, mediation, humanitarian assistance and early warning mechanisms.

Yet they continue to face structural, cultural and practical barriers to meaningful participation in formal peacebuilding and security processes. These barriers may include restrictive social norms, safety concerns, lack of childcare, meeting schedules that conflict with domestic responsibilities and limited economic resources. Effective prevention programming should therefore recognize and strengthen women's existing leadership while reducing the barriers that limit their participation.¹⁷

Men and boys may also experience gender-specific impacts of insecurity, including pressure to assume protection or provider roles, exposure to violence, risks of recruitment, detention and psychological distress. In contexts where social expectations around masculinity discourage disclosure of vulnerability, male survivors of violence, including sexual violence, may face additional barriers to seeking support.¹⁸

RISKS OF STIGMATIZATION AND EXCLUSION

Communities affected by terrorism, criminal activities and illicit economies are frequently viewed primarily through a security lens. This creates risks of stigmatization, particularly for border communities, pastoralists, displaced populations and young people.

Participants emphasized the risks of collective attribution of criminality or extremism to specific communities. Such narratives can deepen exclusion, undermine trust in institutions and contribute to the vulnerabilities that prevention efforts seek to mitigate.¹⁹

Location, identity or livelihood should not be treated as indicators of criminality or support for violent extremist groups. Individuals and communities may occupy complex and changing positions as they navigate insecurity, economic pressures and relationships with different groups and institutions.

Because these dynamics evolve over time, context analysis should be treated as an ongoing process rather than a one-off assessment.

17 Caritas, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.

18 Ibidem.

19 Résilience pour la Paix, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.

AVOIDING COLLECTIVE ATTRIBUTION: THE CASE OF FULANI COMMUNITIES

Discussions during the workshop, including a documentary screening on Fulani communities,²⁰ highlighted the importance of avoiding broad generalizations when analyzing the drivers and impacts of the crime–terror nexus.

Fulani communities are large, transnational and internally diverse, spanning multiple countries, livelihoods and political contexts. In some countries, including Nigeria, Fulani individuals occupy prominent political, economic and social positions. At the same time, these communities are frequently associated with insecurity and criminality. These perceptions reflect a combination of documented incidents, local tensions and broader narratives, but can obscure the diversity of experiences within Fulani communities.

Participants noted that when individuals from Fulani communities become linked to illicit activities or local conflicts, such involvement is often shaped by specific contextual factors. These include competition over natural resources as climate pressures and land-use changes intensify, longstanding tensions between farmers and herders, limited access to effective dispute-resolution mechanisms and the exploitation of existing grievances by armed or extremist groups. Such dynamics reflect broader structural challenges that affect different populations across the region.

Treating an entire community as homogeneous undermines prevention efforts. It risks reinforcing exclusion and grievances, obscuring local realities, and overlooking the experiences of community members who are themselves affected by insecurity. Effective responses therefore require a nuanced understanding of local contexts and engagement strategies that recognize the diversity, agency and resilience within Fulani communities and other groups affected by the crime-terror nexus.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND LOCAL COPING MECHANISMS

Communities affected by insecurity are not merely vulnerable populations; they also possess knowledge, capacities and coping mechanisms that contribute to prevention efforts.

Across West Africa, communities have developed mechanisms to manage risks, support livelihoods and maintain social cohesion. These include women's associations, livestock associations, village savings groups, local information-sharing networks, community volunteers, and traditional and religious structures.

Mapping and strengthening existing mechanisms before creating new structures improves community ownership, trust and sustainability.

20 Documentary “Moi Peul, ton frère incompris”, directed by Francis Akindès, Résilience pour la Paix, 2025.



PRACTICE TIP: AVOID COMMON ANALYTICAL SHORTCUTS

When analyzing local dynamics, avoid assumptions that oversimplify complex realities.

Ask instead:

- Which economic activities, including informal or illicit activities, are operating in this community?
- How do local people describe the security situation and its main drivers?
- Are different forms of criminal activity linked to violent extremist groups in the same way?
- What evidence supports these conclusions, and what information may still be missing?
- Are the findings specific to this locality or being generalized from elsewhere?



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Communities experience the crime–terror nexus through everyday livelihood, governance and protection challenges – not only through violence.
- Vulnerability is shaped by local socio-economic conditions and differs across groups.
- Existing community resilience mechanisms should be identified before introducing new interventions.
- Prevention programmes should strengthen, rather than replace, local capacities.

This part translates the conceptual understanding of the crime–terror nexus into practical considerations for civil society organizations. It focuses on how CSOs can assess local contexts, build trusted relationships with communities, support inclusive participation and strengthen locally led approaches to prevention. It also highlights practical considerations for designing and implementing interventions that are context-sensitive, participatory and responsive to the needs, capacities and priorities identified by communities.

Analyzing Local Contexts through the Lens of the Crime–Terror Nexus

Effective prevention begins with a detailed understanding of local contexts. For CSOs, this means analyzing not only vulnerabilities and risks, but also existing capacities, resources and community-led solutions that contribute to resilience.

Assessment should not be seen as a preliminary activity that can be undertaken with minimal resources. Context analysis and community consultation require adequate time and resources, including dedicated budget allocations, to effectively inform programme design.

Combining household surveys, focus group discussions, interviews with key informants and community validation exercises provides a more comprehensive understanding of local dynamics than relying too heavily on secondary data. Such approaches enable CSOs to identify how communities experience insecurity, what factors shape vulnerability and which existing resources can support prevention efforts.

Participatory analysis should place community members at the centre of the process, enabling them to identify their own priorities, vulnerabilities and sources of resilience. Supporting communities to analyze local challenges themselves strengthens ownership of both the assessment process and resulting interventions.





SPOTLIGHT: FROM PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT TO PROGRAMMING – SÉGBANA, BENIN

A participatory assessment undertaken by civil society organization GBEWA (*Enfin le bonheur*) in Ségbana, northern Benin, demonstrated the importance of combining quantitative and qualitative methods to understand local dynamics.

Recognizing that insecurity is shaped by broader socio-economic conditions, the assessment examined livelihoods, education, governance, informal economies and existing community resources rather than focusing exclusively on security threats.

The assessment combined a review of existing data with household surveys, focus group discussions involving women, youth and older community members, and qualitative interviews with local stakeholders. This approach provided a more nuanced understanding of both factors contributing to vulnerability and existing community assets, including trusted local leaders, women's groups, youth associations, cultural ties and opportunities to strengthen local value chains.

Rather than beginning with predefined project activities, the findings informed interventions that responded to locally identified priorities, such as vocational training, agricultural livelihood support and renewable energy initiatives. The assessment also highlighted the importance of existing social networks, cross-border cultural ties and community organizations as entry points for prevention and resilience programming.

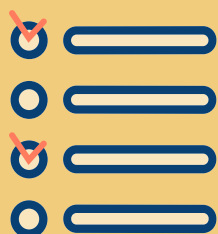
Key lesson: Community assessments should move beyond identifying vulnerabilities to also map existing capacities, local resources and community-led solutions. Understanding both challenges and strengths enables CSOs to design interventions that respond to locally identified priorities.

Analysis should combine different sources of information to distinguish between confirmed links, community perceptions and broader enabling conditions. Triangulating surveys, interviews, focus groups and other sources of knowledge helps identify patterns while ensuring that community perspectives are interpreted within their wider context.

Participatory analysis should also examine how insecurity changes the environment in which illicit activities occur. In some contexts, armed violence may create conditions that enable criminal markets to operate, even when armed groups do not directly control them. This may occur by weakening surveillance, limiting access by authorities and reducing community willingness to report suspicious activities.

Before establishing new initiatives, CSOs should identify existing structures, networks and community groups that already contribute to prevention and resilience. These include women's associations, savings groups, youth organizations, faith-based groups, transport unions, community volunteers, local vigilance structures, traditional authorities and informal information-sharing networks. Allocating time and resources to map these capacities during the assessment phase avoids duplication, identifies trusted entry points for engagement and ensures that interventions strengthen rather than replace locally developed responses.

Local governance structures, including traditional authorities, should be considered important stakeholders in prevention efforts. Their influence over land access, community norms and dispute resolution mechanisms makes their engagement particularly relevant. However, CSOs should assess how these authorities and other local leaders are perceived within the community before defining their role in programme implementation, as their legitimacy and influence may vary between localities.



WHAT CSOs CAN DO

- Engage a diverse range of community members, including women, men, youth and older persons.
- Combine household data with focus group discussions and key informant interviews.
- Map existing community capacities alongside vulnerabilities.
- Validate findings with the community before designing interventions.



PRACTICE TIP: QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

- Who do people trust during times of crisis?
- How is information shared within the community?
- Who supports vulnerable households?
- Which community groups already coordinate responses?
- What existing initiatives already contribute to resilience?



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Border communities possess important social, cultural and economic assets that can strengthen resilience.
- Do not only analyze risks – identify opportunities and existing community assets.
- Addressing economic vulnerabilities is an important component of insecurity prevention.



Effective community-based prevention depends on trusted relationships between CSOs and communities.

Community members are more likely to engage with organizations that demonstrate long-term presence, cultural understanding, transparency and respect for local leadership structures. In environments where fear, insecurity and mistrust may discourage engagement with external organizations, building trust requires sustained relationships rather than one-off interventions.

Women, youth leaders, religious leaders, traditional authorities and other community representatives play an important role in facilitating dialogue, information-sharing and community mobilization through their existing social networks. Working through these relationships strengthens programme legitimacy and improves access to local knowledge. CSOs should therefore identify and engage trusted local leaders, groups and organizations as partners rather than treating communities solely as beneficiaries.

Building trust also requires recognizing that the legitimacy and influence of local leaders and groups vary across communities. Traditional authorities or community defence groups may be trusted partners in one locality but be viewed with suspicion in another. CSOs should therefore avoid assuming that stakeholder roles or levels of trust are transferable across contexts. Instead, partnerships should be informed by participatory stakeholder mapping and community consultation.

Building trust is not a one-size-fits-all process. It requires an understanding of local conflict dynamics, social structures, livelihood systems and community perceptions of insecurity. Above all, it is an ongoing practice of listening, adapting and building inclusive, accountable and locally owned partnerships.



PRACTICE TIPS

- Invest time in relationship-building before implementing activities.
- Build trust through consistent engagement rather than short-term project cycles.
- Be transparent about programme objectives and limitations.
- Work with trusted local groups and organizations instead of creating parallel structures.
- Do not assume that local actors play the same role across different communities. Before engaging traditional authorities, community defence groups, religious leaders or other influential actors as programme partners, validate their legitimacy and community perceptions through participatory consultations.
- When engaging with traditional and community leadership structures, involve religious leaders, emirs, district heads and other influential leaders where they are trusted by communities, establish or draw on existing accountability mechanisms and promote inclusive participation.
- Strengthen trust by involving local authorities throughout the process rather than only seeking their endorsement once activities have been completed.

Working Inclusively with Communities

Effective community-based prevention depends on ensuring that different groups can participate safely and meaningfully. This section explores how CSOs can better understand differentiated experiences of insecurity, support women's participation, remove practical barriers to engagement and adopt trauma-informed approaches. It also highlights participatory methods that enable communities to shape priorities and develop locally owned responses.

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENTIATED EXPERIENCES OF INSECURITY

Experiences of insecurity vary within communities. The risks people face, the capacities they possess and the barriers they encounter are shaped by factors such as gender, age, livelihood, displacement status and social position.

CSOs should therefore move beyond broad categories such as women, youth or displaced persons and avoid assumptions about the needs, priorities or capacities of particular groups. Participatory analysis should examine not only who is affected by insecurity, but also how different groups perceive risks, the resources and coping strategies they rely on and the barriers that influence their ability to participate in prevention initiatives.

Ensuring that groups with different experiences of insecurity contribute to identifying challenges, defining priorities and shaping responses improves the relevance, legitimacy and sustainability of prevention interventions.

SUPPORTING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Research presented during the workshop highlighted the important roles women play in sustaining community resilience during periods of insecurity. These roles include organizing community support networks, facilitating informal information-sharing, participating in savings groups and supporting affected households. Experiences from north-western Nigeria show how these roles extend into direct mediation with armed groups, including negotiating the release of family members.²¹

Despite these contributions, women often remain excluded from peacebuilding and decision-making processes because of structural, cultural and practical barriers. In addition, women's agency rarely translates into recognized or supported positions. Women taking on mediation or resilience functions often do so informally, without safety planning, remuneration or institutional backing. In some contexts, visibility in these roles can itself carry security or social risks, including exposure to retaliation or community backlash. Programmes that nominally include women without mitigating these risks may inadvertently formalize informal risk-taking rather than reduce it.

CSOs can help remove some of these barriers by designing programmes that reflect women's realities and reduce the risks associated with their participation. This includes providing appropriate psychosocial support, removing practical barriers to participation and ensuring that women who

21 Caritas, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.



undertake mediation or resilience functions receive adequate protection, recognition and institutional support.²² Traditional and religious leaders play an important role in legitimizing women's participation, but CSOs should seek explicit commitments to women's inclusion rather than relying on informal support alone.²³



PRACTICE TIPS: DESIGN QUESTIONS FOR WOMEN'S INCLUSION

- Are existing women-led structures (savings groups, informal mediation networks) being reinforced, or are new parallel structures being created that duplicate or undercut them?
- What happens to a woman's safety and standing in the community after she is publicly identified as a programme participant or mediator?
- Is participation being adequately resourced (e.g. transport, stipends and childcare), or are women expected to bear the associated time and costs themselves?
- Who determines whether women's participation is considered legitimate and have the relevant individuals or groups been engaged or bypassed?

REMOVING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Practical barriers significantly limit participation, even where communities express a willingness to engage. They may include meeting schedules, childcare responsibilities, transport constraints and security concerns, all of which can prevent women and other community members from participating in consultations and community initiatives.

Addressing these practical obstacles is an important component of inclusive programming. Participation requires not only an invitation to engage, but also conditions that enable people to participate safely and meaningfully.



PRACTICE TIPS

- Schedule activities at times that are suitable for participants.
- Consider transport and security when selecting meeting locations.
- Provide childcare where appropriate.
- Ensure that different groups are able to participate safely and effectively.

²² Caritas, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.

²³ Ibidem.

ADDRESSING TRAUMA AS A PRECONDITION FOR PARTICIPATION

Communities affected by prolonged violence may require trauma-informed support before they are able to engage in peacebuilding or prevention initiatives. Trauma, stigma and social isolation can limit individuals' ability to engage in dialogue and collective action.

Caritas Nigeria's experience in north-west Nigeria demonstrated that psychosocial support and safe spaces help displaced women address trauma, shame, isolation and loss of identity, enabling them to re-engage as active members of their communities rather than only as victims of insecurity.



PRACTICE TIPS

- Avoid assuming that participation is possible without considering the impacts of trauma impacts.
- Integrate psychosocial support where communities have experienced prolonged violence or displacement.
- Ensure safe and confidential spaces for disclosure.

SPOTLIGHT: WOMEN'S COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN NORTH-WEST NIGERIA²⁴

Research conducted in Sokoto and Zamfara States found that women played a central role in supporting community resilience during periods of bandit violence. Their contributions included organizing village savings and loan associations to support households affected by kidnapping, facilitating informal early-warning networks, coordinating childcare for displaced families and negotiating the release of abducted relatives.

These findings illustrate how locally driven initiatives strengthen resilience even where formal security institutions have limited reach.

Key takeaway: CSOs should identify and strengthen existing community initiatives rather than replacing them with externally designed mechanisms.

²⁴ Caritas, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Identify relevant community and institutional stakeholders, including traditional and religious leaders, security actors and community representatives, and clarify their respective roles and responsibilities.
- Women's contributions to prevention and community resilience frequently remain informal and under-recognized.
- Recognize women as knowledge holders and agents of resilience, not only as affected segments of the population.
- Local coping mechanisms – including village savings and loan associations and informal information-sharing networks – provide valuable entry points for prevention programming.
- Removing practical barriers to participation (timing, childcare, transport and security) is often as important as promoting inclusion.
- Trauma-informed approaches (including psychosocial support) should be integrated where communities have experienced prolonged violence or displacement.
- Promote accountability and transparency.

SPOTLIGHT: FROM PARTICIPATORY ANALYSIS TO COMMUNITY ACTION – MATÉRI, BENIN

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) Busola applied a participatory methodology combining Social Analysis and Action and Clarification of Values and Transformation of Attitudes during a three-day workshop with young people in Matéri, northern Benin.

Rather than beginning with discussions on terrorism or violent extremism, participants were first invited to identify and analyze the broader challenges affecting their communities. Through facilitated discussions, they identified issues such as unemployment, limited economic opportunities and social vulnerability before collectively exploring how these conditions could increase exposure to illicit economies and exploitation by violent extremist groups.

Facilitators encouraged critical reflection rather than delivering predetermined messages, allowing participants to identify locally appropriate responses themselves. The process concluded with participants jointly developing practical solutions, drafting a community pact and establishing a volunteer network to support awareness-raising and follow-up activities within the community.

The experience demonstrated how participatory approaches move beyond awareness-raising by strengthening local ownership and enabling communities to translate analysis into collective action. By facilitating critical reflection rather than prescribing solutions, participants developed their own understanding of local challenges and identified practical responses suited to their context.

Key Practice Points

- Start with community priorities and everyday concerns before introducing discussions on terrorism or violent extremism.
- Use participatory dialogue to help communities analyze the links between local vulnerabilities, illicit economies and insecurity.
- Support communities in identifying their own solutions rather than promoting externally designed responses.
- Translate dialogue into concrete commitments through locally owned action plans, community agreements or volunteer networks.
- Engage local authorities and other stakeholders throughout the process to strengthen ownership and sustainability.



Part III translates the principles and lessons outlined in the preceding sections into practical tools and approaches that CSOs can use to design, implement and adapt prevention interventions. It brings together guidance on communication, advocacy and institutional engagement, with practical considerations for working with communities and other stakeholders in different contexts.

COMMUNICATION AND PREVENTION MESSAGING

Communication is integral to effective prevention programming. Messaging should be accurate, context-sensitive and designed to build trust. Poorly designed or inadequately informed communication inadvertently reinforces stereotypes, fuels fear or undermines relationships with communities.

Lack of a granular understanding of local socio-economic dynamics leads to messages that portray border communities, pastoralists or people engaged in informal economic activities as security threats. Instead, communications should recognize the complex interplay between insecurity and economic vulnerability and avoid reinforcing stigma or oversimplified narratives.

Beyond avoiding harmful narratives, effective communication should provide practical and relevant information that supports informed decision-making. Prevention efforts are more credible when communities have access to practical alternatives that support livelihoods, foster social cohesion and strengthen local resilience to exploitation by criminal and violent extremist groups. Where possible, communication should focus on the concrete impacts of insecurity and armed groups on people's daily lives rather than abstract discussions about peace or violent extremism. Messages that highlight consequences for livelihoods, family well-being, community security and future opportunities are often more meaningful and relevant than generic awareness campaigns.

Communication should also be delivered through trusted and locally appropriate channels. Local-language communication, including community radio where appropriate, extends outreach while reinforcing dialogue around locally relevant concerns.

SPOTLIGHT: LINKING PREVENTION MESSAGING TO COMMUNITY PRIORITIES - NORTH-EAST NIGERIA

The NGO Climate and Sustainable Development Network (CSDevNet) implemented a resilience-building project in north-east Nigeria that combined prevention messaging with climate-smart agriculture training, livelihood support and community resilience initiatives.

The project was informed by an inception workshop that brought together CSOs, traditional and religious leaders, women's groups, youth representatives, government agencies and security sector representatives to identify local priorities and help shape interventions.

Rather than treating communication as a stand-alone awareness activity, CSDevNet's prevention messaging was embedded within practical initiatives that responded to communities' immediate concerns. The project found that prevention messages were better received when they were linked to tangible opportunities such as skills development, livelihood support and economic empowerment.

Key Practice Points

- Engage communities in identifying priorities before designing communication activities.
- Link prevention messaging to practical opportunities that respond to community priorities.
- Integrate communication with livelihood, resilience and development initiatives rather than relying solely on awareness campaigns.

ADVOCACY AND INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Building sustainable community resilience to the nexus between terrorism and illicit, informal and illegal economies depends on a functioning partnership between CSOs, national institutions and the international community, with each playing distinct and complementary roles.

CSOs occupy a space that neither national institutions nor international organizations can easily replicate. Their comparative advantage rests on four interlinked features that any institutional support strategy should seek to preserve and reinforce, rather than dilute.

- ▶ Proximity and trust: through sustained engagement with local communities, CSOs can foster participatory relationships that position community members as co-producers of change rather than beneficiaries of interventions. This proximity, coupled with their perceived independence from political or institutional interests, often confers a level of trust and social legitimacy that formal institutions may struggle to attain.
- ▶ Contextual knowledge: their granular understanding of local realities allows them to design tailored, context-specific interventions rather than standardized responses.
- ▶ Access: CSOs often operate in areas that remain difficult for government institutions to reach, including conflict-affected communities and border areas.
- ▶ Bridging function: CSOs play an important bridging role between communities and decision-makers by translating community-level evidence into policy recommendations and helping communicate policies, programmes and opportunities back to communities.

The role of national and international institutions should therefore be to enable and protect this local ecosystem by strengthening the infrastructure, trust and resources that allow CSOs to carry out these functions effectively, rather than substituting for them.



STRENGTHENING NATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

National institutions play a critical role in creating an enabling environment for community resilience efforts. Their added value lies not in replacing civil society action, but in ensuring that local knowledge, community priorities and evidence generated by CSOs are translated into sustainable policies, programmes and institutional practices. Strengthened institutional engagement should focus on three mutually reinforcing dimensions.

1. Programme Design and Knowledge Management

Policy design and policy implementation often run on separate tracks. Community knowledge does not always inform the design of new policies, while lessons generated during implementation may not be captured, shared or translated into future policy and practice. National institutions can strengthen these links by integrating community-level evidence into policy and programme design and by establishing mechanisms to disseminate lessons learned across sectors. This would enable findings from community research to inform not only individual projects but also national security, governance and development planning. Strengthening these feedback loops, together with clearer accountability and transparency standards, would make interventions more context-responsive and self-correcting over time.

SPOTLIGHT: USING COMMUNITY RESEARCH TO INFORM POLICY

The Ivorian NGO Résilience pour la Paix presented examples of how research on illegal mining, cattle theft, illicit trafficking and border dynamics was shared with national institutions, including the Armed Forces of Côte d'Ivoire and the Parliamentary Defence and Security Commission. By translating field research into operational recommendations, Résilience pour la Paix sought to support evidence-based responses while maintaining strong links with affected communities.

Key lesson: Community-based research supports both programme design and policy dialogue.

2. Partnership and Multi-Stakeholder Engagement

Communities alone cannot effectively respond to the complex interactions between terrorism, crime and illicit economies. Effective prevention requires collaboration between civil society, local authorities, security services, traditional and religious leaders and other community representatives where appropriate and trusted by local populations. Good practices and promising examples of collaborative approaches include community policing initiatives, civil-military liaison mechanisms and local information-sharing structures involving community leaders. Such approaches can improve trust, strengthen early warning and facilitate coordinated responses while recognizing the complementary roles of different stakeholders.

Genuine partnership requires moving beyond ad hoc consultation towards sustained mechanisms for dialogue that allow CSOs and community representatives to contribute to policy development, implementation and review. Such mechanisms help ensure that responses are informed by local realities rather than designed solely through institutional perspectives. In addition, collaborative processes are more likely to generate local ownership when communities actively participate in developing and publicly endorsing agreed actions. Involving local authorities from the outset increases programme legitimacy, strengthen local ownership and facilitate implementation.

SPOTLIGHT: BUILDING COMMUNITY-SECURITY DIALOGUE – YOBE STATE, NIGERIA

As part of the Center for Child Care and Human Development's (C3HD) BRAVE Project in Yobe State, community dialogues brought together community and religious leaders, youth representatives, women's groups, transport unions, community vigilante groups and security agencies to identify local security challenges and discuss possible responses. According to C3HD, these dialogues helped build trust and understanding between communities and security actors while creating opportunities to jointly explore approaches to preventing and reporting illicit activities linked to terrorism.

Key lesson: Bringing communities and security actors together through structured dialogue can help strengthen trust, improve mutual understanding and support more coordinated local responses to insecurity.

The contribution of CSOs to community resilience against the crime–terror nexus should be recognized in both policy and practice, with their involvement spanning the development, implementation and review of relevant policies and action plans. Civil society and community perspectives should also be systematically integrated into early warning and prevention efforts. At the local level, practical trust-building can involve bringing authorities closer to communities, particularly in border areas; improving communication; and supporting the sustainability of initiatives launched by CSOs, including community-based early-warning systems.

Underpinning all of this is a broader structural agenda: strengthening the state–citizen contract, reforming the security sector, formalizing informal economies, and tackling the structural and economic drivers of the nexus.

3. Resourcing and Protecting Frontline CSO Staff

Commitment to financing and protection is key to allowing CSOs to be effective in their actions. CSO initiatives require stronger, more stable and predictable support, including dedicated budget lines for youth empowerment and vocational training for at-risk or vulnerable groups. Broader initiatives are also needed for youth financial inclusion in areas most affected by terrorism, with tailored livelihood support for specific groups such as pastoralist communities. Equally, staff operating in high-risk or border areas require reinforced security protection and regular, dedicated security advising.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

- Establish a permanent, institutionalized framework for dialogue and strategic consultation between the state and CSOs.
- Provide predictable, multi-year financing, including dedicated budget lines for youth livelihoods and vocational training.
- Recognize CSOs as partners and embed them in early-warning, prevention and counter-terrorism policy frameworks.
- Strengthen protection and security advising for CSO staff operating in high-risk areas.
- Ensure a genuine feedback loop between policy design and implementation, informed by CSO and community input.

MOBILIZING REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

The international community remains a major source of funding for CSOs and community-based prevention initiatives. Its contribution also extends beyond financial assistance. By mobilizing resources, strengthening capacities, facilitating cooperation and amplifying local voices, international organizations can create the conditions under which community-led initiatives thrive and inform broader policy responses.

1. Rethinking How Funding Reaches CSOs

The effectiveness of international funding depends not only on the level of investment, but also on how it reaches local CSOs. Funding is often channelled through international intermediaries or capital-based programmes, which offer due diligence, established reporting systems and a track record that reduces fiduciary and reputational risks. Yet these arrangements can mean that resources often fail to reach frontline CSOs working most closely with at-risk populations.

Rather than abandoning the safeguards that intermediated funding provides, funding approaches should be rebalanced by pairing due diligence with mechanisms (for example, direct funding windows for vetted local CSOs, simplified grant procedures or pooled funding arrangements) that enable a greater share of resources to flow directly to vetted local and grassroots organizations. Revising funding approaches also means prioritizing flexible, long-term financing over short project cycles and engaging more actively in joint funding schemes. It involves directing resources towards vulnerable areas, supporting locally led micro-projects with long-term impact and filling thematic gaps that national programming does not cover. It also requires promoting a more integrated approach to programming that responds to the underlying issues communities identify as priorities and, more broadly, increasing funding specifically for community-driven initiatives aimed at preventing violent extremism and countering radicalization and recruitment.

2. Technical and Institutional Support

Beyond funding, international and regional organizations provide valuable technical and institutional support. This includes mentoring, capacity building and technical expertise, provided both onsite

and online, particularly in areas such as advocacy, policy engagement, organizational development and programme management. Such support help ensure that CSOs are better equipped to engage with decision-makers and contribute to policy discussions. In addition, efforts should focus on strengthening the organizational resilience of CSOs, enabling them to continue supporting communities despite challenges such as funding volatility and budget cuts.

3. Enabling CSO–State Dialogue

International organizations play an important convening and facilitating role in strengthening relations between civil society and public institutions. This includes supporting the establishment of formal consultation and dialogue mechanisms between CSOs and state institutions, while also providing technical guidance to national institutions on the design and implementation of participatory policies and programmes.

4. Visibility, Dissemination and Cross-Country Learning

International and regional organizations are well placed to elevate the visibility of civil society initiatives and facilitate cross-country learning on effective prevention approaches. Actions in this regard include documenting and disseminating successful experiences, supporting networking opportunities and creating platforms for peer learning among practitioners from different countries.

The regional dimension is particularly important in West Africa, where porous borders are often exploited for the trafficking of licit and illicit goods and, despite the differences in national and local contexts, some recurrent patterns can be observed across countries. Strengthening regional exchanges of field experience, in alignment with existing regional policy frameworks, can help build on existing good practices and lessons learned. International organizations can facilitate cross-country learning while also fostering dialogue and cooperation among states, including through diplomatic engagement, mediation and peacebuilding initiatives.

In addition, creating opportunities for CSO representatives to participate in international conferences, policy dialogues and expert forums can further amplify community-level evidence, strengthen advocacy efforts and promote more grounded and effective policy responses.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

- Promote flexible, long-term funding for locally led initiatives.
- Invest in non-financial support (for example, mentoring, technical assistance and advocacy capacity building) alongside funding.
- Establish or reinforce a stable platform for regional dialogue and exchange, aligned with existing regional policy frameworks.
- Facilitate and support national CSO–State consultation mechanisms.
- Raise the visibility of CSO-led work, facilitate cross-country learning and networking and ensure that CSOs are represented in relevant national and international bodies and forums



FROM ASSESSMENT TO ACTION

The assessment process provides the foundation for translating community-identified needs, vulnerabilities and existing capacities into practical programming priorities. This section brings together tools and approaches to help CSOs move from gathering information to designing interventions that are locally relevant, participatory and responsive to the context. It also highlights considerations for ensuring that assessment findings inform programme design, while strengthening community ownership, sustainability and accountability throughout the process.

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

Assessments should inform programming by identifying both locally experienced vulnerabilities and existing community capacities. Rather than implementing predetermined activities, CSOs should design interventions that reflect the specific socio-economic, governance and resilience dynamics identified during the assessment process.

Effective prevention should strengthen livelihoods, reduce vulnerability and build on existing community capacities rather than approaching communities primarily through a security lens. CSOs should assess not only whether alternative livelihoods are available, but whether they are economically viable and attractive enough to compete with illicit markets. Programmes should consider the speed, accessibility and perceived social benefits that illicit economies may provide.

This section consolidates the practice tips and examples referenced throughout the guideline, providing a practical resource for the substantive mapping of community assets and vulnerabilities. The questions below are intended to guide semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participatory mapping exercises. Facilitators should adapt the language and sequencing to the local context and build trust before introducing more sensitive topics.

From the outset, CSOs should also consider how interventions will be sustained beyond the lifetime of the project. This includes strengthening local ownership, building institutional partnerships and supporting mechanisms that communities can maintain over time.

1. ECONOMIC ASPECTS AND LIVELIHOOD

The purpose of the following questions is to understand local livelihood opportunities, who has access to them and the extent to which illicit, informal or illegal economies contribute to meeting household needs:

- ▶ What are the primary licit livelihood activities in the community, and how seasonal or stable are they?
- ▶ Which livelihoods are informal, and which are illegal? What distinguishes the two in this context?

- ▶ Which groups have access to which livelihoods, and who is excluded? Who controls access to resources and opportunities?
- ▶ What role do illicit or informal economies currently play in household survival strategies? Who depends on them to meet basic needs, and who participates in them primarily because they are profitable?
- ▶ What formal and informal financial mechanisms exist (for example, savings groups, tontines,²⁵ microfinance, remittance channels)?
- ▶ What skills, trades or forms of expertise are present locally that could be leveraged rather than introduced from the outside?
- ▶ What existing cooperatives, producer associations, market linkages or local value chains could be strengthened?
- ▶ What existing or potential employment opportunities could realistically serve as alternatives to illicit economies?



PRACTICE TIPS: LIVELIHOOD MAPPING EXERCISE

- Rather than asking these questions in a formal interview, CSOs can use a simple seasonal mapping exercise to generate the same information collaboratively.
- Draw a 12-month calendar on the ground or on a large sheet of paper. In small, separate groups (for example, by gender or age, to allow for more open discussions), participants indicate on the calendar each livelihood activity they engage in or know of, showing when it takes place and for how long. Where sensitive or illicit activities are involved, facilitators should avoid requiring participants to identify them publicly. Instead, participants can indicate these anonymously (for example, by writing them on cards for the facilitator to place on the calendar) or these activities can be explored through follow-up interviews or smaller confidential discussions.
- Ask participants to identify who can access each livelihood activity (for example, using coloured thread to link each activity to the groups who typically practice it), making patterns of access and exclusion visible without singling out individuals.
- Close with a group discussion by asking which activities are most stable, which are the most important for survival and which are the most profitable, as well as the skills and existing associations (co-operatives, savings groups) that support these activities.

25 Tontines are informal rotating savings and credit associations widely used across West Africa, in which members make regular contributions to a common fund that is distributed among participants according to agreed rules.



2. HUMAN AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The purpose of this activity is to map local leadership structures, trust networks and community associations that programming can engage with or reinforce. The mapping can begin with a quick inventory, followed by guiding questions to explore relevant dynamics in greater depth.

Quick inventory: which of the following community structures, groups and leaders are present?

LEADERSHIP & LEGITIMACY



Religious leaders
Trusted mediators

ASSOCIATIONAL & ECONOMIC LIFE



Women's groups
Youth groups
Savings associations
Transport unions

INFORMATION & SUPPORT NETWORKS



Local information networks
Trusted mediators
Survivor support groups
Community volunteers

SAFETY & PROTECTION



Community safety committees
Local vigilance groups
Community policing initiatives

Guiding questions:

- ▶ Who are the recognized formal and informal leaders, and what legitimacy do they hold among different segments of the community?
- ▶ How active and trusted are the actors identified in the checklist above, and who participates in them?
- ▶ Are there individuals or groups already engaged in informal mediation, conflict resolution or protection functions?
- ▶ Who do community members currently turn to for information, advice or help in a crisis?

3. GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONS

The following questions assess the presence, legitimacy and interaction of formal and customary governance structures, including how information flows between communities and authorities, and whether community members feel safe sharing information.

- ▶ What state institutions are physically present and functioning (local administration, security forces, judicial institutions, health, education)?
- ▶ How legitimate are these institutions perceived to be by different members of the community, and where is distrust most pronounced?
- ▶ What customary or religious governance structures exist alongside formal ones, and how the two interact (competition, complementarity, overlap)?
- ▶ What existing accountability or grievance mechanisms do communities already use?
- ▶ What prior interventions (state, NGO, donor) have been implemented, and how have they affected community trust and levels of fatigue?



STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

Safe reporting mechanisms are essential for community-based prevention. Communities may possess important information about illicit activities or security risks but may avoid reporting due to fear of retaliation, mistrust or insecurity. Prevention approaches should therefore include confidential reporting channels, appropriate protection measures and trust-building mechanisms that enable community members to share information without increasing their exposure to harm.²⁶

Questions to consider:

- Are community members aware of how to report emerging security concerns?
- Which trusted actors already receive information?
- How do communities communicate with local authorities and security agencies?
- Are existing reporting mechanisms trusted and accessible?
- Are community members able to share information safely without increasing risks of retaliation or stigmatization?

26 Centre for Child Care and Human Development (C3HD) and Promotion Jeunesse Unie pour le Développement (PJUD), Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.



4. PHYSICAL, NATURAL AND CULTURAL ASSETS

The following questions build a better understanding of the infrastructure, resources and access constraints, alongside the narratives, values and communication channels relevant to the specific context:

What infrastructure exists (roads, markets, health facilities, schools, water supply points), and what is its condition and accessibility?

- ▶ What natural resources (land, water, grazing areas, forests) are available, and what tensions or cooperation exist around their use?
- ▶ How does physical access or isolation affect exposure to both state services and armed group influence?
- ▶ What local narratives, values or traditions already promote cohesion, mutual aid or non-violence that programming could reinforce rather than replace with externally introduced approaches?
- ▶ What communication channels are trusted and used locally (radio, town criers, religious sermons, youth networks)?



PRACTICE TIPS: BASE MAP AND CARD SORTING EXERCISE

Rather than asking these questions in a formal interview, CSOs can prepare a base map (using satellite imagery, administrative maps or a simple hand-drawn sketch validated beforehand with a few key informants) and use it to facilitate a participatory mapping exercise.

- Conduct the exercise in small, separate groups (by gender and age) to reduce social pressure to provide uniform or socially acceptable answers.
- Prepare a set of simple pictures or symbol cards in advance representing common categories: roads, markets, water points, schools, health posts, farmland, forests, meeting places, religious sites. Participants place the cards on the base map to indicate where these are located.
- For condition and accessibility, use colour-coded stickers on each card (for example, green, amber, red).
- Use a distinct symbol (for example, a leaf) for cultural or narrative significance, placed next to any location that carries meaning, such as a dispute-resolution site or a trusted gathering point.
- For more sensitive input, such as access constraints related to insecurity or informal early-warning practices, give participants an individual copy of the base map to mark sensitive locations privately. Completed individually and placed in a sealed envelope or box, the maps are analyzed later without attributing responses to individual participants.
- Bring the group back together only to discuss aggregated, non-sensitive patterns from the shared map; sensitive material remains confidential and is analyzed separately by the assessment team.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR A SAFE AND ACCOUNTABLE ASSESSMENT

Before organizing any community meeting, it is important to ensure participation is safe, accessible and genuinely inclusive. Below is a checklist for inclusive community consultations:

- ▶ Is the location safe and accessible?
- ▶ Have transport and security considerations been adequately assessed?
- ▶ Is the meeting scheduled at a time that does not conflict with livelihoods or household responsibilities?
- ▶ Are women, youth and other groups at risk of exclusion able to participate meaningfully?
- ▶ Is childcare available where appropriate?
- ▶ Have potential cultural or social barriers been considered?
- ▶ Are participants able to share concerns safely and confidentially?
- ▶ Are referral pathways available for protection concerns?

Could participation expose individuals to stigma or retaliation? To ensure that communities remain engaged beyond the assessment phase, it is important to show how their input shapes programming. This reinforces the trust and cooperation that sustained engagement depends on. The following questions can serve to frame a community feedback and accountability mechanism

- ▶ How will findings from consultations be shared back with communities?
- ▶ How can community members provide feedback or raise concerns? Are there confidential feedback channels, suggestion boxes or designated focal points?
- ▶ Are feedback mechanisms accessible to women, youth and marginalized groups?
- ▶ How will CSOs adapt programmes based on community input?

TRANSLATING COMMUNITY ASSESSMENTS INTO PROGRAMMING PRIORITIES

The matrix below is intended as a practical planning tool to support the transition from assessment to programme design. Following a participatory community assessment, CSOs should review the findings and may use the matrix to identify programming responses that respond to locally identified vulnerabilities while building on existing community capacities. The examples provided are illustrative rather than exhaustive and demonstrate how different types of assessment findings can be translated into context-appropriate interventions and expected prevention outcomes.

	ASSESSMENT FINDING	POTENTIAL PROGRAMMING RESPONSE	EXPECTED PREVENTION OUTCOME
 COMMUNITY ASSETS	Existing community mechanisms and informal networks already support resilience Strong women's associations or savings groups	Map, recognize and strengthen existing structures rather than creating parallel mechanisms Strengthen existing community organizations through training and small grants	Increased trust, sustainability and community ownership Enhanced community resilience and local ownership
 ECONOMIC LIVELIHOODS	High youth unemployment and limited livelihood opportunities Economic dependence can increase vulnerability	Provide vocational training, apprenticeships, support to local value chains Combine livelihood support with protection analysis and dialogue	Increased economic opportunities and reduced vulnerability to involvement in illicit economies Reduced exploitation risks and stronger resilience
 CAPACITY AND PREPAREDNESS	Weak access to education and skills development Weak communication and early warning mechanisms	Invest in literacy programmes, accelerated learning, vocational education Strengthen community information-sharing networks and locally appropriate communication channels	Improved long-term resilience and opportunities for young people Improved community preparedness and trust
 VOICE AND AGENCY	Limited engagement between communities and local authorities Women affected by conflict are often viewed only as vulnerable groups Trauma prevents affected populations from participating meaningfully Protection frameworks may overlook exploitation within host communities	Facilitate dialogue platforms and multi-stakeholder coordination Support women's recovery, leadership and participation in community mechanisms Integrate psychosocial support, safe spaces and confidential discussion mechanisms into programme design Analyze local power dynamics, dependency relationships and accountability mechanisms	Improved trust, accountability and collaborative problem-solving Women become recognized as peacebuilders, mediators and community monitors Communities regain agency and participate in prevention efforts Reduced risks of secondary victimization

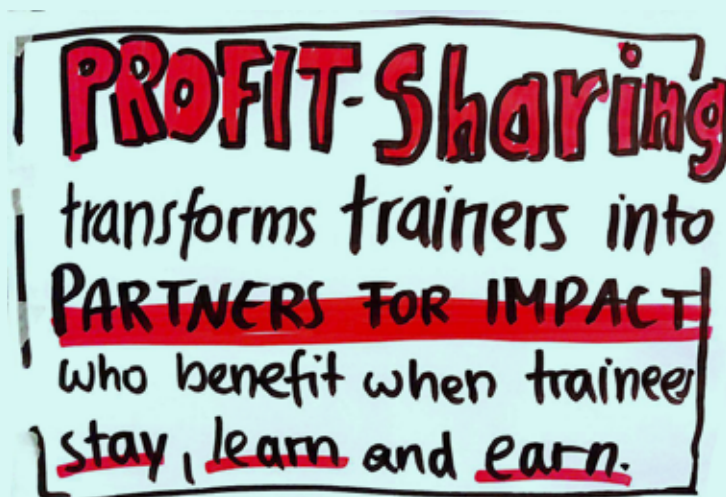


SPOTLIGHT: DESIGNING LIVELIHOOD INTERVENTIONS THAT COMPETE WITH ILLICIT ECONOMIES

Vocational training alone may not be sufficient to reduce vulnerability to illicit economies in contexts where participants face urgent economic pressures. Workshop discussions highlighted that young people may leave training programmes when legitimate income opportunities appear less immediate than the returns offered by illicit activities.

The experience of the Society for the Rights of the Excluded and Disempowered (Sorex Nigeria) illustrates the importance of designing livelihood interventions that combine skills development with early income generation. Rather than focusing exclusively on future employability, the programme introduced a profit-sharing model in which trainers' incentives were linked to trainees' economic progress. Trainers received a defined share of income generated through trainees' early production activities, creating a shared interest in both the quality of training and trainees' rapid economic progress.

This approach transformed trainers from service providers into partners in sustaining youth engagement. By ensuring that participants could generate legitimate income while still learning, the programme reduced dropout risks and strengthened the attractiveness of legal livelihood pathways.



KEY PRACTICE POINTS

- Combine vocational training with realistic pathways for early income generation.
- Recognize that at-risk youth may prioritize immediate economic gains over long-term benefits.
- Design incentives that align trainers' interests with participant retention and income generation.
- Consider models where local trainers share responsibility for, and benefits from, successful livelihood transitions.
- Move beyond training delivery towards market-linked livelihood support.

SUSTAINING COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP THROUGH LOCAL CAPACITY AND FINANCING

Community ownership is strengthened when local community members and groups are recognized not only as participants in prevention activities but also as partners in designing, implementing and sustaining them. Supporting community facilitators through training, mentoring and appropriate financial recognition enhances motivation and accountability, and contributes to the sustainability of prevention efforts beyond project cycles.²⁷

This approach shifts the role of communities from that of beneficiaries of prevention programmes to that of partners in sustaining locally led solutions. CSOs should therefore combine capacity building with practical support mechanisms that enable community facilitators and groups to maintain their role over time.



PRACTICE TIPS

- Identify and train local facilitators who can sustain prevention activities within their communities.
- Recognize community trainers as implementation partners, not only as volunteers or participants.
- Establish transparent mechanisms to support and resource local actors delivering prevention activities.
- Link training, mentoring and financial support to longer-term sustainability plans.

CONFLICT-SENSITIVE ENGAGEMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Workshop discussions highlighted the importance of introducing sensitive security issues gradually. Framing discussions around locally identified priorities – such as livelihoods, youth unemployment or access to services – helps create a constructive environment for dialogue before addressing topics related to violent extremism or criminal activities. This approach reduces defensiveness, encourages participation and grounds discussions in community realities.

Facilitating reflection before presenting solutions strengthens community ownership. Rather than leading with awareness-raising messages, facilitators encourage participants to analyze their own experiences, identify local priorities and reflect on the factors contributing to insecurity. This guided dialogue helps communities develop locally appropriate responses and is often more effective than one-way information campaigns.

27 Promotion Jeunesse Unie pour le Développement (PJUD), Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.



Engagement on sensitive issues also requires safeguards to prevent further harm, particularly when discussing sexual violence, exploitation or other forms of abuse.²⁸

Prevention approaches should avoid securitizing communities affected by illicit economies. Communities living near borders, protected areas or informal trade routes may experience insecurity without being complicit in criminal activity. Prevention efforts should distinguish between communities' exposure to illicit networks and their participation in them, recognizing that many residents are themselves affected by insecurity, economic vulnerability and limited state presence.

Community-based early warning mechanisms should incorporate robust risk assessment and protection measures. Communities may possess important information about illicit activities or emerging security risks but may avoid sharing it due to fear of retaliation, lack of trust or broader security concerns. Safe reporting mechanisms – including confidential reporting channels, appropriate protection measures and trust-building processes – are therefore essential to enable information-sharing without increasing communities' exposure to harm.

Community willingness to cooperate with authorities depends on trust, perceptions of protection and visible follow-through. Where communities share information but see no discernible action in response, cooperation is unlikely to continue. Establishing a feedback loop – even a simple one that informs community members about what was done in response to the information they shared – helps sustain trust and continued engagement over time.



PRACTICE TIP: FACILITATE REFLECTION BEFORE PROVIDING SOLUTIONS

- Rather than beginning community engagement with awareness-raising messages, facilitators can encourage participants to analyze their own experiences, identify local priorities and reflect on the factors contributing to insecurity.
- Instead of talking immediately about violent extremism or criminal activities, begin with livelihoods, youth unemployment or other community priorities to reduce defensiveness.²⁹
- Guided reflection and dialogue foster stronger ownership than one-way information campaigns and help communities develop locally appropriate responses.³⁰
- Prevention communication is more effective when linked to community priorities and practical alternatives rather than delivered as standalone awareness messaging.³¹

28 Caritas, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.

29 Busola, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.

30 Busola, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.

31 CSDevnet and Busola, Regional Workshop on the Crime–Terror Nexus, Abidjan, June–July 2026.

CONCLUSION

This guide has sought to support CSOs translating research on the nexus between terrorism and criminal economies in West Africa into actionable approaches that can be adapted to their own operational realities. It does not offer a fixed methodology or a checklist to be applied uniformly. Rather, it consolidates evidence, field experience and practitioner insight into tools that civil society actors can shape around the specific dynamics of the communities they work with.

Several cross-cutting principles underpin the guidance presented throughout this document. Effective prevention depends on understanding communities not only in terms of their vulnerabilities but also in terms of the assets, relationships and coping strategies they already possess. Programming that builds on these assets, rather than approaching communities solely through a security lens, is more likely to earn trust and to be sustained once external support ends. Communication and engagement work best when they proceed gradually: starting from locally identified priorities such as livelihoods or access to services and introducing more sensitive topics only once a foundation of trust has been established. Throughout, cooperation between communities and authorities remains fragile without visible follow-through on commitments, highlighting the importance of feedback loops and accountability mechanisms at every stage of engagement.

None of this is straightforward in practice. CSOs operate under real constraints – of funding, time, access and, at times, insecurity – and the trade-offs discussed throughout this guide will need to be navigated differently depending on the context. The tools presented here are intended to support informed judgment and strengthen the design of resilient, context-sensitive and impactful interventions.





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