Background/Context:

According to a 2013 report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), while the use of traditional drugs, such as heroin and cocaine, seems to be declining in some parts of the world, the abuse of prescription drug and new psychoactive substance is growing. Africa is emerging as a target for the production and trafficking of illicit substances, making the continent more vulnerable to drugs, crime, as well as health and development related challenges. Cannabis remains the most widely used illicit substance in the continent. While its use has clearly declined among young people in Europe over the past decade, there has been a minor increase in the prevalence of cannabis users in Africa (180 million or 3.9 percent of the population age 15-64) as compared with previous estimates in 2009 (UNODC, 2013). A recent report of the UNODC revealed that little change has been seen with regard to the overall global situation in the production, use, and health consequences of illicit drugs (UNODC, 2015).

In West Africa, the high level of violent crimes is a potential for escalation in violence as a result of drug abused in this sub-region. Violence as a result of drug abuse, together with other violent crimes, can be detrimental to the overall well-being of society, as it undermines the basic tenets of citizens’ expectations as regards their safety and security of life. The link between alcohol/drugs and violent criminal behaviour is well documented, with alcohol/drug abusing behaviours connecting to crime in many ways. Crime is not only related to the possession or sale of illegal drugs, but also to drug related behavioural effects such as violence (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2014). Alcohol/drug abuse has been implicated in offences directly related to drug abuse (Baillargeon, Giordano, Rich, Wu et al, 2009), or to lifestyles that predispose the drug abuser to engage in illegal activities (Binswanger, Stem, Deyo & Heagerty, 2007).
Drug and alcohol abuse is a global health and social problem with conditions and problems that vary locally (WHO, 1987). The use of psychoactive substances among adolescents and young adults has become a subject of public concern worldwide, partly because of its potential to contribute to unintentional and intentional injuries (Whichstrom & Hegna (2003); Daane (2003). The use of drugs and alcohol has impacts that extend across socioeconomic, cultural, religious and ethnic boundaries; and despite the efforts of the various Nigerian tiers of Government and the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) to stem its tide in Nigeria, there has been a consistent rapid rise in the number of cases recorded in the country, especially among young adolescents (10 – 24 years) (Oyakhilome, 1990; NDLEA, 1992/93).

Nigeria was highlighted in 2009 by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) as a high risk country among seven of the eight West African countries assessed as major crime areas. The risks identified range from drug control issues, where Nigeria serves as transit point for cocaine from Latin America, heroin from Asia and a major provider of cannabis which is locally cultivated to small arms, human trafficking, to ammunition and illicit goods such as counterfeit medication. To mitigate these risks, UNODC is implementing a large scale project funded by the European Union, entitled NGAV 16 “response to drugs and related organized crime in Nigeria”. The project is aimed at supporting the effort of Nigeria to combat the illicit production of drugs, trafficking and use— including psychotropic substances and counterfeit narcotics—, and also to curb related organized crime.

Substance use, abuse and dependence are more common in the criminal justice population than the general population. A study conducted at a maximum security prison in North Central Nigeria among inmates already convicted or awaiting trial, reported that 60% of the inmates had used alcohol and illegal drugs before their current offense; 37.3% of them were charged with armed robbery; while 28% were diagnosed with substance use disorder (Armiya’u, Obembe, Audu, & Afolaranmi, 2013). Similarly, a study of jail detainees demonstrated that two thirds of the population had been abusing drugs or were dependent on drugs before they are being detained. These findings are a major cause for concern as the issue is escalating rather than reducing, and might have negative consequences on the future of West Africa in general.

Investigations conducted in Ghana revealed the number of 50,000 drug abusers (Peacefmonline, 2014). It also showed that drug users existed in 275 administrative districts of the 10 regions in
Ghana. Out of the 50,000 people drug users in the country, 35,000 were students from junior/senior high schools and tertiary institutions, aged between 12 to 35 years. It was also pointed out that 70% of patients in psychiatric hospitals in Ghana were youths who abuse drugs (aged between 18 to 35 years). Similarly, in Liberia, the Liberia’s Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) reported that following the fallout from the civil war, the widespread use, production and trafficking of illicit drugs has deeply affected the population and prevents post-war recovery efforts as well (IRIN, 2008). Taye of IRIN reported that “the bulk of people we arrest for drug abuse are ex-combatants […], when these guys take drugs, many of them also get involved in criminal activities. It is a huge challenge for us” (IRIN, 2008). The sole resident psychiatrist in Liberia opined that “the biggest community-based problem is substance abuse, which has permeated the country” (Cheng, 2009). Another study in Liberia among 800 students of secondary school found 51% of their sample population to be abusing drugs and alcohol (Harris, Levey, Borba, Gray, et al, 2012).

In neighboring Sierra Leone, drug abuse is prevalent in among youths, which is fuelled by the high rates of unemployment (all Africa, 2015). The high prevalence of violent crimes, including armed robbery, was attributed to misuse of drugs by the country’s youths according to Ismaila Samura during the launching of Development and Drug Policy Network in Sierra Leone (all Africa, 2015). Medical practitioners are concerned about the health consequences in the long term, which the country is poorly equipped to address. A mental health specialist in Sierra Leone reported that 80% of his patients, aged 10 to 35 years, are suffering from drug-induced psychotic disorders (Inter Press Service, 2016).

The problem is not unique to Sierra Leone as reported by Samura. It concerns the entire West African region, which is used as a transit point for drugs from Latin America to Western Europe. He further stated that cannabis sativa is cultivated in four regions of Sierra Leone (all Africa, 2015). In Senegal, like in other parts of West Africa and the world, cannabis is the commonest drug of abuse, due to its availability. A sharp raise has been reported in cannabis abuse, which is attributed to the availability of the drug, recreational use and unemployment among youths (Diarisso, & Goredema, 2014). However, cocaine and heroin that were previously considered the privilege of the rich are now used by young drug abusers and/or addicts in Dakar, mainly aged 12 to 29 years.
The study also revealed that crime in Dakar is strongly related to drug abuse. The data provided by the Senegalese penal correction services showed that drug related crime has reached an alarming level. In fact, most of the crimes recorded are either from drug abuse or trafficking offences, and include murder, assault, rape, verbal violence and disturbance of peace (Diarisso, & Goredema, 2014).

Drug and alcohol problems are chronic relapsing disorders that have many harmful and disabling effects, not only on the users, but also on their families and on society in general. For some patients, entry into treatment occurs at a time of withdrawal from drugs following the development of dependence. Individuals admitted to a rehabilitation service have often been using drugs and alcohol for many years and are frequently ill (UNODC, 2013). There is no universal agreement on the definition of “drug abuse”. For example, Edwards and Arif (1980) defined the concept as “the use of a drug which is viewed as posing a problem by the society concerned”.

Most societies do not usually disapprove of the abuse of drugs, which do not produce overt behavioural changes. The World Health Organization (2011) defined “substance abuse as the harmful and hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs”. Psychoactive substance use can lead to dependence syndrome:

a cluster of behavioral, cognitive, and physiological phenomena that develop after repeated substance use and that typically include a strong desire to take the drug, difficulties in controlling its use, persisting in its use despite harmful consequences, a higher priority given to drug use than other activities and obligation/increased tolerance, and sometimes a physical withdrawal state (WHO, 2011).

The World Health Organization defined violence as “the intentional or purposeful use of power or physical force against self, others or against community or group in an actual or threatened manner which could eventually result to psychological harm, injury, deprivation, death or maldevelopment…” (WHO 2002). Over 1.3 million people globally die each year as a result of violence in all its forms, accounting for 2.5% of global mortality (WHO, 2014). Violence is the fourth leading cause of death worldwide for people aged 15 to 44 years (WHO, 2014). Drug abuse is one of the principal causes of violence, especially when abusers are intoxicated or withdrawing from drugs. The presence of drug abuse in the West African region and the violence associated with the issue is a cause for concern. Drug related violence have consequences
ranging from fighting between rival drug dealing gangs to drug traffickers to the pharmacological effects of such drugs. This situation intimidates the highest levels of national government in countries involved (ECOWAS).

**Drugs, Crime and Violence:**

The relationship between drug use and crime is complex. Most crimes result from a variety of factors (personal, situational, cultural, and economic); hence when drug is a cause, it is more likely to be only one factor among many. In short, no evidence suggests that drug use alone inexorably leads to criminal activity. However, at most intense levels of drug use, drugs and crime are directly and highly correlated. Among crime-prone individuals, illegal drug use intensifies criminal activity. As illegal drug use increases in frequency and amount, so does criminal behaviour.

Persons who are criminally inclined tend to commit both a greater number and more serious crimes after they become dependent on drugs. As their drug use decreases, so does the number of crimes they commit. In addition, illicit drug use and criminal activity often occur simultaneously and are mutually reinforcing aspects of a deviant behaviour. The propensity for crime-prone, drug using persons to commit violent crimes might be expressed only after they cross the threshold from use to abuse or dependence. Hence the high number of armed robbery suspects (violent offenders) in a maximum security prison in north central Nigeria with alcohol/drug dependence and intoxicated at the time of their offense (Armiya'u, & Adole, 2015).

The manufacturing, distribution and possession of drugs such as marijuana, heroin and methamphetamine, or the misuse of prescription drugs are illegal and have the potential for abuse. Driving under the influence of alcohol and or drugs is also illegal. However, as mentioned earlier, the relationship between drug use and crime is much more complicated. Crime and drug use both usually involve individuals with low self-control. Those willing to try drug are more impulsive and may turn to street crime because of addiction (Idaho State Police, 2010). Drug use does not create a criminal offender; however, it may intensify such actions. In addition, individuals who use drugs are less likely to have a legitimate occupation or the education necessary to find a good job (BRFSS, 2009 cited in Idaho State Police). Life style choices,
environmental factors as well as genetics are determinant factors for those who will abuse drugs as well as those who will commit crime (Idaho State Police, 2010).

**Link between substance misuse and violent behaviour**

The pharmacological properties of a drug can be of effect on an individual, particularly when taken at a high dose. It might inhibit and lead to impulsivity, aggression, abusiveness, argumentativeness, agitation and grandiosity in the abuser, which ultimately results in violent crimes. The link between illegal drugs and offending can also be explored further by focusing on criminal career (Makkai & Payne, 2003). Such a focus provides mechanism for organizing and structuring information, which describes patterns of offending over the life course of the offender (ibid.). In the United States, an analysis of criminal career found significant variation in criminal offending. Though, several researches in criminology have consistently showed that offenders tend to ‘mature out’ of crime. Similar effects were also noticed in drug use literature (Ibid.). There are obvious consequences for interventions that fail to take diversity into account. According to Chaiken and Chaiken (1984):

Faced with high crime rates, fiscal limitations, and a conservative political moment, public officials increasingly long for simple, encompassing policy that would permit them to deal quickly and effectively with criminals. Unfortunately, an important truth has almost disappeared during these developments: There are many kinds of criminals, and to fix on any single punitive solution to the problem of crime is simplistic, unjust and inefficient (p. 195).

Goldstein (1980) undertook a major work in theoretical model of drug and crime. He proposed three models linking drug use with violence. These include:

- The economically compulsive model where an individual commits the crime to fund an expensive drug habit: as reported by Goldstein (1985) “Violence generally results from some other factor in the social context in which the economic crime is perpetrated. Such factors include the perpetrator’s own nervousness, the victim’s reaction, weaponry (or lack of it) carried by either offender or victim, the intercession of bystander, and so on” (p. 257).

- The systemic model argues that the drug distribution system results in violence: drug distribution systems involve large sums of money. Distributors will have to provide their
own protection; due to the illegal nature of the market for obvious reasons, they cannot rely on the formal arms of the criminal justice system. In regulating the drug market, violence could occur. In the late 1980s, the crack cocaine market in the U.S. was surrounded by high levels of violence, which is a clear example of such an association between drug markets and violence.

- The psychopharmacological model which implies that individuals commit crimes due to short and long-term effects of the drugs themselves: several researchers have found high correlation between illegal drugs and violent crime: “research on the nexus of aggression and substance use has consistently found a complex relationship, mediated by personality and expectancy factors, situational factors and sociocultural factors that channel the arousal effects of substances into behaviour types which may or may not involve interpersonal aggression” (Fagan, 1990 p. 243). An extensive review of the literature, as reported by Fagan (1990), found “limited evidence that ingestion of substances is a direct, pharmacological cause of aggression” (p. 214).

What prospects for West Africa?

Africa is becoming more crowded; the continent's population density is projected to almost quadruple by 2100 (UNICEF, 2014). By 2050, there will be 80 persons per square kilometre, which is an increase from 39 per square kilometre in 2015. Out of the 10 most densely populated African countries that are mainly low-income countries, Nigeria, the Gambia and Togo were listed as 5th, 6th, and 9th respectively (UNICEF, 2014). West Africa accounts for 45% of Africa’s huge urbanisation—more Africans live in cities and towns than in rural areas. The urbanisation rate in even worrying some countries such as Gabon ( in 2015, 87% of the country’s population lived in cities and towns). In West Africa, 53% of the population live below 1.25 USD per day; and 74% below 2USD per day. With population explosion and high fertility rate in West Africa, necessary measures need to be taken with regard to the increasing severity of the drug abuse problem, which is likely to increase crime, particularly violent crimes, due to the various negative effects of drugs on individuals.

West Africa is currently a transit area used by drug traffickers to smuggle large quantities of cocaine, heroin and other illicit drugs from South America and Europe, which has been attributed to political instability in the sub-region (UNODC, 2015). According to Aning and
Pokoo (2014), the West African sub-region is also a final destination of hard drugs not just a transit route. The authors also reported that drugs are trafficked into West Africa as a result of poverty, corruption, and porous borders, ethnic or informal networks. The association of drug users with behavioural challenges, including violence and aggression was highlighted in the 2012 World Drug Report. The rising levels of drug consumption in the West Africa poses a great threat as drugs might weaken human security in the sub-region (Wabala, 2013). In 2012, the Executive Director of the UNODC, Mr. Fedetov, expressed concern about rising drug and crime rates in West Africa. He, in fact, reported that 400kg of heroin and 30 tons of cocaine were trafficked through West Africa in 2011. Moreover, according to Skelton (2013), Methamphetamine laboratories were discovered in West Africa which has become an established source of the methamphetamine smuggled into East and South-East Asia via Southern Africa and Europe (UNODC, 2015). The Economic Community of West African countries (ECOWAS) acknowledged that drug trafficking is an enemy of the state and the rule of law and exists as a parallel power to the legal system, and that the Community is compelled to fight such a situation (ECOWAS 2009; UNSC, 2009; UNSC, 2012).

The West African region is facing an increase in drug abuse and lacks reliable epidemiological data and effective prevention and treatment programmes. For this reason, UNODC is working closely with ECOWAS in planning activities in the areas of drug abuse prevention, treatment of drug dependence, legislative development, forensics, and drug law enforcement in some ECOWAS member states (UNOD, 2016). The growing problem of drug abuse and violent crimes in West Africa needs to be addressed urgently. The issue will not go away on its own, and if left unattended, it will intensify and negatively impact the entire region. Moreover, drug abuse in the region is likely to increase, as drug supply and demand is well developed, and that social and class factors are gradually less relevant with respect to drug abuse, which will ultimately affect all spheres of society. Hence, the difficulty in identifying any specific subgroup as drug users. So far, the response of the various governments to drug problem has been fragmented and poorly funded, without coordination between proactive and reactive programmes.

As several studies have revealed that youths are the largest population abusing drugs, especially in the prison environment, urgent action needs to be taken. The abuse of drugs has
far-reaching effects in the progression and aspirations of youths, which determine how the individual can benefit from the available opportunities provided by the home, community and government. There is need for constructive activities and mentoring programs to provide a strong environment for youths and young adults to reject any form of drug abuse and provide benefits across a wide array of indicators, such as school performance and self esteem. These strategies should be central to efforts designed to reducing youths and young adults’ drug use because as they have proved effective in the past (Tierney, Jean, & Nancy, 1995). Researchers have noted that adolescence is a period when youths reject conventional and traditional authority figures in an effort to establish their own independence. During this period drug use may be a "default activity", especially when youths have few or no opportunities to assert their independence in a constructive manner (Tierney, Jean, & Nancy, 1995). There should be educational campaigns based on scientifically accurate information, thereby achieving educational goals and becoming more a credible force with the younger generation. Special financing should be provided by ECOWAS member states for reducing youths and young adults’ drug abuse, as the current war on drugs to save future generations from being hooked on drugs is tragically insufficient (McCaffery, 1998).

In addressing drug problems and violence, the main goal of any strategy is to reduce supply so as to diminish the demand of drugs. Therefore, to combat drug-related crime effectively, a multidimensional approach, requiring multi-professional assistance, should be the way forward. It is however worth mentioning that the use of law enforcement agents in reducing drug production and distribution has neither stopped nor slowed down the abuse of drugs. As such, a more robust approach should be employed, in which a close relationship is built among all parties involved in the control of drug trafficking, treatment of drug abusers, including law enforcement agents and researchers in the field. Each party or actor involved in the prevention of drug abuse, the focus should engage in collaboration based on individual and collective responsibilities, directly or indirectly

ECOWAS must give priority to illicit drugs and should have a master plan that will enable member states to summarize their national policies, define priorities and assign responsibilities, including drug abuse control measures as part of each member state’s social and economic development programme. There also is need for a coordinated approach
through community involvement in the formulation of drug control policy, as most of the people involved in the abuse of drugs live within communities. They should be involved in the design and implementation of culturally acceptable and relevant community based prevention and education programmes. Community based organizations (CBO) need to be provided with human, financial, and technical resources in order to actualize this goal.

REFERENCES:


Inter Press Service. (2016). Unemployed youth turn to drugs. Available at: www.ipsnews.net/2013/01/unemployed_youth_turn_to_drugs/


Peacefmonline. (2014). 50,000 people abuse drugs in Ghana. Resulting in 70% mad cases. Available online at news.peacefmonline.com/pages/social/201411/221894.Php


Skelton, R. (2013). Methamphetamine laboratories found in West Africa as transit hub turns to producing. Available at:


UNODC. (2013). World Drug Report 2013. Available online at:


