



NIGERIA

Annual report 2025-2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Freedom Fund's Tackling Exploitative Child Domestic Work (CDW) in West Africa hotspot program, focused on Lagos State in Nigeria, brings together seven partners: Cece Yara Child Advocacy Centre, Center for the Advancement & Protection of the Rights of Vulnerable People (CAPRIGHTS-VP), Devatop Centre for Africa Development (DEVATOP), Hearts and Hands Humanitarian Foundation (3HF), Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs (MAEJT Nigeria), Slum2School Africa and the Street Project Foundation (SPF). This consortium combines expertise in trauma-informed care, youth-led arts advocacy, survivor-led networking and educational reintegration.

Funded by the U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP), the program entered a transformative second phase in 2025. The transition involved a strategic shift from formative research to a large-scale, community-led intervention across 13 Local Government Areas in Lagos. This was achieved against a backdrop of macroeconomic volatility that acted as a severe "push factor" for vulnerable families, making the program's mission to dismantle the systems enabling child servitude more urgent than ever.

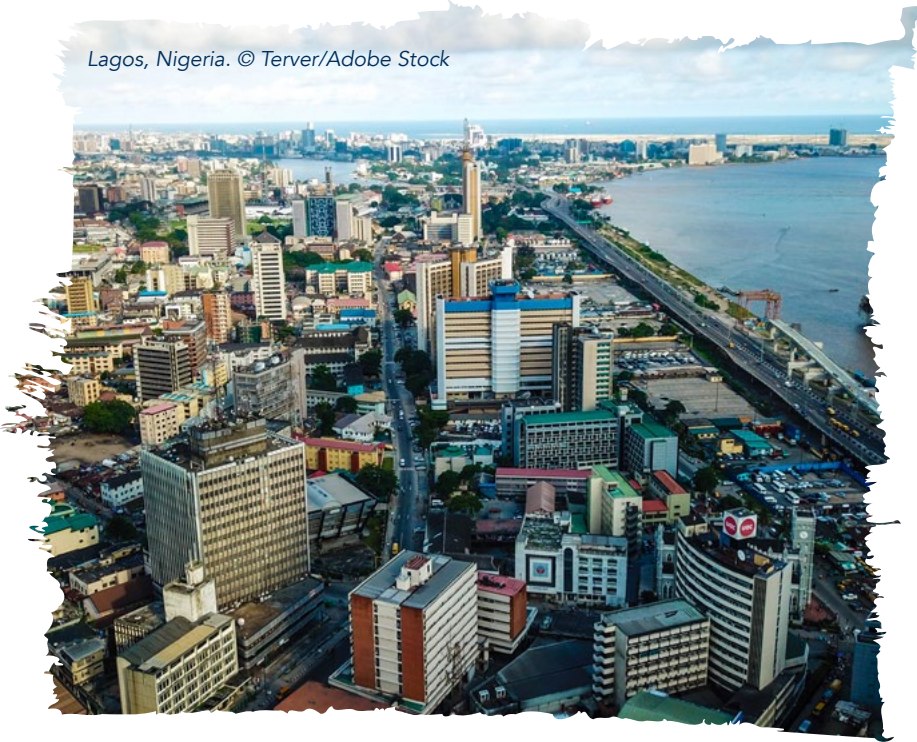
The program's resilience was tested early in the year by the U.S. government's initial pause on all foreign development assistance in January and its subsequent elimination of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and overall reduction of aid programs by more than 80%. However, the Freedom Fund and its partners responded with remarkable agility, re-engaging duty bearers—government officials and various non-state community actors—immediately upon the resumption of activities in March. During this period of realignment partners leveraged the Lagos State Government's expanded social protection budget – which grew to NGN 170 billion (USD ~111.9 million)¹ – ensuring that at-risk households were linked to formal safety nets as a sustainable alternative to sending children into domestic work.

The impact of this coordinated effort has been transformative, reaching approximately 3.3 million individuals through a multi-channel advocacy strategy that has fundamentally shifted the public narrative on child protection in the course of project implementation. Beyond awareness, the hotspot program achieved a 92% school re-enrolment rate for identified child workers, successfully returning 344 out-of-school children to the classroom. This direct impact was reinforced by landmark systemic shifts, most notably the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Freedom Fund partner DEVATOP and Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission. This agreement transitioned DEVATOP's TALKAM app² into a government-recognised digital platform, effectively embedding survivor-centred case management into the national infrastructure and securing a seat for grassroots insights on the National Steering Committee for the Elimination of Child Labour.

The movement-building gained momentum in December 2025 when seven survivor-led organisations formed a unified network, thereby ensuring that those with lived experience will be the primary architects of future interventions. As the program looks toward 2026, it remains committed to refining its digital referral pathways and addressing localised barriers to ensure that the protective environment envisioned for every child in Lagos becomes a permanent reality.

¹ The average exchange rate during 2025 was USD 1 = NGN 1518.88. Source: <https://uk.investing.com/currencies/usd-ngn-historical-data>.

² The TALKAM Human Rights App, conceived by DEVATOP founder Joseph Osuigwe Chidebere, is a global civic tech innovation designed to combat human rights abuses and promote accountability. It empowers citizens to report violations, track cases, and enables organisations and agencies to respond effectively through a secure digital case management system.



OPERATING CONTEXT

Nigeria's economy in 2025 was defined by the dual impact of the 2023–2024 twin reforms: the removal of the fuel subsidy and foreign exchange harmonisation on the country's Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). By mid-2025, these policies contributed to a staggering inflation rate of 23%, with food inflation soaring even higher as the price of staples like yams and rice rose by more than 300%.³

The removal of the fuel subsidy, while intended to redirect national resources, led to a 234% spike in transportation and logistics costs, rendering even

basic movement unaffordable for the urban poor. For the families in the 13 Local Government Areas where the Freedom Fund operates, this economic erosion acted as a primary "push factor" increasing the number of households forced to view the placement of children in domestic work not as a choice but rather as a desperate survival mechanism.

Amid this backdrop, the hotspot program navigated a significant challenge following the U.S. government's suspension in its foreign aid programs in the first quarter, during which it focused on maintaining critical emergency services such as the toll-free hotline and shelter operations, and using diversified internal funding to ensure that vulnerable children were not left without a safety net.

Despite the national economic gloom, 2025 saw a proactive shift in the Lagos State Government's approach to social welfare. The state reaffirmed its commitment to the National Social Register (NSR), increasing its social protection budget from NGN 130 billion in 2025 to a projected NGN 170 billion for 2026. This was accompanied by the presentation of the landmark report, "Leaving No One Behind: Tracking Social Protection Coverage and Vulnerability," which emphasises a shift toward data-driven, geospatial mapping of vulnerable populations. For the Freedom Fund's hotspot program, this trend presented a strategic opportunity to link CDW families directly to state-led "Champion of Care" initiatives and formal social safety nets, providing an alternative to the exploitative labour market.

On the social front, 2025 was marked by a heightened national discourse on child rights. During the 2025 World Day Against Child Labour, Nigeria's Ministry of Labour and Employment urged the National Assembly to pass the revised Labour Standards Bill, which aims to close legal loopholes that currently allow "light work" for children as young as 12 years. However, child domestic workers in Lagos still experience indicators of the worst forms of child labour, as defined by the International Labour Organization. This gap between high-level policy debate and the "hidden" nature of domestic servitude remains the program's most critical operational challenge.

³ Mbaegbu R. and Nwanze C. (2025). "Nigerians say country is headed in wrong direction, oppose fuel-subsidy removal." *Afrobarometer*, Dispatch No. 958, 19 March 2025. Available at: www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/AD958-Nigerians-see-grim-economic-picture%5EJ-favour-reinstating-fuel-subsidy-Afrobarometer-19march25.pdf.

Lagos, Nigeria. © Tolu Owoeye/Adobe Stock



PROGRAM OUTCOMES

All seven partner organisations co-created the program design to ensure a unified strategy. This collaboration is operationalised through a partner-led Community of Practice (CoP), which serves as a space for reflection, joint action and the bridging of grassroots community efforts with formal protection systems in Lagos.

Direct impact in communities affected by modern slavery

Throughout 2025, the program achieved a massive scale of intervention, beginning with a robust awareness and outreach strategy that reached more than 3.3 million people. By leveraging a multi-channel approach

- including radio broadcasts, street performances and social media
- program partners ensured that the risks of child domestic work remained a central part of the public discourse. This wide-reaching advocacy translated into tangible life changes for children and impacted communities. A total of 238 child domestic workers accessed essential direct services, finding refuge in safe spaces and gaining resilience through mentoring, psychosocial support and legal aid.

The program also made significant strides in breaking the cycle of exploitation through education and formal protection, with 344 CDWs who were previously out-of-school successfully enrolled in formal or non-formal education programs, thereby providing them with a viable alternative to domestic servitude. Further, the strengthening of referral tracking systems led to 108 CDW cases being identified and moved into professional care through collaborative efforts of Freedom Fund partners. For the most vulnerable, program partners identified and provided specialised follow-up support to 26 survivors of domestic servitude and human trafficking, ensuring their journey toward recovery was monitored and sustained.

Fostering systems change to shift power

The program priority was to work towards the institutionalisation of child protection. A landmark achievement in this area was the December 2025 Memorandum of Understanding signed between DEVATOP and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). This agreement officially transitioned the TALKAM app into a government-recognised digital platform, effectively embedding survivor-centred case management into the national infrastructure. This shift in power was further solidified as DEVATOP secured a seat on the National Steering Committee for the Elimination of Child Labour, providing a direct line for grassroots insights to reach national policy-makers.

At the state and local levels, the program successfully decentralised authority to ensure faster, more localised responses. Cece Yara, in collaboration with agencies such as the Nigeria's National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), established a formalised referral mechanism across Lagos State to decrease response times for exploitation cases. Simultaneously, the program empowered local economic leaders to take ownership of protection. Notably, the Iya

Oloja of Bariga (the traditional chieftain who serves as a “mother of the market”) established a dedicated task force to monitor and report child maltreatment within the marketplace, becoming a pivotal grassroots ally in the fight against exploitative child domestic work in Lagos. Leveraging her immense influence over the informal sector, the Iya Oloja of Bariga has spearheaded community-led surveillance and sensitisation efforts to identify and protect at-risk children at the marketplace. Her work often bridges the gap between official policies such as the Lagos State Child Safeguarding policy and the local community, ensuring that market women and residents are educated on the difference between “apprenticeship” and “exploitation.” By partnering with frontline organisations, her leadership has transformed Bariga markets into “protection hubs” where influencers actively report cases of abuse and advocate for safe space in the market.

By engaging these traditional and market structures, the program is shifting the responsibility for protecting children from domestic servitude from external CSOs to the community’s own leadership. Another example of this is the involvement of His Royal Majesty the Alado of Ado Kingdom in Lagos, whose leadership ensures that interventions are not viewed as external impositions but rather as a collective effort to making the community fit for children and preserving the dignity and future of children in his kingdom.

Invest in the strengthening of civil society organisations (CSOs) and the movement

The Freedom Fund remains committed to the long-term sustainability of the anti-slavery sector. In March 2025, all seven partners completed a rigorous Organisational Capacity Analysis (OCAT), leading to customised growth plans for internal operations. Recognising that the fight against modern slavery requires a healthy workforce among the partner organisations themselves, the August 2025 CoP session was dedicated to staff mental health and overall well-being. To date, the program has held five CoP events, fostering collaboration not only among grantees but also with government and non-grantee CSOs.

The movement-building efforts culminated in a powerful push for survivor-led advocacy and youth leadership. In December 2025, Freedom Fund

partner MAEJT Nigeria, an organisation that is led by former working children, facilitated a meeting between the hotspot program’s core partners and seven survivor-led organisations (SLOs), for the purpose of creating a unified network that ensures survivors are not just recipients of aid but also leaders of the movement. This focus on future leadership extended into the school system through the establishment of three Child Rights Ambassador Forums. These forums trained student ambassadors to conduct peer-to-peer education, effectively turning the next generation into the primary monitors of child rights and reporting channels within their own communities.

The impact of these outcomes is reflected in the voices of those leading the change. Mrs. Oluyemi Ogunlola of the Lagos State Law Reform Commission emphasised at a high-level dialogue:

“There is a strong call for improved collaboration among government and civil society actors to address persistent gaps in child protection enforcement.”

For caregivers, awareness-raising has sparked a change in heart. Mrs. Ojo, a community member, shared:

“Before the sensitisation, I believed sending my children to work in other people’s houses was the only way we could survive. I did not know how much danger they would be exposed to.”

STRATEGIC AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

A primary focus for future growth involves moving beyond the creation of reporting tools to ensuring the state infrastructure can sustain them. While the institutionalisation of the TALKAM app is a significant milestone, the pilot research suggests that the long-term success of such digital platforms depends on the consistent technical and financial capacity of government agencies like the NHRC to manage these systems independently. Further, there is a clear need to address the “referral bottleneck.” Future strategy could prioritise assessing and strengthening the actual capacity of child protection structures – such as shelters and social work departments – to handle the increased caseloads generated by improved reporting mechanisms. Without ensuring these services are adequately resourced, there is a risk of raising community expectations that the formal system cannot yet meet.

To foster a truly sustainable movement, the program will continue to foster community ownership. This includes scaling successful localised models, such as the market-based task force initiated by the Iya Oloja of Bariga, and replicating them in other high-risk economic hubs and transit points. Similarly, expanding youth-led initiatives like the Child Rights Ambassador Forums can transform schools into permanent protection hubs where students are empowered to challenge the social norms that normalise exploitative domestic work.

The persistent challenge of inflation and the rising cost of living in Nigeria necessitates a more integrated approach to child protection that accounts for economic realities. The program will therefore continue to explore linkages with existing government initiatives such as the community safety net across seven Bariga markets under the leadership of the Iya Oloja to address issues of exploitative child domestic work.

By connecting the families of vulnerable children to vocational training and state-led financial support, the program can address the underlying poverty that serves as the primary driver for child domestic labour. Additionally, budget flexibility could be built into future planning to mitigate the impact of economic volatility on participant engagement, ensuring that transportation costs or lost income do not prevent caregivers and survivors from accessing critical program services.



CASE STUDY

A mother's courageous choice

A story of hope and change

In the bustling communities of Alimosho, Lagos, many families face unimaginable hardship. Meet Mrs. Ojo (not her real name), a devoted mother of three young children in Ijegan, who worked selling sachet water (pure water in local parlance). This informal work is a high-volume, quick-turnover retail business accessible to small-scale entrepreneurs through street hawking or kiosks. Vendors typically purchase bags containing 20 units for NGN 400 - 450 (less than 1 cent in USD) and sell at NGN 50 per sachet. Success in this form of trade depends on securing high-volume locations like motor parks and in Lagos traffic.

Amid severe challenges in the wider economy, Mrs. Ojo's sachet water business collapsed and, with her husband long unemployed, the family struggled to put food on the table or pay school fees. In desperation, she considered sending her children out as domestic helpers – a common but dangerous practice often seen as a survival necessity, yet one that exposes children to abuse, exploitation and long-term harm.

How awareness and support changed everything

Mrs. Ojo attended a powerful sensitisation session organised by Freedom Fund partner CAPRIGHTS-VP at St. John's Catholic Church in Igando. There, passionate team members educated parishioners on child rights, the hidden dangers of exploitative child domestic work and the profound risks of abuse and exploitation these children face.

The message resonated deeply. For the first time, Mrs. Ojo truly understood the long-term harm and resolved to keep her children at home. She reached out to the CAPRIGHTS-VP team for help, prioritising their education and safety over short-term relief.

Connected to vital social protection schemes and equipped with new skills training, she turned her life and her family's lives around.

Real impact – empowerment and independence

Today, Mrs. Ojo is thriving. She now earns a sustainable income through skills in make-up and *gele* (headscarf) tying. Her household enjoys greater food security and stability. With reduced financial pressure, she pays her children's school fees herself and has abandoned any plans to send them into domestic work.

In her own words:

"Before the sensitisation, I believed sending my children to work in other people's houses was the only way we could survive. I did not know how much danger they would be exposed to."

Mrs. Ojo has become an inspiring advocate, eagerly sharing her experience with parents in her community and discouraging them from sending children out as domestic workers.

VISION

Our vision is a world
free of slavery.

MISSION

We invest in frontline organisations
and movements to drive a measurable
reduction of modern slavery in high-
prevalence countries and industries.

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