



Crime and Development in Africa

The UNODC report on “Crime and Development in Africa” argues that high levels of crime may be interfering with Africa's development. Limited government capacity has meant that official data on crime in Africa are scant, and independent research has also been limited. But all available indicators suggest that the continent has a very serious crime problem, including both violent and property crime.

On reflection, this should come as no surprise. Crime rarely occurs in isolation, and is one of a range of cofactors associated with underdevelopment, all of which are present in Africa. Internationally, crime is strongly associated with:

- High levels of income inequality—Africa is home to some of the most unequal societies in the world;
- Rapid urbanization—Africa is urbanizing at about twice the global rate;
- A big proportion of unemployed youth—44% of sub-Saharan Africans are under 15;
- Poorly resourced criminal justice systems—Africa has the world's lowest ratios of police and judges to members of the public, with consequently low conviction rates.

Crime and contemporary forms of conflict:

The proliferation of conflict would also lead us to predict high levels of crime in Africa. In recent decades, Africa has suffered from

more wars than any other part of the world. The particularly brutalizing effect of contemporary warfare, where civilians are targeted in terror campaigns, can have a long-term impact on society. In addition, criminal activities are also increasingly becoming a source of funding for insurgent and terrorist groups, which do not necessarily give them up once peace treaties have been signed. Conflict also destroys the capacity of the state to secure order and to provide services to its citizens, which contributes to crime both during war and afterwards.

The growth of transnational organized crime:

Africa is also increasingly afflicted by transnational organized crime. While in the past only the use of herbal drugs such as cannabis and khat was widespread in Africa, more recently, the continent has become a transit area for international drug traffickers who have contributed to the development, in some urban areas, of problems with cocaine and heroin. With regard to the global challenge posed by human trafficking, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has reported that 89% of African countries are affected by human trafficking flows, either as source, destination or receiving countries. Africa is further undermined by the theft and smuggling of its natural resources (including minerals, petroleum and wildlife). West African organized criminals have made their mark both inside and outside of Africa.

ROUND TABLE FOR AFRICA

In addition to the human suffering caused by crime itself, there is good reason to believe that, in a number of ways, crime is hurting the development process.

Crime is driving business away from Africa:

According to surveys conducted for the 2005 World Development Report, African business leaders were twice as likely to say that crime was a major impediment to investment than their peers in other parts of the world. Foreign direct investment levels in Africa are lower than they should be, and much of this can be attributed to the perception that the rule of law does not prevail in Africa. And Africans themselves are more likely to invest their money outside their continent than investors in other parts of the world. In addition, the World Bank has identified corruption as the single greatest barrier to development, and corruption was ranked highest by African business leaders when asked about obstacles to investment. Corruption is also believed to be behind the large bureaucracies and endless red tape that characterize some African business environments.

Crime erodes Africa's human and social capital:

Crime can have a far greater impact on the lives of citizens of poor countries than of rich ones. The impact of violence-related injuries can be devastating for people who earn a living through physical labour and have limited access to health care facilities. Theft, especially of productive assets such as livestock, can destroy the livelihoods of whole families. Crime undermines quality of life, and may contribute to immigration of skilled labour. Crime also destroys public trust and undermines the basic conditions that are essential for healthy societies. African people are more likely to say they are afraid to walk alone in their area at night than the people of other regions.

By impeding movement, crime undermines access to employment, starting up small businesses and the benefits of educational activities.

Crime undermines the ability of the African state to promote development:

On a day-to-day level in many parts of Africa, corruption blocks the delivery of development assistance to the public, as government officials demand payment before providing service. Corruption allows favoured groups to monopolize the benefits produced by the state and to demand extra income from the public. Predictably, this tends to alienate those who are not part of the inner circle, fuelling both crime and the growth of the informal sector. Large informal sectors and corruption-related tax avoidance deplete the funds available for development, and those monies that remain may be misallocated to graft-rich public works projects and defence procurements, rather than grassroots work. In the end, crime undermines democracy itself, as the people begin to see the state as an adversary rather than a representative body.

Africa is rising to these challenges:

There is presently great international momentum around development in Africa. African leaders have been promoting projects for democratic reform and economic growth for the people of their countries, and there are signs of progress on many fronts, including in creating a legislative and institutional framework to fight crime. The time is ripe for tackling this important barrier to African development.

This Report and the Round Table for which it was prepared were mandated by a 2004 resolution of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, based on the special commitment made by Member States to the development of Africa in the Millennium Declaration.

Fact sheet 1

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