AN AID TO STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO ORGANIZED CRIME IN EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

REGIONAL POLICY BRIEF

An aid to strategic responses to organized crime in East and Southern Africa

REGIONAL POLICY BRIEF

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

The present regional policy brief was produced as an aid for the development of strategies and response frameworks against organized crime in East and Southern Africa. As such, it comprises the following components:

- A description of the character and main manifestations of, and harms resulting from, organized crime in the region

- A summary of current responses to the phenomenon in the region

- An exploration of certain strategic opportunities, including with respect to regional cooperation. The latter recommendations draw heavily on discussions with regional experts held as part of a multi-stakeholder event organized by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in February 2022.

Organized crime constitutes one of the most fundamental and long-term strategic challenges facing East and Southern Africa. Its roots run deep across the region, having infiltrated political institutions, local economies and communities, undermining both effective governance and sustainable development. Involvement in organized crime spans different commodities and activities, including trafficking in persons, wildlife and drugs, money-laundering and the depletion of precious natural resources.

Illicit markets in East and Southern Africa are shaped by complex social, political and economic forces, many of which extend across – and indeed beyond – the region. At the same time, State fragility, corruption and weak institutional capacity across the region have, on the whole, facilitated the rise of criminal actors, who are always quick to exploit the inability of Governments to provide basic services and/or security to their populations. Moreover, the region's geostrategic location, developed transport infrastructure (including flights to economic centres around the world), porous borders and extensive maritime flank have all contributed to establishing its position as a transnational hub for the movement of illicit goods.

The consequences of organized crime in East and Southern Africa are significant and chronic, eroding governance and public confidence in governments, distorting economies, endangering natural resources and wildlife and undermining human rights, including through the exploitation of vulnerable persons. Moreover, the infiltrative and co-optive influence of the criminal economy poses a direct threat to sustainable development and economic growth.

Knowledge regarding organized crime in the region has slowly increased in recent years, and a number of attempts have been made to establish regional cooperation platforms and various strategic or response frameworks. At the same time, however, experts cite endemic corruption, the penetration of society and institutions by organized criminal groups, the networked and cross-border nature of modern organized crime and the speed at which those groups seize new economic opportunities, as core strategic challenges complicating the response. Where strategies and action plans exist, they tend to focus on specific forms of organized crime and/or on securing criminal justice outcomes rather than placing equal importance on preventive efforts.

Strategic opportunities are largely centred around the theme of sharing knowledge as the basis for collective action, and include:

- Developing a comprehensive analysis of the most relevant forms of organized crime at the national level in order to inform the development of both tailored and targeted policy responses

- Prioritizing community-level responses and a stronger understanding of both economic and financial vulnerabilities (PREVENT)

- Making full use of the disruptive measures contained in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and increasing the efficacy of joint investigations (PURSUE)

- Raising awareness of the human risks associated with various forms of organized crime, including by engaging with the private sector and by adopting a more systematic, gender-sensitive approach within different responses (PROTECT)

- Considering whole-of-society, integrated strategies, as well as cross-regional information-sharing systems, including by harnessing technological solutions (PROMOTE)

Contents

Overview and approach

The present publication is part of a series of regional policy briefs summarizing the character of organized crime and formulating considerations relevant to the development of national and regional frameworks and strategies in key regions around the world. It is designed to accompany the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit for Developing High-impact Strategies and is aligned with the UNODC Strategic Vision for Africa 2030, as well as the UNODC Strategy 2021–2025. It was prepared on the basis of the findings of a dedicated regional multi-stakeholder event organized by UNODC, which was held in February 2022 and which brought together experts and representatives from across East and Southern Africa.[1] The present policy brief reflects both an analysis of existing threats and responses and the insights provided at the event as the basis for concrete recommendations. It should be emphasized, however, that the information provided below is not meant to replace a dedicated and comprehensive analysis of the most relevant forms of organized crime at the national level. Such an analysis is the ideal evidence base for a strategy.

The policy brief comprises the following components:

   (a)   A description of the character and main manifestations of, and harms resulting from, organized crime in the region (sections I–III);

   (b)   A summary of current responses to the phenomenon in the region (section IV);

   (c)   An exploration of certain strategic opportunities, including with respect to regional cooperation. The latter recommendations draw heavily on discussions with regional experts held as part of the multi-stakeholder event in February 2022 (section V).

The primary aims of the present policy brief are to support continued regional cooperation to counter the problem and to provide an aid for the development of robust multisectoral strategic responses.

PUBLICATION STRUCTURE

I   REGIONAL CONTEXT
Structural drivers

II   MARKETS ENABLERS AND ACTORS
The character of the problem

III   HARMS AND IMPACT
Impact on the region

IV   THE RESPONSE LANDSCAPE
Current responses

V   OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSIDERATIONS
for enhanced action

---
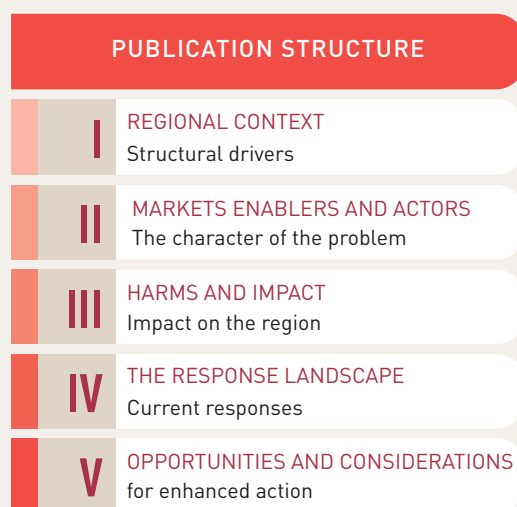
[1] For the purposes of the present policy brief, "East and Southern Africa" includes Angola, Botswana, Burundi, the Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, the Sudan, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

I. Regional context: structural drivers of organized crime

Organized crime poses a substantial and growing threat to the safety and security of East and Southern Africa.[2] Its roots run deep across the region, having infiltrated political institutions, local economies and communities, undermining both effective governance and sustainable development. As the East and Southern Africa region continues to experience significant economic growth and social change, organized crime will similarly morph and adapt, exploiting both new business opportunities and the region's vast natural resources.

State fragility, corruption and weak institutional capacity across the region have, on the whole, facilitated the rise of criminal actors, who are always quick to exploit the inability of Governments to provide basic services and/or security to their populations. For politically marginalized and economically isolated communities and demographic groups (including unemployed youth), organized crime can also provide a source of income in the absence of alternative sources of livelihood, as well as an opportunity for social mobility and, at times, a sense of belonging. Such social ecosystems have provided fertile breeding and recruitment grounds for organized criminal groups, from Cape Town to the urban slums of Mombasa, Kenya.[3] Moreover, territorial battles between organized criminal groups over the control of market share have resulted in escalating violence and spiralling homicide rates across the region.[4]

The phenomenon has flourished within the context of the region's conflict, transitional and post-conflict political economies. At times, the potential gains to be made from the extraction of natural resources or involvement in criminal markets has blurred the lines between armed groups and criminals, with revenue generation overtaking the political

---

[2] See, for example, International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and ENACT (Enhancing Africa's response to transnational organized crime) project, "Overview of serious and organized crime in East Africa", Analytical Report (Lyon, France, 2018).

[3] The criminal gangs of the Cape Flats can be traced back to the exclusionary policies of apartheid (John P. Sullivan, "Gangs, criminal empires and military intervention in Cape Town's crime wars", Small Wars Journal, 2 November 2020. See also Kyalo Musoi and others, *A Study of Crime in Urban Slums in Kenya: The Case of Kirba, Bondeni, Manyatta and Mishomoroni Slums* (Nairobi, Security Research and Information Centre, 2014).

[4] See United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide 2019*, booklet 2, *Homicide Trends, Patterns and Criminal Justice Response* (Vienna, 2019).

ideologies of violent non-State actors.[5] Furthermore, the displacement of persons fleeing the violence in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere has resulted in the proliferation of rural slums and refugee camps prone to high levels of criminality with populations at high risk of exploitation by organized criminal groups.[6] Paradoxically, addressing such security concerns has featured in the narratives of organized criminal groups seeking to legitimize their activities in the eyes of local communities.

The region's geostrategic location, developed transport infrastructure (including flights to economic centres around the world), porous borders and extensive maritime flank have all contributed to establishing its position as a transnational hub for the movement of illicit goods.[7] Perhaps inevitably, coastal countries with major seaports, such as Kenya, Mozambique and the United Republic of Tanzania, have become important transit and distribution centres for illicit business conducted in the region's landlocked countries.[8] At the same time, the globally connected financial system of East and Southern Africa – combining both informal remittance services and formal (i.e. mainstream) banking – offers a highly effective conduit for transferring illicit funds to customers and criminal business partners located in Asia and elsewhere.

Critically, organized crime is woven into the political fabric of the region despite attempts by various Governments to address systemic corruption. The deeply entrenched tradition of foreign investors and firms paying substantial bribes in exchange for public procurement and infrastructure contracts, particularly in countries governed for long periods of time by single political parties, has not been lost on organized criminal groups. Revenue generated from criminal activities thus offers the means of purchasing both the support of elected officials and the protection of the judiciary and security actors at multiple levels, while also contributing to the financing of electoral campaigns.[9]

---

[5] While operating across the region, illicit markets and trafficking networks are thus heavily connected to areas of political instability, including in the Horn of Africa (in particular Somalia) and northern Mozambique.

[6] Yonas Adaye Adeto, "State fragility and conflict nexus: contemporary security issues in the Horn of Africa", *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 19, No. 1 (2019).

[7] This has been aided by the growth of large, container-capable seaports.

[8] See, for example, Joseph Hanlon, *The Uberization of Mozambique's Heroin Trade*, International Development Working Paper Series 2018, No. 18-190 (London, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2018).

[9] See, for example, Nicasius Achu Check and others, *The Integrity of Political Finance Systems in Africa: Tackling Political Corruption*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) Policy Paper, No. 20 (Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and the Africa Institute of South Africa, 2019).

II. Markets, enablers and actors

Reflecting the transnational nature of organized crime, illicit markets in East and Southern Africa are shaped by complex social, political and economic forces, many of which extend across – and indeed beyond – the region. Moreover, further examination of the different markets and crime types reveals a number of overarching trends relating to both the trajectory of organized crime and to some of the most prominent enablers underpinning criminal influence in the region.

Figure I. Multiple layers of organized crime in East and Southern Africa

(Visible) crimes and markets

Identified or prosecuted organized criminal groups

Economic infiltration

Infiltration of shipping and transport infrastructure

Corruption and political influence

Involvement of and impact on local communities

Professional enablers and service providers

©jozefmicnic/stock.adobe.com

3
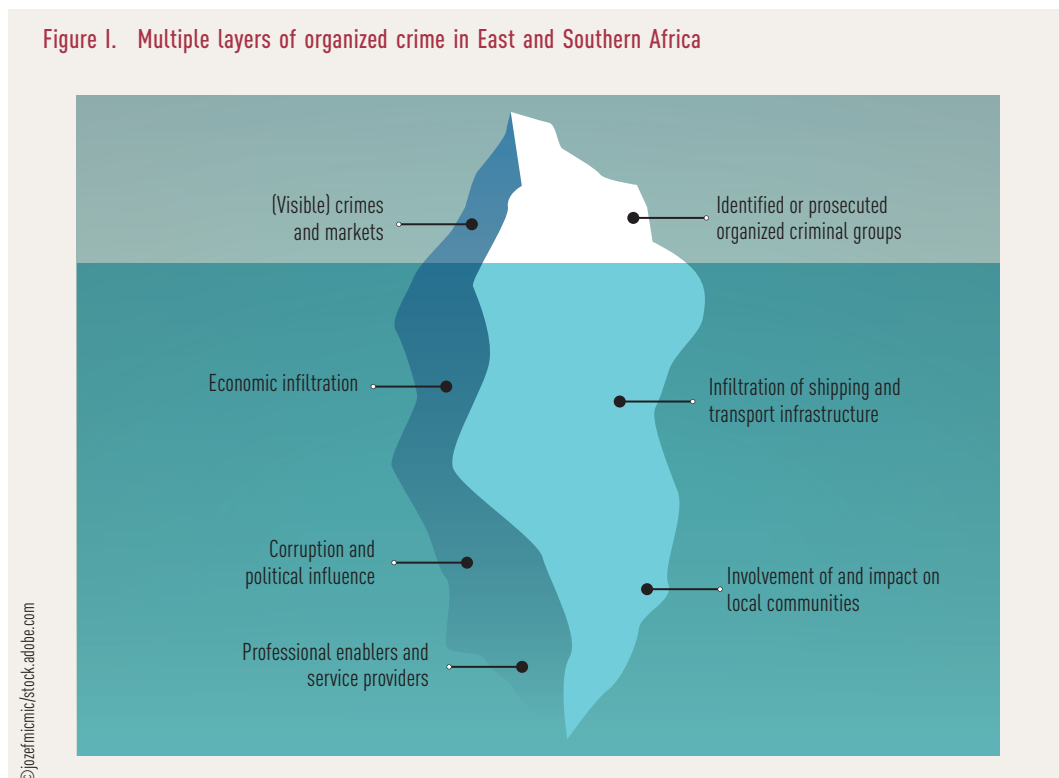
A. Dynamic and adaptable networks

Organized criminal groups in the region have demonstrated the ability to seize new market opportunities. For example, these groups were quick to establish effective cross-border migrant movement solutions in the wake of the 2015 migration crisis, as well as to become involved in the distribution of falsified medical products during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, including, in the case of the latter, by moving some operations online in order to compensate for the reduced mobility at points of entry.[10] Organized criminal groups are also becoming increasingly poly-criminal in nature (where the same networks are involved in trafficking different illicit goods and commodities), resulting in fluidity between different illicit markets.[11]

B. Corruption and professional enablers

Elements of the political elite and a sizeable cadre of key professional enablers facilitate organized crime across the region. Professional enablers include local security actors, specialist money-launderers, lawyers, civil servants, port insiders and many other individuals who, together, assist and support the activities and growth of organized criminal groups in the region. Furthermore, corruption at all levels offers a means of securing political protection, of establishing high-volume trafficking corridors and pathways connecting different regional hubs and of benefiting from the reduced risk of interdiction or disruption.[12]

C. Economic infiltration

Organized crime constitutes a macroeconomic threat to East and Southern Africa, with illicit revenue being reinvested systematically across the region. Proceeds from drug trafficking and other illicit activities are also reinvested in businesses, real estate and other ventures, distorting prices and contributing to inflationary pressures, particularly in affluent neighbourhoods. Corruption at all stages of public procurement and tendering processes, including with respect to large infrastructure projects, offers further entry points to organized criminal groups seeking to diversify their business activities.[13] At a broader level, the heroin trade and other criminal activities have shaped the growth of coastal villages along the Indian Ocean, as well as strategic border towns along interior

---

[10] INTERPOL and ENACT project, "Assessment of COVID-19 pandemic impact on illicit medication in East Africa", Analytical Report (December 2020). It is also likely that some of these same groups have diversified by accessing public procurement contracts for the delivery of medical products. See, for example, Kira Zalan and others, "The cost of Kenya's 'budgeted corruption'", Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 11 August 2021.

[11] See, for example, INTERPOL and ENACT project, "Overview of serious and organized crime in East Africa" (2018).

[12] See, for example, INTERPOL and ENACT project, "Corruption as a facilitator for organized crime in the Eastern African region", Analytical Report (Lyon, France, 2019), p. 5.

[13] See, for example, Eastern and Southern Africa Anti-Money-Laundering Group, *Procurement Corruption in the Public Sector and Associated Money Laundering in the ESAAMLG Region* (Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania, 2019).

smuggling routes, in particular the so-called "southern route" connecting the Horn of Africa with southern countries on the continent, specifically South Africa.[14] The recent increase in illicit drug trafficking, including drugs that were traditionally channelled through different routes, such as cocaine,[15] will likely also result in an increased capacity for organized criminal groups operating regionally or locally to infiltrate regional markets and economies, making use of the additional revenue for investments in economic and financial circuits or the laundering of the proceeds of crime.

D.   Globally connected illicit enterprises

Organized criminal activity in the region is highly connected to networks, customers and financial institutions located around the world. Thus, wildlife trafficking is driven and facilitated by organized criminal groups located in or with ties to East and South-East Asia, drug trafficking is tied to suppliers and transporters operating in and from South-West Asia and Latin America, and migrant smuggling connects brokers and smugglers working on both sides of the Mediterranean.[16] Financial transactions are conducted through formal and informal service providers ranging from specialist remittance providers (including unregulated value transfer providers) and major banks offering global transfer solutions to corporate vehicles providing shell company structures.[17] Connections between organizations and the flow of expertise are further facilitated by digital and transport linkages to most of the world's major hubs.

E.   Urban breeding grounds

Gangs operating in primarily impoverished, large urban areas across the region act as a conduit for "promotion" into more organized, transnational criminal groups and offer a ready source of support and a street-level workforce for those same organizations. At times, these same gangs have also been harnessed by elements of the political elite to gain control on the ground and extract rent.[18] Low-skilled workers migrating to rapidly growing cities across the region in search of employment opportunities are also vulnerable to either recruitment or exploitation by organized criminal groups.

---

[14] Simone Haysom, *From the Maskani to the Mayor: The Political Economy of Heroin Markets in East and Southern Africa*, ENACT Research Paper, No. 13 (February 2020).

[15] See, for example, *World Drug Report 2021*, booklet 4, *Drug Market Trends: Cocaine, Amphetamine-type Stimulants* (United Nations publication, 2021).

[16] For an example of a case involving the ivory trade, see UNODC, Sharing Electronic Resources and Laws on Crime (SHERLOC) knowledge management portal, Case law database, *R. v. Salvius Francis Matembo et al*, Economic Crime Case No. 21 of 2014 (United Republic of Tanzania).

[17] See the Financial Action Task Force mutual evaluation reports for East and Southern African States, available at www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications.html.

[18] Duncan E. Omondi Gumba, "Gangs still drive Mombasa's narco-city image", Institute for Security Studies, 23 September 2020. See also Derica Lambrechts, "The impact of organised crime on State social control: organised criminal groups and local governance on the Cape Flats, Cape Town, South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 38, No. 4 (December 2012), pp. 787–807.

Figure II.   A whole-of-society problem requiring a whole-of-society response

Criminal revenue reinvested in assets and businesses inside and outside the region

Professional enablers and service providers assist with the movement of commodities and the structuring of organized criminal groups

Organized criminal group leaders, coordinators and brokers with international connections

Local gangs and communities enlisted in the criminal business and offering a conduit for political control

Elements of the political elite promising, offering or giving protection or other undue advantages in exchange for payment or other private gains

F.   Overlapping transnational threat networks

Criminal economies in East and Southern Africa intersect with violent non-State actors, including those engaging in acts of terrorism, in at least three ways. First, weapons trafficked by organized criminal groups are used for the purpose of engaging in both criminal and armed activities. Second, violent non-State actors may themselves engage in criminal activities as a means of generating revenue – a phenomenon famously illustrated by the involvement of Al-Shabaab in charcoal trafficking[19] and the involvement of Da'esh in trafficking in persons, including for the purposes of sexual exploitation and forced labour.[20] Lastly, both organized criminal groups and violent non-State actors, including armed groups, employ some of the same clandestine, logistical and financial enablers as part of their business, political and financial operations.

---

[19] See, for example, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2244 (2015): Somalia" (S/2016/919).

[20] See, for example, Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Identifying and Exploring the Nexus between Human Trafficking, Terrorism, and Terrorism Financing* (2019).

Figure III. Organized crime landscape in East and Southern Africa

Wildlife crimes, including trafficking in rhinoceros horns, ivory and pangolin scales, are fuelled primarily by international demand, primarily in East and South-East Asia. Local poachers, the visible, and at times opportunistic, "tip of the iceberg" in organized crime terms, are generally recruited, armed and directed by mid-level coordinators, a number of whom likely work with brokers located in third countries. Further crimes are committed in the fisheries sector.

Trafficking in illegally logged timber and other natural resources reveals the extent to which organized criminal groups rely on the cooperation of corrupt officials and local security actors to transport illicit commodities, including through the provision of permits and export certificates. Corruption also constitutes a means of establishing safe trafficking corridors.

The rising number of migrants travelling from the region to escape conflict or in search of economic opportunities has catalysed the establishment of sprawling migrant smuggling networks and routes that span continents. These networks bring together a wide range of functions and roles, including local recruiters, "travel agents" offering packages along different routes and smugglers facilitating the physical movement of migrants for financial or other material gain – and at times further exploiting their vulnerability by deceiving, forcing or coercing them into exploitative situations (the smuggling of migrants and human trafficking often occur along the same routes and in some cases are carried out by the same perpetrators).

Note: The findings and analysis are supported by UNODC publications, including the *World Wildlife Crime Report 2020: Trafficking in Protected Species* (United Nations publication, 2020) and the *World Drug Report 2021*.

United Nations Cartography Section

Note: The boundaries shown on the map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. The final boundary between South Sudan and the Sudan has not yet been determined.

The region constitutes a hub for international drug trafficking and a key point of entry for Afghan heroin trafficked from the Makran coast of Pakistan. Meanwhile, cannabis production and cocaine trafficking through the region as a lower-risk alternative to West African ports of entry are also reportedly on the rise. Drug trafficking organizations have established a sizeable presence across the region, expanding their political influence while gradually consolidating their control over strategic coastal disembarkation locations in Mozambique and elsewhere.

III.   Harms and impact

The consequences of organized crime in East and Southern Africa are significant and chronic, manifesting themselves at the regional, national and local levels. Its impact and most significant harms are summarized below.[21]

A.   Erosion of governance and public confidence

Organized crime undermines effective and good governance across the region by co-opting or eroding State institutions and/or key functions. Even in the absence of full State capture, corruption fuelled by criminal economies has resulted in a loss of public confidence in the political elite, as well as disengagement from the political process, at times increasing the relative influence of other actors, including organized criminal groups and violent non-State actors; the latter routinely draw on corruption as a galvanizing force within their ideological narratives.[22] In some contexts, the erosion of fundamental principles of the rule of law, fuelled by a combination of growing corruption and poor infrastructure, coupled with a situation of extreme poverty and lack of access to other basic services, is posing a serious threat to the stability of social contracts, creating opportunities for violent protests to take hold, with extremist narratives finding space to flourish.

B.   A threat to economic prosperity

The infiltrative and co-optive influence of the criminal economy poses a direct threat to sustainable development and economic growth. Criminal diversification into the licit economy and increased involvement in public procurement contracts jeopardize investment from legitimate businesses, particularly in areas under the de facto political control of organized criminal groups. Illicit profits reinvested in the economy carry the risk of inflating prices and currencies and of making legitimate goods and exports less profitable. At the same time, money-laundering by means of real estate and other commercial ventures distorts prices, increasing the cost of living for local communities and exacerbating inequality.

---

[21] Elements or a combination of these characteristics can be found to a lesser or greater extent across the region.

[22] An example of organized crime influence is that of pirate networks in the region of Puntland, Somalia, which gained significant support at the local level by increasing the political influence of poor and marginalized clans by means of the proceeds of piracy; a number of pirate commanders cemented their positions as community leaders as a result.

C.   Endangering natural resources and wildlife

The illegal extraction and destruction of natural resources, wildlife crime, waste trafficking and crimes in the fisheries sector in the region continue to pose a strategic threat. In addition to depriving Governments and societies of a source of sustainable and taxable revenue, crimes that affect the environment have exacerbated corruption, caused pollution and undermined the livelihoods of subsistence farmers who depend on soil quality for agricultural production.[23] Increased contact with and trafficking of wild species also carries global health risks, including that of new diseases and pandemics.

D.   Human rights and individual victims

In addition to triggering violence within communities, including through gangs and other organized criminal groups vying for territorial control, organized crime exploits vulnerabilities as part of its key business operations and results in serious human rights violations. For example, human traffickers prey upon vulnerable individuals, causing them serious physical and psychological harm. These may include migrants, many of whom are exploited during the course of their journey, thus blurring the distinction between the crimes of smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons. Involvement in commodity-based criminal activities could also lead to physical harm, such as in the case of falsified medical products that can deprive people of access to effective medical assistance. Furthermore, crimes that affect the environment, including crimes against wildlife, forests and fisheries, as well as illegal mining and waste trafficking, can lead to a number of human rights violations, with the primary victims often being impoverished and marginalized communities.

---

[23] Constanze Blum, "Transnational organized crime in Southern Africa and Mozambique", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security Series, No. 19 (Maputo, 2016), pp. 13–15.

IV. The response landscape: strategies, policies and institutions

Current responses to organized crime in the region can be placed in the four overarching categories of activities outlined below.

A. Knowledge and research

Knowledge of organized crime and its characteristics has slowly increased in East and Southern Africa over the past two decades, including through initiatives such as the European Multidisciplinary Platform against Criminal Threats, supported by the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). States themselves have also, in some cases, developed their own advanced analytical entities, as in the case of the National Crime Research Centre situated in the Ministry of Interior and National Administration of Kenya (and intended as a mechanism for evidence-based responses).[24] Nevertheless, there is generally a dearth of detailed studies focusing on modi operandi and local manifestations of the phenomenon, including its impact on individual districts and cities. Fewer still are assessments comparing the efficacy of policy interventions in different contexts and providing an evidence base for higher-impact strategies, and the production of data and research on the topic by universities in the region is generally limited. There is also a lack of centralized national data-collection mechanisms facilitating the analysis of disaggregated data (e.g. with respect to the characteristics and profiles of victims of trafficking in persons).

B. Strategic and policy frameworks

Strategic and policy frameworks in East and Southern Africa generally remain fragmented, despite genuine attempts to develop coherent responses to the problem. Where national strategies and action plans exist, they tend to focus on specific forms of organized crime and/or offences such as trafficking in persons, wildlife crime and crimes in the fisheries sector, as well as trafficking in counterfeit goods (a trend that admittedly goes far beyond the region).[25] Such single-issue approaches offer an important mechanism for shining

---

[24] Examples of this type of research include studies conducted by the Security Research and Information Centre in Nairobi and the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria.

[25] Such strategies and action plans include the national strategy to combat poaching, illegal wildlife trade and trafficking in wildlife and wildlife products in Uganda, the dedicated strategic framework for countering the trade in illicit goods in Kenya and the anti-poaching and wildlife management area strategies in the United Republic of Tanzania.

a spotlight on individual threats and harms but perhaps also run the risk of failing to capture cross-cutting drivers relevant to or underpinning all forms of organized crime.[26] Moreover, relatively few strategies include provisions relating to tackling the fundamental enablers of organized crime, such as corruption or the systems involved in transferring and laundering the financial proceeds of crime.[27]

Despite a few notable and early attempts at developing holistic strategies, such as in the case of the National Crime Prevention Strategy in South Africa,[28] policy responses have tended to focus primarily on securing criminal justice outcomes through security and policing responses.[29] While such responses are important and at times involve new or dedicated policy leads and accountable departments within key ministries,[30] they have at times lacked a whole-of-society dimension that included a wide and diverse range of stakeholders as part of the response.[31] That has occurred despite the rise of increasingly assertive and capable civil society actors across the region, including advocacy groups, community-level associations and investigative journalists. A notable exception in this context is the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Integrated Strategy to Prevent and Combat Transnational Organized Crime in the SADC Region, which was adopted in 2021 and emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary and multidimensional responses to organized crime.[32]

C. Regional cooperation and initiatives

There have been notable attempts to set up and deliver regional initiatives and platforms. For example, the East African Association of Anti-corruption Authorities, formed in Uganda in 2007, offers a vehicle for promoting regional cooperation, with an emphasis on mutual legal assistance and technical cooperation, again underlining the focus on securing criminal justice outcomes. Similarly, the East Africa Association of Prosecutors, Eastern Africa Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization and Southern African Regional Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization all act as cross-border collaboration platforms.

---

[26] Some exceptions do exist, such as the "National strategy on urban crime prevention in Tanzania", which seeks to develop capacities to support municipal-level responses to crime, including organized crime.

[27] Notably, UNODC supports countries in the development of both anti-organized crime and anti-corruption strategies. While the Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit for Developing High-impact Strategies is the primary UNODC tool for the development of anti-organized crime strategies, UNODC has also released a specific publication on anti-corruption strategies. See UNODC, *National Anti-Corruption Strategies: A Practical Guide for Development and Implementation* (Vienna, 2015).

[28] The National Crime Prevention Strategy of South Africa, which was released in 1996, included pillars focused on crime reduction, public values and education.

[29] Examples of these approaches include action plans calibrated exclusively around the effectiveness of courts and/or prosecutorial systems.

[30] Kenya, for example, has a dedicated policy lead department in the Office of the Inspector General, while the National Crime Prevention Strategy in Ethiopia (aimed at improving the efficiency of the criminal justice system) falls under the remit of the Office of the Attorney General. See, for example, Ezega News, "Ethiopia to introduce new national crime prevention strategy", 1 November 2019.

[31] This is not to say that there are no nuanced approaches to policing and security responses, as in the case of the focus on community policing in Zanzibar, United Republic of Tanzania.

[32] The Strategy is designed around seven main strategic priority actions to be undertaken individually and collectively at the national and regional levels, namely: (a) pre-empting and taking proactive measures to prevent transnational organized crime; (b) pursuing and combating transnational syndicates, cross-border networks, gangs and other perpetrators of transnational organized crime; (c) coordinating and cooperating at the national, regional, continental and international levels in combating transnational organized crime; (d) implementing regional, continental and international instruments against transnational organized crime; (e) strengthening capacity and leveraging resources to prevent and combat transnational organized crime; (f) detecting and disrupting any potential alliances, synergies, convergence and the nexus between organized crime syndicates and terrorist groups; and (g) ensuring the protection of human rights and civil liberties in all measures taken to prevent and combat transnational organized crime. Available at https://sherloc.unodc.org/.

At the same time, SADC acts as a focal point for collective responses, including its new Integrated Strategy to Prevent and Combat Transnational Organized Crime. The Strategy was also supported by the Southern African Regional Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization and received technical input from the ENACT (Enhancing Africa's response to transnational organized crime) project and INTERPOL. Non-governmental and civil society efforts have included those of the Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding,[33] a consortium of research and policy organizations that has provided a forum for discussions on organized crime alongside wider conflict reduction efforts.[34]

D.   Enduring challenges

Despite all these efforts, a number of challenges and obstacles continue to impede attempts to comprehensively address organized crime in the region. While key policy and operational departments regularly lack the capacity and/or resources (analytical and investigative units, customs agencies, supervisory structures and so on), these issues do not necessarily constitute the main barriers to effective action. A UNODC-organized multi-stakeholder regional event, conducted in the course of preparing the present policy brief, that brought together policymakers and experts from different communities of practice (the security sector, non-governmental organizations, civil society, academia and policy units) consistently highlighted endemic corruption, the penetration of society and institutions by organized criminal groups, the networked and cross-border nature of modern organized crime and the speed at which criminal groups seized upon new economic opportunities, as core strategic challenges.

An additional, widely applicable challenge to building resilience to organized crime in the region rests with local and community-level vulnerability to the influence of organized criminal groups. This is particularly the case in strategic localities such as border crossing points, facilitation hubs and coastal (port) cities where such groups have managed to secure and consolidate their influence over time. These centres, in turn, remain critical to the ability of criminal networks to operate, recruit new members and invest their illicit profits, and constitute the main entry points for gradual infiltration into societies.

Policies and interventions will inevitably be delivered against a rapidly changing social, economic and geostrategic background, including as a result of pressures from climate change (including drought), foreign investment from regional or international actors and a rapid rise in technology (ranging from transport and communications infrastructure to new e-payment systems). The interlinkages between the region and international criminal supply chains are only likely to increase further, while some of the most harmful impacts will inevitably be felt within communities, particularly in marginalized and low-income groups, as well as vulnerable segments of the population, including women and girls.

---

[33] The project, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, provides avenues for African researchers and practitioners to engage with, inform and exchange analyses on approaches to achieving sustainable peace in Africa.

[34] There are also a number of initiatives focused on tackling crimes associated with and often enabling organized crime. These include the Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network of Southern Africa and networks of anti-corruption authorities, although some appeared to be inactive at the time of writing.

V. Opportunities: implications for regional cooperation and strategies

A. Overarching theme: shared knowledge as the basis for collective action

Analysing the main characteristics of – and responses to – organized crime in East and Southern Africa offers a mechanism for identifying corresponding opportunities for enhanced regional collaboration and/or national strategic frameworks. These are outlined below under the main principles of the UNODC Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit. The opportunities highlighted in this section are not exhaustive, but they do capture key areas and recommended actions. They build on the issues and dynamics identified in the previous sections of the present policy brief, while also reflecting the input of experts and stakeholders from across the region provided at the UNODC regional multi-stakeholder event. Moreover, it is recommended that a detailed national-level analysis of the problem be used as the basis for a tailored and targeted policy response.

B. PREVENT

1. Community-focused responses

A body of research and discussions with experts conducted in the context of the UNODC East and Southern Africa regional event have highlighted the importance of addressing the root causes of organized crime wherever possible. While this is clearly a long-term development challenge for many countries, there are nevertheless opportunities for a more targeted approach to both identifying and mitigating the harm caused by organized crime at the local and community levels, including by increasing the participation of civil society in crime prevention activities. As highlighted above, this approach is particularly relevant within the context of large urban areas acting as breeding and/or recruitment grounds for organized crime, including through "progression" by way of gangs. It is important to ensure that socioeconomic and behavioural dimensions are reflected in national strategies while establishing a regional dialogue (e.g. by means of a dedicated forum) aimed at comparing best practices and experiences in developing community-level programmes. This should involve a combination of local government (municipal)

actors, community leaders, civil society organizations and researchers, making sure to incorporate the voices and needs of those most affected.[35]

2. Addressing social marginalization and exclusion

Social marginalization and exclusion should be addressed with a focus on particular social or political groups that demonstrate a high level of participation in or support for organized crime. This includes groups whose support for or engagement in organized crime is connected to their inability to access employment and other opportunities or to participate in the prevailing politics. Such a dynamic is particularly relevant within the context of minority population groups who turn to organized crime as a means of gaining status and/or "getting ahead" in the absence of other opportunities. Understanding and addressing the linkages and pathways between such exclusion and/or lack of opportunity and migration, including through the assistance of smuggling networks, is also key to reducing the smuggling of migrants and the associated risks for people on the move (e.g. the risk of becoming victims of trafficking in persons).

3. Electoral campaign financing

The risks associated with electoral campaign financing, including the role of gangs and other organized criminal groups in harnessing support for political parties and the way in which elections are used as entry points for organized crime interests, need to be understood and addressed. This might include measures or initiatives such as establishing donor and beneficial ownership databases and/or requirements, as well as encouraging greater transparency around political financing, procurement and tendering processes, especially where large contracts are granted to campaign financiers. Here, too, civil society has an important role to play in monitoring contracts, promoting accountability processes and highlighting irregularities. Such an approach would also help to support the aim of reducing corruption connected to public procurement.

4. Improving understanding of economic and financial vulnerabilities

Discussions with experts and analysis highlighted opportunities to strengthen knowledge of the main channels, vehicles and forms of money-laundering across the region that are relevant to all forms of organized crime. This could include developing a typology of the primary methods and enablers employed by organized criminal groups to reinvest their proceeds in the formal economy, as well as of the key sectors targeted for this purpose (e.g. real estate, construction and/or large infrastructure projects).[36] A similar typology could be established with respect to the transfer of illicit funds across borders, including to offshore financial centres and through the use of informal value transfer services. Such an effort could also catalogue typical examples of activities of corrupt public officials as a means of helping to bolster preventive anti-corruption efforts. These typologies could be used as guidance for further ensuring the protection of those vulnerable sectors, centres and activities from organized crime infiltration.

---

[35] See, for instance, the regional examples analysed in Summer Walker and Américo Maluana, "Assessing resilience to organized crime at the community level" (Geneva, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022).

[36] See, for example, Eric Scheye, "Heart of Africa's organised crime: land, property and urbanisation, ENACT Policy Brief, No. 9 (May 2019).

C. PURSUE

1. Making full use of international treaties

The multi-stakeholder event highlighted the continued utility of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime as the main international instrument allowing international cooperation on the issue. Critical measures that could be used as the basis for cooperation include extradition (article 16), the transfer of sentenced persons (article 17), mutual legal assistance (article 18), joint investigations (article 19), the transfer of criminal proceedings (article 21) and law enforcement cooperation (article 27). To this end, and to ensure that the Convention can be used as the legal basis for cooperation at the regional level, all countries in the region should consider becoming parties to this international treaty.[37] Opportunities also exist to highlight the compatibility of the provisions of the Convention with Islamic law, which is of relevance to, inter alia, Djibouti, the Comoros and Somalia.[38]

2. Strengthening financial investigations

On a related theme, and despite some examples of success, regional experts have indicated that there appears to be a general need to strengthen the efficacy of and processes relating to joint investigations, not least given the extent to which organized criminal groups and their business span multiple jurisdictions (thus also supporting the "Promote" principle). Moreover, strengthening financial investigation and analysis capabilities and systems, including the ability of financial intelligence units to identify trends, methods, networks and strategic deficiencies, would provide the basis not only for a stronger response but also for joint action and asset recovery efforts. Undermining the ability of the most harmful groups to operate with impunity and the possibility for their members to enjoy the proceeds of their illicit activities should continue to constitute an important component of the region's strategic response, in particular if this is conducted alongside local prevention efforts.

3. Developing a regional mechanism for cooperation

Building on the previous recommendation, there would also be value in developing a regional mechanism for cooperation on organized crime, including specific high-harm crimes or activities (accepting that these may evolve over time). This could take the form of working groups built around existing networks such as the East Africa Association of Prosecutors and/or the Eastern Africa Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization (see above), also offering the opportunity for law enforcement practitioners and technical experts across the region to work together on real cases.

---

[37] At the time of writing, Somalia and South Sudan were not parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Although not covered in the present policy brief, the Congo is the only other country in Africa that is currently not a party to the Convention.

[38] The *Digest of Cases of International Cooperation in Criminal Matters involving the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime as a Legal Basis*, published by UNODC in 2021, identified only a few instances in which the Convention had been used for international cooperation by countries in the region and none related to cooperation within the region, thus further demonstrating its untapped potential.

D. PROTECT

1. Protective measures and awareness

Increasing protective measures and raising awareness of the risks associated with various forms of organized crime in the region will continue to constitute an important means of safeguarding potential victims from harm. Of particular significance in the region is abuse suffered at the hands of migrant smuggling and human trafficking networks, including abuse resulting from forced labour and servitude, which sit alongside the wider societal impacts of organized crime. Opportunities include strengthening victim identification and referral mechanisms and building safeguards around and within supply chains, major industries and labour sectors, such as through dialogue with business associations. Discussions with stakeholders also highlighted the importance of understanding the gendered dimension of organized crime, both with respect to victims, in particular women and girls, and with respect to those engaging in criminal activities. Such efforts are, once again, likely to require the input of local communities and associations with knowledge of existing vulnerabilities.

2. Ensuring respect of human rights

Although cross-cutting (e.g. within the context of activities under the "Pursue" principle, including investigation and detention), the protection of human rights should be specifically mentioned. Not only is this an obligation under international law, but adherence to such measures also helps to build legitimacy and public confidence in government approaches, while avoiding the risk of fuelling criminal – and indeed other violent non-State actor – grievance narratives, for example with respect to ill-treatment. Aside from ensuring assistance to and protection of victims and witnesses of organized crime, special protective measures should also be considered for whistle-blowers, offering further means of identifying abuses of power by public officials or corrupt connections to organized criminal groups at different societal levels.

E. PROMOTE

1. Collaborative approaches to research and analysis

Building on the above themes – and while the region also benefits from deep expertise across different communities – there would be clear value in establishing a regional e-platform through which knowledge and expertise could be easily shared and accessed, thus allowing the various stakeholders to operate as part of a connected network. Technology could play an important role, such as through the creation of a database that could act as a knowledge repository and allow for contributions from different communities of practice.[39] Such an initiative would also support efforts to produce joint analyses, as well as to consolidate and share best practices and success stories. Furthermore, such an approach could take the form of a physical institute, hub of excellence or joint training establishment (similar to an academy or staff college) that could offer a basis for specific

---

[39] The UNODC Sharing Electronic Resources and Laws on Crime (SHERLOC) knowledge management portal could be used as a starting point for the development of such a regional repository. See https://sherloc.unodc.org.

qualifications and certifications (e.g. relating to countering money-laundering) and act as a repository of knowledge in support of strategies and policies across the region.

2. Multisectoral strategies

Finally, States may wish to consider developing their own overarching multisectoral strategies against organized crime where these are not already in place. In a survey taken during the multi-stakeholder event, when asked which communities should be involved in organized crime responses, 92 per cent of the respondents highlighted the need for cross-sectoral collaboration, while 84 per cent of the respondents considered dedicated organized crime strategies very important in the fight against the phenomenon. Such strategies, particularly those in which gender, human rights and community-level objectives are clearly reflected, provide a framework for bringing together the types of objectives and approaches described in this section, as well as a mechanism for both whole-of-society responses and international cooperation.

In line with the UNODC Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit, such strategies provide a means to:

(a) Highlight key principles and objectives for countering the phenomenon;

(b) Identify the ways and means (including activities, tools and tactics) required to address organized crime across different sectors. This might involve the application and coordination of existing instruments and levers, or the development of new bespoke capabilities;

(c) Clarify the mechanisms and structures required to implement strategies. These might include multi-agency strategic analysis units tasked with developing an overall understanding of the problem and policy and planning units responsible for the coordination and overall delivery of strategies. Clear political ownership of organized crime policy through accountability to the relevant executive bodies will typically also be necessary;

(d) Describe the monitoring and evaluation processes that will be used to assess overall progress against key outcomes, as well as potential areas for improvement.

Figure IV.   Building blocks of enhanced strategic responses

Regional cooperation and initiatives

3

Strategy and policy frameworks

2

Knowledge and research

1

Enduring challenges