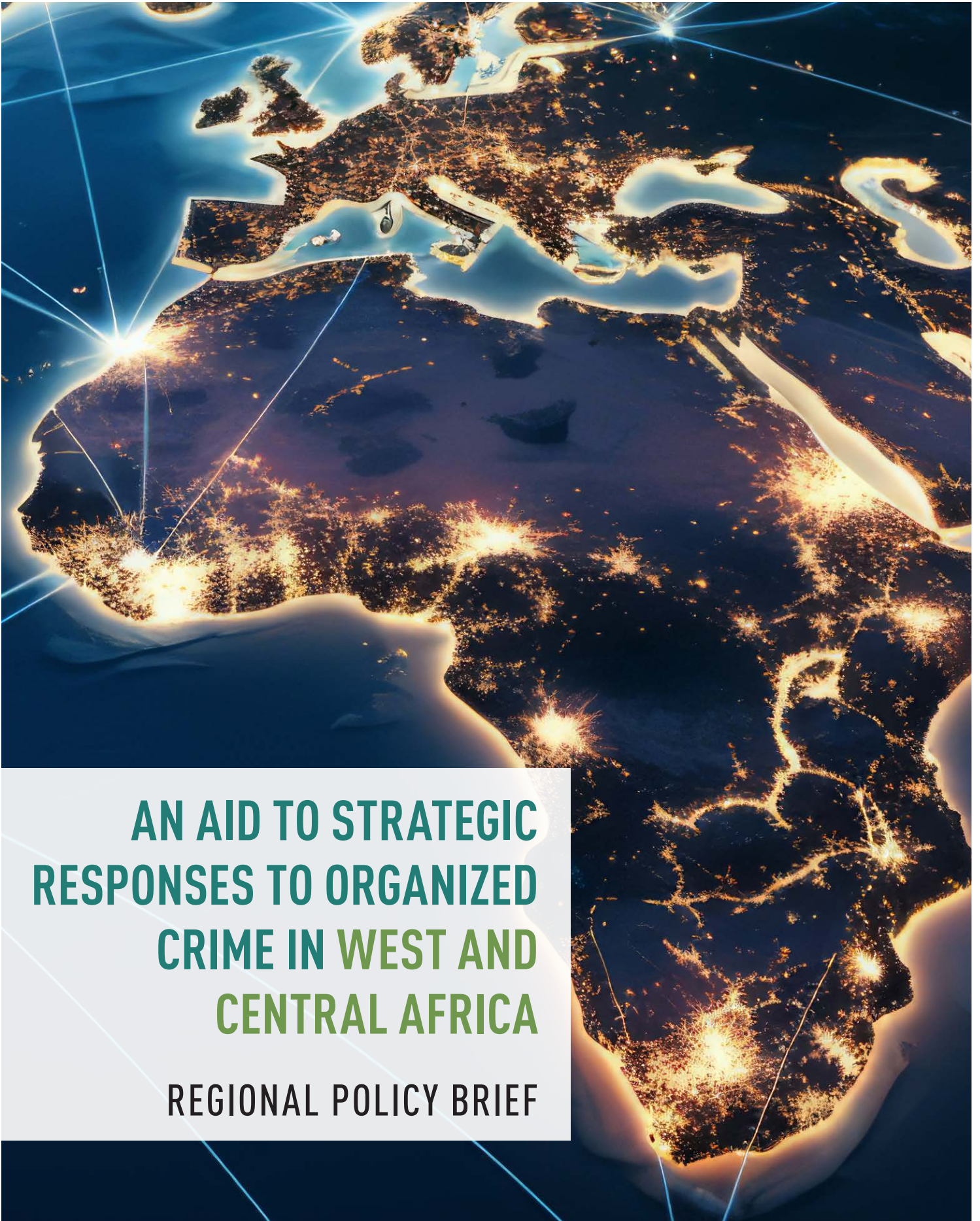




**UNODC**

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



**AN AID TO STRATEGIC  
RESPONSES TO ORGANIZED  
CRIME IN WEST AND  
CENTRAL AFRICA**

**REGIONAL POLICY BRIEF**



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME

# **An aid to strategic responses to organized crime in West and Central Africa**

REGIONAL POLICY BRIEF



UNITED NATIONS  
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## Executive summary

The present regional policy brief was produced as an aid for the development of strategies and response frameworks against organized crime in West and Central 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 (UNODC) in March 2022.

Available analyses of organized crime in the region reveal a number of overarching trends relating to key enablers, markets and actors:

- Organized criminal groups have strategic international ties and engage in a number of illicit activities, including drug trafficking, trafficking in persons, the smuggling of migrants, crimes that affect the environment, trafficking in falsified medical products, cybercrime and maritime crime. Border areas are often flashpoints for multiple tensions and disputes generated by the various trafficking activities that take place there, including over access to valuable natural resources.
- Corruption, one of the greatest challenges facing governments, undermines good governance, reducing the capacity of countries to deliver basic services and fight crime effectively, and distorts public policy, leading to the misallocation of resources and to market deficiencies, as well as undermining the population's trust in institutions. Corruption is a major contributing factor in attracting and facilitating the operations of organized criminal groups.
- Illicit financial flows and money-laundering remain key impediments to sustainable development and inclusive economic growth in West and Central Africa.
- Local and subregional conflicts fuelled by the proliferation of firearms afflict the region and are connected to the emergence of multiple violent non-State actors. Recent evidence points to linkages between those actors and organized crime.
- Women and young people are among those most affected by security threats in the region. Sexual and gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation are prevalent across the region, and organized criminal groups are overwhelmingly responsible for or involved in the violence and exploitation inflicted on women, boys and girls.

Overall, national strategy and policy frameworks in West and Central Africa remain fragmented. Where strategies exist, they tend to focus on specific forms of organized crime, such as drug trafficking, trafficking in persons or wildlife crime. Such approaches, while offering an important mechanism for shining a spotlight on individual threats, involve the risk of failing to address the role of key drivers and enablers, overall market dynamics and key actors in organized crime.

Knowledge of organized crime in the region has improved, although comprehensive organized crime assessments at the national level remain scarce. Future efforts to close current gaps should include analyses of structural drivers, the dynamics of criminal markets and actors, and the effectiveness of the responses of States to bolster resilience to organized crime. In this context, it should be emphasized that the ideal evidence base for a strategy is a dedicated and comprehensive analysis of organized crime dynamics in the national context.

Available analyses of organized crime trends in the region, combined with the main findings and recommendations stemming from the UNODC multi-stakeholder event in West and Central Africa, point to key strategic opportunities and considerations that are useful for developing comprehensive regional and national strategies to tackle this phenomenon. Those opportunities and considerations are summarized below and categorized under the main principles identified in the UNODC Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit for Developing High-impact Strategies:

- It remains crucial to strengthen the focus on preventing organized crime from infiltrating communities, the economy and political institutions, including by addressing drivers of and pathways to organized crime recruitment, promoting the effective implementation of evidence-based policies, providing alternatives to engagement or re-engagement in organized crime, improving the understanding of financial vulnerabilities and building capacity to block attempts at infiltrating the licit economy (PREVENT).
- Efforts should be made to incorporate international and regional obligations, standards and commitments into national frameworks in order to pursue organized criminal groups more effectively. Strengthening financial investigation and operational capabilities, including for the identification, recovery, seizure and confiscation of assets, should remain a key priority alongside the training and technical upskilling of law enforcement officers and the judiciary (PURSUE).
- Tailored approaches are necessary to protect the most vulnerable members of society. Where not already in place, national mechanisms should be established to ensure that victims, witnesses and whistle-blowers receive assistance and protection, including during the investigation, prosecution and adjudication of organized crime cases. Risk awareness campaigns, conducted in partnership with civil society and the private sector, are a valuable tool for promoting societal understanding of the problem and reducing vulnerabilities (PROTECT).
- The mobilization of actors across civil society, the private sector, the media, academia and research institutes is crucial for combating organized crime more effectively. Enhanced judicial and law enforcement cooperation remains vital in the fight against organized crime and should encompass intelligence-sharing, border surveillance strategies and asset recovery, as well as the replication of successful initiatives, such as the use of liaison officers and magistrates and the establishment of transnational crime units, joint airport task forces and port control units (PROMOTE).

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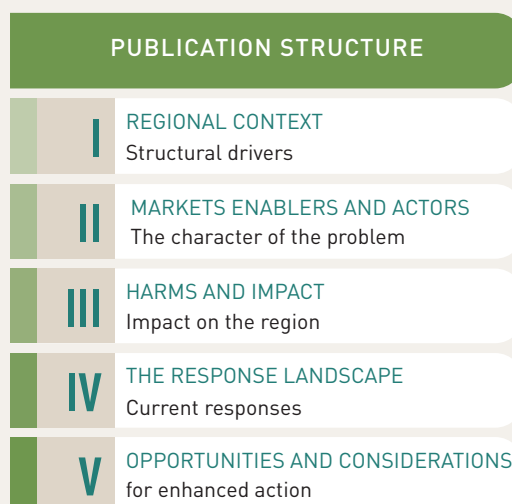
## Overview and approach

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 March 2022 and which brought together experts and representatives from across West and Central Africa.<sup>1</sup> 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, which is required as the basis for tailored policy responses.

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 March 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.



<sup>1</sup>For the purposes of the present policy brief, “West and Central Africa” includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, the Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.



# I. Regional context: structural drivers of organized crime

Africa is experiencing unprecedented levels of economic and social transformation. The African continent as a whole can look forward to further demographic and economic growth, and its prosperity is intrinsically linked to the full use of its young people's potential. Countries in the West and Central Africa region can leverage numerous opportunities to strengthen resilience to the challenges that they face – including organized crime – thereby fostering stability, attracting investment and fuelling a virtuous circle that will lead to higher levels of human security, economic prosperity and social development and cohesion. If not harnessed to create positive change, these same factors could lead to increasing levels of unrest, crime and violence, widening inequalities and aggravating vulnerabilities that are likely to inflict the most harm on those who are already disadvantaged and marginalized, as well as more broadly affecting entire societies.

To a large extent, organized crime remains deeply connected with sociopolitical conflicts or post-conflict situations prevailing in the region.<sup>2</sup> Organized criminal groups have taken advantage of fragile institutional and enforcement frameworks and weakening State control in crisis zones to carry out their illicit activities, thus contributing to further spiralling instability and rendering societies more vulnerable.

Border areas are often flashpoints for multiple tensions and disputes generated by trafficking and conflicts over valuable natural resources, including pastures, metals, minerals and oil. As in other regions of the world, cross-border freedom of movement, in particular within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has also created opportunities for organized criminal groups to expand their markets and operations. At the same time, that freedom of movement has led to diminished demand for certain services, such as the smuggling of migrants within ECOWAS; beyond its borders, however, migrant smugglers are still widely used to enable people

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of such conflicts and post-conflict situations in recent decades include violent conflicts and civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone; political violence in Guinea and Guinea-Bissau; intermittent secessionist agitations in the Casamance region of Senegal and in Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia and Nigeria; and the spread of armed groups in the Sahel region, in particular in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger.

to reach North African countries when regular travel options are not available to them.<sup>3</sup> Within and outside ECOWAS, migrants continue to face the risk of being trafficked, in particular for forced labour and sexual exploitation.

The region's geostrategic location, well-connected international airports (such as those in Abidjan and Dakar), porous borders and extensive coastline have all contributed to establishing its position as a transnational hub for the movement of illicit goods. The expansion of seaports along the coast has turned a number of port cities across the region into essential parts of international trade, while criminal businesses are also flourishing. In this context, "home-grown" organized criminal groups in West Africa are playing an increasingly independent role in bringing such illicit goods, including drugs, into the region, as well as in producing them.<sup>4</sup> The same factors have also contributed to the region's vulnerability to other forms of organized crime, such as maritime crime. The Gulf of Guinea has become one of the world's hotspots for maritime crime, with pirate groups operating in that area becoming more sophisticated and increasingly able to conduct attacks against international vessels in deeper waters.<sup>5</sup>

Past and current conflicts and tensions mean that a large number of weapons are available in the region, fuelling both trafficking and further violence and instability. As clear links are emerging between drugs and firearms trafficking across the continent, it is also apparent that terrorist and violent armed groups active in the region are further driving the demand for illicit arms.<sup>6</sup> The links between the availability and misuse of small arms and the phenomenon of gender-based violence are also well established.<sup>7</sup>

The challenges facing the region are often compounded by corruption and weak rule of law, and by the limited capacity of law enforcement and the criminal justice system to identify, disrupt and prosecute certain forms of organized crime. Such is the case, for instance, for cybercrime, as a limited number of countries in the region are equipped with national cybersecurity policies, legal and regulatory frameworks or computer emergency response teams, as well as for trafficking in waste, including in hazardous waste, which is one of the many forms of crime that affect the environment in West and Central Africa.

<sup>3</sup> Regular movement within West Africa is facilitated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment. As noted in a [2021 report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\) Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#), "migrant smugglers and facilitators are therefore used within the subregion in situations where the person travelling does not have valid travel documents, enters via an informal border crossing, where the Member State in question is not implementing the Free Movement Protocols, or when there are security issues" (UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants, "Key findings on the characteristics of migrant smuggling in West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean" (2021), p. 1).

<sup>4</sup> On this topic, and for an in-depth analysis of drug markets, including those affecting the region, see [World Drug Report 2021](#) (United Nations publication, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Curtis Bell, [Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea: A Cost Analysis for Coastal States](#), report by Stable Seas (December 2021).

<sup>6</sup> See [Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020](#) (United Nations publication, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, [Security Council resolution 2220 \(2015\)](#).

## II. Markets, enablers and actors

West and Central Africa is a region of transit and destination for various illicit goods and also provides fertile ground for the provision of illicit services by organized criminal groups. These illicit markets are the result of a complex combination of endogenous and exogenous factors, including the social, geopolitical and economic forces mentioned in section I above. An examination of different organized crime markets and activities reveals a number of overarching trends relating to key organized crime enablers, markets and actors.

### A. Market dynamics and networks

Weak governance, social and political vulnerabilities, conflicts and the consequences of climate change, combined with the geostrategic importance of the region, its abundant natural resources and growing economies and populations, make West and Central Africa particularly vulnerable to organized crime. Illicit activities also exploit the erosion of the redistributive capacities of States and the socioeconomic divide in the region. Those dynamics have not been lost on organized criminal groups, who are always quick to exploit vulnerabilities to maximize their illicit profits. Research highlights that such groups are mostly active at the national or regional level, although they maintain strategic international ties, in particular to networks based in the Middle East and North Africa, South-East Asia and Latin America. Some sources suggest that groups based outside the region are increasingly dependent on partnerships with criminal associates operating in the region to conduct illicit business.<sup>8</sup>

### B. Corruption as a persistent enabler

Recent surveys show that the vast majority of people in Africa believe that institutional corruption is worsening, with police corruption cited as the most acute problem.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and Enhancing Africa's response to transnational organized crime (ENACT) project, "[Overview of serious and organized crime in Central Africa](#)" (September 2018).

<sup>9</sup> See Christiaan Keulder, "Africans see growing corruption, poor government response, but fear retaliation if they speak out", [Afrobarometer, Dispatch No. 488](#), 10 November 2021. According to a survey conducted in 34 African States between July 2019 and July 2021, almost 6 in 10 Africans believed that corruption had increased in their respective countries over the previous year, including 40 per cent indicating that it had increased significantly. Moreover, the majority of respondents perceived corruption to be worsening, with the notable exceptions of those from Benin and the United Republic of Tanzania, where 70 and 77 per cent of respondents, respectively, believed that corruption had decreased over the previous year.

Corruption remains one of the greatest challenges that West and Central African States need to face, as the integrity of those States and public trust in their Governments are at stake. Corruption undermines and distorts public policy, leading to the misallocation of resources and to market deficiencies, as well as being a major enabler of the operations of organized criminal groups.

### C. Illicit financial flows

Given their multidimensional and transnational nature, significant domestic resources that are illicitly acquired and channelled out of States pose a challenge to development throughout the region.<sup>10</sup> Although illicit financial flows remain a key impediment to sustainable development and inclusive economic growth in West and Central Africa, the lack of relevant data enables only a limited understanding of both the size of estimated flows and the policies required to address them. Owing to the informal nature of economies in the region, a significant number of financial transactions are not subject to institutional control, and money-laundering remains instrumental for organized criminal operations. Low levels of financial inclusion and limited access to the formal banking system further contribute to creating an environment that allows criminal economies to flourish, as most economic transactions are carried out in cash, or through *hawala* for long-distance or cross-border transactions.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, although countries in the region have been working to strengthen their frameworks for the identification, seizure, confiscation and management of proceeds of criminal activities, it remains challenging to carry out those actions in practice, often because of a lack of sufficient capacity.

### D. Linkages between organized crime and violent non-State actors

The security and development of Africa are jeopardized by local and subregional conflicts fuelled by the proliferation of firearms and ammunition in the region, in particular in the Sahel, following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and the emergence of multiple violent extremist groups, such as Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin region and The Organization of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb in the Sahel.

Reports show that organized crime and non-State armed groups in the region, including those involved in terrorist activities, are linked in several ways. For example, non-State armed groups across the region, including in the Sahel, fund their operations through organized criminal activities, including drug trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, controlling illegal mining sites and extorting gold through illegal taxation.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup>The African Union has increasingly stressed the importance of addressing corruption and illicit financial flows. See, for example, the work of the [African Union Advisory Board on Corruption](https://anticorruption.au.int/) (available at <https://anticorruption.au.int/>).

<sup>11</sup>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Illicit Financial Flows: The Economy of Illicit Trade in West Africa* (Paris, 2021). The term *hawala* refers to a money transfer mechanism operating as a closed system with corridors linked to family or a specific tribe or ethnicity. See, for example, Financial Action Task Force, *The Role of Hawala and Other Similar Service Providers in Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing* (October 2013).

<sup>12</sup>See, for example, INTERPOL and ENACT, *Illegal Gold Mining in Central Africa*, Technical report (May 2021); Financial Action Task Force and Intergovernmental Action Group against Money-Laundering in West Africa, “[Terrorist financing in West Africa](#)” (October 2013); and the [report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel \(S/2021/1091\)](#).

## Organized crime landscape in West and Central Africa



**Drug trafficking.** Trafficking in cocaine continues to be a major issue for West and Central Africa, and other drug markets also pose an increasing threat. For example, the region has become a manufacturing hub for methamphetamine, mainly destined for markets in East and South-East Asia.



**Cybercrime.** Organized criminal groups are increasingly exploiting the Internet for profit. Online fraud and extortion attacks are on the rise in the region.



**Arms trafficking.** The violence affecting the region is inextricably linked with the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, which are widely available, including as a result of multiple conflicts in the region. Terrorist and violent armed groups active in the region fuel the demand for illicit arms.



**Trafficking in falsified medical products.** Africa is the continent most affected by the falsification of medicines and other medical products, which can endanger health, prolong illness, kill, promote antimicrobial resistance and the spread of drug-resistant infections, and undermine confidence in health systems, while generating significant income for organized criminal groups.



**Piracy and maritime crime.** The Gulf of Guinea remains one of the most dangerous waterways in the world, with incidents in the area accounting for more kidnappings of seafarers for ransom than in any other area in the world.



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.



**Crimes that affect the environment.** West and Central Africa is one of the regions most affected by such crimes. Wildlife trafficking, including trafficking in rhinoceros horns, elephant tusks and pangolins, crimes in the fisheries sector, waste trafficking, and illegal mining and trafficking in metals and minerals cause immeasurable harm to the health, well-being, development, safety and security of the region and its people, as well as to the biodiversity of our planet.



**Human traffickers and smugglers of migrants.** These pose a significant threat to the security and development of West and Central African countries and their people. The region is a place of origin, transit and destination for victims of human trafficking and for smuggled migrants, with both groups being a source of significant profit for organized criminal groups involved in such crimes.

*Note:* The findings and analysis presented in the figure are based on information from UNODC publications, including the *World Wildlife Crime Report: Trafficking in Protected Species*, the *World Drug Report 2021* and the *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020*.





## III. Harms and impact

### A. Undermining regional stability

Despite national, regional and international efforts, the security situation in West and Central Africa remains complex. Violent non-State actors, including those involved in terrorist activities, and organized criminal groups continue to expand the scope of their operations, in particular within and into areas already affected by violence and instability, such as the Sahel, the Lake Chad basin and the Gulf of Guinea. Linkages between terrorism and organized crime, including the employment of organized crime tactics and engagement in criminal activities by terrorist groups, represent a key threat to the security and development of West and Central Africa.

### B. A threat to governance and prosperity

Organized crime, which exploits and benefits from situations of instability, violence and poverty, poses a clear threat to regional governance, as well as to the prosperity of the region and its people. Weak rule of law and weak criminal justice systems, in particular in conflict-ridden countries, seriously undermine governance and accountability. Corruption and money-laundering, which are embedded in the modus operandi of organized criminal groups and act as key enablers of organized criminal activity, cripple institutions, erode public trust and frustrate the economic aspirations of millions of people, and criminal markets curtail economic opportunities and licit revenues. In turn, a lack of opportunities and a sense of frustration drive more young people into organized crime, making them more receptive to both criminal and terrorist narratives. Women and young people are among those most heavily affected by security threats in the region, and the lack of protection systems for those most in need deepens the distrust between the population and the security and justice sectors.

### C. Depleting natural resources and biodiversity

The wealth of natural resources in West and Central Africa, including the incredibly diverse flora and fauna and the abundance of metals and minerals, has not gone unnoticed by organized criminal groups, which have long profited from crimes such as wildlife trafficking, crimes in the fisheries sector, illegal deforestation and timber trafficking,

and illegal mining and trafficking in metals and minerals, to name but a few examples. These activities not only have lasting, and sometimes irreversible, consequences for the region's resources and ecosystems, but also limit opportunities for income generation (e.g. from tourism and the sustainable use of resources), create insecurity and instability and potentially compromise public health. Protecting biodiversity and natural resources from the effects of organized crime is a key step towards promoting economic, social and environmental sustainability.

#### D. A threat to the enjoyment of human rights for all

Organized crime has a devastating impact on the health and well-being of people across West and Central Africa and can contribute to adverse effects on the enjoyment of human rights. With the expansion of the illicit drug market in the region, many people across West and Central Africa, in particular disaffected youth and those living in rapidly urbanizing areas, are at increased risk of developing drug use disorders and associated health problems, such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and hepatitis C. This worrying trend is exacerbated by limited or non-existent access to health care, which affects millions of people in Africa, and by the fact that the majority of medicines and medical products have to be imported, which has led to increasing levels of corruption and organized crime targeting medical products and health systems.<sup>13</sup>

Organized crime also exploits vulnerabilities as part of its core business operations in a broader sense. For example, young people, in particular those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are prime targets for recruitment into organized crime. Organized criminal groups are also overwhelmingly responsible for or involved in violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, as well as the exploitation of women, boys and girls through trafficking in persons and online exploitation.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the region and its people have long dealt with the consequences of crimes that affect the environment, such as the dumping of waste (including hazardous waste), which causes environmental disasters of immeasurable proportions, along with serious harm to health and land and marine resources, and endangers the livelihoods of entire communities.

<sup>13</sup> World Health Organization, *Primary Health Care on the Road to Universal Health Coverage: 2019 Global Monitoring Report – Executive Summary* (Geneva, 2019); and the statistical database of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, available at <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/EN/>.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the UNODC *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*, which indicates that boys, girls and women are the main victims of human trafficking in West Africa and that the majority of victims in the region are being trafficked for the purpose of forced labour. See also the advocacy note entitled “[Protecting children from grave violations in West and Central Africa](#)”, published by the United Nations Children's Fund in November 2021, which highlights that, since 2016, West and Central Africa has been the region in the world with the largest number of children verified as victims of sexual violence, as well as recruited and used by non-State armed groups.

## IV. The response landscape: strategies, policies and institutions

Current responses to organized crime within the region can be placed within a number of overarching categories of activities, which are outlined below.

### A. Holistic approaches to organized crime

Strong, transparent and accountable institutions, including law enforcement and judicial systems, are key enablers of good governance and socioeconomic progress. In turn, creating economic opportunities, increasing social integration and addressing marginalization inflict significant losses on organized crime and criminal economies, thus reinforcing the rule of law. Both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063 of the African Union have included security and development dimensions in their objectives and recognized their interdependence in efforts to combat organized crime.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, ECOWAS is currently working to strengthen its legal framework against transnational organized crime, on the basis of an understanding of this phenomenon as a key challenge to both security and development.<sup>16</sup>

At the national level, comprehensive strategies against organized crime can provide a solid framework to foster such integrated responses, combining the effective pursuit of organized criminal groups with a strong focus on prevention and the protection of the most vulnerable, through enhanced cooperation and partnerships, including with civil society organizations and the private sector.<sup>17</sup> Against the backdrop of its Strategic Vision for Africa 2030, and relying on the Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit and the present regional policy brief, UNODC is renewing efforts to promote such inclusive frameworks, with a view to sustaining the aspirations of Africa towards a safer future for its people, governments and institutions.

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<sup>15</sup> Key goals in this context include Sustainable Development Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda (Peace, justice and strong institutions) and aspirations 3 (An Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law) and 4 (A peaceful and secure Africa) of Agenda 2063 of the African Union.

<sup>16</sup> ECOWAS is currently elaborating a political declaration and common position against transnational organized crime, as well as a supplementary act and a strategic plan against transnational organized crime (2022–2026).

<sup>17</sup> This was also highlighted at the UNODC multi-stakeholder event on strategies against organized crime for West and Central Africa, held in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, on 9 and 10 March 2022, in the course of preparing the present policy brief.

## B. Strategic and policy frameworks

In general, strategy and policy frameworks in West and Central Africa remain fragmented, despite developments towards the formulation of coherent responses to the problem of organized crime. Where strategies and action plans exist, they tend to focus on specific forms of organized crime or related offences, such as drug trafficking, trafficking in persons or crimes that affect the environment, or they tackle the fundamental enablers of organized crime, such as money-laundering and corruption (a trend that admittedly goes far beyond the region).<sup>18</sup> Such approaches offer an important mechanism for shining a spotlight on and comprehensively addressing individual threats and harms, but also involve the risk of failing to capture cross-cutting drivers relevant to or underpinning all forms of organized crime that only a comprehensive strategy against the problem could tackle.<sup>19</sup>

## C. Regional cooperation and initiatives

Enhancing regional and international cooperation remains vital to countering transnational organized crime in West and Central Africa and beyond. The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols thereto provide a solid basis, including through a toolkit of measures, for enhancing such cooperation, including at the regional level, in the prevention, investigation, prosecution and adjudication of transnational organized crime.<sup>20</sup> All countries covered in the present analysis, with the exception of the Congo, are parties to the Convention, although challenges in implementing it effectively at the national level persist throughout the region. Overcoming such challenges will be the core objective of the observations produced by the Mechanism for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention and its Protocols in the coming years.<sup>21</sup>

In recent times, there have been notable attempts at fostering regional dialogue and cooperation and delivering initiatives to combat various forms of organized crime, including the ongoing efforts within ECOWAS highlighted in this policy brief and those

<sup>18</sup> Strategies and action plans include the “National policy and strategy for combating money-laundering and financing of terrorism” (2018) of Benin, the “National strategy and plan of action to combat poaching and wildlife crime” of the Central African Republic, the “National cybersecurity strategy and action plan 2020–2024” of the Gambia, the “National action plan on human trafficking 2022–2026” of Nigeria, the “National drug control master plan 2021–2025” of Nigeria and the “National strategy to combat corruption 2020–2024” of Senegal. All of the relevant strategies found are available from the strategies database in the UNODC Sharing Electronic Resources and Laws on Crime (SHERLOC) knowledge management portal (<https://sherloc.unodc.org/>).

<sup>19</sup> UNODC supports countries in the development of strategies against both organized crime and corruption. The Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit for Developing High-impact Strategies is the primary UNODC tool for the development of strategies to combat organized crime, and UNODC has also issued a publication on anti-corruption strategies: *National Anti-Corruption Strategies: A Practical Guide for Development and Implementation* (Vienna, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> These measures include extradition (article 16), 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).

<sup>21</sup> The *Mechanism for the Review of the Implementation of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols thereto* is a peer review process that was launched in October 2020 by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention in its [resolution 10/1](#). The Mechanism aims to support States parties to the Convention and its Protocols in the effective implementation of those instruments, as well as to help States parties identify and substantiate specific needs for technical assistance and promote international cooperation.

undertaken in the wider context of the African Union.<sup>22</sup> The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) has ventured more recently than ECOWAS into the realm of security cooperation<sup>23</sup> and therefore holds great potential for further integration in this area, including through the adoption of a comprehensive framework against organized crime.

#### D. Enduring challenges

Organized crime is constantly evolving and adapting to new opportunities, such as those recently presented by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. In order to effectively address the pervasiveness of organized crime in West and Central African countries, it is crucial to rely on solid evidence and a shared understanding of the structural drivers of organized crime, the dynamics of criminal markets and the actors involved, as well as the effectiveness of State responses in bolstering resilience to this phenomenon. In terms of regional trends, key initiatives such as the European Multidisciplinary Platform against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) programme, supported by the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), have contributed to developing a common understanding of the issue,<sup>24</sup> and UNODC has been assisting States in this area through the development of transnational organized crime threat assessments.<sup>25</sup> Efforts at the regional level need to be sustained and assessments continuously updated; meanwhile, in-depth analyses at the national level are largely unavailable.<sup>26</sup> Where possible, future efforts to formulate such analyses should include an attempt to capture the drivers and enablers, including socioeconomic vulnerabilities, that fuel organized crime in a specific context.

In a world of deeply entrenched criminal economies, it is vital for West and Central African States to engage in inter- and intraregional cooperation, including knowledge-sharing and exchanges of best practices, to enable them to tackle the most pressing challenges facing them, namely, organized crime, terrorism and violence. The effective implementation of the Organized Crime Convention provides States parties with essential tools to enhance such cooperation against organized crime, further supported by continental and regional mechanisms and initiatives in the context of the African Union, ECOWAS and ECCAS. Although crucial developments towards the reinforcement of relevant frameworks are under way and cross-border cooperation has significantly

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the African Union Plan of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention (2019–2023). Well-established mechanisms within ECOWAS include the Intergovernmental Action Group against Money-Laundering in West Africa, and UNODC has also supported the establishment of a number of other relevant networks, including the Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network for West Africa, the Network of West African Central Authorities and Prosecutors against Organized Crime, the Regional Judicial Platform of the Sahel countries (Sahel Judicial Platform) and the Network of National Anti-Corruption Institutions in West Africa. Other notable initiatives include the Niamey joint declaration on combating the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons, adopted in March 2018 by 13 ministers of the interior and of foreign affairs from West Africa and Europe, together with the European Union and other international organizations.

<sup>23</sup> The Economic Community of Central African States established the Council for Peace and Security in 1999 as its main structure for the promotion, maintenance and consolidation of peace and security in Central Africa, whereas ECOWAS had started its work on subregional security in 1978, with the adoption of its Protocol on Non-Aggression, followed in 1981 by the Protocol relating to Mutual Assistance on Defence.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, INTERPOL and ENACT, “Overview of serious and organized crime in Central Africa” and ENACT, *Africa Organised Crime Index 2021: Evolution of Crime in a COVID World – A Comparative Analysis of Organised Crime in Africa, 2019–2021* (2021).

<sup>25</sup> The most recent UNODC transnational organized crime threat assessments for West and Central Africa were published in 2011 and 2013, respectively. UNODC is currently developing updated threat assessments for the Sahel countries.

<sup>26</sup> A notable exception is the current effort, in partnership with UNODC, towards the development of a comprehensive transnational organized crime threat assessment for Nigeria.

improved in recent decades, the number of cases successfully brought against the most dangerous organized criminal groups in the region remains low. Continuing to enhance judicial cooperation, intelligence-sharing among law enforcement agencies and exchanges of information through formal and informal channels remains of paramount importance to allow for a more effective criminal justice response. This could include a more sustained use of available subregional mechanisms linked to INTERPOL, such as the West African Police Information System.<sup>27</sup>

The full involvement of local communities and civil society at large often represents the missing link for the effective functioning of frameworks against organized crime. Such involvement might mean engaging key local actors and organizations during the development of relevant measures, with a view to understanding vulnerabilities and galvanizing support towards effective implementation of those measures. In this context, it is also crucial to encourage the involvement of women, who are uniquely positioned to be agents of change but whose potential remains greatly underutilized, as well as to empower children and young people to unleash their transformative potential. These considerations are essential for the formulation of responses to organized crime that are able to address exclusion and discrimination, and at the same time to effectively challenge harmful sociocultural norms relating to gender. The involvement of all relevant parts of society, including women and young people, serves as the cornerstone for the formulation of frameworks and policies that are truly gender-sensitive and compliant with human rights.

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<sup>27</sup> UNODC works to support States in this undertaking. Under the framework of the project entitled “Organized crime: West African response to trafficking”, UNODC facilitates the joint operations of transnational crime units and their connection to the West African Police Information System and other secure police communication systems, such as the I-24/7 of INTERPOL.

## V. Opportunities: implications for regional cooperation and strategies

The analysis of the main characteristics of and responses to organized crime in West and Central Africa offers a mechanism for identifying corresponding opportunities for enhanced regional collaboration and national strategic frameworks. In this section, those opportunities are organized under the four main principles of the UNODC Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit. The opportunities highlighted in this section do not constitute an exhaustive list, but they do capture key areas and recommended actions. They build on the issues and dynamics identified in the previous sections of this policy brief and reflect the input provided by experts and stakeholders from across the region at the UNODC regional multi-stakeholder event.

### A. PREVENT

#### 1. Addressing drivers of and pathways to organized crime recruitment

Targeted grass-roots prevention programmes that rely on the active participation of civil society and local communities at every stage from the outset are key to addressing drivers of recruitment into organized criminal groups. For instance, the promotion of sustainable livelihood programmes, with a focus on youth and women, is likely to result in a reduction of local drug production and trafficking. Such efforts might involve a redefinition of State presence and restoration or an enhancement of key State functions to encompass the provision of essential social services, comprehensive school curricula covering crime prevention and criminal justice issues, and improved safety and security through accountable law enforcement institutions, as well as effective oversight mechanisms, including through the judicial system. This is likely to require tailored interventions that take into account the diversity of cultures and traditions (e.g. those of nomadic peoples) in border areas, where State authority is often more fragile, as well as accounting for the needs of those living in informal urban contexts, including refugees and displaced persons.

## 2. Ensuring the effective implementation of evidence-based policies.

This is key to strengthening the integrity and transparency of government institutions, both at the local and national levels. Academia, civil society, the private sector and international and regional organizations are key partners for the development of evidence-based approaches and for facilitating the exchange and implementation of good practices, which is crucial for tackling some of the most pressing threats currently faced by West and Central African countries, such as trafficking in drugs and falsified medical products, maritime crime, trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling, and crimes that affect the environment. National research capacity should also be built up in order to guide policy development and programming in anti-corruption efforts, combating cybercrime and integrating gender-responsive approaches. The establishment of a West and Central Africa crime observatory, ideally as part of and building on existing initiatives, could play a critical role in generating reliable data and evidence-based analysis for policy and action.<sup>28</sup>

## 3. Providing alternatives to engagement or re-engagement in organized crime, including through the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders

For example, specific resources should be devoted to psychosocial support and vocational training within detention and correctional facilities in order to provide offenders with the skills required to play a meaningful role in their communities upon release. Lessons could be learned from programmes for countering violent extremism and for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration in the region that have pursued similar objectives. Such initiatives should be multisectoral and multilevel, involving communities and religious leaders as appropriate, and should include tailored measures for children and youth recruited and exploited by organized criminal groups.

## 4. Improving understanding of financial vulnerabilities and capacity in order to block attempts at infiltrating the licit economy

To prevent the diversion of resources from the licit economy and the corrosive influence of money-laundering, States should send an unequivocal signal by fostering transparency and improving the local management of public finances. An enhanced understanding of the size of illicit flows, of sectors that are particularly vulnerable to such tactics, and of the methods employed by organized criminal groups to reinvest their proceeds is required in order to develop tailored measures to address those issues. Such measures will most likely need to take into account the cash-based nature of economies in the region. Furthermore, States should consider establishing safe mechanisms for the reporting of local corruption incidents, as well as promoting, protecting and supporting investigative journalism.

<sup>28</sup> The UNODC Centre of Excellence for West and Central Africa, established in Abidjan in 2022, could become a vehicle for such an initiative. The Centre currently functions as a regional hub to strengthen the implementation of the Organized Crime Convention, including through acting on the observations produced by its Implementation Review Mechanism. The Centre also serves as a regional platform for technical assistance and international cooperation in the fight against transnational organized crime.



## B. PURSUE

### 1. Implementing and making full use of international and regional treaties

As highlighted during the UNODC multi-stakeholder event, relevant international treaties, such as the Organized Crime Convention and the United Nations Convention against Corruption, and regional and subregional instruments<sup>29</sup> are crucial in fighting transnational organized crime more effectively. All countries in West and Central Africa are parties to the Convention against Corruption, and it is recommended that the Congo consider becoming a party to the Organized Crime Convention so that both instruments can be used as the legal basis for cooperation among all countries in the region. At the same time, challenges in the effective national implementation of international and regional commitments persist, leaving the full potential of those instruments unrealized. The effective engagement of West and Central African States in the implementation review mechanisms for the Organized Crime Convention and the Convention against Corruption (with the former mechanism currently picking up pace and the latter well under way) and the implementation by those States of relevant observations and recommendations will be crucial to overcoming such challenges and enhancing frameworks and measures to combat organized crime more effectively.

### 2. Pursuing the proceeds of organized crime

As organized crime is mainly motivated by financial gain, it is crucial to strengthen financial investigation and operational capabilities, including those of financial intelligence units to address the informal economy, in order to increase the number of successful investigations and prosecutions of organized criminal groups. Where not already in place, specific frameworks and measures need to be established in order to facilitate asset recovery, including the timely identification, tracing, freezing, seizure and confiscation of assets, as well as the effective management and disposal of confiscated assets, which could encompass their reuse for public or social purposes.

### 3. Strengthening strategic investigation and prosecution

Training and technical upskilling of law enforcement officials and the judiciary remain essential components of all successful strategies against organized crime, in particular for making full practical use of tools and measures included in legislation and other relevant frameworks, as well as enhancing intelligence-led law enforcement detection and investigative capabilities, including the use of special investigative techniques. Training should also be focused on strengthening capacity for conducting complex investigations, including in cybercrime cases and other cases connected to the use of new markets and technologies (including cryptocurrencies) for criminal purposes.

<sup>29</sup> Examples include the [African Union Convention on Cross-Border Cooperation \(Niamey Convention\)](#), the [ECOWAS Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters](#) and the [ECOWAS Convention on Extradition](#). There are also a number of continental and regional instruments relevant to countering activities connected to organized crime, such as the [African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection](#), which remains open for ratification. States Members of the United Nations are currently elaborating a comprehensive international convention on countering the use of information and communications technologies for criminal purposes, which is intended to strengthen responses and coordination at the international level.

## C. PROTECT

Victims and vulnerable individuals require protection from organized crime.

### 1. Promoting risk awareness

This requires regular information and public awareness campaigns in support of victims, witnesses and whistle-blowers, ideally undertaken in partnership with civil society organizations, academia, the media (including social media) and the private sector. Potential victims of organized crime would benefit from understanding the risks and harms associated with certain behaviours. For example, buying medicines from unofficial vendors might result in the consumption of falsified products manufactured or trafficked by organized criminal groups, which not only translates into a contribution to the profits of organized crime, but could also cause serious harm to patients or fail to treat the diseases for which the medical products were intended. For such awareness campaigns to be effective, States need to ensure that, where relevant and appropriate, the required products and services are both available and affordable so that people do not seek illegal alternatives. Similarly, national victim referral mechanisms and whistle-blowing mechanisms (e.g. helplines, websites and apps) should be advertised and made available to all.

### 2. Protecting vulnerable individuals from harm in high-risk contexts

States should ensure that victims, witnesses and whistle-blowers are protected and assisted, including during the investigation, prosecution and adjudication of organized crime cases. To this end, States that have not yet developed witness protection programmes should consider doing so. As relatively few countries in the region have national cybersecurity policies and legal and regulatory frameworks, particular attention should be given to victims and witnesses of cybercrime, in particular in relation to online child sexual exploitation.

### 3. Supporting and compensating victims of organized crime

In line with the Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, victims should be treated with compassion and respect for their dignity and are entitled to prompt redress for the harm that they have suffered, through access to the criminal justice system, reparation and relevant services (including social services, such as physical and mental health care) to assist in their recovery. Victim-centred approaches should also prioritize reintegration and the reduction of victim stigmatization. States should consider working closely with civil society and other organizations for the provision of such services and support for victims, thus complementing and fostering existing initiatives.

## D. PROMOTE

The “Promote” principle recognizes that every strategy to counter organized crime needs to reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of the problem. Fundamentally, this makes it necessary to encourage cooperation and partnerships across all sectors for a whole-of-society approach.

## 1. Mobilizing actors across civil society, the private sector, the media, academia and research institutes

This is essential for combating organized crime more effectively. The power of civil society organizations, in particular those operating at the grass-roots level and those led by women or young people, could be harnessed to generate socioeconomic interventions to tackle challenges such as maritime insecurity, drug consumption and vulnerability to trafficking in persons and to ensure wildlife and forest protection, as well as to ensure effective support for victims and the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders. Public-private partnerships are particularly beneficial for formulating innovative responses to cyber-crime and online exploitation, as well as for ensuring the integrity of medical products. Increasing cooperation with financial institutions and leveraging partnerships to encourage the participation of civil society remain key to preventing and countering corruption and identifying financial vulnerabilities and suspicious transactions.

## 2. Ensuring solid criminal justice responses at the national level, combined with regional and cross-border cooperation

To combat transnational organized crime more effectively, States can rely on the available mechanisms for sharing information and intelligence on organized crime, including those provided for in the Organized Crime Convention, and should consider creating specialized inter-agency law enforcement units, where not already present, as well as regional networks of such units. Enhanced cooperation remains crucial for the recovery and return of illicitly obtained assets, for the implementation of effective border surveillance strategies and for conducting complex financial investigations, which often span multiple jurisdictions. Initiatives such as the use of liaison officers and magistrates and the establishment of transnational crime units, joint airport task forces and port control units should be sustained and replicated, as they have yielded encouraging results for the disruption of organized criminal groups.<sup>30</sup>

Building on its well-established knowledge and long-term operational engagement in countering drugs, crime and terrorism in West and Central Africa, UNODC will continue to encourage and support such initiatives and is committed to further aligning its efforts with those of the African Union, ECOWAS and ECCAS, among other regional actors, to assist States in combating organized crime more effectively and to achieve better governance, security and sustainable development for all people living in West and Central Africa.

<sup>30</sup> Transnational crime units (i.e. elite inter-agency units, trained and equipped to fight transnational organized crime and to coordinate their activities in an international framework) are already present in a number of countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone.





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