



THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

Policy Note

Organized Crime, SDG 16 and the High-Level Political Forum



Background to the HLPF

The UN's High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) provides the main intergovernmental UN platform for reviewing progress made towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The HLPF meets each year under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Council, and every four years under the General Assembly. This year, the SDG Summit at the General Assembly will be held on 24 and 25 September, bringing together heads of state to reaffirm their commitment to the SDG Agenda.

The annual meeting of the HLPF encompasses several key processes. Each HLPF meeting centres on a major theme, which is then addressed under a thematic review, including an in-depth review of several SDGs, which are selected according to that theme. As well as providing an up-to-date view of progress on these goals, thematic reviews aim to identify gaps in implementation and lessons learned, and facilitate an exchange of experiences between member states. Voluntary National Reviews are presented by states, providing an overview of their progress towards achieving the SDGs. Because the primary responsibility for achieving the SDGs lies at the national level, such reviews are an important monitoring mechanism.

Representatives of civil-society groups, including NGOs and the academic community, are able to participate in the HLPF in several ways. Stakeholders are able to attend and intervene in official meetings, submit documents and written contributions, and participate in the preparatory process leading up to the thematic reviews, for example through expert group meetings.

This year's session, to be held in July, will be themed around 'empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality', and includes an in-depth review of SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies. Target 16.4 of SDG 16 commits states to 'significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime'. Hence, this year's thematic review provides an opportunity to discuss the role of organized crime in terms of how it hinders development efforts, and to provide insight into the relationship between development and illicit flows.

This session will bring together views on how organized crime is positioned within the HLPF context and the SDGs more broadly. How are the main challenges posed by organized crime in states' ability to achieve SDG 16 reflected in the SDG process? The discussion below summarizes findings from the Global Initiative's ongoing research into the links between organized crime and development.

Organized crime within the development agenda

The adoption of target 16.4 was, in many ways, a watershed moment, as it decisively and unequivocally placed organized crime on the development agenda. It acknowledged the inter-relationship between security and development, which was, at the time, becoming increasingly recognized among the development community. Since 2015, wide-ranging analysis and research have documented the connections not only between forms of organized crime and development, but also between stable governance, conflict and corruption. Multiple forms of organized crime are addressed at other points in the SDG agenda, including human trafficking (targets 5.2, 8.7 and 16.2); trafficking in wildlife (15.7 and 15c); and illegal fishing (targets 14.4 and 14.6).

Although acknowledging a series of organized-crime threats is essential to the development agenda, particularly within these key areas, experience has shown that organized crime is a cross-cutting threat to many core development objectives. Organized crime threatens directly not only specific goals, such as the reduction of poverty and the promotion of economic growth, but also the general maintenance of global biodiversity and sustainable environments; the building of safe and inclusive societies; the promotion of public health and people's well-being; and even the orderly management of migration.

The agencies of the UN emphasize the 'indivisibility' of the SDG framework, and have stated that achievement of the SDGs requires progress across the broad spectrum of the agenda, and that failure to achieve targets in one goal area may preclude the achievement of others. While an integrated and indivisible agenda is to be welcomed, we would argue that it does not fully capture the harm that organized crime poses to achieving the SDGs, nor does it fully acknowledge that organized-crime threats are not individual or disparate issues across the development agenda, but are indicative of systemic, closely inter-related problems.

Despite the increasing weight of evidence demonstrating the wide-ranging implications of organized crime on development, and the increasing connections between different forms of criminal markets, strategies to counter organized crime within development efforts remain siloed, and its impacts on development objectives more broadly are not well understood. Development actors need to understand not only how organized crime will undermine their objectives, but also that development itself presents opportunities for organized crime to flourish. Too much of the analysis of and response to organized crime is crafted in the form of policies and approaches to counter specific illicit markets, rather than examining the issue and its impacts holistically.

The crime–development paradox

The relationship between organized crime and development is complex and, in many ways, paradoxical. In many contexts, organized crime can be a source of livelihood, a resilience strategy for the poor and vulnerable, and, in some aspirational markets, a genuine means for achieving development. The legitimacy and currency upon which criminal groups often trade, is their ability to offer advantageous livelihoods. There is a development paradox at play where the illicit economy may present the best possible development returns for certain communities or for the life chances of individuals. The role of development actors in providing viable, legitimate and sustainable livelihood alternatives is a critical component of any strategy seeking to counter organized crime’s impact on governance and the rule of law.

Development efforts may also inadvertently facilitate organized crime. Illegal markets are inextricably linked with the global economy and are widely facilitated by the same infrastructure and services that support legitimate trade. Trade and transport infrastructure – for example, ports or airports – are vulnerable to becoming hubs of the illicit economy. Communication networks and technology, along with global financial infrastructure, are widely used to facilitate criminal profiteering. Development interventions that are intended to stimulate economic growth can carry with them the risk of unintended consequences.

Innovations in technology continue to revolutionize how people around the world communicate, share ideas and do business, and infrastructure development continues apace globally (China’s Belt and Road initiative being one major example). In this context, gaining an understanding of how the illicit economy interacts with such developments, and of how organized-crime groups might use them to their best advantage, is increasingly necessary.

Understanding organized crime as part of development: The SDG indicators

It is understood that the indicators are a practical starting point for assessing progress made towards achieving the SDGs. While some indicators give an idea of illicit activity, no indicator measures organized crime as a distinct issue. Indicator 16.4 does not provide us with a measure with which to gauge the impact of organized crime on development. Without such a benchmark, organized crime is likely to be monitored inconsistently or ignored in the SDG process.

But to work towards SDG 16 and towards sustainable development more broadly, it will be important to assess the impact of organized crime. When you look at both the goals and targets that address illicit activity, ranging from reducing illicit flows to ending human trafficking, the role played by organized criminal groups is a key driving factor in these phenomena. In one study, the Global Initiative found that of the 169 targets included in that framework, 23 of them –12.5% of the total – will require directly addressing

organized crime, or at least one illegal market, if those targets are to be achieved. And while this is recognized in the targets, the current review process appears weak in terms of addressing this. Of the 230 indicators to monitor progress, there are roughly four that measure organized-crime-related activity, two of these within goal 16. While they provide a sense of criminal activity, they do not allow for an assessment of the relationship between organized crime and development, as criminal groups are often poly-crime groups operating in a number of activities. Nor do they provide a sense of how these groups impact levels of violence, local and national economies, corruption, extortion and conflict.

One challenge, which is particularly pertinent, is the need to better understand what the marker of a successful response to organized crime entails. This is important, as the way that success is measured tends to drive the toolbox of approaches that are brought to the table in response. In seeking a more responsive and multidimensional set of metrics, therefore, it is clear that one single indicator is unlikely to fit the bill. Arguably, there is a need for a basket of indicators that will provide data across two categories, the scale of organized crime and its impact. Measurements of scale would analyze the depth and forms that organized crime has assumed; measurements of impact would look at the ways that organized crime is engaging with communities, states and the natural environment. It is worth noting that scale and impact, as the two outputs, do not necessarily rise and fall with each other. In fact, a decrease in the scale of organized crime can result in a greater impact on communities.

A critical element of moving towards people-centric and human-security-focused responses will be the greater use of public perceptions data. In the first place, public perceptions of the presence of organized crime are essential to supplement and interpret criminal data, as there is a tendency for organized-crime actions to go unreported, particularly in environments where corruption is a concern.

The damage that organized crime has on development is known. It is critical that development actors engage in responding to organized crime and in mitigating its impact, especially in the context of the newest global development agenda – which has provided more space for accountability on issues such as peace and security, and organized crime. As the HLPF considers progress towards achieving Goal 16, it is still not well positioned to measure the organized-crime–development nexus. What are the opportunities that the HLPF process presents for addressing this deficit? How can the HLPF process contribute to closing the policymaking loop between development and organized crime, and help strengthen the evidence basis?

Targets and indicators aimed at reducing a form of organized crime

5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

- No relevant indicator.

8.7 Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms

- No relevant indicator.

14.4 By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics

- No relevant indicator.

14.6 By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing... (etc.)

- Indicator 14.6.1: Progress by countries in the degree of implementation of international instruments aiming to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing – which is relevant but, from our point of view, still not a direct measure.

15.7 Take urgent action to end poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna and address both demand and supply of illegal wildlife products

- Indicator 15.7.1: Proportion of traded wildlife that was poached or illicitly trafficked.

15.c Enhance global support for efforts to combat poaching and trafficking of protected species, including by increasing the capacity of local communities to pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities

- The same indicator from 15.7.1 is used for the target 15.c, though the target itself is different.


16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children

- Indicator 16.2.2: Number of victims of human trafficking per 100,000 population, by sex, age and form of exploitation.

16.4 By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime

- Indicator 16.4.1: Total value of inward and outward illicit financial flows (in current United States dollars), and
- Indicator 16.4.2: Proportion of seized, found or surrendered arms whose illicit origin or context has been traced or established by a competent authority in line with international instruments.

Read more



Q and A with Nadia Isler,
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The Crime-Development
Paradox: Organised Crime
and the SDGs in Africa



Capturing proceeds of
crime in illicit financial
flows models



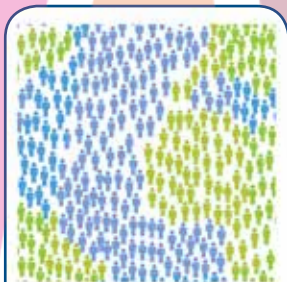
OC & the SDGs




Trade infrastructure and
organized crime



Organized Crime: a cross-
cutting threat to
development



Beyond the SDGs:
Implementing Results-
based approaches to
Organized Crime and
Development



GIResilience Project – UN
Solutions Summit 2018

at globalinitiative.net

