



The ESACD is funded by  
the European Union

# ESACD

Eastern & Southern Africa  
Commission on Drugs



## The Eastern & Southern Africa Commission on Drugs

### Maritime-based drug trafficking in Eastern and Southern Africa

An overview

AUGUST 2023

# Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations.....	3
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>COMMON METHODS OF MARITIME TRAFFICKING .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Straight-up.....	6
Commingling within legal cargo loads .....	6
Rip-on/rip-off .....	7
Concealed within the container housing .....	7
Contamination via drop-off at sea .....	7
<b>PRIMARY TRANSNATIONAL ROUTES .....</b>	<b>9</b>
The southern route.....	9
The lusophone route .....	9
The Asian route.....	9
The Indo-Pacific route.....	10
<b>CURRENT STATUS OF MARITIME DRUG TRAFFICKING IN THE REGION .....</b>	<b>12</b>
Heroin.....	12
Cocaine .....	13
Methamphetamine and other synthetics .....	13
Cannabis and khat .....	14
<b>CHALLENGES TO DISRUPTION.....</b>	<b>15</b>
Surveillance and interdiction .....	15
Embeddedness of regional secondary and tertiary maritime trafficking routes .....	16
Rise of Madagascar .....	16
Overlapping capacity-building initiatives .....	17
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>18</b>
Notes.....	20

## Acronyms and abbreviations

CMF	Combined Maritime Forces
CTF-150	Combined Task Force 150
ESA	Eastern and Southern Africa
EU	European Union

# INTRODUCTION

The coastal states and islands of the Eastern and Southern African (ESA) region are being buffeted by illicit drug markets. While the dynamics of drug markets are shaped by a range of domestic political and socioeconomic factors, these states have been rendered vulnerable also by their proximity to major transnational drug trafficking routes that link illicit drug production origin points with regional and global marketplaces. Cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, cannabis and a wide array of synthetic substances flow through the region along various routes, exploiting vulnerabilities in port facilities and interdiction agencies, and connecting the substances, their markets and their organized criminal beneficiaries.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of maritime drug trafficking in ESA, with a particular emphasis on explaining the dynamics behind distribution. The paper summarizes the most common transnational maritime trafficking routes that affect ESA along with regional maritime drug trafficking trends, before outlining challenges to the disruption of these drug flows. It concludes with five recommendations.

# COMMON METHODS OF MARITIME TRAFFICKING

Illicit drug loads are moved through maritime environments in various ways. Several of the most common techniques are discussed below.

- **Cargo delivery – point-to-point:** The simplest of delivery methods to explain, this involves the movement of illicit drugs in high volume, often of a tonne or more, from a point of shipping origin to a pre-determined destination. The origin and destination points may be formal or informal ports, or even smaller marine-based facilities. The vessels involved can range from large freighters to small pleasure craft, and everything in between. The loads are transported knowingly by the vessel's crew, and often are not disguised while within the hold of the ship.
- **Ship-to-ship transfer:** As the name implies, this delivery method involves the transfer of a drug load from one marine vessel to another. This is normally done at sea in international waters. Shipments are sometimes redistributed from a mothership to multiple other vessels bound for various destination points. The shipments can then be moved by less vulnerable vessels to multiple geographic locations without the mothership risking an approach to a port. The crew of each ship must be complicit in the transfer for this method to succeed.
- **Ship-to-shore transfer:** Also done in international waters, this technique involves moving a drug load from a larger mothership to a smaller, faster vessel for immediate transfer to a shoreline location, and onward movement along the supply chain. While the smaller vessel could be a fishing trawler, tugboat or even go-fast speedboat, the purpose of the transfer is to move large loads quickly from sea to shore. This is a common technique used along the coastal beaches of Mozambique, as well as in the waters offshore of both Somalia and Kenya, where small flotillas of fishing vessels migrate between a distant ship at sea and a shore-based drop-off point. The owners and crews of these small fishing boats are complicit in this technique; the crews transport the illicit cargo to shore.
- **Parasitic attachments:** This technique involves the secretive securing of a watertight container to the external hull of a vessel without the knowledge of the crew or owner. Often done while a ship is in port, the container is fixed below the vessel's waterline by divers and filled with its drug cargo. The shape and size of the container is such that normally it can hold only several tens of kilogrammes. Removal largely mirrors the attachment process; it is done in secret by divers once the target vessel arrives at the destination port. However, many European port authorities are now aware of this technique, and deploy law enforcement agents and divers who actively screen incoming and outgoing suspect vessels for such unusual underwater modifications.
- **Drop-off/GPS bundling:** This technique involves the discharge of bundles of drugs into the sea by the crew of a mothership. These bundles are wrapped in watertight packaging and dropped at pre-arranged positions at sea. The locations are offshore but within range of smaller go-fast boats that are tasked with locating and retrieving the bundles, then delivering them to shore where they are moved further along the trafficking chain. Sometimes these bundles are affixed with a GPS tracker so that the retrieving vessels can locate them more easily, especially at night. This technique is normally employed for shipments of a few hundred kilogrammes, and is used often along the length of the ESA coastal region and its surrounding islands.
- **Container concealment:** By far the most common method of moving large volumes of illicit drugs is through international shipping containers, also known as 'sea cans'. These containers are steel-based boxes that measure eight feet wide by eight and a half feet tall and come in two lengths: twenty-foot equivalent units, and forty-foot equivalent units. They are the lifeblood of the international shipping industry, a core facilitator of global trade and, by extension, a key driver of the global economy. These containers enable licit goods to be moved in volume from point of origin to destination in an efficient, reliable, consistent and relatively low-risk manner.

Every year, 750 million containers are shipped around the globe, but less than 2% of these are inspected.<sup>1</sup> At any given time there are around 6,000 container ships travelling at sea.<sup>2</sup> The busiest ports in the world handle up to 47 million twenty-foot equivalent units of containers annually.<sup>3</sup> The busiest ports in Africa can accommodate up to 2.6 million twenty-foot equivalent units annually, with plans in place to expand these capacities.<sup>4</sup> While there is some recognition in the region of the challenges that arise from this, most particularly through the African Union's 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (2050 AIM Strategy), these newly considered approaches fail to push states into direct action. Subsequently, and unsurprisingly, this political inertia around the evolving dynamics of this vast containerized ecosystem provides traffickers with the perfect opportunity for exploitation in order to reach global markets. The challenge for them then becomes one of camouflaging their large consignments of drugs to minimize the risk of seizure, while still maximizing profits. Traffickers employ several container-based smuggling methods.<sup>5</sup>

## Straight-up

As straight-forward as it sounds, this method entails loading a container with illicit goods and transporting it. Often this is done by networks who have compromised port facilities or agents that are tasked with monitoring container traffic, both at the departure and arrival ports. It may involve the use of a fake or altered manifest, alongside other fraudulent documentation. A riskier move than employing a secondary level of concealment, it tends to be used today to ship goods that fall within a grey area of legality. Examples include precursor or pre-precursor chemicals that may have both a licit and potentially illicit use. One such chemical that falls into this area is caffeine powder. It is an additive that has many licit uses in the food and healthcare industries. A stimulant, it also is used as an additive to illicit substances such as amphetamines, synthesized methcathinones and MDMA. A host of other chemical substances fall also into this category.

While such a direct approach to shipping illicit drugs might appear to be brazen or foolhardy, it does have an advantage; the ignorance of most customs and port officials when it comes to identifying what a chemical is, what it is used for, and what it could be used for. It is common for customs officials in the region to seize containers from shipments they have profiled as suspicious only for them to encounter a container consisting of drums of substances they are unable to identify. More often than not, the officials tend to release such loads later on because they are unable to verify the contents as being illicit in any way. Thus they end up accepting the suspect cargo for entry on the basis of the manifest description alone, regardless of whether or not the manifest description is accurate. For example, Namibian port authorities seized a container from a Chinese vessel on the grounds that it was illicit. The unmarked drums they found inside, and a visual test of the contents, provided no clue as to the nature of the seizure. The load was sold at a public auction a few weeks later, as the shipment receiver failed to claim the goods. By sheer luck the contents were tested by local law enforcement just prior to being released to the bidder. It was then discovered that the drums contained safrole, a chemical whose primary use is in the production of MDMA, and the successful bidder, who turned out to be the aforementioned absent shipment receiver, was arrested.

## Commingling within legal cargo loads

Early proponents of container trafficking favoured a strategy some authorities call 'within the load'. This is a technique where the drugs to be shipped are camouflaged by everyday exports. This technique requires traffickers to run front companies, which they either set up themselves or buy, so they can be the owners of businesses with a long history of clean exports. They then hide the drugs in their ostensibly legal exports. Mostly, this involves simply stuffing drugs into boxes of cargo (for example, mixing bricks of cocaine within boxes of bananas), but in other cases traffickers have used everything from hollowed-out fruit to barrels of hazardous chemicals, and even chemically transformed the drugs to disguise them as benign everyday products such as clothing, charcoal, hot sauce or fertilizer. In addition, this commingling technique allows traffickers to maintain direct control over the shipment. However, since many international authorities have begun investigating and profiling export companies to detect suspicious patterns, risks have increased accordingly. This has driven a shift to the rip-on/rip-off method.

## Rip-on/rip-off

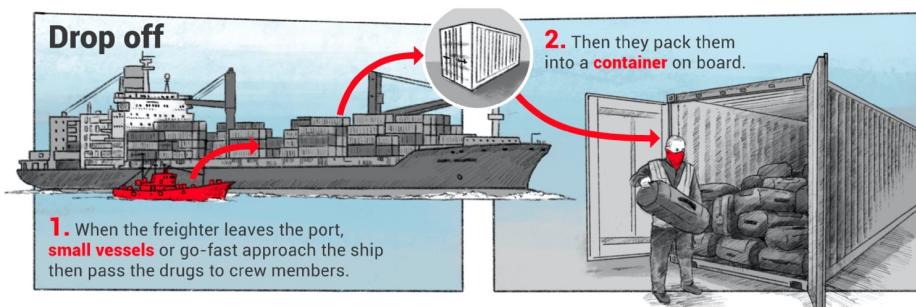
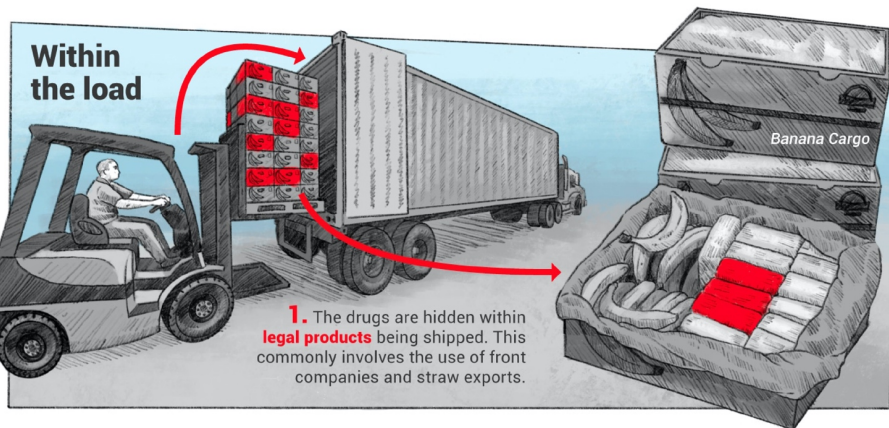
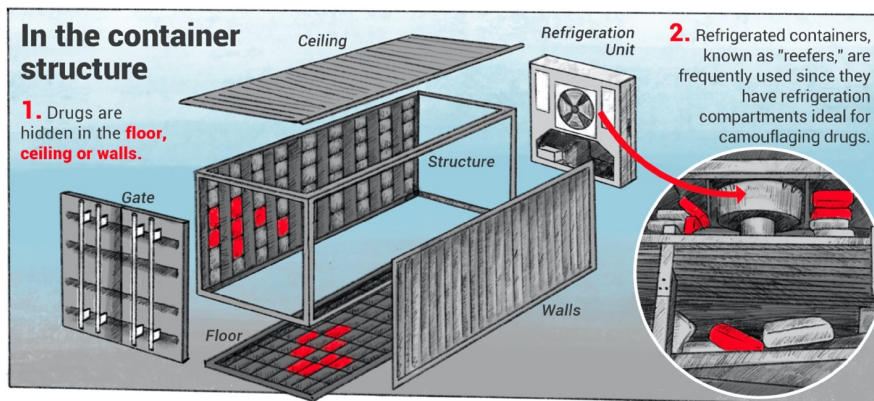
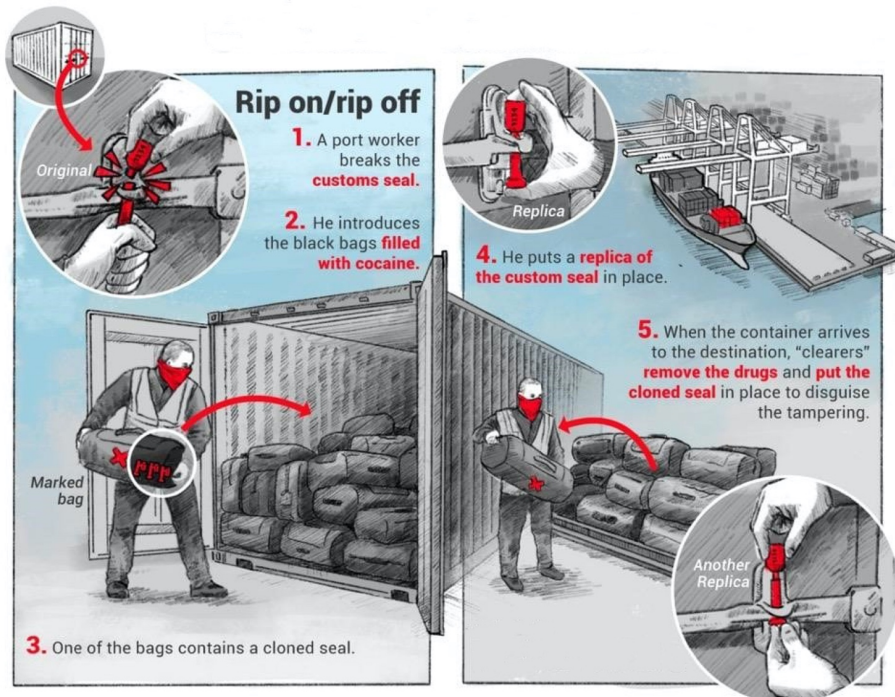
This is a technique where traffickers avoid the exporter/importer profiling efforts of law enforcement authorities by breaking open containers of legitimate exports to ship the drugs, then use cloned customs seals to conceal the tampering. Initially, rip on/rip off was favoured by smaller traffickers sending tens of kilograms. But as it has grown in popularity, the shipments have grown in size, with multi-tonne hauls now commonplace. This technique requires the complicity of port workers or other agents at both departure and arrival facilities at ports to ensure insertion and removal.

## Concealed within the container housing

Another technique employed by traffickers looking to avoid profiling risks involves hiding the drugs in the structure of the container itself. Traffickers have been known to insert quantities of drugs into cavities in the walls, ceilings, floors and doors of containers. It is common also to insert loads into the insulation or cooling equipment of refrigerated containers (also known as 'reefers'). Using the container structures lowers the risks of authorities detecting fake customs seals, but it requires complicity from people inside shipping companies or container yards. Some traffickers have worked around this by mounting front companies to tamper with the containers in a scheme similar to that undertaken when, as described above, the commingling technique is being employed.

## Contamination via drop-off at sea

The surest way to avoid security measures is to 'drop off' at-sea, a technique involving contaminating containers after the ship has left the port. This usually depends on extensive corruption of the crew, although there are some reports that armed bands are now boarding ships and forcing crews to take loads at gunpoint. Drop offs are now not only orchestrated within the maritime boundaries of countries where ships set sail, but also as they pass through the waters of other nations. Authorities are trying to tackle this trafficking method using the vessel's GPS device, which gives information on the speed of the ship. If a ship suddenly slows down or stops, an alarm sounds. However, traffickers are already exploring new options.



**Figure 1:** Container concealment techniques used in maritime drug smuggling.

Source: Illustrations courtesy of InsightCrime



# PRIMARY TRANSNATIONAL ROUTES

There are four transnational maritime drug trafficking routes that impact the ESA region. Three of these are import routes for transporting illicit substances into the region and the fourth is an export route for shipping substances from the region to points elsewhere. These routes are the following:

## The southern route

The 'southern route' refers to the movement of heroin out of Afghanistan and through the Makran coast of Iran and Pakistan, departing the Gulf of Oman in a variety of maritime vessels, transiting around the Omani coast and across the Gulf of Aden before then tacking southward off the Somali coast toward landing points from Kenya to Mozambique on the Swahili coastline of ESA. Following interdiction successes by the Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150) of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), some traffickers began taking a longer and more circuitous route further out into the Western Indian Ocean, before tacking back near the Seychelles and targeted landing points in Mozambique. While this route is known for the ubiquitous use of traditional dhows, as they are able to mix in well with existing licit traffic flows, these deep-sea forays involve larger, sturdier dhow versions. Originally a shipping route for Afghan heroin, since 2019 these shipments have been accompanied regularly with Afghan-produced methamphet-amine. Regional analysts suspect that larger proportions of the heroin and methamphetamine that transit this route are shipped in steel-hulled ships flagged by Iran, Pakistan or a variety of other regional states, instead of in dhows.

## The lusophone route

The 'lusophone route' refers to maritime traffic originating in Latin America that moves drug shipments across the southern Atlantic Ocean to Angola in the southwest of Africa, as well as to primary landing points at several Mozambique ports. Cargoes are also shipped to ports in South Africa, Tanzania and Kenya. Vessels plying this route also simply transit the region altogether as they make their way further eastward beyond the Western Indian Ocean to ports in East Asia, particularly China. Brazilian ports of all sizes, but particularly Santos, form the nucleus of this transnational trade route. Other Latin American ports contribute also to the movement of drugs along this route, but a majority of the shipments seized (and suspected) tend to be of Brazilian origin. Freighters, container ships and other large ocean-going vessels are most common along this route, although there have been instances of larger personal watercraft being used for point-to-point transit of drug loads. Cocaine is the primary drug found on this route. In recent years methamphetamine from Mexican producers, shipped to and through Brazilian ports, has been found in shipments to South Africa.

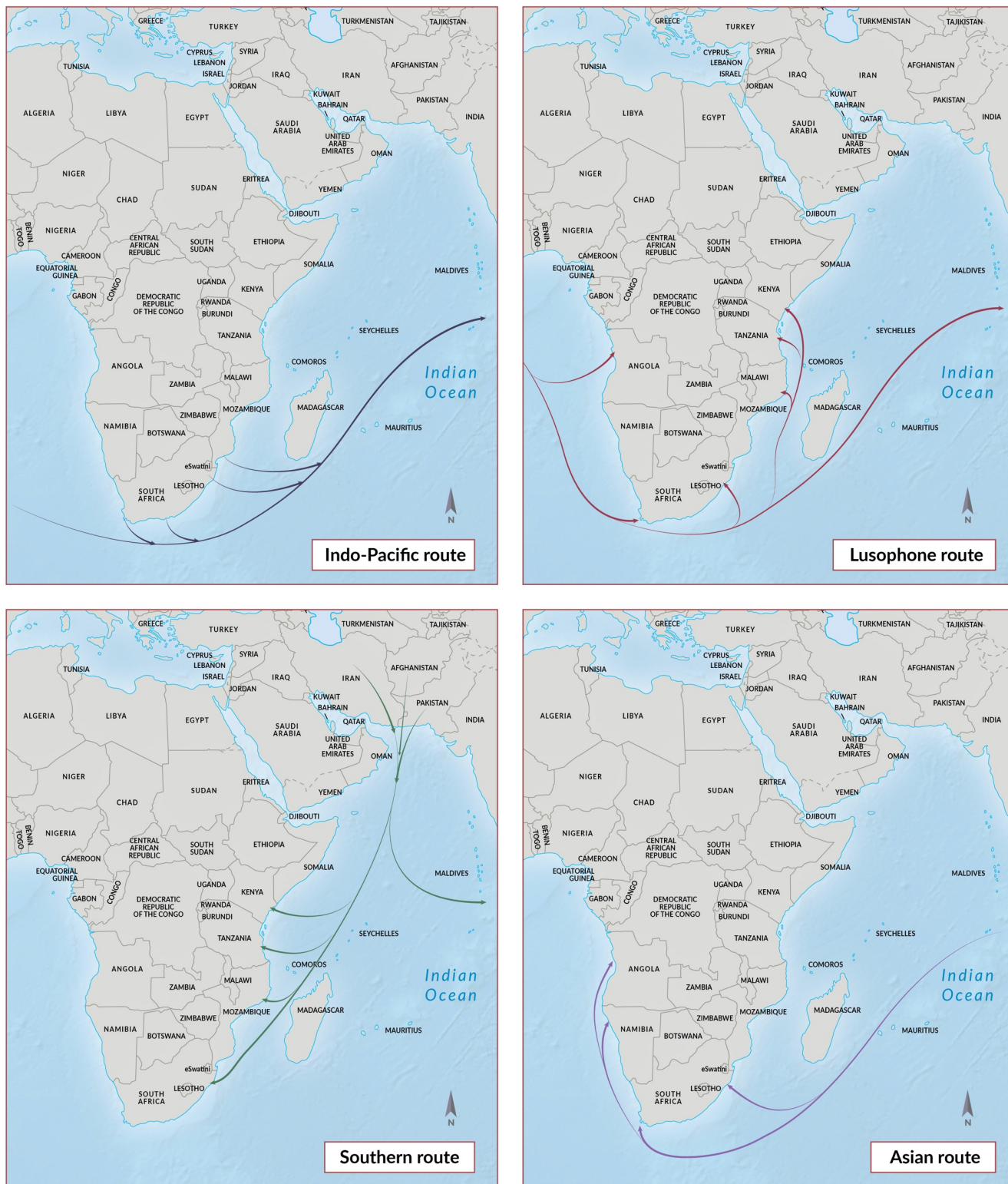
## The Asian route

The 'Asian route' originates in China, but also includes shipments coming via other ports in the Southeast Asian region and, more recently, from the Indian subcontinent in South Asia. This route involves the movement of synthetic substances, and particularly precursor and pre-precursor chemicals necessary for the synthesis of illicit substances in ESA labs and beyond.<sup>6</sup> While many of these substances - examples include caffeine and hydrochloric acid - have legitimate industrial uses, they possess highly desirable secondary uses in the chemistry of illicit drug production. This includes uses in the production of methamphetamine (known as tik), MDMA (ecstasy), methcathinone (cat), methaqualone (mandrax), and a variety of cannabinoids (spice). The Chinese and Indian chemical and pharmaceutical industrial bases are the two largest in the world and are responsible for supplying a great deal of the diverted licit or overtly illicit chemicals that are fed into the synthesis of established and new synthetic drugs around the world. From the supply of fentanyl and fentanyl analogues that contribute to the opioid crisis currently plaguing North American drug markets, to the synthetic cannabinoids that have overtaken most Western Indian Ocean island drug markets, and the ephedrine and pseudoephedrine that until recently had fed the meth production labs of southern and western Africa, China and India have been the origin points. And a great deal of this synthetic drug traffic has transited the Asian route from factories in Asia to the labs in the ESA region and beyond.

## The Indo-Pacific route

Unlike the other three routes, the Indo-Pacific route originates in the ESA region. Grounded in the movement of cocaine and methamphetamine, this channel emerged from the Lusophone route. Cocaine shipped to the region from Brazil, and methamphetamine originating from regional production, but also from meth production points in West Africa (e.g. Nigeria) and from Afghanistan, is transported along this route to the final destinations of Australia and New Zealand (collectively known as the AUS-NZ drug market). There is an insatiable appetite for both cocaine and meth in this market, and the retail price for each is among the highest in the world. This is due as much to the distance of the countries from high-volume production and supply points as it is to the success of law enforcement surveillance operations in interdicting high volume drug shipments to the country.

The AUS-NZ drug market is therefore a significant target for many transnational organized criminal groups. Southern Africa thus increasingly serves as a filter through which the origins of illicit drug loads are disguised. This is achieved by placing loads in new containers or transferring loads to another ocean-going vessel, the contamination of licit loads originating from locations perceived to be low-risk from a drug profiling perspective, and the use of private vessels. The pre-existing substantial licit trade relationship between South Africa and Australia may factor into the rise of this route as well.



**Figure 2:** Key transnational maritime drug flows in Eastern and Southern Africa.

# CURRENT STATUS OF MARITIME DRUG TRAFFICKING IN THE REGION

While maritime-based drug trafficking has affected the ESA region for generations, recent years have yielded more interdiction-based assistance initiatives designed both to target the trade directly by squeezing its incipient contributors and beneficiaries, and by building the capacity and resilience of national actors and institutions. Yet despite this support, the trade in the most common drugs continues to grow without fear.

## Heroin

Heroin, almost exclusively produced in and sourced from Afghanistan, is trafficked by sea from the Makran coast of both Pakistan and Iran through traditional trade flows that extend across the Western Indian Ocean to the East African coast. While a large proportion of these shipments is ultimately destined for European consumer markets, an increasing amount is retained to supply a growing heroin consumer base in the region. Dhows – a type of traditional wooden fishing vessel from the Makran coast of Iran and Pakistan – have long been the major vessel type transporting heroin (as well as myriad other illicit and licit goods) into and across the Southern Indian Ocean. Purse seiners (a larger type of fishing vessel), bulk carriers and other steel-tipped vessels have also been implicated. These vessels are able to travel longer distances than dhows and can directly reach states which are currently beyond the reach of smaller dhows. They also fall outside the enforcement mandate of the CTF-150 marine presence in the international waters that extend from the South Asian trafficking source points south to the mouth of the Mozambique Channel corridor.<sup>7</sup>

Heroin is trafficked directly from the Pakistan and Iran coasts to Mombasa (Kenya), Zanzibar (Tanzania), and increasingly in volume to the beaches and informal coastal landing points of central Mozambique.<sup>8</sup> It is sent also to the Seychelles directly, with some reports indicating a Seychellois heroin supply chain trade flow also via Sri Lanka. Other regional importation routes move via ports in Madagascar, which serves as one of the primary import routes for heroin into Mauritius. Dhows do not go directly to Mauritius from the Makran Coast.

Mauritius and the Seychelles, which are afflicted by some of the highest rates of heroin use in the world, operate as the principal consumer markets for heroin in the region alongside the coastal states of Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa. Consumption in Mauritius and the Seychelles is not just the result of overspill from the southern route; rather, both these island states have been targeted by traffickers because of their comparative wealth. The dynamics of accelerating consumption in the Seychelles and Mauritius can thus be distinguished from the coastal transit states of the East African coastline, where domestic heroin markets developed predominantly through overspill from principal flows.

Madagascar is emerging as a significant transshipment hub in both regional and international heroin markets. Trafficking through the country has grown significantly over the past five years. With the landing of ‘southern route’ heroin shipments having shifted southwards along the East African coast, Madagascar has emerged to play an increasingly prominent role as a repackaging and redistribution breakbulk hub. Heroin is trafficked by sea from a range of points along the East African coastline, particularly Tanzania (Dar es Salam, Zanzibar) and Mozambique (Pemba) to Mauritius, the Seychelles and Madagascar. Some heroin is moved by container ship from South Africa to the island states, predominantly Mauritius. From Madagascar, heroin is shipped by sea to other Indian Ocean island states, predominantly the Seychelles and Mauritius.

The northern coastline of Mozambique is also a significant disembarkation and trans-shipment location facilitating the onward flow of heroin both to consumer markets in neighbouring countries, as well as for cargo breakdown and onward shipment through mainland continental air hubs to markets both in the region and in Europe. In South Africa, competition among domestic gangs around heroin distribution supply chains and territories – particularly in and around the port city of Cape Town – continues to contribute to significant violence and instability.

## Cocaine

Increasing volumes of cocaine are arriving from South America in Kenya, South Africa and Mozambique concealed in container vessels or transferred at sea from a 'mothership' in international waters to smaller local vessels for ferrying to shore. In most cases, once ashore much of this cocaine is redistributed and transported to transit points inland before it is shipped onwards. The growing transit of cocaine through ESA has contributed also to increases in the availability and use of cocaine in local drug markets. Growing volumes are remaining in the region to fuel rapidly expanding domestic cocaine consumption markets in South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Malawi, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Yet the region is also a transit depot for the movement of cocaine to destination markets beyond, including to the European Union (EU) via both sea and air-based routings, as well as onward transit for consumption in East Asia (e.g. China, Japan), Australia and New Zealand drug markets.

## Methamphetamine and other synthetics

Crystal methamphetamine is available for retail purchase and use in every ESA country and is manufactured in the region in rapidly increasing volumes for both domestic consumption and sale into international supply chains. In early 2020, the trafficking of Afghan-produced methamphetamine was detected alongside Afghan heroin in dhow shipments along the Swahili coast into the Mozambique Channel.<sup>9</sup> This Afghan origin meth flow had gone completely undetected through the region for over a year before its eventual identification.<sup>10</sup> This dual traffic has been confirmed through the traditional Makran coast maritime routings to Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa, moving inland to supply domestic markets in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Ephedra-based, of high purity and quality, and flowing in significant volume, this new supply chain is becoming an increasingly significant competitor to existing Nigerian and South African production chains and is contributing to an increase in use across the region. Interviews also point to a small but growing supply chain of Mexican-based meth transiting with established maritime cocaine shipments via Brazil and feeding the South African market.

Among other synthetic compounds, synthetic cannabinoids, which arrived in the region between 2011 and 2013, pose a growing risk. By 2015, these new synthetic compounds had drastically changed the illicit drugs markets of the Comoros and Mauritius, quickly becoming a priority public health concern. In contrast, usage is low but increasing in the Seychelles, Madagascar and the continental mainland countries. Synthetic cannabinoid compounds and their precursors are imported directly into Mauritius and Mayotte, while in the Comoros these imports are predominantly transit flows arriving from Mayotte. Significant overspill of synthetic cannabinoid supply chains and use to other Indian Ocean islands and, most specifically to the larger consumer markets of the continental mainland, is highly likely.

The movement of myriad other synthetic substances including methcathinone ('cat'), methaqualone ('mandrax'), MDMA ('ecstasy') and diverted pharmaceuticals (e.g. Tramadol) are also being traced at sea in the region, although they are not nearly as widely available or used as cannabis, heroin, cocaine and meth. Alongside meth, South Africa is also a cornerstone production location for cat, mandrax and MDMA. Precursors for their synthesis are sourced from production points in both India and China, and arrive by ship through the ports of Durban, Gqeberha and Cape Town in South Africa, and Walvis Bay in Namibia. Precursors are imported also through grey channels created by the diversion of licitly-procured chemicals that are then diverted to illicit supply chains, often with the assistance of complicit, corrupted or compromised government and private sector officials. This is done via enterprises in South Africa, but also allegedly via grey market entities in the neighbouring countries of Lesotho, Eswatini, Botswana, Zambia and Namibia. In fact, the trade in precursor chemicals is widespread across the continent, likely generating a wealth of easily accessible sources of precursors.

In addition to being manufactured locally, finished mandrax is imported by sea also from production points in India and channelled to South Africa consumers via Durban and Cape Town import/export 'business' networks.

## Cannabis and khat

Khat has been called the 'archetypal quasi-legal substance'. A plant indigenous to Eastern and Southern Africa, it contains the psychoactive alkaloids cathine and cathinone and has been used as a recreational stimulant in Ethiopia and Yemen since the 12th century. While its active alkaloids have been listed under international control, unlike cannabis, the coca leaf and the opium poppy, its plant matter is not likewise listed. The incongruent nature of its scheduling has contributed to khat's classification status straddling the boundaries of both the legal and illegal markets of the region.<sup>11</sup>

Cannabis, a non-native plant imported from Asia to East Africa via Indian Ocean trade networks, has a long history of production and use extending as far back as the 14th century. The African continent has some of the highest levels of cannabis production in the world, accounting for around 25% of the global total. Much of this production is consumed on the continent. Cannabis is the most commonly used and traded drug in Africa with an estimated 38.2 million consumers, compared to the 5 to 10 million consumers of khat. It is a product of cultural practices, a medicinal herb used by traditional healers, and a key livelihood crop (like khat) for poor farmers. Although grown in significant amounts in each of the region's countries, local demand for cannabis still regularly exceeds supply in each country's domestic drug market, with only two exceptions: Madagascar, which is the bulk cannabis exporter by sea among the Indian Ocean islands, and, in a far more recent phenomenon, Réunion, which exports smaller volumes almost exclusively to Mauritius. Cannabis is also widely grown in volume in northern Tanzania, as well as Uganda, Eswatini and Zambia. Whilst much is for local consumption, there is growing evidence of maritime-based exportation within the region.

# CHALLENGES TO DISRUPTION

There are several complicated challenges that must be considered in the context of attempts to disrupt the embedded systems and networks of maritime-based drug trafficking in the ESA region. These include:

## Surveillance and interdiction

More than 140 000 vessels fitted with and tracked by an Automatic Identification System (AIS) cross the Indian Ocean every year, together with countless smaller vessels that are not required to carry this equipment. This makes the Western Indian Ocean among the most transited maritime regions in the world. It is also a pivotal maritime trading route, with around half the world's container vessels, one third of bulk cargo traffic and two-thirds of global oil shipments sailing its waters.

Myriad illicit flows also transit the Western Indian Ocean, with narcotics being the most prevalent. This has led to the establishment of a wide range of international maritime security cooperation initiatives, agreements, joint ventures and treaties. However, the weakness of the ESA region's coastal and island states' maritime-surveillance capacities leaves them deeply dependent on support from foreign powers, who have long had an interest in the region. France, India, the UK, the United Arab Emirates and the US all feature in the national security infrastructure of the maritime region and the surrounding ocean, and China and Japan have also recently entered this crowded space. The CTF-150, a multilateral naval force made up of a coalition of countries, is the most prominent international force acting to counter maritime-based drug trafficking.<sup>12</sup>

Several other structures/projects/partners provide (or have provided) support for maritime capacities to improve surveillance and interdiction activities in the region. Some of these include:

- The Information Fusion Centre focusing on regional maritime security in Madagascar
- Regional Coordination Operational Centre RCOC in Seychelles
- The Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific and Critical Maritime Routes Law Enforcement Agencies series of programmes supported by the EU
- The Maritime Security Programme (MASE) umbrella of programmes, also supported by the EU
- The Container Control Programme (CCP) of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

However, there are doubts as to whether all these different initiatives and interests provide a critical mass of inputs capable of achieving and sustaining an effective response to maritime drug trafficking in the region. The practical challenges of policing this vast maritime region are daunting. The expanse of the Western Indian Ocean means that tracking maritime shipping must be intelligence led, but such intelligence is reliant on AIS data, which is incomplete and non-comprehensive. Smaller vessels, such as the fishing boats often used to collect or transit drug consignments, are not required to carry AIS, and even larger vessels can turn off the tracking systems at will, creating transmission gaps. These two loopholes significantly hamper the effectiveness of AIS by rendering much maritime movement invisible.

These practical challenges are compounded by three factors. Firstly, there is the legal complexity of sovereignty that can undermine maritime surveillance, where even vessels in possession of confirmed intelligence cannot board another country's ship unless a range of conditions are met. These complex jurisdictional arrangements are a significant challenge to addressing maritime crime, while they simultaneously offer an opportunity to organized crime actors. In short, interdiction operations cannot exceed either their limited mandate or their rules of engagement. The CTF 150, for example, cannot board a vessel that is implicated in criminal flows unless such flows can be linked to terrorist financing.

Secondly, many nations active in policing part of the Indian Ocean not only lack countertrafficking mandates, but are also hampered by jurisdictional boundaries. Even if the vessel is boarded and illicit goods are seized, prosecuting the crew is often complex. Consequently, many interceptions merely result in the narcotics being thrown overboard, while

the crew and vessel are free to go. This approach is, for example, applied by the crews of French navy vessels based on the island of Réunion.<sup>13</sup>

And, thirdly, gaps in technical, human resource and financial capacity at law enforcement, prosecutorial and judicial levels in the coastal and island states of the ESA region may be considered the most significant challenge for states combating maritime drug trafficking. The apparent lack of political will among key regional stakeholders remains an additional threat to change as this suggests that the plethora of initiatives established to fight maritime crime, including drug trafficking, largely amount to lip service. Limited coordination between the many powers that crowd the Western Indian Ocean region further weakens responses and hampers information sharing. Ultimately, maritime drug trafficking in the ESA region could be viewed as a crime characterized by 'a stark absence of effective deterrents'.<sup>14</sup>

## Embeddedness of regional secondary and tertiary maritime trafficking routes

The popularity of dhows in the regional maritime trafficking of illicit drugs is partly due to the ubiquity of these vessels across the Western Indian Ocean region, and their ability to travel to ports unsuitable for larger vessels. Dhows are also relatively durable over long distances, as some vessels are adapted to further enhance their long-distance capabilities, including by adding extra-large fuel tanks. Yet, their popularity may be waning. Authorities are now highly aware of dhows' historical connection to regional drug trafficking. Regional maritime trafficking modalities as a whole are shifting away from the use of dhows towards bulk carriers, steel-hulled vessels and containers. These vessels are able to travel further than dhows and are less affected by seasonal monsoon weather conditions. They are also integral in the networking of maritime-based trafficking systems with land and air-based networks. Air and overland transit of illicit drugs from coastal landing points to landlocked countries of the region is perpetrated with great frequency, as is the onward transit of these drugs via mules and concealed air cargo shipments to points in South Asia (e.g. India) and the EU - often via additional transit points in the Middle East, particularly the Qatari capital Doha and the emirate of Dubai.

## Rise of Madagascar

Commentators have warned for some years that Madagascar either is, or is at risk of becoming, a hub for transnational maritime drug trafficking. These warnings appear to be turning into reality. While domestic heroin consumption is – and has always been – far lower than in Mauritius and the Seychelles, Madagascar's role as a transit country is driving a domestic market. Heroin use has, particularly since 2015, been growing, particularly in urban settings such as areas of the capital Antananarivo and Hell-Ville, the main town on the north-eastern island of Nosy Be, which is also an important maritime heroin export point. Power in the Malagasy drugs market is reportedly highly centralized among a small number of major traffickers who direct these networks from Antananarivo. These trafficking networks are not specialized in particular drug types. Their illicit commodity trade portfolios include heroin, methamphetamine, cannabis and cocaine. They manage these illicit flows through brokerage arrangements with overseas supply networks, and collaboration with lower-level domestic drug distributors.

The rise of Madagascar as a maritime trafficking transshipment point can be linked to shifts in the southern route to landing points further down the East African coast. Disembarkation points for vessels carrying heroin have, in broad terms, shifted southwards along the East African coast over several years: from Kenya through to Tanzania, then to northern Mozambique, and now to coastal disembarkation points in central Mozambique. A growing law enforcement focus on disrupting 'southern route' flows has played a role in displacing these dhow-based landing points further south along the coastline. Yet regular seizures of heroin off the Mozambique coast and disruptions due to the conflict in the country's northern Cabo Delgado province may now be contributing to Madagascar's increasingly prominent role as a repackaging and redistribution hub, in addition to its prominence already in the secondary and tertiary maritime distribution of drugs. Domestic geographic and socio-political factors combine to make Madagascar highly vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks. There is little naval or coastguard capacity to monitor effectively the island's five-thousand-kilometre shoreline, which is peppered by informal ports and landing points. Limited infra-structure renders some rural areas difficult for government forces to access, especially when combined with issues of banditry and armed cattle rustling, meaning state oversight of some rural and coastline areas is minimal. Not only are Southern route vessels



moving to exploit the Malagasy coast, larger transnational maritime shipments plying the Lusophone, Asian and Indo-Pacific routes also are in position to exploit Madagascar as a new illicit drug port of call.

## Overlapping capacity-building initiatives

Capacity-building initiatives may see the percolation of good intentions as represented by statements of support, or even some agreement of action from national partners; however, such intentions are highly variable and often fleeting. The core constraint is the inability of many of these states to uphold the commitments inherent in such assistance agreements. This deficiency is endemic; political intentions can change quickly, but nations' institutional capabilities evolve only very slowly. This is a discrepancy that is often at the root of many challenges when it comes to the acceptance, uptake and impact of capacity-building ventures.

An apparent dichotomy meanwhile exists between the expectations attached to donor support and the willingness and ability of recipient states and institutions to implement such prescriptive measures. This gap applies to several regional actors. Advocating for the local adoption of such measures certainly is a step forward; however, we must also consider how local capacities are to be improved to meet the performance expectations that will grow from such adoptions. This is beyond the predictable 'buy equipment & train' models that many generalized technical assistance programmes have employed for decades to such limited effect. We must instead focus on some of the core features of the institutional maritime-based landscape. Here we are referring to the need for local action in dealing with entrenched corruption at port and surveillance facilities and institutions. Corruption of institutions, agencies and agents involved in all aspects of maritime-based trafficking surveillance, interdiction and prosecution remains an endemic feature that undermines the programming and commitments designed to circumvent its harms and to support developmental resilience against organized maritime-based trafficking networks and their constituent criminal enablers.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

In concluding this overview of maritime-based drug trafficking in the ESA region, an initial set of five recommendations are put forward for consideration:

## **1. Recognize and address the rapidly emerging role of Madagascar as a key regional maritime drug trafficking hub, and the consequences this has for regional illicit markets and stability.**

Madagascar's emergence as a significant drugs transshipment hub has received limited attention to date. Yet as argued in this paper, the region is closely connected to the nexus of four principal transnational maritime drug flows. It lacks any meaningful level of surveillance capacity over its maritime territorial jurisdiction and is a prime candidate for absorption into the laundering of illicit loads via its poorly maintained port facilities. Research initiatives to document the place of Malagasy ports and coastal facilities in regional maritime trafficking operations are necessary, alongside threat assessments of existing port facilities and operations in the context of expanding drug market exploitation.

## **2. Enhance collaboration and intelligence sharing between regional states on maritime trafficking dynamics.**

The region's drug markets are intricately interconnected. Greater coordination and information sharing between states in the region, including by enhancing engagement with and through existing regional bodies, and including the Information Fusion Centre, are required to improve the overall understanding of marine-based drugs trafficking in the region and bolster the regional response. The development of a regional strategic plan with support priorities could ground such a unified response. After all, maritime security is a key focus of interventions by the United Nations Security Council.<sup>15</sup> Further, the African Union Peace and Security Council must address the African Union's 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (2050 AIM Strategy), and ESA countries must prioritize intelligence sharing to counter drug trafficking effectively. For example, the creation of joint intelligence centres could facilitate real-time information exchange.

## **3. In reference to synthetic precursors, secure port-based surveillance tools to help detection officers to identify rapidly whether suspect shipments contain licit or illicit substances.**

As the proliferation of synthetic substances expand ESA drug markets, it is increasingly challenging for front-line law enforcement officers to identify whether a substance is legal or illegal, particularly at the few port locations where goods shipments are still subject to successful inspection. Many national law enforcement, port and border security bodies in the region lack sufficient training in identifying and seizing controlled or suspect substances. Port-based customs officers in particular have reported that they are unable to distinguish between a variety of substances in terms of both identity and legality. Interviews with law enforcement officers indicate that often seizures are made with a presumption of a substance's illegality, but without knowing the content. Other seizure possibilities are overlooked because officers assume that the substances are legal, again without knowing the content. The conflation of illicit substances with licit substances is a common mistake by enforcement officers and front line law enforcement, yet it is one that could be overcome with financial investment in the purchase of Fourier-transform infrared spectrometers, and training in their use. This technique could be used to identify suspect substances far quicker than at present in these locations.

#### **4. Adopt and harmonize customs paperwork systems.**

In conjunction with the World Customs Organization, support and promote the adoption and harmonization of e-customs paperwork systems for sea freight shipments, alongside improving port-based agents' and institutions' targeting and profiling capabilities. This technology can reduce opportunities for corruption, speed up the clearance of freight and boost countries' tax revenues.

#### **5. Improve maritime surveillance and interdiction in the Mozambique Channel.**

An important container and tanker maritime transit route linking the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean and beyond, the Mozambique Channel is a strategically important global shipping corridor. It is a main trade route for licit trade, yet a large volume of illicit goods, and drugs in particular, also move through it. This includes westerly transnational flows of heroin and methamphetamine from Afghanistan along the Southern route, and Chinese- and Indian-sourced precursors for synthetic drug production along the Asian route. This channel also includes easterly flows of cocaine from Brazil and other Latin American embarkation points that transit the Lusophone route, and it is used by a wide range of smaller traditional fishing and cargo vessels that move illicit drugs intra-regionally. This growing perception of the channel's strategic importance exists alongside a growing realization of its significant surveillance and security vulnerabilities. Coastal states bordering the route lack the capacity to undertake any meaningful marine monitoring and enforcement actions in their territorial waters along the channel, or in either of its maritime approaches. Under the jurisdiction of the AU and its two regional economic communities that cover the geographic area of the channel, bordering states should consider development of a joint maritime security initiative, similar in its scope to the CTF-150 in the northwest, to cover their own territorial waters. A pan-African pact covering the international waters of the Mozambique Channel is also recommended.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy McDermott et al., The cocaine pipeline to Europe, GI-TOC and InSight Crime, February 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cocaine-to-europe>.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Schulz, When shipping containers sink in the drink, *The New Yorker*, 30 May 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/06/06/when-shipping-containers-sink-in-the-drink>.

<sup>3</sup> ShipHub, Top 50 container ports 2022, <https://www.shiphub.co/top-50-seaports-2022/>.

<sup>4</sup> Antony Sguazzin, Biggest African port to be partially privatized, Bloomberg News, 17 July 2023, <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/biggest-african-port-to-be-partially-privatized-1.1946819>.

<sup>5</sup> The narrative section draws heavily from the GI-TOC/InSight Crime discussion content on the same subject as included in Jeremy McDermott et al., The cocaine pipeline to Europe, GI-TOC and InSight Crime, February 2021, pp 42-45, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cocaine-to-europe>.

<sup>6</sup> A precursor chemical is a chemical that is used to make another chemical. A pre-precursor is a chemical that is used to make a precursor chemical. Because many precursor chemicals necessary for the production of a variety of illicit drugs have been controlled and are increasingly difficult to obtain, illicit drug chemists are seeking instead supplies of pre-precursor chemicals – many of which may not be tightly controlled, or may have a variety of licit uses so they are easier to obtain – to use to make their own precursors.

<sup>7</sup> CTF-150 is unable to stop and search flagged vessels without the permission of the flag nation. Since traditional dhows are unflagged, and therefore viewed as being 'stateless', CTF-150 assets are permitted to interdict them while transiting the international waters of the CMF mandated area of operations.

<sup>8</sup> Owing to the increased violence and instability in the Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique, traders have moved south from the Moçimba de Praia-Pemba stretch of coast to points along the Nacala-Angoche coast, and even further south toward Beira.

<sup>9</sup> Jason Eligh, A synthetic age: The evolution of methamphetamine markets in Eastern and Southern Africa, GI-TOC, March 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/meth-africa>.

<sup>10</sup> GI-TOC, Is Afghanistan a new source for methamphetamine in Eastern and Southern Africa, Observatory of Illicit Economies in East and Southern Africa, Risk Bulletin – Issue 12, GI-TOC, September–October 2020, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/esa-obs-012/02-is-afghanistan-a-new-source-for-methamphetamine-in-eastern-and-southern-africa.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Jason Eligh, The evolution of illicit drug markets and drug policy in Africa, ENACT Continental report no. 3, June 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-evolution-of-illicit-drug-markets-and-drug-policy-in-africa>.

<sup>12</sup> The CTF 150 is made up of a range of participating nations including Australia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the UK and the US. The mandate of the CTF 150, originally set up as an international military response to Somali piracy, includes counter-narcotics trafficking (as a link to terrorist financing). As the threat of Somali piracy waned, drug trafficking became a more predominant security threat in the region and a larger part of CTF 150's mandate and work.

<sup>13</sup> Lucia Bird et al., Changing tides: the evolving illicit drug trade in the western Indian Ocean, GI-TOC, June 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/drug-trade-indian-ocean>.

<sup>14</sup> Katja Lindskov Jacobsen and Julie Høy-Carrasco, Navigating changing currents: A forward-looking evaluation of efforts to tackle maritime crime off the Horn of Africa, Centre for Military Studies, University of Copenhagen, September 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Walker, Africa must get on board as world attention turns to maritime security, ISS, Oct 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africa-must-get-on-board-as-world-attention-turns-to-maritime-security>.



The ESACD is funded by  
the European Union

## The Eastern & Southern Africa Commission on Drugs

---

Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

[secretariat@esacd.org](mailto:secretariat@esacd.org)

The ESACD is funded by the European Union. The contents of this publication can in no way be taken to reflect the views or position of the European Union.

