



Building blocks of a global strategy against organized crime

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Intersections

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From vision to action: A decade of analysis, disruption and resilience

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.

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Foreword

In the last few decades, organized crime has mutated faster than our ability to understand or disrupt it. It threatens our lives and the security and well-being of societies. Despite the severity and pervasiveness of the threat, current responses are proving inadequate. Innovative thinking and proactive measures are urgently required.

Some may say, why work on a strategy against organized crime now? Surely there are more pressing issues to tackle, such as geopolitical tensions and conflict, climate change, migration and state failure. But, as this report makes clear, organized crime intersects with all of these challenges. It is impossible to promote peace, human rights and sustainable development in places wracked by organized crime and corruption. The harms caused by illicit economies strike at the heart of how business, governance and international relations work: it is everybody's problem. Furthermore, if we wait too long for the 'right time' to tackle this threat, it may be too late. Therefore, it is important to continue to push for a debate that engages with solutions.

This report builds on the successes – and failures – of past interventions aimed at countering organized crime and reducing its negative impacts on communities and states. Much that is in the report may not be new to some readers, but what is new is the intersections it seeks to highlight in the responses to organized crime. Additionally, the report seeks to open up the debate, so that voices of other stakeholders – civil society, law enforcement, local communities and the private sector – are also included to work together to counter and strengthen resilience to organized crime.

This report examines the intersections between the upperworld and the underworld where organized crime operates. It looks at how illicit economies intersect with global megatrends, how a complex global problem can be more strategically addressed through targeted interventions at key geographic nodes, or intersection points, in value chains, and how such an approach can foster more cooperative action and effective responses from key stakeholders.

We do not pretend to have all the answers, nor should this report be considered a blueprint for a global strategy. Rather, because the discussion on responses to organized crime is often stove-piped in different expert communities, this report is intended to provoke discussions among people who may not always connect. It is also a call to action, highlighting the major challenges posed by transnational organized crime, and outlining recommendations and priorities to stimulate more effective responses to it. This goes back to the roots of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), which was established in 2013 to identify the building blocks of a global strategy to address transnational organized crime more effectively.

Some of the recommendations proposed in this report will take time and require substantial changes; others can be implemented more easily and quickly. Cynics may argue that the approach taken in this report is naive. However, continuing to implement policies that are failing while society expects more effective outcomes from them is arguably even more illusory.

The size and pervasiveness of this challenge will require what may seem like a highly ambitious response. But failure to rise to that challenge will cause harm to millions of people around the world and future generations.

It could be argued that formulating a global strategy is the task of states and international organizations such as the United Nations. We agree and would support such a process. However, as argued in this report, dealing with organized crime requires input and engagement from a wider spectrum of stakeholders, including youth networks, criminal justice practitioners, experts from the private sector, non-governmental organizations, academia and intergovernmental organizations as well as governments.

It may not be politically feasible to mobilize universal support for a global strategy in the current geopolitical environment. Furthermore, state-embedded actors who may profit from illicit activity are likely to resist efforts to enhance international cooperation.

However, that should not stand in the way of those who are concerned about the status quo and the harms posed by organized crime. This report provides a range of ideas for a diverse group of actors to inspire action at the local, national and regional levels, as well as across key sectors. Concerted action by enough networked individuals and groups acting locally can have a global impact even in the absence of the adoption of a global strategy.

Therefore, we hope that this report can provide inspiration, provoke conversations, spark new approaches, improve prevention, disruption and cooperation, and be a catalyst for change.



Mark Shaw

Director, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

Process design

This report, and other sources of inspiration, could be used to provide input into a process of developing a global strategy against organized crime as recommended by the High-Level Advisory Board. Based on a clear mandate from the UN Secretary General, and in cooperation with INTERPOL, an intergovernmental consultative process could be initiated involving civil society – represented by the GI-TOC – and engaging with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including academia, youth groups, the private sector, regional organizations and law enforcement agencies.

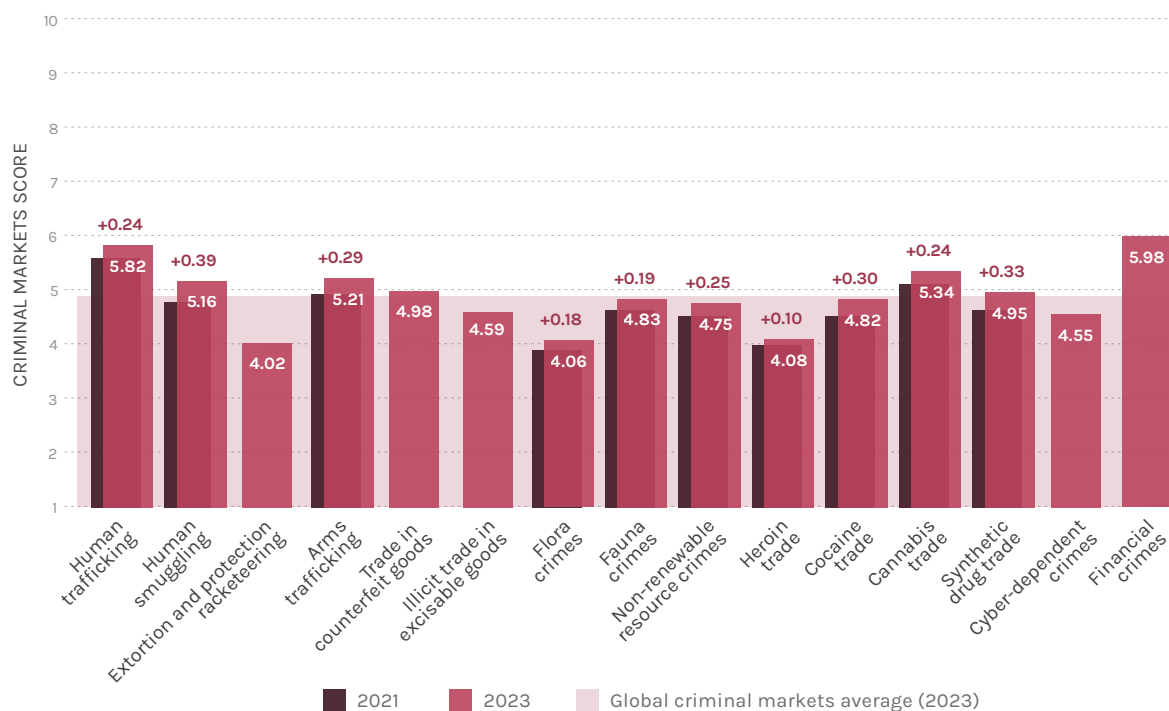
If such a process is considered too ambitious or not politically possible, a group of committed countries could come together in a ‘flexilateral’ format such as a coalition of the willing to generate political will and joint action, building on the ideas contained in this report. Additionally, civil society actors could engage and mobilize their communities, collaborating with various partners to foster support for more effective and sustainable responses to organized crime.

This report identifies building blocks rather than advocating a one-size-fits-all approach; the blocks can be put together in different ways depending on the prevailing conditions and circumstances. If enough people, sectors and countries take action in their own way, together we can affect global change.

Overview



Organized crime has become a threat to international peace and security. It harms so many fundamental aspects of our lives – from governance to the environment and from health and safety to our online activities. As demonstrated by the Global Organized Crime Index 2023, more than 80 per cent of the world's population live in countries with high levels of criminality, and the problem is getting worse, as the figure below shows. Indeed, over the past few decades the geographical reach, diversity of markets and impact of illicit economies have increased dramatically. Organized crime is manifesting itself in places and ways never seen before. And the omens for the future are menacing.



Data from the first and second editions of the Global Organized Crime Index shows that scores for every criminal market increased between 2021 and 2023.



New approaches and new thinking are needed.

Currently, there is no global strategy against organized crime. To reduce the harm to our communities and future generations, this needs to change.

Before trying to fix the system it is important to understand where it is broken. For example, the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) has not lived up to its potential, it is under strain from many sides, and its review mechanism has proved to be slow and weak. There is a lack of urgency and little solidarity within the international community to deal with this threat. As the trend towards illiberal democracy spreads, state-embedded actors who profit from illicit economies will have little incentive to tackle the problem or to cooperate. Too often, because of protection economies and power structures, the big fish get away while low-level offenders are put in jail. The victims meanwhile are largely forgotten.

Existing responses tend to be reactive, short-term and disjointed. Good practices are seldom learned or shared. Siloed responses have not stopped a networked problem. And despite the transnational nature of organized crime, there is little cross-border multilateral cooperation and a deficit of trust between the law enforcement agencies of one country and another.

Unrealistic expectations are put on the shoulders of law enforcement to win a war on drugs and crime or to implement prohibitionist policies. Meanwhile, private sector actors are seldom held accountable for their role in facilitating illicit flows. Furthermore, while civil society groups are on

the front lines, standing up to organized crime in their communities, they are increasingly targeted by criminals and the state, and denied access to intergovernmental processes that affect their lives. Insufficient resources are allocated to youth-led and youth-focused counter-crime initiatives, even though young people are disproportionately affected by organized crime either as victims or perpetrators.

Past crises in Guinea-Bissau and Myanmar and most recently in Haiti and Ecuador show the dangers of organized crime to national security yet also the inability of states and the international community to respond in a timely and targeted way.

One of the biggest handicaps to anti-crime efforts is a dearth of information on organized crime and over-reliance on official national statistics, particularly data on seizures. Furthermore, there is a disproportionate focus on illicit drugs while other types of crime, such as cybercrime, environmental crime, counterfeit goods and financial crime, receive less attention and fewer resources.

Therefore, new approaches and new thinking are needed. Most importantly, organized crime should not be looked at as an isolated phenomenon. It intersects with global megatrends as well as violent conflict and terrorism. It thrives in a blurry ‘mezzosphere’ – that often ignored zone at the intersection between the criminal underworld and the upperworlds of business and politics.

Since organized crime operates within an ecosystem, it is important to use systems thinking to analyze it and to identify pressure points to

disrupt it. Furthermore, it is vital to change the conditions in which illicit economies operate, rather than just pursue criminal actors. Therefore, in addition to changing market forces and drying up the pool of potential offenders it is important to change attitudes and behaviours.

Past GI-TOC reports such as the Global Illicit Economy and the Global Organized Crime Index provide an x-ray of the world crime situation; the diagnosis is grim. This report provides remedies for what to do about it. Furthermore, it looks over the horizon at the possible future evolution of organized crime and how it could be impacted by technological advances, armed conflicts and instability, an increase in illiberal forms of governance and the growth of scarcity markets. But instead of just anticipating possible dystopias of a crime-plagued planet, we take the long view of what a world with less crime could look like.

This report is the outcome of a consultative process spanning almost two years involving regional and thematic dialogues that drew in particular on the Global Initiative Network of Experts. It also builds on decades of counter-organized crime interventions, learning from both their successes and failures. In the process, building blocks for a global strategy against organized crime were identified.

Transforming these ideas into action will require more effective multilateral cooperation as well as enhancing and synchronizing regional, national and local anti-crime strategies. Consistent with the multi-stakeholder approach we advocate throughout the report, the concluding section

underscores the need for greater law enforcement cooperation, making the private sector part of the solution as well as strengthening public-private partnerships, and using civil society as a catalyst for change at the local and global levels. In this way, a community of action can be created that works together towards common goals based on a shared strategic agenda.

Opportunities for fostering greater multilateral cooperation on this issue include building on the 100th anniversary of INTERPOL and its Vienna Declaration; the pact being prepared for the Summit of the Future, scheduled to take place in September 2024; the 25th anniversary of the Palermo Convention in 2025; and the next United Nations Crime Congress in 2026.

The publication of this report is not the end of the process of formulating a global strategy against organized crime, rather it is designed to stimulate further debate among a wider audience of practitioners and policymakers in local and national governments, law enforcement, as well as among the private sector, civil society, youth and inter-governmental organizations. We urge you to join the conversation, respond to the call for action and use this report as an inspiration and a guide for working towards a global strategy against organized crime.

The following two pages provide an overview of the main ideas in this report, which can also be considered building blocks of a global strategy against organized crime.

“It is vital to change the conditions in which illicit economies operate, rather than just pursue criminal actors.”

Building Blocks

INNOVATE

Use new narratives and approaches

Apply systems thinking to reduce the harms of organized crime, viewing illicit economies as an ecosystem that involves underworld and upperworld. Take a whole-of-society approach.

Close information gaps

Close the information gap about organized crime by developing an independent global analytical capacity along the lines of, for example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Look ahead

Devote greater focus and resources to strategic anticipation of possible future trajectories of organized crime, including the establishment of a global foresight group.

Use tech for good

Use technology as a tool to disrupt illicit markets, improve information gathering, analysis, as well as law enforcement and protect the public and companies.

Bring untouchables to justice

At the moment there is no supra-national court to deal with transnational organized crime and high-level corruption cases; it is worth exploring if such a body could be established.

Be strategic

Build political support for a global strategy in intergovernmental bodies (G7, G20, UN Security Council) and regional organizations. Countries that have not done so should develop national organized crime strategies.

Give youth a future

Young people are often either victims or perpetrators of organized crime. They should be at the centre of any efforts to reduce vulnerability to this scourge.

Develop gender-sensitive responses

Apply a gender lens when analyzing criminal groups and markets, and take a gender-sensitive approach in law enforcement responses.

Prioritize human rights

Human rights must inform interventions against organized crime, companies should address human rights impacts linked to their operations, and criminal groups must face accountability for rights violations.

Don't forget the victims

Establish national and global funds for compensating victims of organized crime, including from recovered assets.

Strengthen local resilience

Devote greater attention and investment to enhancing community resilience to organized crime and supporting counter-crime activists and other civil society actors.

A PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACH

Revive the Palermo Convention

Enhance its implementation review mechanism, increase access to and engagement of civil society, and raise the profile of the potential benefits of the UNTOC in addressing environmental crime.

Look at crime and corruption together

Organized crime and corruption are often treated separately but are linked. Ensure synchronization of legal instruments and approaches to tackle organized corruption.

BREAK DOWN SILOES

Promote law enforcement cooperation

Enhance cross-border and inter-regional law enforcement cooperation.

Streamline information exchange and mutual legal assistance

Further develop protocols to enable the collection, retention and sharing of e-evidence and take steps to streamline and accelerate mutual legal assistance.

Involve the private sector

Adopt a definition of 'professional facilitators', crack down on such enablers, incentivize compliance to enhance regulation, and engage the private sector in more effective prevention and remedies.

Keep free trade zones clean

Strengthen international regulatory standards to enhance transparency and integrity in free trade zones.

CRIME IN CONTEXT

Factor crime into peace plans

Increase awareness of the impact of organized crime on geopolitics, factor organized crime into peace operations, and provide guidance to peacemakers who are dealing with illicit economies.

Enhance integrity and protection of supply chains

Work with the private sector and make effective use of technology to reduce the risk of criminal infiltration and human rights abuses in supply chains.

Future-proof new technologies

Make it mandatory to integrate a crime-proofing safety check into the process of issuing patents and international quality management standards to future-proof the abuse of inventions and new technologies.

Strengthen maritime security

Enhance cooperation between port authorities, shipping companies and law enforcement and devote greater attention to flag hopping and IUU fishing.

Develop safer cities

Focus on strategies to develop safer cities and engage municipal governments in crime prevention and reduction strategies.

GET CRIME OUT OF BUSINESS

Establish a global financial intelligence unit (FIU)

Explore the possibility of creating a global FIU to facilitate rapid and efficient responses to potential cross-border financial crimes.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Develop more coherent drug policies

Ensure that drug policies protect health and human rights while law enforcement focuses on large-scale traffickers.

Curb counterfeiting and contraband

Devote greater attention and research to the smuggling of licit products, which is an underestimated but lucrative type of crime.

SHRINK ILLICIT MARKETS

Deploy targeted sanctions

Deploy targeted sanctions against criminal groups or individuals engaged in organized crime as well as secondary sanctions against their enablers.

Discover who benefits

Adopt comprehensive and transparent ownership registries, and minimize secrecy jurisdictions.

Reduce the benefits of crime

Strengthen legal obligations to confiscate illegal proceeds of crime and make more frequent and effective social reuse of confiscated assets.

Prioritize environmental crime

Reduce demand for precious natural resources, disrupt online markets for endangered species and environmental commodities, and tackle waste crime.

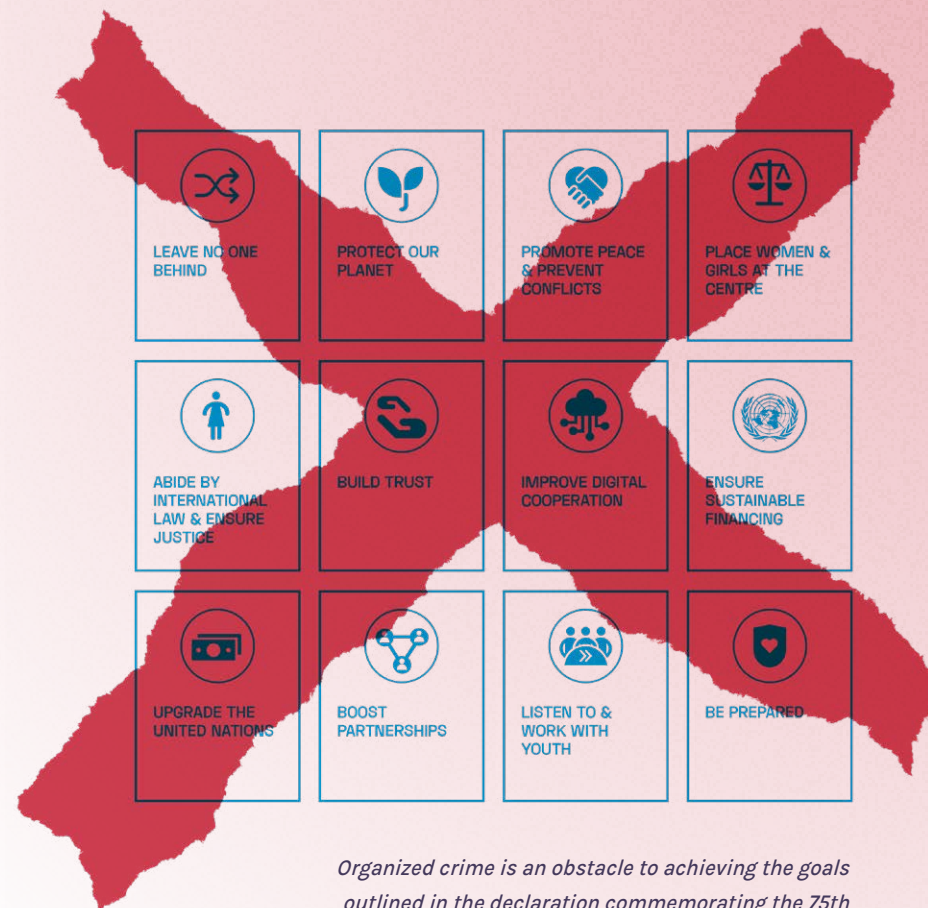
Crack down on firearms trafficking

Tighten compliance of the norms and standards designed to regulate the safe storage and sale of firearms and ammunition and arms trade, and create a global firearms registry.

The urgent need for a global strategy

Organized crime is one of the gravest threats to humanity. It generates violence and fear, leads to injuries and deaths, and profits from the destruction of our planet. It weakens governance, fuels corruption and benefits from conflict and instability. It endangers human health and welfare, undermines development and increases inequality. The most vulnerable become victims or foot soldiers, while the powerful, greedy and corrupt are its allies and enablers.

Not only is organized crime a menace to individuals and communities, it is also an impediment to certain fundamental global objectives. These include achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), promoting justice and social progress, maintaining peace and security, upholding basic human rights, combating climate change, and enabling people to live in safety and dignity. Indeed, organized crime stands in the way of reaching each of the goals pledged by heads of state and government in their declaration on commemorating the 75th anniversary of the United Nations in 2020.¹



Organized crime is an obstacle to achieving the goals outlined in the declaration commemorating the 75th anniversary of the UN.

What is organized crime?

Organized crime is a shape-shifting phenomenon that has infiltrated almost every aspect of life and society, from development and governance to conflict resolution, from migration to climate action, and from elections to the financial system. There is no universally accepted definition of the term. The UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) defines 'organized criminal groups' but not organized crime. It is therefore common in the literature to offer a definition by providing a taxonomy of criminal activities, such as trafficking in people, drugs, weapons and counterfeit goods, and broader categories such as environmental crime.

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) defines organized crime as illegal activities carried out by groups or networks acting in concert, using violence, corruption or deception to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit. Such activities may be carried out within a country's borders, transnationally or, increasingly, in cyberspace.

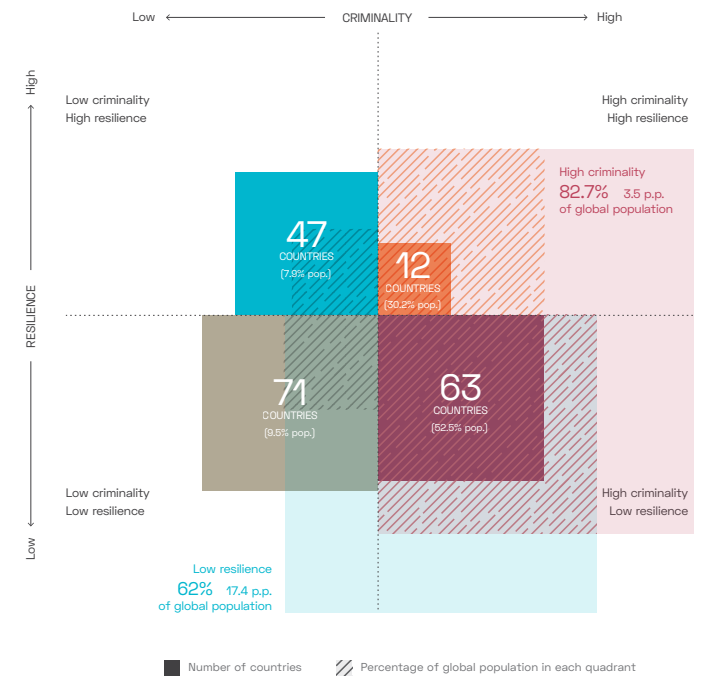
One of the main findings of this report is that the usual ways of defining organized crime are insufficient and no longer capture the complexity of the phenomenon. The lines between the underworld and the upperworld are often blurred. For example, not all activities that take place within the ecosystem of crime are illegal, while not all illicit activities are perceived as such by those engaged in them. Although most types of organized crime are harmful to society, in many contexts illicit activities also perform vital functions, such as providing livelihoods and a form of social order or alternative governance.

As a result, it is important to broaden the way we view and approach organized crime, considering how a complex set of actors and processes intersect and interact with markets and flows and adapt to changing circumstances and environments. This report therefore looks beyond specific types of organized crime to focus on

- › the environments in which organized crime takes place, including its drivers and enablers;
- › the interrelation between types of crime and the intersection of illicit flows; and
- › the grey areas between legality and illegality that provide openings for organized crime, and activities that are informal or illicit rather than illegal.

Organized crime is not an isolated phenomenon that plagues just a few neighbourhoods or fragile regions in far-flung places. According to the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, over 80 per cent of the world's population live in countries with high levels of criminality; and many of these have low levels of resilience to the threat.²

If not addressed urgently and effectively, this danger and the harms that it causes will increase to the extent that they could become unmanageable.



Overview of organized crime risk and resilience in UN member states.

Source: GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index 2023

“The longer we wait to confront this menace, the harder it will be to dislodge and the greater the potential damage to humanity.”

Organized crime has boomed since the end of the Cold War on the back of globalization. Illicit activities flow through the same channels as licit ones: the internet, ports, border crossings, financial institutions and services, transportation networks, supply chains and free trade zones. Money from illicit economies is laundered through real estate and businesses, or stashed offshore thanks to financial institutions and law firms, some of whom specialize in hiding the money of wealthy individuals. Illicit economies are not only part of a murky underworld: they are all around us. It is therefore up to us to change these systems, disable the conditions that make them possible and strengthen the social antibodies necessary to combat this contagion of corruption and criminality.

Yet, as serious as the problem is, there is no global strategy to address it. There are global strategies to deal with terrorism, climate change, nuclear non-proliferation and disaster risk reduction. Multinational corporations have global strategies. But there is no global strategy for combating organized crime. Strictly national responses will not stop criminals without borders.

The longer we wait to confront this menace, the harder it will be to dislodge and the greater the potential damage to humanity. The plundering of our natural resources will accelerate beyond a point of no return. Inequality will increase. Democracy will be further undermined and there will be more mafia states. Inter-state relations will be hijacked by criminal agendas. Conflict zones will become battlegrounds for control of illicit economies. More victims will fall into the clutches of those seeking to exploit the vulnerable. Criminals will move into new markets, particularly those where there is scarcity of commodities such as water and critical minerals, or where they can offer their services for hire. They will also take advantage of emerging and disruptive technologies such as 3D printing, nanotechnology, biotechnology, artificial intelligence and quantum computing.

However, bleak as it is, the situation is neither hopeless nor irreversible. Change is possible by design. New ways of looking at the problem can make it more comprehensible and transparent, and enable targeted responses in vulnerable regions, illicit hubs and supply chains. A combination of global and local ('glocal') action can address the problem both from the bottom up and the top down.

New thinking and more coordinated action may not be able to eliminate criminal markets completely, but it can at least manage them and reduce the harm that they cause.

Success will depend on a whole-of-society approach, including interventions at all levels of government, law enforcement, the private sector and civil society. Calls for change must be championed by those who believe in making a better future for their communities and their planet – including youth, activists, human rights defenders, political leaders, criminal justice practitioners and the media. And there must be a common agenda that all dedicated stakeholders can buy into and seek to implement, ideally based on an internationally agreed commitment in a high-level forum. This is a big challenge that requires big ideas.

There is no time to lose. The moment is now!

The ecosystem of organized crime

Organized crime occurs not only in the underworld or the shadows: it is embedded in the ecosystem all around us. It is often difficult to identify because it operates discreetly, lurking in the same institutions, businesses and practices as licit actors. We all live in the ecosystem of organized crime. Some of the main characteristics can be seen in the nine sections of this image and are explained in greater detail later in the report.

1. Illicit markets

Organized crime will flourish as long as there is demand for illicit goods and services. It depends on the exploitation and commodification of people, animals and the environment.

2. Governance

Corruption prevents law enforcement, governments and businesses from taking action against organized crime. Criminal groups use corruption to infiltrate political institutions and to co-opt enablers.

3. Geopolitics

State-embedded actors use the trappings and privileges of their power as well as connections and corruption to profit from illicit activities; they make use of cybercrime as a tool to gain political advantage. They also engage with criminal groups to carry out the dirty work of statecraft under a cloak of deniability, which destabilizes international relations.

4. Environment

Organized crime is a threat multiplier that aggravates climate stress and resource scarcity. Crimes that affect the environment are often hard to detect, as they happen at the intersection between the licit and illicit. However, they have severe implications for our global commons and for human health and security.





5. Violence and instability

Instability caused by violent conflict or weak governance creates a conducive environment for criminals to provide 'protection' or exploit people and natural resources. Violence is a tool that criminals use to prove authority, gain control over illicit markets, structure their operations, silence communities, and instill a culture of fear. Violence is also evident when there is competition for markets, or in heavy-handed law enforcement crackdowns on criminal groups.

6. Vulnerable communities

Underdevelopment in urban neighbourhoods or rural communities often attracts criminality as people turn to illicit activities to survive. Such communities are often more vulnerable to those who offer informal employment, loans or opportunities, some of which lead to criminality.

7. Infrastructure

Illicit goods and services often flow through the same supply chains and use the same trade infrastructure (such as ports and airports) as legal commerce, making them difficult to detect.

8. Secrecy jurisdictions and financial crime

Offshore havens designed to enable the rich to stash their wealth are also attractive to criminals for laundering or hiding their profits. These assets usually pass through the financial system. Illicit financial flows are difficult to detect and deprive governments of resources to pay for public services and security.

9. Technology

Digital technology enables criminals to communicate, move money and prey on vulnerable people. The development of digital infrastructure is opening up new possibilities, both for criminals and law enforcement.

The impacts of organized crime

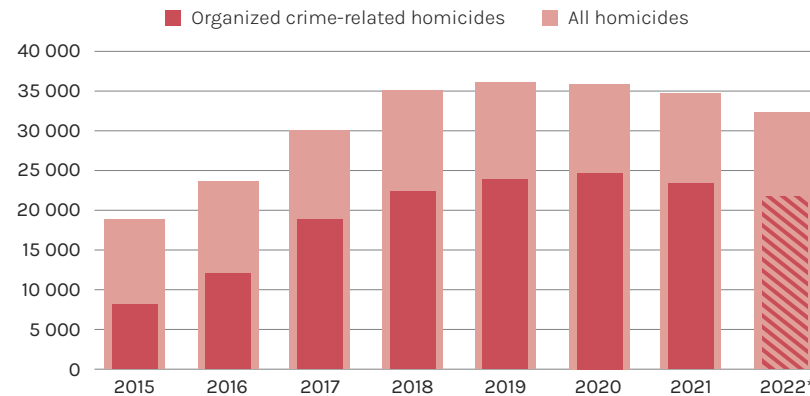
Organized crime has serious impacts, many of which are illustrated in the ecosystem of organized crime infographic. These, and other harms, are unpacked here.

Threats to peace and security

Criminal activity can threaten the sovereignty of states, for example by fuelling violence or undermining governments' ability to control borders against illicit flows or criminal groups. In some states, the violence and instability triggered by organized crime can affect national security. Furthermore, criminal markets often proliferate in conflict zones, ranging from the smuggling of weapons and fuel to the exploitation of natural resources and the trafficking of people. Since criminals profit from instability in such environments, the nexus of crime and conflict can make it harder to sustain peace. There are also cases where criminals partner with terrorist or insurgent groups to control strategic corridors and smuggle goods, or where terrorists and armed groups operate like organized criminal actors. In such situations, the spaces between these violent entrepreneurs become blurred. In other cases, states collude with criminal groups to use their services as a function of statecraft and to fight proxy or hybrid wars.

Death and violence

Organized crime can lead to people being physically injured, or even killed, particularly as a result of gun-related violence, forced disappearances and assassinations. Indeed, the costs of violence associated with transnational organized crime far outweigh those caused by terrorism or conflict.



Annual homicides in Mexico, overall and estimated number associated with organized crime, 2015–2022.

Note: The organized crime-related homicides figure for 2022 is an estimate based on trends from the previous three years.

Source: Institute for Economics and Peace, Mexico Peace Index 2023

Corruption of politics

Through violence and corruption, criminal groups create unfair advantages and buy power, access and impunity. Alliances between political, business and criminal actors often result in the criminalization of governance, undermining democracy and the rule of law, violating fundamental freedoms and generating instability in international relations. Corruption drains much-needed resources from public services, administration and security, and erodes trust in public institutions. It can facilitate organized crime and debilitate institutional and operational responses, while the profits of crime may fuel corruption and money laundering. The relationship between organized crime and corruption is circular and difficult to break.

Destruction of the environment

Organized criminal groups are profiting from the destruction of our natural environment. Illegal logging, overfishing, wildlife poaching and trafficking, toxic waste dumping, and the illegal extraction and exploitation of natural resources contribute to unsustainable growth and the destruction of the global commons. The criminal destruction of our habitat is also increasing the scarcity of natural resources such as sand, water and charcoal, leading to emerging scarcity markets from which criminal entrepreneurs can profit. Not only does organized crime accelerate climate change, but climate change is likely to trigger large-scale migration, creating a politically destabilizing and potentially lucrative environment for criminals to exploit.

Health risks

Illicit drugs cause harms such as addiction and death, and drug trafficking can generate deadly violence. Counterfeit medicines, medical supplies and vaccines harm those who are most in need, while other counterfeit products can jeopardize health and safety. Water contamination from drug production or illicit waste dumping can lead to serious health problems. Criminal markets – from illegal mining to the manufacturing of counterfeit goods – are unlikely to have measures in place to ensure the safety of workers (including children), who may have few alternatives to earn a living than the dangerous and degrading conditions that they are subjected to. There are also mental health issues associated with organized crime. For example, victims of human trafficking or organ smuggling are often left physically or psychologically scarred.

Harming the economy and development

While criminals and their collaborators may profit from the proceeds of crime, organized crime in turn causes economic damage. This includes the costs of corruption and money laundering (and the inequalities they create within societies), extortion, brain drain, lack of investment, and governments investing heavily in law enforcement and security rather than allocating public finances to other services. Counterfeiting robs businesses and governments of jobs and revenue. Organized crime is also an impediment to achieving most of the SDGs.

Stealing data and violating privacy

In an era of unprecedented digital advancement, our collective reliance on technology is increasingly being exploited by organized criminal groups. Technology has revolutionized criminal enterprise, providing organized criminal groups with a range of resources to carry out their activities. Criminals are stealing data and intellectual property, holding businesses to ransom, attacking digital supply chains, hacking into computers and tricking people out of their life savings. The anonymity, accessibility and security afforded by encrypted communication apps, dark web forums and marketplaces, and cryptocurrencies have enabled organized crime to thrive. Artificial intelligence also has the potential to open up sinister new opportunities. The democratization of cybercrime is further intensified by the lower barriers to entry, where criminals do not necessarily require sophisticated cyber-skills: malware kits and software as a service are readily available on the dark and surface web. By 2025, it is projected that the total global damages inflicted by all forms of cybercrime could reach US\$10.5 trillion.³

Tearing apart the social fabric

Organized crime sows fear and suffering in communities, and harms public health. It can cause people to move away or change their behaviour in order to survive in a dangerous environment. For some, it can be a ticket to upward social mobility; for others, it can result in misery, entrapment and even death. In either case, it erodes social, family and community ties and values. A criminal culture that glorifies violence and illicit wealth can create stereotypes and

images that make unlawful and harmful behaviour attractive or normalized. Organized criminal groups prey on vulnerability: those on the margins of society are often the most vulnerable to exploitation. Organized crime flourishes where there is a breakdown of trust between the community, the state and the police. In this respect, it is sometimes a symptom as well as a cause of social decay.

Threats to freedom and human rights

Organized crime threatens several human rights, including the right to life, liberty and security of person, for example through violence, extra-judicial killings and targeted assassinations. Those who expose organized crime are often at risk: witnesses, survivors, whistle-blowers, community leaders and activists can become targets of both criminals and the law, or suffer retribution from those they expose, including through 'lawfare', surveillance, public humiliation, arbitrary arrests, death threats, damage to property, assault and even death.

All forms of human trafficking violate the right to freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The right of minorities to freedom from discrimination is often violated in the case of indigenous groups who are threatened with violence or whose land is stolen or exploited by people involved in environmental crimes. Children's rights to freedom from social and economic exploitation are denied to young victims who are forcibly recruited to work in the production, sale and trafficking of illicit commodities.

Crime-prevention efforts can cause violations of human rights, particularly procedural rights. In some cases, a heavy-handed response by the state in the name of law and order (for example, in the 'war on drugs') may trigger human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrest and detention, or even injury and death.

The functionality of organized crime

It is important to acknowledge that organized crime has some perceived benefits, in addition to the harm it causes. In many parts of the world, organized criminal activities provide livelihoods in communities where alternatives are lacking, thereby helping to maintain a degree of economic stability. Such

practices range from counterfeiting, smuggling, using the services of a smuggler to cross borders, cultivating illicit crops, engaging in clandestine mining or working for gangs. These activities may be socially accepted or simply a matter of survival in some contexts, making it difficult to disrupt these markets. Conversely, taking away livelihoods in the name of combating organized crime may leave people more vulnerable.

Furthermore, where the state is unable or unwilling to provide public security, administration or basic services, communities may feel that actors engaged in illicit activities have more legitimacy or utility than the state, particularly if they are maintaining order, providing protection, and delivering services and security to the community in the absence of the state.

While recognizing the role of organized crime in sustaining livelihoods and providing rudimentary governance and service delivery, it is also important to highlight the unintended negative consequences of combating organized crime. The difficulty lies in disrupting criminal markets without worsening the vulnerabilities of communities that depend on them for survival or stability.

This is exacerbated in situations where corrupt governments instrumentalize the fight against organized crime to support their drive for greater control or to consolidate power. By invoking what has been described as 'privilege violence',⁴ autocratic state agents can leverage the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force to, for example, crack down on opposition supporters and curtail freedoms in the name of law and order, thereby maintaining power and privilege and deepening underlying social problems.

Addressing organized crime requires a broader approach that not only targets criminal activity, but also focuses on expanding social services, employment opportunities and health care for affected communities. Such an approach should aim to diminish the attractiveness of illicit activities by providing viable alternatives, while reducing impunity and increasing the risks for those involved in criminal economies.

For some people, organized crime is a threat to their survival. For others, it is a matter of survival.



**What is
wrong with
the current
approach?**

If the problem is so serious, and growing, why is there no global strategy to address it? There are several reasons for this:

- › There is a perceived lack of urgency, partly because the problem is often hidden or slow-burning, systemic rather than acute.
- › Governments have other priorities, especially fast-breaking and unexpected crises. When they do focus on organized crime (such as drug or migrant trafficking), the response tends to be politically motivated short-term and securitized rather than strategic, long-term and sustainable.
- › State-embedded actors who profit from illicit economies have little incentive to tackle the problem; indeed, they have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.
- › Some countries do not want to 'internationalize' what they regard as a national security issue and jealously guard their sovereignty even as it is being eroded.
- › Current responses are heavily reliant on state actors for implementation, yet organized crime is often most problematic in places where states are weak or compromised.
- › Victims are often far away from the crime scene, making it difficult to link cause and effect, and to bring those responsible to justice.
- › At the global level, there is a sense that while organized crime is a problem, it is too big, complex or 'wicked' to analyze, disentangle and address.

Legal framework under strain

International efforts to combat transnational organized crime are a relatively recent phenomenon. INTERPOL, established over a century ago in September 1923, marked a crucial milestone in this pursuit, but the singular international instrument dedicated to countering organized crime – the Palermo Convention (UNTOC) – was signed in December 2000. Developments in the fight against organized crime have failed to keep pace with our rapidly changing world. Technological advances, environmental degradation, the creation of new psychoactive substances, changing attitudes towards drugs, and the nexus between violent crime and threats to international peace and security – challenges the Convention was not designed to address – have placed it under strain. Furthermore, the implementation of the UNTOC's review mechanism has proven to be slow and weak, with only one review completed in the more than two decades since the Convention's adoption, and there is limited space for civil society and the private sector in the implementation review process. As a major study of thousands of international agreements concluded, treaties that do not have enforcement mechanisms have little chance of achieving their intended effects.⁵

The trigger for international action

In 1992, the world was shocked by a massive explosion that killed the anti-mafia prosecutor Giovanni Falcone, his wife, and three bodyguards in Italy. Two months later, Falcone's colleague and fellow prosecutor Paolo Borsellino was murdered. It became clear that urgent action was needed to stop the threat to open societies posed by organized crime.

In reaction, a World Ministerial Conference on Organized Transnational Crime was held in Palermo, Italy, in 1994. This meeting laid the foundations for strengthening international cooperation against organized crime.

Follow-up consultations in the late 1990s led to the drafting of the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), which was signed in Palermo in December 2000. The UNTOC came into force in December 2003 with the aim of promoting cooperation to prevent and combat transnational organized crime more effectively. The Convention is supplemented by three protocols on trafficking in persons, the smuggling of migrants, and the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms. As of 2023, there are 191 states parties to the UNTOC.

The assassination of Falcone and the drafting and ratification of an international convention represented a turning point in the recognition of the global impact and seriousness of organized crime, and the need for international cooperation to prevent and counter it.

Neither the UNTOC nor the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) has an adjudicative body, which means that the responsibility for implementation lies completely with member states. There is no international court for dealing with serious cases of organized crime or corruption, and while there is an international police organization (namely, INTERPOL), there is no international police force.

Another major handicap is that the international solidarity that existed in the late 1990s to deal with this global challenge has frayed as a result of geopolitical rivalries. The lack of adjudicative mechanisms and binding enforcement, as well as consensus-based decision-making and restricted space for civil society, have hampered the Convention's ability to respond to existing and emerging threats.

When it comes to following the money, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) guidelines to combat money laundering, terrorist financing and other financial crimes are not legally enforceable, resulting in uneven levels of commitment and implementation among governments.

The drug control regime has become increasingly contested in recent years. Once characterized by coherence, policy uniformity and active support from key member states, the interpretation and implementation of drug conventions has begun to shift in recent decades. The move towards greater flexibility in the interpretation and implementation of the conventions has seen some member states pursue policies that were once anathema to the UN drug consensus, such as the legalization of certain drugs, a greater focus on public health and human rights, and an attempt to find new paradigms that take a different approach to the prohibitionist 'war on drugs' model. While some states and activists want to go further, others seek to maintain strictly prohibitionist approaches. This creates a contested multilateral environment.

International system full of holes

Current international regulatory systems are full of holes. Opaque banking systems enable corrupt officials, businesses and criminals to hide vast amounts of wealth. Shadow banks perform functions parallel to those of commercial banks, but under less stringent regulatory frameworks, allowing them to accept funds from dubious investors. The dark net is a vast and largely unregulated space where almost anything can be bought and sold. The 'warrant-proof' encryption of phones enables criminals to send messages without being intercepted. The result is that phones become de facto law-free zones, a major handicap for law enforcement.

Meanwhile, special economic zones permit the free flow of goods, including trafficked commodities. It is estimated that more than 20 per cent of the world's trade moves through such zones⁶ – twice the amount of trade that passes through the Suez Canal. More than 90 per cent of the world's trade is carried by sea, mostly in containers, but only 2 per cent of these are inspected.⁷ In addition, it is estimated that over 70 per cent of global shipping is carried out by vessels flying flags of convenience,⁸ which is advantageous for ships engaged in illicit trading. This risk is compounded by 'flag hopping' by ships involved in smuggling, illegal fishing or circumventing international sanctions.

Most of these holes have been created with the complicity of governments and are enabled by private sector entities and actors that benefit from them. Yet there is limited liability and accountability for companies when it comes to their witting or unwitting involvement in facilitating illicit activities, such as financial and environmental crime or the shipping of illicit commodities. Furthermore, the private sector is seldom included in relevant discussions and initiatives to tackle organized crime and corruption.

Unclear definitions

As noted above, there is no internationally agreed definition of organized crime. The UNTOC contains a definition of an organized criminal group and defines the concept of transnationality. However, while it defines 'serious crimes' as those that would result in a prison term of at least four years, countries have different interpretations of what should be considered a serious crime.

There are also debates about what constitutes environmental crime and cybercrime. Differences in legal frameworks and systems, and lack of harmonization of national crime definitions, hinder cross-border cooperation.

It is time to take stock of whether the term 'organized crime' is still useful as a way of describing illicit economies, criminal actors and their impact on our societies.

Wrong approaches

The discourse on dealing with organized crime has been influenced by the logic of a 'war on drugs'. This has encouraged militarized responses to eliminating threats or, in the case of illicit drugs, eradicating crops. This approach, which has proved largely unsuccessful against drugs, is even less suitable for dealing with other criminal markets, such as human smuggling or environmental crime. Moreover, high-profile, short-term police operations usually displace the problem rather than curtail it, resulting in a never-ending 'whack a mole' chase.

Similar limitations are evident in attempts to follow the money. Chasing suspicious transactions without changing the enabling system has overwhelmed the capacity of banks and financial intelligence units without reducing the flow of dirty money. The absence of mechanisms to measure the success of such policies enables law enforcement agencies and politicians to claim success or carry out subsequent crackdowns without much accountability for the effectiveness of these approaches.

Few shared priorities

At national and international levels, there is a disproportionate focus on illicit drugs. Drugs are undoubtedly a major criminal market: drug money fuels corruption, and drug trafficking affects the lives of millions of people around the world. Other types of crime, such as cybercrime, environmental crime and financial crime, are also serious problems, but they do not receive the same attention or resources. The infiltration of licit markets, such as waste management and transport, by criminal groups, is also underestimated, as are the social, economic and health costs of counterfeit goods or adulterated pharmaceuticals. This imbalance reflects the problem of governance when it comes to dealing with illicit economies: priorities are usually set for political reasons rather than being guided by carefully weighed evidence or objective threat assessments. Furthermore, different states have different priorities.

Siloed approaches

With illicit economies, there is a tendency at policy or operational levels to focus on a single commodity, region or neighbourhood. Organized crime threat assessments are seldom carried out at the national level, and almost never at the regional or global level. This prevents the formulation of the big picture that is needed to understand the demand for goods and services, the components of supply chains, transnational flows, the convergence of criminal markets and actors, and the ecosystems in which organized

crime operates. Focusing on isolated parts of the problem rarely leads to comprehensive or long-term solutions. Indeed, it may even have negative side effects.

Currently, there are siloed approaches to dealing with organized crime within states, between states, and within the international system and organizations. This reflects weak governance, a lack of shared strategic priorities, and competition for resources and attention. Moreover, organized crime and corruption are often dealt with separately when in reality they are inextricably linked. This is evident within the UN system, which has separate conventions on organized crime and corruption – with little alignment or coordination between them. Since the accumulation of wealth is one of the key drivers of organized crime, counteracting money laundering, and tracing, seizing and confiscating the proceeds of crime must be prioritized.

Playing catch-up

Criminals are quick to exploit opportunities. They harness new technologies, open new routes and networks, and tap into new markets. The rapid globalization and modernization of crime is causing some police departments to be left behind, lacking the resources, skills and personnel to investigate financial crime, gather and exchange digital evidence, carry out forensic analysis of new types of synthetic drugs, or crack down on cybercrime. This impedes their ability to cooperate with more technologically advanced counterparts and to catch more sophisticated and better resourced criminals.

Organized crime is constantly evolving, but law enforcement tends to focus on yesterday's challenges. Innovation is slow and few police forces invest in strategic foresight or anticipatory intelligence. Repeating the same procedures with the same tools and approaches that have had limited success will not change the trajectory of organized crime. More attention needs to be devoted to anticipating the future of organized crime and preventing the worst-case scenarios.

Limited trust and cooperation

International coordination among law enforcement agencies lags behind that of criminal groups. There is no universal framework for international law enforcement cooperation, and states have not fully exploited the potential of the Palermo Convention, including its policies on intelligence sharing, mutual legal assistance (MLA), joint operations and electronic evidence (or 'e-evidence') sharing. Collaboration is often hampered by a lack of trust due to concerns about corruption, state-embedded actors, politicization – of INTERPOL Red Notices or FATF grey-listing, for example – or concerns about the motives and connections of those with potential access to sensitive information. Meanwhile, criminals have proved more adept at using technology – sharing information, cooperating across borders and developing networks – than the police. Criminals have organized globally, while police remain largely focused on national jurisdictions or bilateral cooperation.

Distorted and outdated picture of organized crime

Popular culture has painted a picture of criminals as mafia bosses or gun-toting thugs. Such criminals do exist, but people involved in illicit activities often do not resemble the popular image. While some politicians are beginning to look and act more like mafia bosses, criminals increasingly tend to look and act more like businesspeople or politicians. Furthermore, many of the transactions that enable illicit activity follow the same paths, supply chains and techniques as licit transactions, and rely on the same intermediaries.

In some countries where state-embedded actors are involved in illicit activities, the people who should be part of the solution are actually part of the problem, while those who are labelled 'criminals' enjoy a degree of legitimacy in the community.

Getting away with murder

Despite the pervasiveness of the problem, there are few prosecutions for grand corruption or serious organized crime. Instead, there is a tendency to round up low-level criminals, or for prosecutions to founder or fail. Too often, deaths and disappearances related to organized crime go unsolved. For example, it has been reported that in Mexico in 2021, 93.2 per cent of crimes were not recorded in official statistics because no investigation was opened or the crimes were not reported to official authorities.⁹ People are literally getting away with murder. Moreover, high-level criminals and the high-level officials who protect them tend to act with impunity.



Throwing people in jail

The other extreme is to imprison suspected or convicted criminals and assume that the problem is solved. Misdemeanours and minor infractions often result in long periods of pre-trial detention, followed by prison sentences. Populist approaches of throwing people in jail are an easy short-term solution for social problems and a stepping stone to more authoritarian rule. In such situations, no consideration is given to restorative justice or rehabilitating the incarcerated. In this microcosm, prisons become places where petty criminals are recruited by more hardened criminals, gang culture is strengthened, illicit deals are struck and criminal operations are run. We cannot arrest our way out of this problem.

Neglecting the victims

While law enforcement responses tend to focus on pursuing criminals, less attention is paid to protecting human rights and providing overall support to witnesses, victims and survivors. Civil society actors are often left to do the best they can in difficult and often dangerous conditions with limited resources. In addition, whistle-blowers often receive insufficient legal and practical protection.

It is clear that a fundamental change of approach is needed.

03

**What
to do
about it?**

A new global approach to tackling organized crime must be coordinated and address the most salient problems. The need for a more strategic approach has been identified in the past. In 2009, for example, the International Peace Institute produced a blue paper with recommendations on how to strengthen multilateral security capacity in the face of the mounting transnational organized crime threat. Entities such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union (EU) have strategies for addressing organized crime, but these are largely regionally focused.

In a 2023 report, the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism proposed that the Summit of the Future should 'agree on a global strategy on transnational organized crime, laying out the key areas for collaboration, strategic priorities, and common benchmarks for the multilateral system, and providing inspiration and direction for collaborative responses across a wide range of sectors and regions'.¹⁰ INTERPOL's Vienna Declaration of 27 November 2023, issued to mark the organization's centenary, stated that 'tackling organized crime must become a global national security priority'.¹¹

The challenge is to turn these words into action.

New narratives

It is time to move beyond simplistic and clichéd perceptions of criminality to understand the bigger picture and the blurred lines between the licit and the illicit.

It is also time to change the militaristic rhetoric against organized crime that can trigger heavy-handed responses. Law enforcement – at times necessarily robust – is a key aspect of preventing and controlling crime. But whereas enforcement agencies can pursue criminal groups, they cannot go to war against illicit economies. Furthermore, talk of winning a war creates false expectations and sets up law enforcement agencies for failure. What matters is changing the conditions of illicit economies, not just the actors.

Organized crime is clearly a complex and serious issue for which solutions are difficult to find. Instead of judging success based on 'solving' the problem, we should measure instead our capacity to manage organized crime and reduce the harms that it inflicts. This does not mean giving up, but adopting a more realistic approach – one that does not set out to eliminate all types of organized crime.

Organized crime is challenging to measure – it operates in the shadows yet seems to be everywhere. But that does not mean that we should be defeatist and accept that nothing can be changed. Change is possible, but only through proactive design, not disjointed reaction. We therefore need to understand the incentives, drivers and enablers of organized crime, the system in which it operates, to imagine better alternatives and to take action to achieve them. The following sections examine some of the proposed approaches to help realize these better alternatives.

Social and behavioural change

Curbing organized crime will depend on changing behaviour, and not just laws or policies. After all, markets are driven by demand, so persuading consumers to change their habits and preferences can lead to changes in market forces. This has been attempted with high-profile campaigns against blood diamonds, child exploitation in the cocoa industry, and illegal fishing. Such campaigns work best when combined with education, policymaking and community engagement.

That said, even when people are aware of the problem, it is difficult to change behaviour because consumption patterns are not exclusively determined by our personal and collective preferences and beliefs, but also by income levels, product availability, government policies and external shocks. For example, people who do not have access to prescription medicines are likely to turn to counterfeit pharmaceuticals even if they are aware of the potential health risks. Or if there are only counterfeit goods available in a marketplace, it is difficult to convince people to buy something else.

Another significant challenge to demand reduction is a context where it is socially or culturally acceptable to make use of an illicit product or service. This is often the case with counterfeit goods or certain illicit wildlife products that are considered to have medicinal benefits. Changing behaviour in such contexts goes beyond law enforcement. It requires a whole-of-society approach involving educational institutions, the media and those in advertising and popular culture, community and religious leaders, development agencies and politicians to establish the tone and set an example from the top. Education should focus on enhancing a culture of integrity from an early age.

Companies, and not just consumers, also need to change their behaviour and exclude from their supply chains products that are illegally sourced or produced in conditions of forced or child labour. Paying bribes – common in the extractives and construction industries – should not be considered just ‘part of the game’. The business community can also be a valuable ally in strengthening resilience and reducing levels of violence. After all, businesspeople should see the self-interest in not living in an environment where they fear for their own safety and that of their families.

Behavioural change is linked to the notion of risk-benefit analysis. If the status quo is considered low risk, even if it involves illicit behaviour, there is little incentive to switch to a different course of action. Therefore, there should be a dual track policy of increasing the availability of legal alternatives while lowering the personal and social desirability of obtaining illicitly produced products. This applies to both companies and people engaged in illicit activities.

Changing attitudes, behaviours and social norms may seem like a tall order. But approaching the issue with an attitude of learned helplessness or indifference will not change anything. If massive change is what is needed, then that is what we should aspire to.



**WE CAN
MAKE A
DIFFERENCE!**

يمكن أن
نُحدث
فرقاً

我們可以帶來改變

**¡PODEMOS
HACER LA**

**Nous
pouvons
faire la
différence!**

**Мы можем
всё
изменить!**

DIFERENCIA!

**можем
всё
изменить!**

Youth as agents of change

Organized crime has a disproportionate impact on young people. Youth – aged 15 to 29 – are commonly victims and perpetrators of organized crime.²¹

Participation in organized crime, including gang activities, or involuntary exposure to its violence is a major cause of homicide among young people. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that over 176 000 young people between the ages of 10 and 29 are victims of homicide each year (although not all at the hands of organized crime).²² Young people are also susceptible to human trafficking. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), children under the age of 18 account for about one-third of the detected cases of human trafficking – and half of detected cases in low-income countries.²³ If we factor in young people up to the age of 29, the percentage is undoubtedly much higher.

Today, children and young people are increasingly in danger of becoming victims of sexual exploitation. This is not only because they are spending considerably more of their time online, but also because they are exposed to cyberspace at a younger age. Children and

young people are often groomed on social media and gaming sites by predators who exploit the accessibility and anonymity of the internet.

Drug use among young people is also more prevalent than among older people, making them particularly vulnerable to the violence and health risks associated with drug trafficking.²⁴

Young people are particularly vulnerable to recruitment by criminal groups. For example, many gang members are young people. Young people are seen as easy targets to lure with promises of wealth, status and identity. They are impressionable to deviant role models. Furthermore, they are considered useful to criminal groups for hiding weapons, acting as lookouts, drug dealers or couriers, or extorting clients. In these roles, their advantage is that punishments for offences committed by minors are often lighter than those for adults.

In some societies (particularly in parts of Africa and Latin America), many contract killers are young people.

Despite these challenges, young people have a major stake in building a safer future – their future. Therefore, any global strategy dealing with organized crime needs to have a strong focus on youth; to increase their chances of becoming agents of change rather than agents of violence. Given the right opportunities, youth can be drivers of development, creative sparks in their communities, advocates for social justice and human rights, peacebuilders and protectors of the planet. All the more reason to keep them off the escalator of crime.



De-escalating risks to youth

Include youth in all anti-organized crime strategies – not only those focusing on juvenile criminality and gang recruitment

Prevent gang recruitment and develop exit strategies

Develop and implement community-based violence intervention programmes

Promote alternatives to prison and improve post-penal reform

Integrate vulnerable youth into society

Provide job and skills training

Create opportunities for sports, cultural and social activities

Support organizations working with at-risk youth

Provide mentoring, life skills training, mental health support and positive narratives

Explain the harms of organized crime and corruption, and promote a culture of integrity from an early age

Recommended actions to break the youth crime circuit:

- › **Be strategic.** Put greater focus on youth crime prevention strategies, and mainstream anti-crime elements addressing the needs of youth into strategies designed to promote rural development as well as strategies for safer communities. Engage youth – particularly youth-led civil society organizations – in the development and implementation of strategies for crime prevention, alternative development and urban renewal.
- › **Support civil society.** Support civil society organizations working with young people, both in cities and in rural communities.
- › **Develop sustainable programmatic activities to assist at-risk youth.** Invest in early childhood education. Create opportunities for sports and cultural activities, for example, and provide counselling and mentoring on life skills.
- › **Explain the harms of organized crime and corruption.** Place greater emphasis in secondary and tertiary education on building a culture of integrity and educating young people about the harms of corruption and organized crime. Provide

guidance to schools and parents on digital safety to reduce vulnerability to online grooming, fraud and human trafficking.

- › **Create and promote positive images.** Promote narratives that counteract the glamorization of organized crime, toxic masculinity and the attractiveness of a 'get rich quick' lifestyle.
- › **Provide mental health support.** Focus more on preventing and treating drug use among youth and educating them on the risks. Invest greater resources in working with young offenders and young people in communities wracked by violence to deal with trauma and other mental health issues.
- › **Reform post-penal processes and create alternatives to prison.** Create and use alternatives to imprisonment for minor drug offences. Pay greater attention to post-penal reform and work with juvenile offenders before they are released from detention, to enhance resocialization and reduce their risk of recidivism.
- › **Increase opportunities for training.** Promote closer cooperation between local government, education authorities and the private sector – with the support of donors – to enable training for in-demand skills among young people, particularly in sectors where there are employment opportunities.
- › **Improve community policing.** Ensure that neighbourhood and community-policing strategies and guidelines include a youth component, and that police services work with community leaders and young people to reduce the vulnerability of young people to crime and to foster safer communities.
- › **Deter gang recruitment and develop exit strategies.** The short-term priority should be to provide safe pathways for young people who want to exit gangs, tailored to the needs of vulnerable groups, such as female gang members or youths. In the longer term, efforts should be made to prevent gang recruitment by finding other ways to foster a sense of identity and belonging; for example, through social programmes coordinated by youth groups, educational projects and recreational activities such as sports. However, only by addressing structural inequality and poverty and fostering alternative livelihoods can gang recruitment and associated violence be fully prevented.

New approaches

In the past, when thinking about how to tackle the problem of organized crime, there has been a tendency to focus on criminal groups or markets. This is necessary but not sufficient. Instead, it is vital to understand and seek to change the conditions in which organized crime operates. This requires looking at the ecosystem in which organized crime flourishes and tracing illicit flows from source to destination through the entire value chain. In this way, we can understand how and why the different elements fit together and where they intersect. Based on this understanding, we will be in a better position to disrupt or even transform some parts of the system through more targeted responses.

Organized crime is not an isolated phenomenon: it is affected by and connected to other factors that co-exist in the same space, such as migration, technological change, governance and conflict, and it helps shape those factors. It is therefore important to understand the intersections and unpack the complexity of this 'wicked' problem. It is also important to be under no illusions about the limitations of tackling organized crime in isolation. As noted elsewhere in this report, poor migration policies, lack of reform of the international financial system, the persistence of armed conflict, and policies that coddle kleptocrats will undermine even the best efforts to change the ecosystems of crime. Therefore, while this report explains the links between organized crime and exogenous factors, it keeps its focus on reducing the harm posed by organized crime rather than aspiring to change all the global megatrends that fuel illicit economies.

A recurrent theme is therefore that it is misleading and simplistic to portray organized crime as an underworld of crooks distinct from an upperworld of 'good guys'. The two are symbiotic, and we need to understand how these worlds are connected, where and how key players in the underworld intersect and engage with or expose those in the upperworld. The space where this happens could be called the 'mezzosphere' – a middle world where licit and illicit intersect.

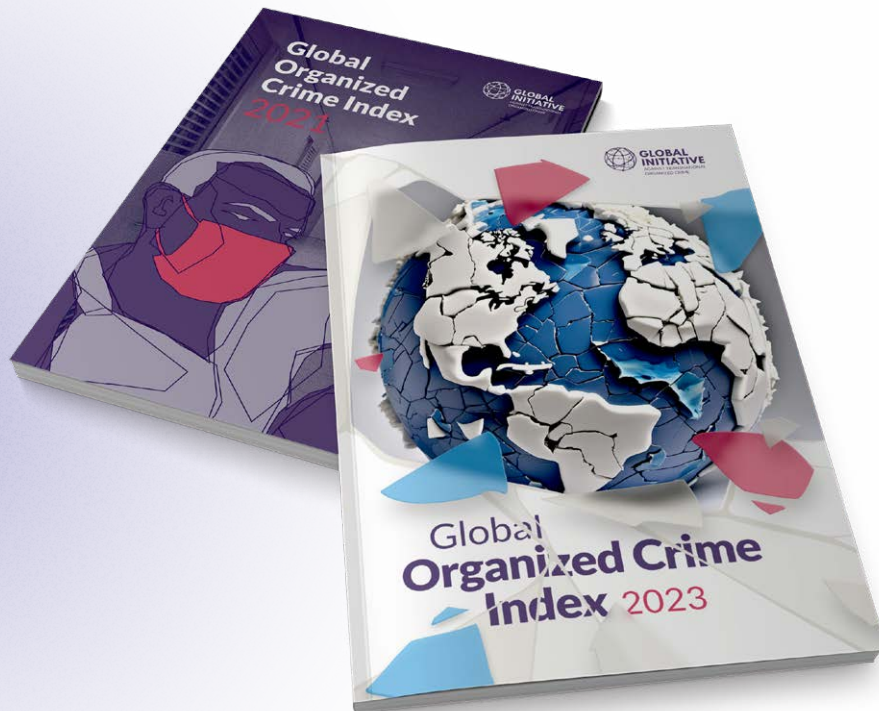
Whole-of-society approach

Since organized crime affects us all, it is essential that all parts of society are involved:

- › **Community leaders, religious groups, mentors and teachers** – to explain the harms of organized crime and provide young people with a basis for moving forward along licit pathways.
- › **Criminal justice systems** – to keep communities safe, uphold the law, and work with peers to share information to disrupt and degrade criminal groups.
- › **Governments** – to lead by example, ensure the implementation of relevant laws and guidelines, and implement policies that leave no room for organized crime.
- › **The media** – to carry out investigative reporting on organized crime and corruption and move away from the glorification of wealth and violence.
- › **Civil society** – to build resilience in their communities, and to analyze and educate their stakeholders about organized crime.
- › **Youth** – to help their peers who are in trouble and champion the cause of reducing the impact of organized crime on their lives, their communities and their world.
- › **The private sector** – to distance themselves from illicit economies, root out professional facilitators within their ranks, and shoulder their share of the responsibility for keeping illicit goods and services out of the supply chains.
- › **The general public** – to understand their potential contribution to fuelling illicit economies, make personal choices to reduce demand for illicit goods, deny organized criminal groups a place in society, and hold governments and criminal justice systems accountable for dealing with the problem more effectively.

Information and analysis

Illicit markets and their impact are still insufficiently understood. There are information gaps, an over-reliance on national crime statistics (such as seizure data) and insufficient analysis of the data. There is little country-level



information on fatal and serious violence committed by organized crime groups. At best, this information remains at the intelligence level in the context of the individual investigations. Many violent events are not reported and therefore not recorded, as the victims often do not file a complaint or assist the police in investigating the circumstances of the crime. Often violent incidents do not appear to be connected to organized crime, or there is no attempt to link them. Furthermore, statistics on violent incidents that are linked to organized crime groups are not recorded in a systematic way. There is also a lack of comparable information: data collection is inconsistent between countries in terms of availability, reliability and uniformity, and the methodologies used. As a result, there is no shared global understanding of the problem. This is an impediment to evidence-based policy and joined-up action at the international level.

Having a global overview of the problem is the first step to designing global responses. A major step in this direction is the Global Organized Crime Index, which was first published in 2021 and updated in 2023. It provides a comprehensive picture, or X-ray, of the world crime scene, including the scope, scale and impact of major criminal markets; the structure and influence of criminal actors; and the resilience of countries to organized crime.

However, there is still a need for more research on illicit economies, from granular information about local markets to quantitative information on trafficking routes and methods, as well as tracing and price mapping. Greater understanding is also needed about the convergence between different criminal markets and between illicit economies and global megatrends.

At present, academia is poorly equipped to address the problem. Onerous ethical and security review processes deter would-be researchers from conducting much-needed fieldwork in complex settings, and academic publications tend to focus on theory or quantitative analysis rather than policy-relevant outputs.

Moving forward, innovation, including new methodologies, is needed to study organized crime. Thanks to technology, the topic is becoming more accessible – for example, through the use of open-source intelligence, big data analytics and artificial intelligence. That said, there is no substitute for analysis based on human intelligence and granular knowledge of local conditions on the ground.

A change in the culture of intelligence is also required. As information gathering has become democratized, intelligence and law enforcement agencies should regard civil society, academia and financial institutions as allies in the information community. They should also draw on civil society organizations in affected regions to provide context and meaning to data and facts about illicit economies. It would also be helpful if they were to share their threat assessments with academia, NGOs, the private sector, the media and the public. It is difficult for societies to adapt to evolving threats if they are kept in the dark. Since the problem is shared, the search for solutions to the problem should be collaborative.

Enhanced research and analysis would shape a common understanding of illicit economies, raise societal awareness of the harms of organized crime, build political will, enable more targeted interventions, provide the evidence to guide policy and law enforcement actions, and enable all stakeholders to be better prepared for the future. This could be achieved through developing an independent global analytical capacity along the lines of, for example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Systems thinking

The traditional approach is to analyze the value chains of illicit commodities such as drugs in the same way that you would look at the life cycle of any other product.



Linear approach

This approach assumes a linear trajectory, which has its limitations because in crooked economies there are seldom straight lines. It also mimics what licit supply chains look like. But illicit networks are illicit because they are engaged in unlawful activities. We need to change the way that we look at illicit economies. Criminals operate using violence and corruption. This business model needs to be factored into analysis and operational responses.

In addition, many criminal groups are involved in polycriminal activities. Focusing only on one market therefore risks overlooking their many potential operations and networks, both with other criminal actors and with intermediaries in the upperworld. The intermediaries include bank managers, financiers, money transfer operators (such as *hawala* brokers), accountants, auditors, lawyers, logistics and haulage companies, real estate agents, security providers, corrupt politicians and networkers – these are the enablers who grease the wheels of the trade in illicit commodities and operate in the mezzosphere between licit markets and the underworld.

Since illicit economies operate as a system, it makes sense to analyze them as a system, including by looking at the interdependent variables. Such an approach helps to explain the complexity of relationships, their interconnectedness and the dynamic character of illicit economies. It also shows how criminal actors as well as licit ones provide services at different points in the system and sometimes for more than one market. Such an overview can anticipate the emergence of new trends, threats and challenges associated with illicit economies and their relationship to drivers and enablers, and may allow for more targeted interventions to disrupt linkages that facilitate criminal activity.



“Intersections are seldom clear vectors, distinct nodes or hotspots. Most often they are blurred lines and grey zones where the licit meets the illicit.”

Intersections approach

Having analyzed the complexity of the problem using a systems approach, the challenge is to understand the weak points in the system and make targeted interventions there.

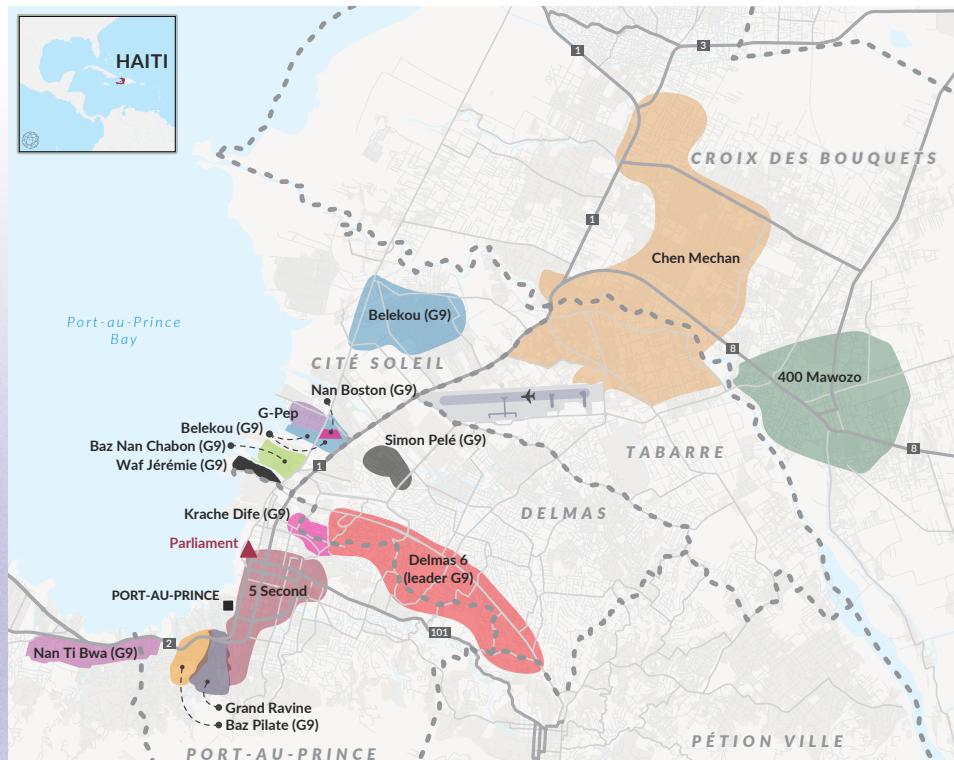
This requires identifying the points of intersection between different criminal markets, linking transnational networks, and connecting the upperworld and the underworld; and between organized crime and other global challenges, such as climate change, armed conflict, irregular migration, unsustainable development and the risks associated with rapid technological change. These intersections are seldom clear vectors, distinct nodes or hotspots. Most often they are blurred lines and grey zones where the licit meets the illicit. Understanding these intersection points will enable more effective preventative and remedial action to disrupt and degrade criminal networks.

Consider the example of the illicit wildlife trade. Multiple endangered animal species or derivatives (for example, rhino horn and ivory) may be trafficked together by the same brokers and through the same hubs. Multiple environmental crimes often occur simultaneously – one crime may create the conditions for another, as in the case of illicit logging and wildlife poaching. Beyond the interdependencies between various environmental crimes, there is often convergence with other forms of organized crime, such as drug trafficking, human trafficking and the smuggling of weapons.¹² To disrupt such markets and networks, more work is needed to map the supply chains, identify the points of convergence, understand how different

crimes enable each other, identify the intersection points between the licit and the illicit, and the costs and payments involved, and make targeted interventions in key nodes or hubs.

The intersections approach also has a geographical component. Organized crime tends to cluster in particular hotspots – for example, close to critical infrastructure (such as highways, ports or urban hubs), at borders, in national parks or in conflict zones. Granular mapping of crime incidents, combined with the factors of vulnerability that enable a fertile ecosystem for illicit economies, reveals clusters or hotspots of organized crime. This information can be enriched by adding profiles of criminal or other armed groups operating in these locations. In this way, clusters of criminality can be pinpointed. The same approach can be applied in mapping criminal groups in urban areas, as seen in the overview of gangs in Port-au-Prince on the right. Armed with this information, it is possible to make more focused interventions.

In the best case, a global strategy would be based on a global threat assessment of organized crime, combining granular local information with an overview of illicit flows. Such an approach could also help to anticipate possible changes in criminal markets. For example, country-level data, based on information from national law enforcement as well as the GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index,¹³ could be combined with indices of other factors of vulnerability to identify instability dynamics and thereby increase the potential for preventive action. Even simply projecting the criminal market indicator scores from the Global Organized Crime Index onto a map reveals geospatial correlations that



Mapping of gangs in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Source: GI-TOC, *Gangs of Haiti: Expansion, power and an escalating crisis*, October 2022

suggest potential risks of contagion. A country with a high level of resilience but surrounded by countries with high levels of criminality is probably more vulnerable than a country with low resilience and a medium level of criminality but located in a less crime-prone region. As the geographer and cartographer Waldo Tobler remarked, 'Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things.'¹⁴ This is certainly the case with transnational organized crime.

In addition to mapping supply chains and hotspots, a third component of the intersections approach is to map illicit financial flows. This can reveal key nodes, such as money laundering by individuals or institutions, and enable law enforcement to disrupt or reduce such flows. Of course, given the dynamic and changeable nature of criminal markets, assessments would need to be carried out on a regular basis.

In short, what is being proposed is an approach that builds on systems thinking and focuses on important intersections. It is an approach that considers value chains, ecosystems of organized crime, illicit hubs and illicit flows to understand the components and the interrelationships between them in order to identify and address vulnerabilities. The goal is to break down a complex phenomenon into smaller, more manageable pieces and then bring to bear sufficient resources and pressure on these points in an asymmetric response to disrupt or degrade the target. It enables a jiu-jitsu flip of the current situation in which police are looking for needles in a haystack.

Gender-sensitive response

Fresh thinking on tackling organized crime requires being more attentive to the specificities of gender and gender dynamics. This includes disaggregating data on the basis of gender; applying a gender lens when analyzing criminal groups and markets; taking a gender-sensitive approach in law enforcement responses; and developing prevention strategies that account for organized crime as a highly gendered sphere.¹⁵

Organized crime has long been perceived as a male-dominated sphere, but the situation is not as binary as such perceptions suggest. We need to change unhealthy stereotypes of masculinity based on strength and dominance that

are constructed in many societies and projected through some media and popular culture channels. We should be careful of ascribing certain roles to different genders: there are women gang leaders and human trafficking recruiters, while many men are victims of crime. It is also important to understand how the marginalization of women in some societies makes them more vulnerable to human trafficking.

A whole-of-society approach to reducing the harms of organized crime must be underpinned by the principle of gender equality, to ensure that all stakeholders have agency in this process, and that all people benefit equally from these efforts.

A gender perspective should be incorporated at all stages of law enforcement interventions, from situational analysis and risk assessment through to implementation and evaluation. When analyzing the strategic context and the situation on the ground, it is important to identify gendered power structures. When planning interventions, consideration should be given to the possible impact on individuals with different gender identities (women, men and members of the LGBTQIA+ community), and unintended negative consequences for different gender groups should be carefully assessed.

Networks against criminal networks

The world is increasingly networked. The advantage of networks is that they are adaptable and flexible, and enable a quick exchange of information. While states tend to rely on centralized and hierarchical

decision-making and control, networks are more loosely arranged, horizontal structures. While states tend to defend the status quo, networks seek to innovate and develop partnerships to grow and acquire information. They spark ideas and are solution-oriented.

Effective responses to organized crime require breaking down the silos between different stakeholder groups such as states, criminal justice, civil society and local communities, and the private sector, with increasing cooperation among them. Therefore, crime prevention and anti-organized-crime networks should be extended beyond the current multilateral system to include a wide range of actors, including local activists, mayors, academics, law enforcement and the private sector.

Furthermore, institutions should adopt a networked approach, particularly among law enforcement practitioners. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called for 'a multilateralism that is more networked, inclusive and effective'.¹⁶ We need benign networks to respond to criminal ones.

Look ahead

One reasonably safe prediction for the future is that organized crime will continue to grow in opportunistic and often unexpected ways. It is likely to be influenced by technology and geopolitics, and new opportunities afforded by migration, climate change, scarcity, economic disparity, insecurity, political instability and urbanization.

Criminals cooperate across borders, adapt quickly and innovate technologically. They have their eyes

set on future opportunities. National responses tend to be reactive, however, and based on insufficient information and past precedents, while international responses are often characterized by sluggish procedures that are handicapped by a lack of cooperation.

To rectify this situation, there should be improved strategic anticipation and, where possible, early action to be proactive rather than reactive. It is also essential to anticipate the intersection of organized crime with global megatrends and the potential impact of cascading threats and challenges. In short, we need to plan for the future of organized crime.

To this end, national crime agencies, regional organizations and international bodies dealing with organized crime should include a forward-looking perspective in their strategies and research, not only by working with or training experts with the necessary skills, but also by establishing new roles and teams for embedding future-oriented methods in the design, implementation and evaluation of policy.

Law enforcement agencies should promote and invest in an organizational culture that supports innovation, strategic foresight and anticipatory intelligence. They should work more closely with the private sector on issues such as cyber, financial and environmental crime.

National security strategies should anticipate and prepare for the evolution and impact of organized crime. To this end, there should be closer cooperation between national security intelligence and law enforcement intelligence, and government agencies should factor organized crime into their risk assessments.

Strategic anticipation of organized crime could be improved by establishing a global foresight group. Uniting intergovernmental agencies such as INTERPOL (which has an Innovation Centre in Singapore), regional organizations, national futures and foresight labs, and academic centres, the foresight group could improve horizon scanning and strategic anticipation, and draft scenarios to track and anticipate crime trends and opportunities, thereby identifying, managing and mitigating risks. It could also assess the strategic implications of anti-crime policies and legislation. Since the world is facing what has been described as a 'polycrisis',¹⁷ the group should attract experts who can provide interdisciplinary and polymathic approaches to understanding and deconstructing the complexity of illicit markets and their relationship to global trends. Particular emphasis should be put on the relationship between technology and organized crime – both in terms of how organized crime can exploit technology and how technology can be used to disrupt organized crime.

Future of organized crime

There is no crystal ball to predict the future of organized crime. But based on our knowledge of the emerging threats and challenges, the key drivers and the trajectories of organized crime, we are able to anticipate possible futures – in the plural. There are two reasons for talking about multiple futures. First, it is important to look at plausible scenarios rather than pretend to know what will happen, which is not possible with certainty. Second, the evolution of organized crime will manifest itself in different ways in different parts of the world, depending on the opportunities for criminal enrichment and the level of resilience to illicit economies in those countries and communities. Moreover, the future of organized crime is correlated with the future of any possible countermeasures. All the potential ways that organized crime could develop are likely to affect, or be affected by, new adaptations in crime prevention, criminal justice and multilateral cooperation. Foresight can enhance prevention and mitigation strategies can be put in place. Therefore, looking beyond the horizon should not be seen as scanning for depressing possible dystopias, but rather as strategically anticipating how to manage risks and reduce the likelihood of bad things happening.

A critical determining factor will be technology – the great accelerator of many aspects of our lives, including illicit economies. Technology could further

democratize many aspects of crime. This could diffuse the provision of goods and services currently supplied by criminal networks. For example, the wider availability of more sophisticated 3D printers could reduce criminal markets for some goods, such as small arms, while synthetic biology could alter the market for organ trafficking. It will become cheaper and easier to splice genes, augment human capabilities and use synthetic biology. We are already seeing a major change in drug markets towards growing production and use of synthetic drugs such as cannabinoids and cathinones. Since synthesis can occur anywhere, unlike plant-derived drugs, we can expect to see a shift in production to places where governance is weak, as well as an expansion of production across the globe. Near-shoring may also be a trend, with, for example, 'cooks' manufacturing small batches of synthetic drugs to cater to local markets, thereby shortening supply chains.

More innovation will lead to greater opportunities for counterfeiting and intellectual property theft, with the attendant human and environmental costs. Counterfeiting of pharmaceuticals could accelerate, especially if there is an economic downturn, a shortage of affordable medicines or another pandemic.

Augmented reality, virtual reality and mixed reality could blur the boundaries between the physical and the digital, even opening up possibilities for organized crime activities in the metaverse. Nanotechnology could open new horizons for both criminals and police.

Technology will also transform delivery systems. For example, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) is already causing a significant change in the distribution and delivery of substances in many global markets. An expansion in the use of submersibles and semi-submersibles for product transport and the use of GPS-guided unmanned marine vehicles, especially for trans-Atlantic drug shipment, is likely to increase.

The Internet of Things (IoT) will increase the number of target points for gathering information and data about users. Data has already become a key commodity, making it an even more attractive target for criminals. This has created greater incentives for fraud and the theft of personal data (such as credit card, health or financial information) or to fake DNA certificates or a legal digital identity. Information collected through IoT devices can be used to commit crimes such as burglary, sexual offences, blackmail, stalking, or political crimes and the spread of misinformation.

“To reduce the future harm of organized crime, we need to anticipate its possible progression.”

In countries where the state will increasingly use technology to keep an electronic eye on its people – for example, through facial recognition software, CCTV, and surveillance of email and social media – there could be a growing market for services that help citizens, and not just criminals, to hide their activities. Quantum computing could radically alter encryption and create a revolution in terms of how data is gathered and used.

More sophisticated deep fakes could facilitate fraud, kidnap-for-ransom or extortion. Furthermore, artificial intelligence could make it easier to copy patents and intellectual property, and give criminals options for identifying opportunities in complex systems such as supply chains, critical infrastructure, transport networks, and financial and healthcare systems.

Since organized crime is largely driven by profit, the future of organized crime will be closely linked to the future of money: what form it takes, how it is moved, where it is hidden and the impact of new financial technologies. Will blockchain make it harder or easier to launder money and disguise the origin of funds?

Other than changes in technology, changes in social, environmental, political and economic conditions may also drive future crime.

As in the past, criminal markets will flourish where there is scarcity. In the future, this could include critical minerals, sand, fertile soil, rare plants with medicinal properties, rare species and even food, water and energy. Criminal entrepreneurs may seek to meet this demand with products such as counterfeit food and medicines, fake solar panels and adulterated fuel. Efforts to green the economy, for example through subsidies and

major investments in renewable energy, bring with them opportunities and corruption risks that are attractive to criminal groups.

In the more distant future, the next frontiers for organized crime could be space and deep-sea mining. Increased competition in space – not least involving private actors – could lead to a bigger market for counterfeit parts for spacecraft and satellites, bringing serious risks as well as the weaponization of certain technologies, such as jamming or manipulating satellites.

Competition for diminishing natural resources and scarcity of arable land and water increase the risk of conflict and instability, and hence the demand for illicit arms. Competition over pastoral land and access to natural resources (such as mining, fishing and forestry) could become more violent. More extreme weather events, as well as violent conflict and political instability could increase humanitarian disasters and the number of desperate people on the move, providing opportunities for human traffickers and migrant smugglers.

Inequality and diminishing job prospects as a result of climate change, greater automation and artificial intelligence, and future economic downturns could increase job insecurity and make people more desperate. This may in turn drive people into the illicit economy, make them more vulnerable to human trafficking and debt bondage or recruitment into gangs or other criminal groups, or more willing to take the risk of being smuggled abroad.

Demographic changes – particularly a youth bulge in Africa and Asia, and ageing populations in the northern hemisphere – could also be key push and pull factors for increasing the number of people on

the move, either towards cities or abroad. The continued trend towards growing barriers to movement will create more incentives for trafficking in vulnerable populations such as refugees and migrants.

Urbanization is predicted to increase dramatically over the next 20 years. In 2008, half of the world's population lived in cities. By 2050, more than two-thirds are expected to live in urban areas.¹⁸ This might lead to opportunities in terms of jobs, education and improved quality of life, but it could also result in hardship. Poorly managed urbanization will create more opportunities for crime to flourish. That is why the future of crime will be determined to a large extent in cities. Moving forward, cities, and not just states, should be a key unit of analysis, mayors should be decisive actors in the fight against crime, and strengthening local resilience will have both local and global benefits.

Legal and regulatory frameworks can also unintentionally facilitate organized crime. Legal restrictions on certain goods or services can give rise to black markets. The introduction of new taxes, regulations or barriers can prompt criminal adaptations to circumvent them.¹⁹ Asymmetries in the laws of different countries can be exploited by criminals to determine where to base or conduct their activities and to develop sophisticated transnational criminal schemes, such as money laundering, fraud or tax evasion.

A growing trend towards illiberal forms of governance in the future will increase corruption and strengthen the link between illicit economies and state actors. In many developing countries, the state remains the main source of personal enrichment through corruption, misappropriation of natural resources and control of state power for personal gain. Organized criminal groups and private sector actors with criminal tendencies will continue to collaborate with state-embedded criminal actors. At the international level, this may create alliances between criminal states, merge criminal and political agendas, and create greater unpredictability in international relations. This would shrink the space for multilateral cooperation in the fight against transnational organized crime. In the worse-case scenario – of which there are already examples – we may see state-sponsored organized crime such as drug production, firearms smuggling, smuggling of weapons of mass destruction technology and ransomware attacks. The more such states are ostracized by the international system, the greater their incentives and desperation to engage in illicit activities to survive. In other cases, there is a risk that authoritarian states could use criminal actors

and groups as a tool of statecraft, for example to provoke violence, or to carry out hybrid warfare, cyber-attacks, assassinations, industrial espionage and misinformation campaigns. This is already happening.

At the other extreme, where states are weak, the vacuum could be filled by a motley variety of state and non-state actors, including militias, vigilante groups, private security companies and gangs, competing for a monopoly on violence and access to resources. The result could be protracted instability, cycles of violence and little basis on which to build peace. Such violent contestations of power defy traditional paradigms of conflict and therefore require a focus on combating crime rather than just making or building peace. The current situations in Haiti, Libya and Gaza could be harbingers of things to come.

More wars mean more opportunities for the smuggling of small arms and light weapons into conflict zones, as well as an increased risk that weapons will spill out of these conflict zones and end up in the hands of criminal groups. This includes firearms, but also man-portable air defence systems, anti-tank weapons, drones and lethal autonomous weapons ('killer robots'). This could increase the firepower and violence of criminal groups, and trigger an arms race with state security forces.

The extent to which these possible futures will materialize depends on the ability of states, particularly law enforcement agencies, to anticipate and prevent these developments, and on whole-of-society responses to strengthen resilience. The dangers of the potential developments outlined above should be a major incentive to stimulate all those concerned to save future generations from this misery. As Jürgen Stock, the Secretary-General of INTERPOL, has warned, 'without unity in addressing this threat, and addressing it now, it is going to be beyond the reach of the world's law enforcement and security agencies'.²⁰

The long view

A successful strategy against organized crime would lead to a better future where:



The private sector has integrity
in its supply chains, working conditions and business practices rather than facilitating illicit markets



There is less violent conflict
and fewer opportunities for criminals to profit from violence



Fewer people are killed or harmed
as a result of organized crime





Consumers can be confident that the goods and services that they buy are good
for themselves, their environment, and the people who made them



Youth can advance through
education and meaningful employment rather than up the escalator of crime, dying young or serving lengthy sentences in prison



Cross-border cooperation
and joint operations are more efficient among police than criminals



Public funds and foreign investment have a visible impact

on improving communities instead of being secretly siphoned offshore to enrich a corrupt few



People have licit opportunities to
move safely to other countries
rather than endangering themselves




Human rights rather than perpetrators of crime are **protected**

All this is possible.

04

Priority actions





This section dives deeper into the nine elements highlighted in the ecosystem of organized crime in Section 1, identifies key problems and suggests a number of priority actions that could be cast into the building blocks of a global strategy against organized crime.

Illicit markets: Rethink regulation

Some markets – such as drugs – are over-regulated. Others, such as arms, waste and the environment, are under-regulated. Over-regulation creates incentives for people to provide goods and services that circumvent the law, for example selling illicit drugs or cigarettes or facilitating irregular migration. Prohibition also creates unrealistic expectations of what law enforcement can do to eliminate the resulting illicit markets. Under-regulation creates a permissive space for activities that might be harmful but for which there are insufficient controls. Examples include types of environmental crime, waste crime and cybercrime. Therefore, it is time to rethink regulation in order to achieve a more effective balance – tightening control in less regulated markets and jurisdictions and loosening it in over-regulated ones. This should reduce the opportunity space for criminal groups.

Priority actions to rethink regulation

01

Illicit drugs are highly regulated. They are controlled by the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (as amended by the 1972 Protocol), the Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971 and the Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988. Billions of dollars have been spent to implement this drug control regime, and many countries have tried to win a 'war on drugs'.

However, around the world, millions of people are still drug dependent; drug profits fuel narco-economies; and more people are killed or injured by drug-related violence or overdoses than by wars. Furthermore, the ease of production methods for synthetic drugs and easy access to delivery systems such as the internet, courier services and drones are creating new sources and routes, making regulation and interdiction more difficult.²⁵ These harms are compounded by the side effects of robust anti-drug policies, which often lead to human rights violations and high numbers of incarcerations, while exacerbating existing embedded societal inequalities and causing spiralling violence. And yet, today more drugs are being produced, trafficked and consumed than at any time in the past 30 years.²⁶ In short, the current system is not working.

✓ Illicit drugs: Shift towards decriminalization

Since prohibition is not working, countries should change the legislative classification of drug use,

ensuring that laws distinguish between use, possession for use and possession of controlled substances with intent to distribute, in order to avoid the criminalization and imprisonment of people who use drugs for possessing small quantities. Law enforcement agencies should be encouraged to shift their focus away from the suppression of individual drug use and toward the producers and large-scale distributors of illicit drugs and those who protect them. In other words, we need a targeted and asymmetric approach rather than blanket prohibition strategies or a disproportionate focus on drug users and lower-level drug dealers. The judiciary should be encouraged to eschew mandatory sentencing requirements and instead focus on efforts of diversion from incarceration to treatment and other social support services. At the same time, it is worth examining regulatory models beyond prohibition and their potential impacts both on organized crime and drug dependence outcomes. Efforts such as these would contribute to a drug policy more consistent with human rights-based principles, and particularly the fundamental rights to life and health.

02

The world is awash with weapons. In 2017, the Small Arms Survey – a source of information and statistics on small firearms and armed violence – estimated that there were more than 1 billion firearms in circulation globally.²⁷ Whether illegally produced, recycled from past conflicts, diverted from government stocks or smuggled from areas where the supply is legal and readily available,





firearms and ammunition trafficking strengthen and expand illicit markets across the world. Illicit firearms give criminal networks symbolic power – as well as real firepower – which they wield in order to expand their enterprises and gain control of territory. Transnational and local networks are both consumers and suppliers of illicit firearms. The GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index 2023 ranks arms trafficking as the fourth most prevalent criminal market in the world. Greater regulation, along with better implementation and enforcement of existing measures, could help manage and reduce stockpiles and prevent their diversion to organized crime groups.

Arms trafficking as a violence multiplier

Weapons tend to be smuggled into or out of conflict zones or areas of instability, including urban neighbourhoods with high rates of criminality. But markets for illicit arms also exist in countries not experiencing conflicts or instability. While weapons spill over from conflict regions (so-called 'legacy weapons' or the result of battlefield capture), they are also recycled from past conflicts, diverted from government stockpiles with the help of corrupt public officials, or smuggled from the areas where arms supply is legal and steady but poorly regulated. For example, the illicit firearm and drug trade economies have become inextricably linked. Drug profits enable the purchase of more and higher-powered weapons, which triggers an arms race between rival criminal groups and security forces. As a result, places that are not conflict zones begin to look like them. Furthermore, weapons can be produced or assembled outside of factories. This is a trend that is becoming ever more concerning as 3D printing and other technologies continue to develop apace, leading to a proliferation of so-called 'ghost guns', which are virtually impossible to trace. The use and modification of alarm and replica guns for criminal purposes also deserves greater attention.

✓ Firearms: Create a global registry

There are already in place numerous norms and standards designed to regulate the arms trade and counter arms trafficking. These include the Firearms Protocol supplementing the UNTOC; the International Tracing Instrument (ITI); the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms; and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). The highest priority should be given to ratifying and implementing these agreements, and translating them into national policies and agreements. In this respect, the guidelines in the UN Modular Small-arms-control Implementation Compendium (MOSAIC) are helpful. It is critical that all countries sign up to them. For example, only 122 states are party to the UN Firearms Protocol – a far cry from universalization. Regional agreements and initiatives are also useful.²⁸

Registration of firearms, recording information on ownership and location, should be mandatory. All firearms (in existing stockpiles and at the point of manufacture) should be marked with unique identifiers that include all essential components of the gun. Standards exist, for example in the ITI and the Firearms Protocol, but implementation is lacking. Gun manufacturers should adopt track-and-trace systems to monitor the circulation of weapons. More effective use should be made of reporting mechanisms for lost and stolen firearms, such as INTERPOL's Illicit Arms Records and tracing Management System. More efforts should be made to ensure that the import and export of firearms adhere to international instruments such as the ATT and the ITI, including mandatory end-user documentation, as stated in the ATT.


Longer term, it is worth exploring the establishment of a global registry of small arms and light weapons underpinned by blockchain. This should record information on the registration of firearms, such as the make, model, serial number, calibre and country of origin in order to help monitor the circulation of weapons and ease the efforts of tracking and tracing illicit firearms.

03

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that imports of counterfeit and pirated goods are worth nearly half a trillion dollars a year, or around 2.5 per cent of all global imports.²⁹ The illicit trade in licit goods includes a broad range of diverted commodities: from contraband luxury goods such as cars and jewellery to artworks and antiques, from essential goods such as food and medications to excise goods such as tobacco and alcohol products. Counterfeit, falsified, illegally copied or illicitly traded products are thought to be more lucrative than the markets for illicit drugs. Fake goods not only undermine the sales and reputations of legitimate brands, but can also pose serious health, safety and environmental risks.³⁰ This includes fake pharmaceuticals, food, cosmetics, toys, medical equipment and chemicals.

✓ Counterfeiting and contraband: Fill the information gaps

Devote greater attention and research to the smuggling of licit products. Increase public awareness about the harms of purchasing counterfeit products. Prioritize goods with higher levels of vulnerability to smuggling and which



Convergence between smuggling contraband and cocaine

It is common to find a convergence between smuggling contraband and other types of criminal activity, such as drug trafficking. One of the main reasons is that transnational criminal groups need to repatriate profits made abroad. Common ways are through money laundering or smuggling cash. But these involve risks. A less risky and more profitable modus operandi is large-scale contraband smuggling.

An illustrative example was revealed by an operation carried out by law enforcement in Colombia, Mexico and the US in 2017. Drug traffickers from Colombia shipped a consignment of cocaine to Mexico. Profits from the shipment were transferred to Hong Kong by means of money orders. The money was used to buy textiles and shoes in Asia that were shipped to Panama from where they were redirected to Colombia. In Colombia, the products were sold at a value 200 per cent higher than the price paid in Asia with the proceeds of the cocaine deal. Not only did the traffickers make a major profit, but they also received the payment in pesos – their local currency.

have the most serious impact (i.e. cigarettes, alcohol, medicines and electronic components). Create a global system for mandatory reporting, assessment and dissemination of information on types of counterfeit products. This could be housed in the World Trade Organization. There is also a need for a database to highlight vulnerable markets and track seizures, arrests and criminal actors.

04

War, climate stress, poverty and lack of opportunities are driving people away from their homes. The numbers are staggering, with an estimated 117 million forcibly displaced persons in 2023.³¹ Around 40 per cent are children below the age of 18. It is estimated that there are around 281 million international migrants,³² some of whom cross borders without complying with the legal requirements. Many refugees and migrants traverse dangerous routes, such as the Libyan Desert, the Mediterranean Sea or the Darien Gap in Panama. The result is often injury or death. While a growing number of people are on the move, there are simultaneously an increasing number of barriers to stop them. There are policies designed to keep out migrants and asylum seekers, pushbacks at borders as well as the erection of physical barriers. In 1990, 15 countries worldwide had border walls; today there are 74, and 15 more are under construction.³³ Walls and pushbacks increase the risks and costs for people on the move, but also have the effect of incentivizing human smugglers, who benefit from this growing illicit economy.

Border walls and fences around the world keep increasing



Dramatic increase in the number of border walls and fences between 1989 and today.

Source: Élisabeth Vallet, *The world is witnessing a rapid proliferation of border walls*, Migration Policy Institute, 2 March 2022

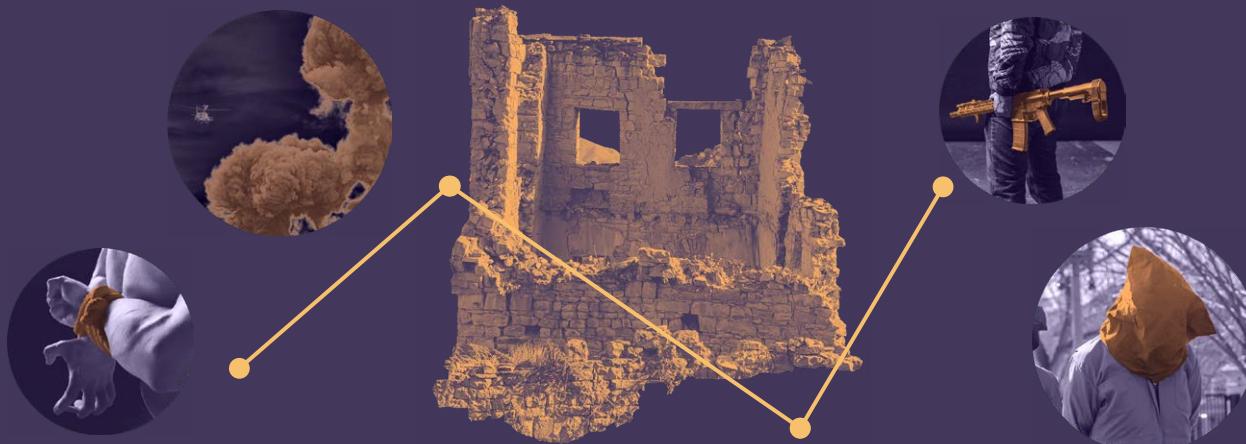
✓ Trafficking and smuggling of people: Create pathways for safe migration

Greater attention must be devoted to implementing existing international commitments designed to protect refugees and migrants, including the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees (and its 1967 Protocol) and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Furthermore, greater efforts should

be devoted to implementing the protocols of the UNTOC that deal with human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants, as well as the Protocol and Recommendations (2014) of the Forced Labour Convention (1930) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2008).

Lowering barriers to lawful entry and freedom of movement would reduce migrant smuggling activities and make migrants less vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking. For example, opportunities could be created for seasonal employment, twinning programmes under which developed countries could enhance skills in developing countries, and specific vocational programmes targeting at-risk groups such as unemployed youth or communities where there are high rates of emigration. Until these ideas come to fruition, states should provide safe corridors for people fleeing conflict and/or transportation to bring them to safety and thereby shrink the market for smugglers.

In some settings, human smuggling and irregular migration can become human trafficking. For example, forced labour and exploitation often take place in industries that are under-regulated, such as artisanal mining, agriculture, the textile and garment industries, and the fishing industry. Sexual exploitation often happens in special economic zones, on the internet, through unregulated and illegal marriage broker services, or is facilitated by recruitment agencies. Therefore, better, more enforceable and human rights-compatible regulations are needed in these industries to keep slave-made products out of supply chains and to ensure fair recruitment and respect for labour and human rights.



Where terrorism, human trafficking and displacement converge

Like many other types of organized crime (from drug trafficking to illicit mining to extortion), human trafficking has become a central feature of the operations of violent non-state actors such as the Islamic State, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab. Trafficking generates revenue, facilitates recruitment and demoralizes ‘the enemy’ – a composite concept that includes the collective West as well as ethnic and religious minorities and other groups viewed as ‘unbelievers’. Some see human trafficking as a new weapon of war for terrorist groups.³⁴

Islamic State militants are believed to have kidnapped some 6 000 Yazidi women and girls from Sinjar, in northern Iraq, in August 2014, when the group had significantly expanded its territorial control in Iraq and

Syria.³⁵ Thousands more Yazidi men, women and children were executed in what was seen as an ethnic cleansing campaign to eliminate the Yazidi population. As part of this campaign, the Islamic State committed acts of sexual abuse and sexual slavery, trading Yazidi women and girls at open slave markets and through online auctions, using encrypted applications to facilitate the trade.

Elsewhere, the chain of displacement and commodification of women set in motion by terrorist groups shows the intersection between terrorism, human trafficking and displacement. Similar acts of violence against women belonging to religious minorities were committed by Boko Haram, who famously abducted over 270 girls from a school in Chibok, Nigeria, in 2014. While there is no evidence of Boko Haram’s direct involvement in the trafficking of the abducted girls, reports indicate that women displaced by Boko Haram were trafficked to Europe through Niger and Libya, and forced into prostitution.³⁶



Governance:

Fold the umbrella of impunity

Criminal activity is, by definition, illegal. But in many cases, the risks of getting caught or prosecuted are low because those involved in illicit activities or grand corruption are protected by an umbrella of impunity. The highest priority should therefore be to fold this umbrella. This requires tougher anti-corruption measures and strengthening integrity, transparency and accountability.

Like any entrepreneur, a successful criminal seeks high benefits and low risks. Risks can be reduced through corruption and intimidation. Corruption extends along a continuum from small bribes that see to it that commodities enjoy uninhibited passage, to kickbacks, all the way up to 'organized corruption', which enables control of political systems and even state capture, and enriches and protects those with access to power.³⁷

High demand for illicit products – whether drugs, counterfeit goods or weapons – fuels corruption at every step of the supply chain, from production to distribution. The umbrella of protection also shelters those who exploit the environment: illegal logging, poaching and mining thrive where oversight is weak, and where officials can be easily bribed. Much of this illicit trade passes through the mezzosphere, that realm where the lines between the legal and the illicit blur. Professionals such as accountants, lawyers and transport agencies, at times unknowingly but often intentionally, facilitate illicit trade through their corrupt actions.

In conflict zones, deals struck between state-embedded actors and groups involved in illicit activities enable production of illicit drugs, extraction of natural resources and smuggling.

Critical infrastructure and procurement projects meant to facilitate trade and spur economic growth can sometimes become conduits for siphoning off public funds, with organized crime groups and corrupt officials colluding for mutual benefit.

This co-dependence of criminal and state actors is more common than we think. The 2023 Global Organized Crime Index ranks state-embedded actors as the most prevalent type of criminal actor in the world. This has a serious impact on the governance of states and their reliability as international partners.

To fold this sturdy umbrella of impunity, a concerted, global effort is needed. This not only necessitates stringent laws and their effective enforcement, but also a cultural shift and behavioural change to stand up against widespread corruption. This requires the rule of law, effective and accountable institutions, freedom of the media and a vibrant civil society. At an operational level, a number of actions should be prioritized.



Priority actions to fold the umbrella of impunity

01

Obfuscation of beneficial ownership allows individuals and entities to conceal their identities behind complex legal structures, facilitating illicit activities such as money laundering, tax evasion, bribery and fraud. This opacity poses challenges for law enforcement, undermines public trust and perpetuates economic inequality.

✓ Discover who benefits

Enforce the requirement for countries to establish transparent beneficial ownership registries. This would mean enacting laws for mandatory disclosure of beneficial ownership information for companies, trusts and other legal entities, with penalties for non-compliance. If governments establish a centralized registry of companies and their owners, supported by robust technology such as blockchain, it would provide a tamper-proof record of ownership. At a minimum, beneficial ownership registries should be publicly available, searchable and downloadable, while maintaining data protection measures for sensitive personal information. Measures should be introduced to verify the accuracy of the data provided, such as random audits or requiring supporting documentation. There should be stringent penalties for non-compliance and a dedicated body to enforce these rules. Standards and practices should be harmonized between countries to ensure consistency and facilitate cross-border investigations.

02

High-level officials involved in corrupt practices often operate as though they are untouchable and immune from consequences. Sanctions can help to reduce their room for manoeuvre. However, sanctions are often deployed as a 'fire and forget' tool, or as a standalone measure. Moreover, imposing country-wide sanctions can inadvertently foster opportunities for criminal groups to benefit from evasion, such as by smuggling prohibited goods into the sanctioned country.

✓ Targeted sanctions

Various jurisdictions, including the US, UK and EU, have deployed targeted sanctions against criminal groups or individuals. The Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN List) produced by the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (known as OFAC designation), for example, is often cited as a tool to disrupt criminal networks while simultaneously strengthening international cooperation and information-sharing. The effectiveness of such sanctions should be further studied. Sanctions should not function as a standalone solution, but should be integrated with a suite of other strategies. To effectively counteract criminal networks, it is imperative to expand the scope beyond individual sanctions to comprehensively target and disrupt the intricate web of players and supporting structures that constitute these networks, for example through secondary sanctions.



03

Currently, there is no supra-national institution to deal with cases of transnational organized crime. Even when there are well-intentioned criminal justice officials, investigations can be blocked from above. As a result, major criminals and their collaborators – often at high levels of state institutions – operate with impunity.

✓ Create supra-national mechanisms

Serious violations arising from organized crime (such as enslavement, enforced disappearances or extra-judicial killings) potentially qualify as crimes against humanity (as defined in Article 7 of the Rome Statute) and could therefore be brought before the International Criminal Court. It is also worth exploring the creation of a supra-national judicial mechanism to deal specifically with cases of transnational organized crime. For example, a proposal has been made to create a Latin America and Caribbean Criminal Court against Transnational Organized Crime. Lessons can also be learned from international cooperation that has seen pirates brought to justice in East Africa and the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala. A supra-national entity could reduce impunity and herald a new era of international justice and cooperation.

04

The private sector appears hesitant to assist in anti-corruption efforts due to profit motives, fear of competitive disadvantage or retaliation, and cultural norms that view certain corrupt practices as customary. Weak regulatory frameworks, loopholes exploited by clever professional facilitators, the profit motive as well as the perception that fighting corruption is primarily the government's responsibility can also deter the private sector from tackling corruption.

✓ Incentivize compliance

Work with business and regulatory agencies to include more aspects of corruption and organized crime into environmental, social and governance (ESG) frameworks. Incentivize corporations to voluntarily self-disclose wrongdoing by establishing a legal framework that authorizes reduced penalties and similar benefits. This can expedite investigation and prosecution processes while motivating corporations to take ownership over their actions. Moreover, businesses should adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption, implementing robust internal controls and promoting a culture of integrity, ethics and compliance. Businesses should proactively identify and reduce corruption within their operations and supply chains, while ensuring that whistle-blowers are protected and receive financial rewards for their disclosures.



Geopolitics:

Beware the chess game under the table

Organized crime used to be a localized problem in a few city neighbourhoods or isolated rural communities. In the past 30 years, it has gone global, becoming a major transnational business and a threat to international peace and security. The problem could get worse as a result of increasing geopolitical rivalries, the trend towards illiberal forms of governance and instability in regions of contested sovereignty. For example, state-embedded actors with criminal agendas or links to criminal groups could become increasingly engaged in smuggling (including weapons and nuclear materials), production of synthetic drugs, extraction of natural resources or theft of cryptocurrencies. They could also deploy hackers and assassins for political advantage and to carry out the dirty work of statecraft under a cloak of deniability. Crooked regimes that may present one face at the table might be playing a different game of chess under the table, for example colluding with 'enemies' for criminal gain or directing national security policy for personal enrichment. This could increase instability in these countries, cause a spillover effect with an impact on regional security and create unpredictable international relations. This is a threat in itself and will lower the chances of effective international cooperation against organized crime. Furthermore, increased rivalry between great powers as well as proxy wars could trigger more zones of instability and humanitarian crises, which could be exploited by nefarious actors. In such a geopolitical environment, attention and resources would be diverted from tackling organized crime.

With this in mind, it is vital to raise the prerogative to combat organized crime to a high political level in intergovernmental bodies such as the G7, G20, the UN Security Council and regional organizations. Countries that want a safe, democratic world, good-neighbourly relations and sustainable development should regard more effective cooperation against organized crime as a common denominator rather than a peripheral 'nice to have'. A global strategy could both focus political attention and generate political will, and where those are lacking, other actors – such as civil society – could spur governments into action. The 25th anniversary of UNTOC in 2025 could also be a good occasion to bring greater political attention to the issue.



Captagon: An intersection between criminal governance, terrorism and conflict

The psychostimulant drug fenethylamine, also known by its brand name Captagon, is popular among poverty-stricken drug users in the Middle East, many of whom are enduring the consequences of prolonged military conflict. As such, the drug is sometimes referred to as 'the poor man's cocaine'.³⁸ However, Captagon is also used as a party drug by wealthy youth in the more affluent oil-exporting countries of the region. While the drug is mainly trafficked across the Gulf region, seizures have been made in North Africa and southern Europe, and as far away as South East Asia.³⁹

Lebanon and Syria became key producers of Captagon in the first decade of the 2000s – although the drug has been accessible in the region for nearly four decades.⁴⁰ In both countries, the Captagon trade has been linked to Hezbollah networks, with Syrian criminal and state-embedded actors drawing on Hezbollah's experience in trafficking the drug to expand the local trade.⁴¹ Although terrorist groups such as the Islamic State have been allegedly involved in the trafficking of precursor chemicals for Captagon production, media reports have tended to over-emphasize the nexus, even dubbing Captagon 'the terrorist drug'.⁴²

In fact, the production and trafficking of Captagon involves a broader range of actors operating both within and outside of formal state structures. In Syria, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, paramilitary groups, terrorist organizations and local warlords all use Captagon production and trafficking as a means of increasing their relative power. Production and trade have risen dramatically during the Syrian war and have reached near-industrial levels under the Assad regime, allegedly valued at three times the total trade of Mexican cartels.⁴³ In short, the production and trade of Captagon show the intersection of conflict, terrorism, criminal governance and drug dependence.



Environment:

Protect the planet

The exploitation of the environment underpins the ecosystem of organized crime. However, environmental crime receives insufficient political attention. This is perhaps because the consumers of illegally sourced products seldom see the direct consequences. Environmental crime appears victimless. Yet the victim is the environment. Therefore, we need to protect the planet.

Environmental crime includes many types of illicit activities that damage the environment – through overexploitation of finite natural resources or pollution – and often have adverse consequences for human health. Crimes that affect the environment include illicit trade in protected animal and plant species, overfishing, illicit logging and mining, trafficking of minerals and fuels, and waste trafficking.

Many of these activities are hard to detect, as they happen at the intersection between the licit and illicit. Illicit trade in protected species threatens biodiversity and human health through the risk of spreading zoonotic diseases. Illegal, unreported or unregulated (IUU) fishing occurs in areas within national jurisdiction and on the high seas, undermining national and regional efforts to conserve and manage fish stocks. Illicit logging of timber results in rapid deforestation, with devastating economic and social impacts. The illicit mining of precious metals such as gold, silver, platinum, palladium and iridium occurs without appropriate land rights or mining licences, often in protected areas. This has a destabilizing impact on peace, security, development and governance. The green energy sector is at increasing risk of infiltration by organized criminal actors seeking to exploit critical minerals that play a key role in the decarbonization industry. The trafficking of non-renewable resources includes the illicit trade in fuels, such as oil and gas, and minerals, such as gemstones, diamonds and precious metals, as well as other resources, such as sand, land and water.

Climate change and organized crime are closely interlinked. The plundering of natural resources to supply illicit markets leads to biodiversity loss and rampant deforestation, which, in turn, lead to air and water pollution, and climate change. Organized criminal groups seek to capitalize on new lucrative markets that emerge in response to climate stress and resource scarcity. For example, the rising prices of essential goods such as water, food, fuel and critical minerals create potential new markets for criminals. Furthermore,

climate stress drives irregular migration by displacing large numbers of people who may then become vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of human traffickers.⁴⁴ In a vicious circle, this type of organized crime hinders efforts to adapt to climate change. Therefore, mitigating the negative consequences of climate change and organized crime should be treated as interdependent policy priorities rather than competing policy interests. And since this type of crime threatens our survival as a species, it should be addressed as a high priority.

The intersection of criminal markets in the Brazilian Amazon

On 5 June 2022, Brazilian indigenous expert Bruno Pereira and British journalist Dom Phillips were murdered in the Javari valley in the western Amazon region, close to Brazil's border with Colombia and Peru.⁴⁵ When the attack took place, Phillips was reporting on the Javari Valley Indigenous Monitoring Team, a community organization that Pereira had helped create to detect organized criminal activities occurring within their territory and threatening the integrity of the forest and local communities.⁴⁶ The murders of Pereira and Phillips have brought international attention to the violence directed against environmental defenders and indigenous rights activists in the polycriminal landscape of the Amazon.

Institutional weakness and complicity, as well as the practice of land grabbing by private companies, have enabled a host of illicit economies in the Amazon that have become increasingly complex and violent. These include gold mining, logging, wildlife poaching and illegal fishing. The Amazon has also grown in importance for drug trafficking organizations in recent years, which has drawn large criminal groups from the south-east and boosted the strength of local criminal organizations in northern Brazilian states.

This coincided with a time of growing organization in the criminal underworld in the northern and north-eastern Brazilian states, with local organizations seeking autonomy from the São Paulo-based First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital, PCC) or striking alliances to fight rivals.⁴⁷ This geopolitical restructuring of organized crime has been a strong driver of the increasing violence in Brazil's Amazon region. In recent years, this has given rise to soaring homicide rates along the Amazonian drug trafficking routes,⁴⁸ which overlap with the routes used by illegal logging groups.⁴⁹ The cross-border flows of illicit gold and timber are used to launder the proceeds from drug trafficking and to raise funds for drug trafficking operations, and timber is also used to conceal the export of drugs from the Amazon to European markets.⁵⁰

Despite the rising murder rates and concerns about the scale of deforestation linked to criminal activities, the climate of impunity persists in this region. According to data from the Pastoral Land Commission, over 90 per cent of all murders related to access to land and resources in Brazil between 1985 and 2018 resulted in no arrest or trial.⁵¹ Without addressing the structural conditions enabling violence, the threat to activists, indigenous communities and the rainforest itself will continue – with consequences for us all.

Priority actions to protect the planet

01

Like other markets, environmental crime is driven by demand, but in some cases it is also stimulated by a lack of environmental protection. The trade in environmental commodities is not inherently illegal. However, a significant challenge arises when illicitly supplied products infiltrate licit supply chains. Examples include illicitly sourced timber, gold, diamonds or minerals that become mingled within legal channels. In sectors that straddle the licit and the illicit, such as artisanal and small-scale mining, logging, or the sale of some wildlife and plant species, such as parrots and orchids, law enforcement is particularly challenging.

✓ Address the demand

Governments need to design policies and campaigns that prompt consumer and behavioural change, by reducing the desirability of endangered species, as well as debunking myths or providing sustainable alternatives for illicitly sourced environmental commodities. More work is needed to change social behaviours and attitudes, for example in relation to the medicinal benefits of certain types of wildlife derivatives. Even more importantly, robust mechanisms for monitoring and verification need to be put in place to prevent the integration of illicit goods into legitimate markets.

A note of caution is needed, however. It is important that awareness-raising campaigns do not raise the threat status and therefore the market value of endangered species or environmental commodities in the eyes of potential buyers. Trade bans should also be approached with caution, as they disrupt both the illegal and legal trade in certain commodities, and may create unintended incentives for smuggling licit natural resources that are scarce yet hard to prohibit. More stringent regulation rather than prohibition may be more effective.

02

Regulators struggle to address the complexity of environmental crime. What is understood as environmental crime differs from one jurisdiction to another. These definitional ambiguities lead to a proliferation of legislation addressing different types of environmental crime and inconsistencies between different laws, creating legal loopholes and regulatory voids that are exploited by organized criminal networks.

✓ Map and strengthen normative frameworks

Map the plethora of existing normative frameworks dealing with environmental crime, identify and fill any gaps, and harmonize legislation globally. One idea that has been proposed is a fourth protocol to the UNTOC – Illicit Trafficking in Specimens of Wild Fauna and Flora. At the regional level, the EU Environmental Crime Directive, which was updated in November 2023, provides useful guidance, and there are efforts to update or replace the 1998 Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of the Environment through Criminal Law.⁵² An idea that is gaining traction is the campaign to push for the recognition of ecocide as an international crime. This would raise awareness of the seriousness of the harmful impact of environmental crime and hold those responsible to account.

03

Endangered species and commodities derived from them are increasingly traded in the online markets of the surface web. With rising levels of global connectivity, organized criminal actors seek to exploit the marketing advantages of online platforms to supplement the illicit trade in physical offline markets.



✓ Shrink online opportunities

Foster more effective cooperation between governments, law enforcement agencies and tech companies. Enhance online regulation and standardized protocols to prevent the emergence of so-called 'digital safe havens'. Use data-scraping software to improve the ability of law enforcement to monitor and disrupt online markets for endangered species and environmental commodities. Private sector actors such as internet service providers, online financial mechanisms and logistics companies should shift from being facilitators of wildlife crime to becoming key partners in tackling it. For example, social media platforms should screen advertisements to promptly detect and remove illicit materials.

04

In some settings, communities tolerate the presence of organized criminal groups, engage in illicit activities (such as poaching, illegal fishing, logging or mining), or resist counter-crime measures because their livelihoods depend on their engagement in illicit activities.

✓ Promote sustainable alternatives

To prevent loss of biodiversity, policymakers should engage with communities and indigenous groups to ensure that their needs are central to conservation efforts (for example, through the restitution of property and land, and guaranteeing their rights to natural resources) and that legal wildlife economies can provide viable alternatives to poaching and trafficking of protected species. There is a need for greater formalization and regulation of the industries where the boundary between formal and informal is blurred, such as artisanal and small-scale mining or logging. Community leaders can play a key role in shifting the attitudes of local communities and therefore producing a more sustainable change.

05

Many resources on our planet are finite and dwindling. So-called 'resource mafias' controlling environmental commodities such as sand, land, water, critical minerals and coal pose an ever-growing threat to societal stability and contribute to environmental degradation.

✓ Anticipate scarcity markets

Protect green mineral supply chains from criminality and corruption, and ensure that the green transition is based on respect for human rights, as well as the ESG standards. Good examples are the Sustainable Critical Minerals Alliance⁵³ and standards developed by the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance.

06

Waste crime in the form of the illegal disposal of solid waste, hazardous waste and e-waste is a growing problem. Organized criminal groups seek to infiltrate the entire value chain of waste processing and take advantage of illegally trading waste.

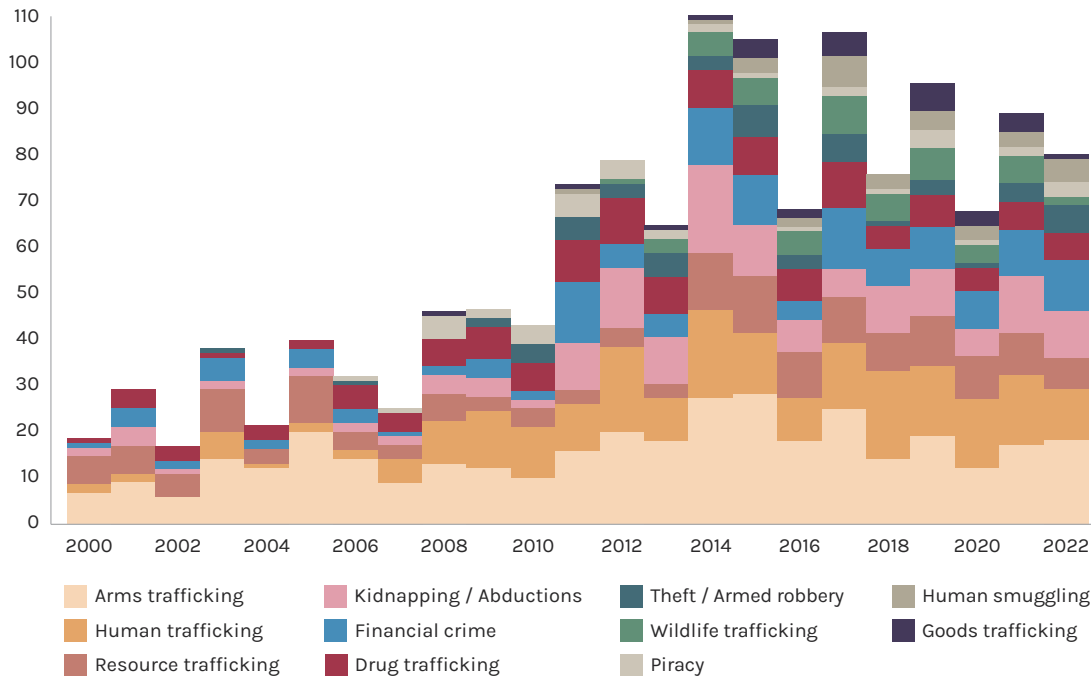
✓ Watch out for waste

Ensure buy-in from the private sector. Industry can help by monitoring demand for waste disposal sites, flagging links in the supply chain most vulnerable to criminal infiltration and identifying key points of intervention. Municipal governments should pass regulations to combat illicit waste trafficking. Local communities should act as 'crime spotters' and anonymously provide evidence on resource crimes through, for example, dedicated websites.

Violence and instability:

Build peace and accountability

Armed conflict, political instability and corruption are major drivers and enablers of organized crime. Organized crime and illicit markets were mentioned in 55 per cent of all UN Security Council resolutions in 2022,⁵⁴ which indicates that organized crime is a threat to peace, security and development.



Organized crime types referenced in UN Security Council resolutions, 2000–2022.

Source: GI-TOC, 2000–2022: Charting organized crime on the UN Security Council agenda, February 2022

War zones and protracted conflicts are permissive environments for criminal activities both by armed non-state actors and state-embedded actors. They enable illicit economies for smuggling weapons, drugs, antiquities and fuel, circumventing sanctions and profiteering from the exploitation of finite resources (such as wood, gold and other minerals) and from human trafficking. Conflicts both enable new illicit economies to emerge – such as the trafficking of weapons and people into fragile regions and the exploitation of natural resources – and amplify existing illicit economies. While organized crime is seldom the trigger for a violent conflict, it can contribute to the escalation of conflict and act as an impediment to peace.

Conflict settings are often characterized by shifting alliances between extremist or terrorist groups, armed groups, private security companies, criminal groups and state-embedded actors, who compete or collude for control of illicit economies. In many cases, violence regulates a market for protection where the state is a player rather than an innocent bystander. Rather than preventing violence, the state may seek to regulate, instrumentalize or outsource it for political and financial gains.⁵⁵ This is closely linked to situations where, instead of stamping out illicit markets, the state seeks to control them or at least get a piece of the cake. The fog of war becomes more dense

when the 'bad guys' enjoy a degree of local support by protecting local economies that are vital for survival, even if such activities are labelled as 'illegal' by outsiders and those engaged in them are branded as 'criminals'.

Conflict zones are not the only place where criminal groups threaten peace and security. In some areas – such as Haiti or Mexico – the violence that they generate resembles or even surpasses that of a war zone. Violence is a common feature of unstable regions where uneven rule of law is replaced by criminal governance. In such environments, armed criminal groups control communities through fear and intimidation. Criminal groups, violent extremists or non-state armed insurgents may also exploit illicit economies to exercise power and governance, and, in the process, enjoy some degree of local legitimacy. That said, there are also cases in different parts of the world where civilians have reacted to predatory groups by taking up arms and forming self-defence groups. This can trigger a further cycle of violence and fear, and in time such self-defence groups may themselves become engaged in the same criminal markets that they were established to quash.

As perverse as it may seem, there is a market for violence: for example, where contract killers are hired to carry out assassinations, and gang members offer violence as a service to extort legitimate businesses and silence communities. In some cases, criminal groups outsource violence to gangs, hitmen or private security companies, or they bribe or collude with state-embedded actors to eliminate the competition. It is also disturbingly common for state-embedded criminal actors to reach out to criminal groups to engage them to carry out violence.

For most criminal groups, violence is used strategically to create fear, expand markets, defend territory and control routes, or to eliminate those who jeopardize their activities. It is also a way of enforcing agreements. In other cases, violence is used within groups to instil discipline, enforce loyalty or punish defectors. Violence is also used to send certain warnings to rivals, the local population or even the state – as seen from several examples in Latin America where criminal groups have terrorized cities in order to force governments to improve conditions in prisons.⁵⁶ In short, violence is paradoxically both the key to criminals' survival and the biggest threat to their lives. It is part of the business model of organized crime.



Priority actions to build peace and accountability

01

In conflict-affected regions, the entanglement of organized crime with political instability and violence is increasingly complex. Predatory criminal groups and state-embedded criminal actors often exploit the fragility of these regions, exacerbating tensions and undermining peace efforts. While there may be references to illicit economies or the impact of organized crime in the preamble of UN resolutions, there is less guidance on what to do about the threat. Traditional peace operation strategies are not adequately equipped to handle the nature of organized crime in these settings, and most peace operations, whether mandated by the UN or regional organizations, frequently lack the specialized tools, analytical capabilities and experts needed to examine and address illicit economies.

✓ Factor organized crime into peace operations

Mainstream anti-organized crime mandates and measures into peace operations and peace building, including by looking at how civilians can be protected from predatory criminal groups and state-embedded criminal actors. Ensure peace operations and monitoring missions – both mandated by the UN and by regional organizations – have sufficient tools, analytical capacity and experts to assesses and address illicit economies and organized crime and their impact. To that end, create a network of law enforcement, financial intelligence and criminal justice experts with experience in dealing with organized crime, who can be rapidly deployed to peace operations (both for the UN and its agencies,

and for regional organizations) to carry out serious organized crime threat assessments, and support mediation processes (both UN-led and regional) and UN panels of experts dealing with illicit economies. These experts should be trained according to common standards, including intelligence gathering and carrying out serious organized crime threat assessments. At the same time, it is vital to build the capacity of local police forces to counter organized crime.

02

Despite a growing focus on ‘conflict sensitivity’, the political economy of conflict is often overlooked in peace processes or excluded on purpose for being ‘too sensitive’. This usually creates problems later on. Furthermore, there is currently no guidance for peacemakers involved in violent conflicts or peace processes where one or another of the parties is involved in organized crime. As a result, peacemakers are often unable to spot potential spoilers or to understand the incentives of some of the parties or the ecosystem in which peace is supposed to be built. This increases the risk of failure and the emergence of criminal governance.

✓ Provide guidance to peacemakers

Develop guidelines on the crime-armed conflict nexus for peacemakers to navigate the potential pitfalls in dealing with actors (state-embedded and as part of criminal groups) involved in illicit economies, and use these in briefing and training



procedures. More work is also needed to collect and learn lessons from negotiation processes that have involved criminal groups. Organized crime should be included in a conflict-sensitive approach.

Buyer beware: rather than imposing external solutions, efforts to transform crime-affected zones of instability should include a representative cross-section of local actors and incorporate the need to hear local grievances.

03

The role of illicit economies in providing a livelihood for marginalized populations, including in fragile, conflict and post-conflict settings, has too often been ignored in designing stabilization operations and peacebuilding. Peacebuilding efforts can be unravelled by powerful people who profit from instability or communities that see no viable alternatives to illicit activity.

✓ Strengthen resilience in peacebuilding

Prioritize initiatives designed to strengthen resilience in conflict-affected communities to reduce the likelihood of relapses into violence and armed conflict, particularly ones that work with women, youth and the business community. This can be done by identifying communities particularly vulnerable to organized crime and developing a targeted set of interventions with influential members of the community to mobilize economic and political capital, and strengthen local institutions, networks and capacity. Such interventions should be aimed at demonstrating viable alternatives to illicit activity. It is also vital to understand the perceived benefits of illicit activities in post-conflict settings and the costs of disrupting them. Where organized crime is a driver of conflict, such an approach should be considered in conjunction with peace operations, like an 'ink spots' counter-insurgency strategy aimed at transforming violent local hotspots of illicit economies.

04

Mercenaries and private military and security companies (PMSCs) are often active in theatres where there are illicit economies. In some cases, they are paid to provide protection, but in others they are involved in smuggling and trafficking as well as misinformation campaigns. Indeed, in some cases, these companies act like criminal groups. The US has designated the Wagner Group





a 'transnational criminal organization' and imposed sanctions. Although mercenary groups are illegal in many countries, PMSCs are a multi-billion-dollar global industry with close ties to governments. Despite codes of conduct and good practices, the industry is poorly regulated. Furthermore, bringing cases against individuals in such companies who break the law is difficult, and in some cases, accountability is unclear in terms of international humanitarian law.

✓ Regulate private security companies

To counteract the complex challenges posed by mercenaries and PMSCs, particularly in regions with substantial illicit economies, a multi-pronged approach must be adopted. Critically, international regulation and oversight of PMSCs need to be strengthened, with clear legal guidelines and accountability mechanisms. Collaboration between states, international organizations and industry stakeholders should be fostered to develop and enforce globally harmonized codes of conduct. Furthermore, steps should be taken in earnest to develop a binding international instrument to regulate PMSCs with a dedicated international body to monitor compliance and investigate allegations.

05

When it comes to addressing crime-related violence, there is a tendency to fight fire with fire. But militarized responses to organized crime have often proven counterproductive, as they prompt organized criminal groups to invest in weapons in an attempt to 'outgun' law enforcement agencies. A heavy-handed reaction by the state may escalate rather than reduce violence. Deploying heavily armed police or the army into certain areas often results in deaths and human rights violations of civilians or violent reprisals by criminal groups against the state. It may also lead to enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings of civilians and suspected criminals. Such contexts can result in structural violence involving both the state and criminal groups.

✓ Take a holistic approach to violence reduction

In addition to effective law enforcement and limiting the availability of and access to firearms and ammunition, there is a need for non-securitized approaches to tackling gun violence. These should involve active engagement with communities to understand and address grievances and the underlying causes of violence - for

example, structural inequality and poverty; lack of opportunities, employment and education; and juvenile delinquency. A particular focus should be put on youth, including programmes to deter their recruitment by gangs or to provide safe pathways to exit gangs. These should be designed to foster a sense of belonging, change behaviour and spread positive norms, particularly through working with mentors. Social programmes coordinated by youth groups, educational projects and leisure activities such as sports should also be part of the engagement.

06

How organized criminal groups could be subjected to the rules and provisions of international humanitarian law (IHL) is not clear. There are several legal unknowns here. For example, could situations of widespread violence and criminal governance in cases where the state is not able to protect its citizens justify attributing responsibilities to respect IHL standards to members of organized criminal groups? Do they fall into the same category as non-state armed groups and de facto authorities? Some conflicts generated by organized crime are not considered non-international armed conflicts or else fall below the minimum threshold for consideration, and the groups involved occupy a legal grey zone, since they do not have a clear political will to replace state authority, but nonetheless control territory and illicit economies. People who live in areas controlled by criminal groups may be deprived of humanitarian and human rights protections, particularly in relation to the right to remedies.

✓ Hold criminals responsible for human rights violations

Efforts must be made to clarify and potentially expand the scope of IHL to define the responsibilities and obligations of organized criminal groups. A comprehensive legal framework should be developed to categorize and address the specific nature of these groups, considering their control over territory and illicit economies. Collaboration between states, international organizations, legal experts and human rights bodies is essential to tailor the application of IHL to the characteristics of criminal governance. Additionally, mechanisms should be put in place to ensure the protection of human rights and access to remedies for individuals living in areas controlled by criminal groups. Greater use should also be made of restorative justice.



Resilience Fund

The GI-TOC Resilience Fund, established in 2019, has made significant strides in building the resilience of civil society organizations and individuals to organized crime. With a focus on supporting grassroots organizations that often face challenges in attracting international attention, the fund has supported more than 170 grantees and 220 projects in 55 countries. Through continual communication and capacity-building efforts, it has helped grantees expand their knowledge on organized crime, strengthen their networks and enhance their organizational capacities. As the network of grantees continues to grow and their needs evolve over time, the fund aims to sustain collaborative efforts and replicate successful initiatives on a global scale. By maintaining connections among grantees beyond the implementation of their projects, the Resilience Fund Community Platform encourages collaborations, the exchange of lessons learned, and the development of new ideas and innovations to combat organized crime effectively.

Vulnerable communities: Strengthen local resilience

When discussing organized crime, there is a tendency to focus on numbers, markets and money, and maps with hotspots or vectors. But it should not be forgotten that behind this data are people who are harmed by organized crime. The primary goal of any counter-organized-crime initiative is to improve the lives and livelihoods of people. This includes strengthening community resilience, protecting victims and upholding human rights.

In the past, many governments around the world have responded to the challenges of organized crime with heavily securitized policies and militarized approaches that have failed to address the underlying problems and overlooked their most vulnerable citizens. Such policies have been largely ineffective against organized crime groups in areas affected by criminal activity. Furthermore, in many contexts, law-enforcement approaches have often bred a parallel subculture of violence and catalyzed human rights violations, exacerbating the core problem.

An alternative is to take a bottom-up approach, working with communities to strengthen their resilience to organized crime. To be effective, interventions and policies need to be based on understanding local contexts. They are also unlikely to succeed without the consent or support of local leaders, businesses and political groups. Hence, it is vital to include affected communities and activists advocating for their rights and interests in policy development processes.

Those who stand up to organized crime in their communities face risks. They deserve support and protection. Journalists and activists are often subjected to harassment, threats, discrediting, strategic lawsuits against public participation, and violence; many are even assassinated.

Where prevention and protection fail, the victims of organized crime should not be forgotten. For example, the GI-TOC's Assassination Witness initiative is designed to keep in the public consciousness cases of journalists, human rights defenders, activists, community leaders, and police officers and judges who were assassinated (or faced attempted assassination) because their work exposed illegal activity. There are more than 2 700 cases in this programme's database, the Global Assassination Monitor.⁵⁷ This tool is designed to bring visibility to the problem, keep alive the memories of the heroes and monitor trends related to assassinations in an effort to raise awareness and enhance prevention.

More intensive efforts are needed to find those who have disappeared: for example, in Mexico, more than 300 000 people are reported to have disappeared since the 1960s (of whom 100 000 have never been found), many of them thought to be victims of organized crime.⁵⁸ Every year, more than 4 000 people die along migratory routes – drowning at sea or suffocating to death in trucks or containers. The tragedy of these deaths should catalyze better responses.⁵⁹



Priority actions to strengthen local resilience

01

Grassroots civil society organizations have become crucial in mobilizing peaceful community action against organized crime. Yet while these actors create community cohesion and call attention to injustice and exploitation, they are also vulnerable. Community groups, anti-crime activists, academics, journalists, labour unions, youth groups, brave politicians and others on the front lines need adequate protection.

✓ Support and enhance community-based interventions

Community-based interventions are key to building resilience to transnational organized crime and reducing its harms. Activities include supporting counter-crime activists who are standing up to organized crime and corruption; empowering young people through sports, the arts and other extracurricular activities; seeking justice for victims of assassinations and forced disappearances linked to organized criminal activities (and for their families); supporting the effective reintegration of offenders into society; and training and supporting investigative journalists who report on illicit economies.

02

Resources devoted to strengthening local resilience are minimal, especially in communities outside big cities. Furthermore, existing funding mechanisms are constrained or sometimes misaligned with the complex nature of the work of

local civil society organizations in crime-affected areas. The Resilience Fund has demonstrated some success in addressing these issues, but a broader problem persists: lack of a cohesive, well-funded and adaptive support structure that can respond to the changing needs of, and challenges faced by, these vital contributors to community resilience.

✓ Scale up a global fund for local resilience

Scale up support for local actors drawing on the model of and lessons learned from the Resilience Fund, and support its existing global platform of environmental defenders, journalists, activists, anti-corruption activists and other resilient community leaders and organizations. Funding mechanisms should be expanded and diversified, potentially leveraging both public and private resources.

03

Prisons are supposed to protect society from dangerous criminals, not to breed them. Furthermore, incarceration should help to rehabilitate and reform offenders. However, in too many parts of the world, prisons often function as schools of crime, where petty criminals are recruited by more hardened criminals, and gang culture is thus strengthened. Notable examples include the PCC in Brazil and the Mara Salvatrucha in El Salvador. Despite attempts to divide leaders, such criminal groups have been able to expand and build new alliances from within high-security





prisons. In some cases, criminal operations are run from prisons. The incarceration rate in El Salvador is the highest in the world, with almost 2 per cent of the entire adult population imprisoned.⁶⁰ Additionally, in Latin America, incarceration of women is growing rapidly due to punitive drug laws, endangering not only the women but also their dependent families.

✓ Manage prisons better

Recommendations include promoting alternatives to incarceration for petty crimes, such as decriminalization of personal drug use, and separating petty criminals from hardened ones. Prisons should provide access to basic services and human rights, avoid overcrowding, and prepare prisoners for release with support for reintegration including psychological support and vocational training. A gender-sensitive approach is vital, with non-custodial alternatives and community collaboration to prevent stigmatization and facilitate rehabilitation.

04

The recovery and management of assets obtained through criminal activities often lacks a coherent strategy for social reinvestment in many jurisdictions. Even in cases where assets are confiscated, their utilization for community development is frequently overlooked or mismanaged. Existing mechanisms may be inefficient or misaligned with local needs, resulting in a valuable resource for social change remaining largely untapped or squandered.

✓ Invest confiscated assets in social causes

Encourage greater social reuse of recovered assets of crime to fund community development projects. Engage civil society in the identification of impactful projects and in the oversight of how recovered assets are disposed.

05

Local communities often face challenges in securing rights to land, fishing and mining, leading to conflicts and unsustainable practices. Constraints in geological exploration (e.g. information being withheld by private companies) and bureaucratic hurdles compound these challenges. This situation hinders economic development and perpetuates inequalities.

✓ Focus on land rights and make them a right for all

Support local communities in securing land, fishing and mining rights, improve access to land and assist in geological exploration. Use geospatial information systems to improve land administration in order to control and prevent inappropriate land use and settle land disputes through appropriate legal systems. In urban areas, devote greater attention to titling of land in informal settlements to reduce the risk of land grabbing and to strengthen the sense of ownership of people in their community. Enhance land registry record keeping, including the use of blockchain technology that can be decentralized for people to be able to confirm availability and ownership of land in a more transparent and user-friendly way.

Don't forget the victims

It is vital to support the victims of organized crime and provide survivors with recourse to justice, compensation and social support, including free legal aid, safe housing and psychological counselling. This can alleviate suffering, hold criminals accountable and promote social justice.

Unfortunately, lack of reporting mechanisms, complex regulations, and expensive lawyers and court fees often deprive victims of effective remedies and hence the ability to obtain just compensation against misconduct. On the other hand, companies, corrupt businesspeople or state-embedded criminal actors who can afford expensive legal advice can resist victim claims and sustain prolonged litigation to bring survivors to accept negotiated settlements that offer inadequate compensation and do not entail any admission of responsibility. Furthermore, investigative journalists or civil society activists who try to expose wrongdoing often become victims of 'lawfare', where the full force of the law and administrative procedures are deployed against them. To alleviate this problem, victim compensation procedures should be streamlined at the national level. Ombudspersons should also be created to help victims seek recourse.

Governments should implement policy changes to better recognize and protect the rights of victims of organized crime, including strengthening legal frameworks for victim compensation as well as whistle-blower protection. Inspiration can be found in the 1985 Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, the 2011 UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and the 2015 UN Doha Declaration as well as the UNTOC (articles 24 and 25) and

its anti-trafficking Protocol. Furthermore, the UNCAC, the Political Declaration adopted at the 2021 UN General Assembly Special Session against Corruption and the Council of Europe Civil Law Convention on Corruption 1999 recognize and emphasize the need for the protection and appropriate compensation of corruption victims. At the regional level, the EU Victims' Rights Directive sets baseline standards for the rights and protection of victims, requiring adherence by all member states.

Pursuant to article 25 of the UNTOC, each state party should establish appropriate procedures and provide access to compensation and restitution for victims of organized crime. The UN Protocol on Trafficking in Persons also calls on states to ensure that victims of human trafficking can obtain compensation for damage suffered. A good example is the US Office for Victims of Crime, established by the 1984 Victims of Crime Act, which is mandated to control the Crime Victims Fund, which is financed by fines and penalties paid by convicted federal offenders, as opposed to tax money. This model could be replicated in other countries and regions. It is also worth exploring a global fund for victims of organized crime. One source of revenue for such a fund or national funds could be recovered assets.

Governments should allocate resources to victim-support programmes and initiatives in line with article 25 of the Palermo Convention. The private sector should consider pro bono services, such as legal aid, funding victim-centred initiatives, raising awareness and compensating victims. Both governments and the private sector should consider funding trusted civil society organizations that provide assistance to survivors, such as psychological counselling, legal aid and safe housing.



Infrastructure:

Expose the enablers

Organized crime is usually carried out at the veiled intersection of the underworld and the upperworld – or the mezzosphere referred to earlier in the report. Professional enablers and facilitators operating in this blurred space have emerged over the last two decades as a key hinge between illicit activity and the global licit economy. The enablers are from many professions, mostly related to making deals, moving money and goods, and shielding wealth. Criminal actors co-opt or collude with lawyers and legal advisors, notaries, trusts and company service providers, tax professionals, third-party payment service providers, investment advisors, accountants and real estate agents using incentives, threats and coercion. The problem is particularly acute in relation to economic crime. Among the services provided by professional enablers are establishing companies, trusts and other business structures and exploiting legal arrangements to shield the identity of beneficial owners, create an impediment to recovering assets, or disguise criminal origins of funds; creating offshore structures to hide beneficial ownership and income; providing false documentation; abusing a so-called phoenix company arrangement by transferring assets of a failing company at below their market value to a newly created company; enabling tax fraud by facilitating fraudulent tax refunds or filings; enabling financial crime and the evasion of sanctions through crypto-assets; and facilitating the laundering of the proceeds of crime.

Financial services are not the only industry complicit in organized crime. Other professional enablers and criminal service providers include shipping, haulage and storage companies; delivery services and couriers; merchants of metals and precious stones; private security companies; gambling establishments; waste disposal companies; high-value goods dealers (such as art, antiques, yachts, cars and jewellery); IT experts and internet platforms; cryptocurrency brokers; public relations firms; importers and exporters involved in trade mis-invoicing; companies that have slave labour or illegally

sourced natural resources in their supply chains; companies that produce counterfeit goods, and merchants who knowingly sell such products as well as companies that produce legitimate goods (such as cigarettes) but then facilitate smuggling of them to evade taxes. Hotels, tourism and travel agencies, financial services, airlines, the short-term rental industry, as well as internet service providers are particularly susceptible to becoming enablers of human trafficking.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, some public officials – often as a result of corruption, threats or mutual interest – may be facilitators of organized crime. The most common cases involve port officials, customs officers and border guards, police officers, prosecutors and judges.

Certain places act as nodes between the illicit and the licit. The speed of global trade, accelerated by a range of preferential trade programmes, the privatization of trade infrastructure, including ports and airports, and free trade zones (FTZs) and special economic zones have supercharged the potential for trade-based money laundering, counterfeiting, infringements on intellectual property rights, the smuggling of contraband, as well as the physical movement of illicit goods across borders. These are the permissible yet opaque interfaces between the licit and the illicit.

Often located close to major logistical hubs such as airports, seaports and borders, FTZs enable goods to be imported, exported, produced and stored without payment of duties or trade taxes. FTZs resemble offshore financial centres that offer preferential treatment for users, such as security and discretion, effectively allowing transactions to be made without attracting the attention of regulators or tax authorities.⁶¹ The number of FTZs has grown dramatically worldwide from a few dozen in the 1970s to over 7 000 today⁶² – with almost a thousand more either under development or planned.

The secrecy of what goes on in such zones is a boon to organized crime. Control over FTZs is often not in the hands of central or local governments but private corporations and public-private partnerships. Standard rules and due diligence processes seldom apply.

This problem will have to be tackled by creating friction in the mezzosphere and exposing the enablers. It will require law enforcement and government to work more closely with the private sector to warn of the legal and reputational impact of facilitating organized criminal or corrupt actors, encourage more transparent reporting and compliance with ESG standards, and engage the private sector in strengthening the integrity of business practices and supply chains.

SEZs in the Mekong

Development initiatives have led to the creation of 128 SEZs in the Greater Mekong subregion. Originally designed to stimulate trade, attract investment and create jobs by providing tax incentives, trade benefits, deregulation and other investment privileges, these zones have become attractive hubs for illicit activities, including drug trafficking, the illegal wildlife trade, illegal casinos and gambling operations, as well as financial crimes.

In addition, it is estimated that tens of thousands of people are currently being held against their will at so-called 'cyber-scam' operations in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, typically inside SEZs, repurposed casinos, resorts or hotels.⁷⁹ Victims appear to have been recruited online, deceived by lucrative fraudulent job offers and some were even kidnapped, then trafficked and forced to operate online scams including so-called 'pig-butcher' and romance scams.

Priority actions to expose the enablers

01

At the moment there is no commonly accepted definition of facilitators, and there is insufficient attention paid to their role in the mezzosphere. Implementation of anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) regulations on facilitators is considerably lower than in the financial services industry, representing a critical weak point in AML/CFT infrastructures across many jurisdictions.

✓ Strengthen definitions and compliance

Countries should establish and maintain a comprehensive list of entities deemed as professional enablers or facilitators, particularly in money laundering. Money laundering should be criminalized as a standalone offence and regarded as a national security priority. Countries should impose AML compliance obligations on facilitators that are not already subject to AML/CFT reporting obligations. They should consider the use of a range of sanctions tailored to potential offences, including criminal sanctions, civil penalties, naming and shaming, as well as blacklisting of individuals and companies that are not compliant with regulations. The Enablers Act of 2022, debated by the US Congress, serves as a guiding reference.⁶³ Moreover, professional bodies bear the responsibility of enforcing disciplinary actions, including suspension of their members who are found to be involved in facilitating organized crime, thereby helping to maintain the integrity and reputation of their professions.

02

Weak regulatory frameworks and inadequate enforcement mechanisms concerning FTZs enable smuggling, counterfeiting and trade-based money laundering,

such as price misrepresentations, export and import quantity and quality misrepresentations, invoice falsifications and phantom shipments (where no goods are moved).

✓ Keep free trade zones clean

An ideal scenario would see a reduction in the number of FTZs or even their complete elimination. At a minimum, steps should be taken to create clean FTZs, as defined by the OECD's Recommendation of the Council on Countering Illicit Trade: Enhancing Transparency in Free Trade Zones (2019)⁶⁴ and the Code of Conduct for Clean Free Trade Zones. It would also be prudent to establish national registries of companies operating in FTZs, including the beneficial owners.

03

Profit motives and lack of transparency mean that companies sometimes create conditions where their employees might become victims of forced labour or provide goods and services generated by victims of human trafficking. People who work under such threats and exploitation conditions need protection.

✓ Implement human rights and anti-exploitation due diligence in supply chains

The private sector should implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which state that 'as part of their corporate responsibility to respect human rights, companies are expected not only to avoid causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts', but to address 'human rights impacts that are directly linked to their operations, products or services'⁶⁵. Companies that do not comply should be blacklisted.





04

It is estimated that around three-quarters of shipping occurs in vessels that fly flags of convenience (such as Panama, Liberia and the Marshall Islands).⁶⁶ Some of these countries have lax regulatory regimes, which is advantageous for ships engaged in illicit trading. This risk is compounded by flag hopping (i.e. repeated and rapid changing of a vessel's flag for the purposes of circumventing conservation and management measures). This is done by ships engaged in smuggling, circumventing sanctions and illegal fishing.

✓ Stop flag hopping

Efforts have been made to counteract this trend, such as the Food and Agriculture (FAO) Voluntary Guidelines for Flag State Performance (2014), which are designed to prevent, deter and eliminate IUU fishing through the effective implementation of flag states' responsibilities.⁶⁷ But these guidelines are only voluntary. They should become mandatory. Furthermore, there is scope to build on the Global Record of Fishing Vessels, an initiative that was developed by the FAO to enhance transparency and traceability.⁶⁸ To help shed light on 'dark shipping', more effective use should be made of technology such as satellites and analysis of data from ships' automated identification systems.

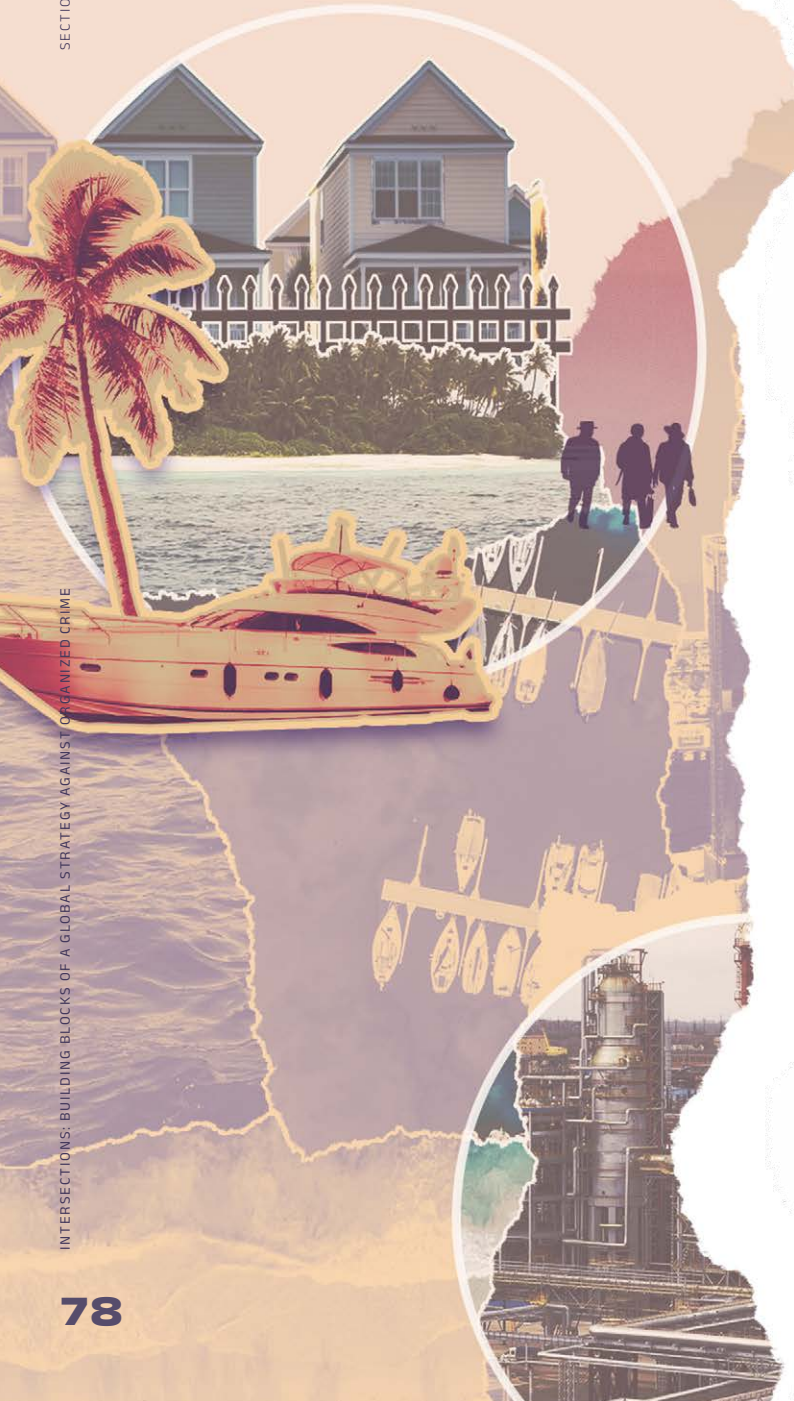
05

More than 80 per cent of the world's trade is carried out by sea. It is estimated that in a given port only around 2-3 per cent of all containers are physically inspected.⁶⁹ As a result, the degree of control over maritime cargo is extraordinarily low. Furthermore, while considerable attention and resources are devoted to port security and container security, there is little cooperation among port authorities, or between law enforcement and companies

that either control ports or are involved in shipping. As a result, finding illegal goods in containers is like looking for a needle in a haystack.

✓ Enhance maritime security

To crack down on maritime crime, it is vital to enhance triangular cooperation between port authorities, shipping companies and law enforcement agencies. One practical step to this end is to deploy liaison officers in key hubs to assist national authorities. Pre-shipment inspection standards should be enforced and regularly reviewed. Standards of public control and oversight of port authorities by states should be enforced across regions. Regional coordination centres should systematically gather and share data regarding ports within their jurisdictions, including details on shipping lines, maritime routes and seizures of illicit goods. This information should be circulated within and beyond the region to similar coordination centres, facilitating broader collaboration. At an international level, more attention should be devoted to maritime crime in the context of the UNODC and INTERPOL to foster greater multilateral cooperation, including through engagement with the private sector. There should also be a renewed focus on enhancing operational collaboration in maritime law enforcement. This could be modelled on past successful initiatives such as efforts to counter piracy off the coast of East Africa or the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre (comprising France, Ireland, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal and the UK), which facilitates multilateral cooperation in tackling illicit drug trafficking by sea and air.



Secrecy jurisdictions and financial crime:

Lift the veil on hidden wealth

Money is the oxygen of organized crime. It is revealing that the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index ranks financial crime as the world's biggest criminal market.⁷⁰ Through a sinister feedback loop, the proceeds of crime buy power and protection.

Over the past 30 years, global financial and trade systems have been designed in a way that has enabled a cadre of wealthy and politically connected elites to hide their wealth and evade taxes almost completely free of oversight and out of the reach of regulatory and law enforcement bodies. Corporate service providers, front companies, offshore havens, opaque businesses, as well as wily accountants and lawyers, help shield the super-rich from declaring beneficial ownership and unexplained wealth. This results in less money flowing into public services and administration, and a widening gap between a wealthy elite and the rest of humanity. This same system enables kleptocrats, oligarchs and criminals to protect their assets. In this environment, funding from organized crime activities, corruption and legitimate wealth are co-mingled and integrated into legitimate global financial flows in ways that become entirely indistinguishable. Revelations such as the Panama Papers have exposed how many of those hiding assets offshore are senior servants of the state.

Standards and procedures have been introduced by, for example, the FATF, the Egmont Group and the International Monetary Fund to crack down on money laundering. Financial institutions, such as banks, are obliged to file suspicious activity reports (SARs) when there are concerns that money laundering, financing of terrorism or other financial crimes may be

occurring. Some countries are pushing to expand the range of businesses to be regulated by AML/CTF regulations, with calls to include real estate agents, accountants and precious-metal dealers in the regulatory framework. However, FATF standards are not legally enforceable. As a result, governments may have differing degrees of commitment and implementation, as well as resources, reducing the overall efficacy of international efforts to combat financial crime. There are also different models of financial intelligence units, and even competition among the institutions that are mandated to tackle money laundering. Cross-border information exchange and cooperation is also hampered by the different policies and procedures that states have for handling sensitive data. There is also no universally binding framework or regulations that govern the filing of SARs across multiple jurisdictions. Currently, SARs are filed inside individual jurisdictions, with no centralized mechanism or database for cross-border information exchange. Information is exchanged bilaterally, at best using the Egmont Group secure platform and other similar regional mechanisms. This constraint frequently causes delays and difficulties in obtaining information for investigations spanning different countries. The result is a system that is overwhelmed by a high volume of SARs, a low level of prosecutions, convictions and asset recovery, and major blind spots, since money tends to flow through multiple jurisdictions, making tracing, investigation and prosecution even more challenging.

Another challenge is the fact that technology has increased the volume, velocity and variety of financial transactions, while reducing transparency. Digital currencies and decentralized systems enable criminals to move money and bribe people in anonymous ways, adding new challenges to law enforcement and the financial sector to detect and recover criminal assets. Criminals are also adept at using more old-fashioned transfer techniques, such as the *hawala* system, which enables the informal transfer of funds involving multiple jurisdictions.

Reforming the international financial system goes beyond the scope of this report. Nevertheless, it is vital to flag how existing legal business structures and practices enable illicit activity, and enrich and empower organized crime. Furthermore, because of the corrosive impact of corruption, fighting organized crime and corruption must go hand in hand. We must lift the veil on hidden wealth.

Priority actions to lift the veil on hidden wealth

01

It is estimated that 10 per cent of global GDP may be held in offshore financial assets,⁷¹ and US\$7 trillion of private wealth is hidden in haven countries.⁷²

✓ Minimize secrecy jurisdictions

Take steps to minimize financial secrecy in financial havens and other major financial centres around the world. For example, push for greater compliance of the OECD's Common Reporting Standard and its Common Mandatory Disclosure Rules to counter avoidance arrangements and opaque offshore structures. Support the adoption of a UN tax convention to crack down on tax avoidance and evasion. Increase public scrutiny and transparency of procurement processes and funding of political parties. Encourage countries to adopt measures that increase transparency and accountability in their financial systems, such as publicly searchable beneficial ownership, trust and public procurement registries as well as anti-money-laundering regulations. In the public sector, encourage the adoption of enhanced financial disclosure requirements and conflict-of-interest measures for public officials. It is time to open the books.

02

Banks, financial institutions and other entities are generally obliged to file SARs. However, the sheer volume of such reports often means there is very little follow-up. Additionally, the current practice of filing SARs within individual jurisdictions impedes the seamless tracking of cross-border financial flows, posing a significant challenge to the effective monitoring and combating of transnational financial crimes.

✓ Take action against suspicious transactions

To enhance the fight against money laundering, the current system requires reforms that foster multi-jurisdictional collaboration and distribute responsibilities more evenly between banks and financial intelligence units. Leveraging technology, especially artificial intelligence, can streamline the processing of SARs, enabling quicker and more accurate responses to cross-border financial crimes. Additionally, the creation of a global financial crime intelligence centre should be considered. This would act as a centralized hub, receiving, analyzing and circulating reports on suspicious financial transactions or activity





primarily from private sector entities in the financial market and actively collaborating with the private sector to track, trace and recover illicit funds before they are dissipated. Serving as a liaison between these entities, specialized law enforcement agencies and governments, a global financial crime intelligence centre would facilitate rapid and efficient responses to potential illicit activities and coordinate multilateral actions. With sufficient resources and independence, it could also carry out certain investigative activities, allowing it to delve deeper and more swiftly into suspected cases of financial crime.

03

Too many cases of financial crime are never brought to trial. Of those that are brought before the courts, there are few prosecutions and even fewer cases where the guilty are held accountable for their actions. Only a small percentage of the assets of organized crime are recovered.

✓ Confiscate and recover illegal proceeds

Since many criminals fear losing their assets more than losing their freedom, there should be a general obligation to ensure the timely confiscation of illegal proceeds while following due process. Furthermore, crime would be less beneficial with more robust non-conviction-based confiscation systems for seizing and forfeiting criminally derived assets without requiring the conviction of the asset owner, respectful of due process and human rights principles. There should also be more frequent social reuse of confiscated assets,

fostering a system where crime is less profitable and its proceeds can be redirected to aid victims, be they individuals, communities or states.

04

Many significant exposures of major fraud, including cases such as the Panama Papers, have come from whistle-blowers within private companies or public institutions. However, whistle-blowers are vulnerable to retribution.

✓ Protect whistle-blowers

Prosecution authorities should work with state bodies responsible for implementing whistle-blower protections, as well as with internal reporting channels at corporations to establish clear lines of communication and encourage those responsible for whistle-blower protection to report wrongdoing to prosecution authorities. Whistle-blowers should be protected from retaliation, and financial rewards should be provided to persons who disclose illegal conduct, particularly if the misconduct results in financial fraud targeting the state. Inspiration should be sought from the Tshwane Principles on National Security and the Right to Information 2013.⁷³ An international cooperation framework for whistle-blower protection should be created with dedicated funding and a well-articulated programme for beneficiaries calibrated to the risks and amounts of money involved.

Technology:

Gain a digital advantage

Technology is evolving faster than our ability to regulate it, which increases the possibility for criminal exploitation of tech. Almost 5 billion people (more than 60 per cent of the global population) use the internet,⁷⁴ but regulation and safeguards are lacking. As a result, the internet is a target-rich yet relatively anonymous environment for criminals. This has resulted in a significant increase in the number of victims of crimes such as identity theft, fraud, hacking, 'doxing', blackmail, extortion and sextortion. Data is becoming a valuable commodity for criminals. Individuals, businesses and even states can be affected, for example through ransomware attacks on critical infrastructure or leaking of classified documents such as financial accounts, health records and personal information. Both the financial and personal damage inflicted on victims can be long-lasting and immense. The methods are becoming more sophisticated yet more present in our daily lives. Call centres are being used as 'fraud factories' to bilk unsuspecting victims of their money. The internet and social media are being used to lure potential victims into trafficking or fraudulent schemes. Next-level artificial intelligence, human-machine interfaces, robotics, synthetic biology, nanotechnology, human augmentation, organoids and psycho-social strategies enabled by digital and algorithmic technologies create all kinds of frightening opportunities for organized crime.

By the same token, the potential benefits of harnessing technology to prevent and fight crime are also enormous. For example, artificial intelligence, machine learning and big data can enable law enforcement agencies to anticipate, investigate and prosecute organized crime more effectively. These types of technologies can be exploited to gather and analyze greater

amounts of information and verify its accuracy, while open-source information – including the use of satellite imagery – as well as geographic-information-system mapping can democratize crime analysis. Data-scraping and data analysis software can automate the monitoring of online sales of illicit commodities such as endangered and protected wildlife species. Participatory technologies can enable the public to become more engaged in reporting on organized criminal activities and strengthen networks among those who are analyzing or fighting crime and building community resilience. If there is to be a digital arms race between law enforcement and criminals, it is vital for the police to gain a digital advantage.

Moving forward, active collaboration with the private sector will be crucial. Given that most technologies utilized by organized criminal groups are developed and maintained by private companies, it is essential that these entities have defined legal responsibilities to deter criminal misuse. However, merely shifting the burden onto the private sector cannot be a long-term solution. Instead, it is vital to foster a shared sense of responsibility through the establishment of robust and functional public-private partnerships. This approach could include the development of sound regulatory frameworks and mechanisms that incentivize the private sector's proactive involvement in cybercrime prevention, recognizing their indispensable role in technological innovation and the vested interest they have in ensuring a secure cyber environment.



Strengthen regulatory frameworks and standards

The development of a global cybercrime convention⁷⁵ presents a unique opportunity to enhance online safety in a way that also protects human rights and privacy. As negotiations continue at the UN, it is vital that this legal instrument establishes a universally accepted and future-proof definition of cybercrime that captures its broad spectrum, from individual malicious acts to large-scale cyber-attacks targeting national infrastructure. At the same time, integrating human rights, data protection and privacy provisions into the wording of the treaty would enhance trust among states and their citizens. Moreover, the treaty should promote inclusivity, leveraging insights from a wide array of stakeholders, from civil society to the tech industry, ensuring a balanced approach that provides for security needs while protecting individual freedoms.

Governments and the private sector should work together to establish and enforce international cybersecurity standards that focus not just on technical aspects, but also on the overall governance approach. The series of standards known as ISO/IEC 27000, a collaborative effort of the International Organization for Standardisation and the International Electrotechnical Commission, offers a comprehensive guide for various aspects of information security. The recommended practices within ISO 27000 revolve around managing potential information threats through the effective deployment of security measures, all within the structure of a comprehensive Information Security Management System.⁷⁶ Related to this, governments, in cooperation with law enforcement agencies and the private sector, should develop standardized reporting requirements for cybercrime incidents. This will help increase the pool of accurate data and evidence while allowing greater analysis of the extent of cybercrime, the actors involved and their modus operandi, while also informing future strategies.

Future-proofing

Cost-effective and timely regulations are vital to prevent criminals from exploiting innovative new technologies. Forecasting and futureproofing inventions is therefore crucial, ensuring that criminals do not gain an advantage over users or law enforcement due to delayed preventative responses. To that end, it is imperative to include a crime-proofing safety check into the process of issuing international quality management standards (ISO 9001), information security, cybersecurity and privacy protection (ISO/IEC 27001), as well as environmental management systems (ISO 14001) and patents. Regulation should require developers, manufacturers and suppliers or providers of new technologies to assess the future crime risks of such technologies and adopt adequate measures to mitigate them. Such measures include the integration of security and safety features into the design of new technologies (so-called 'security by design'). Institutional mechanisms and platforms should be established to enable close collaboration and knowledge exchanges with researchers, particularly lead scientists (for example, those engaged in synthetic biology, biotechnology or artificial intelligence) and tech companies, to think more closely about the security implications of their work and its potential misuse by criminal actors.

It is also vital to future-proof legislation so that it is sufficiently flexible and capable of remaining relevant in light of future technological advancements. This regulatory architecture should consider different categories of tech, from foundational technologies such as encryption and blockchain, proprietary tech such as social media platforms, particular algorithms or operating systems, and more importantly, prospective technologies capable of severely affecting the status quo, such as artificial general intelligence, quantum computing, nanotechnology and advanced synthetic biology.

Priority actions to gain a digital advantage

01

The digital divide between organized criminal groups and law enforcement agencies is significant, highlighting the urgent need for broad digital literacy in the criminal justice system. There is also a discrepancy between countries in terms of resources and capacities.

✓ Cybersecurity awareness, education and capacity

It is important to invest in education and awareness campaigns targeted at the general public and small and medium-sized enterprises. This requires a whole-of-society response: governments can initiate and fund; the private sector can provide expertise and use their platforms to amplify; civil society can ensure the programmes are inclusive and effective in reaching the target audience. While a particular focus should be placed on youth, the vulnerability of older people should not be overlooked, as it is estimated that one in five are victims of cyberattacks. Concerning law enforcement, countries with resources and expertise have a self-interest to assist other countries in need of both. INTERPOL's Cyber Capabilities and Capacity Development Project, for example, aims to strengthen the ability of countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to combat cybercrime.⁷⁷

02

Rapid technological innovation driven by the private sector has created a double-edged sword. While aiming to foster growth and convenience, it

has also inadvertently enabled new, and facilitated already existing, forms of cybercrime. Technologies developed in the private sector, such as advanced network mapping software, big data analytics and blockchain, have now become indispensable to the operations of many criminal groups. The lack of coordination between technology developers and law enforcement, coupled with insufficient consideration of potential misuse during the development phase, has created vulnerabilities that criminals exploit.

✓ Encourage public-private partnerships

Given the private sector's technological prowess, governments and law enforcement agencies should strive to build stronger relationships with them. Such partnerships can help in enhancing cyber resilience and responses, facilitate information sharing and increase the resources dedicated to fighting cybercrime. Law enforcement should develop cadres of technology liaison officers whose task is to develop knowledge of technologies and connections to key individuals, groups and companies in the technology world who can provide expertise and advice as needed, particularly for more effective prevention and crisis management. After all, those who develop new technologies are best placed to anticipate how they could be misused. Furthermore, companies and researchers in such sectors should be incentivized to innovate in developing proactive technologies to effectively identify, prevent or respond to criminal activities, and to enhance predictive policing



through the deployment of network mapping software, big data (i.e. to reveal and anticipate crime patterns), blockchain, digital forensics, target hardening of large-scale data collections as well as surveillance and detection technologies (used in a way that respects civil liberties and privacy).

03

The misuse of personal data by both licit and illicit actors poses serious threats to privacy and security. Existing data protection measures in many jurisdictions are often fragmented, outdated or inadequately enforced, leading to vulnerabilities that can be exploited. While some regions have implemented stringent laws, a global disparity in data protection standards persists. This inconsistency not only hampers international collaboration in combating cybercrime, but also leaves individuals exposed to potential abuses of their personal information. In our digital world, it can be anticipated that data will become an increasingly valuable commodity for licit and illicit actors.

✓ Enhance data protection laws

Governments should develop robust data protection laws to safeguard individuals' privacy rights and deter misuse of cybercrime legislation: the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 is a good example.⁷⁸ By emulating key principles of the GDPR, such as consent, transparency and accountability, states can foster a more secure and privacy-conscious environment. Civil society can play a critical role in holding governments accountable and ensuring regulations are in line with international human rights standards.

04

Traditional measures to ensure transparency and authentication are often inadequate in the face of sophisticated criminal networks that exploit the intricacies of international supply chains. Additionally, the proliferation of online marketplaces

and social media platforms has facilitated the distribution of illicit products, outpacing existing regulatory mechanisms and 'know your customer' practices. This convergence of factors underscores an essential need for innovative solutions that harness technology to enhance supply chain transparency, protect consumers and promote ethical business practices.

✓ Harness technology to increase transparency of supply chains

The private sector can improve the integrity and accountability of supply chains by leveraging new technologies, leading to enhanced traceability and easier authentication of commodities. For example, artificial intelligence, electronic tags, isotopes and blockchain solutions can increase supply chain transparency and stronger authentication processes in combination with more traditional safety measures such as banderol tax stamps or holograms. Combining track-and-trace techniques with serialization – for example of pharmaceutical products – can reduce the risk of counterfeiting or tampering. Online marketplaces, payment service providers, social media sites and logistics companies should have more stringent 'know your customer' measures to keep illicit products out of their supply chains or off their platforms. For example, social media platforms should impose verification mechanisms for all seller accounts to ensure that track and tracing can occur in cases where counterfeits are discovered. Search engines should terminate a violator's account and remove the search results that lead to illicit content.



05

Intersecting responses

Having considered the complexity and impact of the problem, and the shortcomings of current approaches, and having identified a number of priority actions, the next step is to consider how different actors can do their part to disrupt illicit economies and change the ecosystems in which organized crime flourishes. This section identifies how actors at different levels of governance – international, regional, national and local – as well as in different sectors can apply the ‘intersections approach’ to reduce the harms caused by organized crime.

Multilateral cooperation

Adopting more integrated responses at the global level will require leadership and coordination. Strengthening international governance as a bulwark against organized crime is also vital. The UN and INTERPOL are best placed to spearhead the formulation and implementation of a global strategy against transnational organized crime in a triangular partnership with the GI-TOC, which can bring a civil society perspective to the table and draw on its global Network of Experts, extensive research capacity to bolster the evidence base, and the lessons learned from drafting this report.

Now is an opportune moment for launching a process to formulate a global strategy: the UN is preparing for the Summit of the Future in September 2024 and is looking ahead to the 25th anniversary of the Palermo Convention in 2025; INTERPOL is entering its second century and seeking to improve operational responses, and has declared that tackling transnational organized crime must become a global national security priority.

It could be argued that in the current fractured geopolitical environment the chances of fostering concerted international cooperation against transnational organized crime are slim. Although the type of consensus that existed in the early 1990s on the need for global action against organized crime is no longer evident, organized crime could nevertheless be an issue on which non-like-minded states could find some common ground. After all, one would assume

that most states, regardless of their politics, share a common concern about the diversion of public resources into private pockets, the impact of drugs on health, the intersection between terrorism and organized crime, the impact of organized crime on conflict, the exploitation of the global commons by criminal actors, the destruction of the environment for the benefit of criminals, technology accelerating faster than regulation, illicit economies hampering the achievement of the SDGs, and the escalation of cybercrime. Questions should be asked of governments that do not see these as a problem. Furthermore, even where there is lack of solidarity among states, enough of them should at least realize the shared responsibility and joint interest inherent in a common agenda to tackle this destructive global threat.

In that respect, even in the absence of consensus on a global strategy, a group of committed countries could come together in a ‘flexilateral’ format such as a coalition of the willing to generate political will and joint action, building on the ideas contained in this report. This process should also involve committed actors in civil society and the private sector, as well as interested organizations.

Positioning the United Nations for more effective responses

Institutionally, the UN is well placed to promote the idea of a global strategy and would need to play a role in its implementation. As noted above, and as recommended by the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, a global strategy against organized crime could be launched or adopted in the context of the Summit of the Future, setting out the key areas for collaboration, strategic priorities and common benchmarks for the multilateral system. The global strategy could also be promoted in the context of the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the UNTOC, which is scheduled to be commemorated in November 2025.

The UNTOC’s formal review mechanism, while slow and so far largely ineffective, could be given new life and relevance by being used in a track 1.5 process to foster cooperation between states, civil society and the multilateral system. Such a process would encourage a more frank and critical assessment of efforts to prevent and counter transnational organized crime, and build consensus on

key elements of a global strategy, while identifying champions and advocates to help drive forward awareness and, ultimately, implementation.

At the same time, steps should be taken to align the UNTOC and the UNCAC, particularly in considering the ways in which corruption enables organized crime. For example, the UNCAC contains several measures concerning asset recovery, whereas the UNTOC has none. A joint session of the Conference of the Parties and/or the Implementation Review Groups of both instruments could enable synergies to be developed to reduce the risk of ‘organized corruption’. The UN and its member states should also revisit the Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power (1985) and give it a higher priority and greater application.

Taking into account points made earlier in this report about the disproportionate attention given to illicit drugs, the disintegrating consensus on the need to prohibit drugs and the growing trend towards approaching drug use from a public health perspective, the UN may wish to consider removing the ‘D’ from UNODC and sharpening the Office’s focus on organized crime and corruption, while retaining its mandate on drug trafficking as a form of organized crime. The renamed ‘UN Office on Organized Crime and Corruption’ could also play a more prominent role in providing early warning of emerging crime threats and advising on crime-proofing relevant international initiatives. It could also mainstream the fight against crime and corruption throughout the UN system and with regional organizations to reduce the threat these phenomena pose to the three pillars of the UN’s work: peace and security, development and human rights.

To provide better and swifter support to UN member states and regional organizations, it could be helpful to establish a pool of prosecutors and criminal justice experts to supply a surge capacity of independent experience to supplement local capacity. It is also important to develop training materials and a pool of trainers – for example, through the Peacekeeping Intelligence Academy – to prepare personnel deployed to UN peace operations (particularly to Joint Mission Analysis Centres) and Panels of Experts to have an adequate knowledge to assess the political economy of conflict situations. Regional organizations should also be able to contribute to and draw on this pool of experts.

Law enforcement

We urge law enforcement agencies and criminal justice professionals more generally to put their weight behind the call for a global strategy against transnational organized crime.

Priorities could include the following:

- **Retool the police.** As explained earlier, there is a tendency towards militarization of the police. This is essential in some countries where criminals have access to a pool of powerful weapons. However, greater efforts should be made to reduce the flow of weapons rather than to outgun criminals. Lethal weapons are of little use in tackling many types of modern crime. The police arsenal needs to be better equipped with cyber and financial crime experts, data scientists, smart technology (including drones, robotics and AI), forensic equipment, and data and e-evidence. The police and intelligence services of the future

will need specialized skills and to be digitally literate; acutely aware of their local environments, information space and global trends; and able to operate nimbly in both the virtual and physical spheres, with good networks and bonds of trust in their communities, criminal justice systems, the private sector and with their international counterparts. Investigative units may need to make greater use of non-police experts. In a rapidly changing environment, there will also have to be greater emphasis on predictive policing and anticipatory intelligence. Dealing with the emerging criminal landscape, which will become more complex, connected and transnational, may require the biggest overhaul of policing since the publication of Robert Peel’s Policing Principles in the 1820s or the establishment of INTERPOL in 1923.

- **Streamline mutual legal assistance.** To streamline MLA at the national level (for example, for extradition, asset seizure and recovery agreements), it is vital to increase resources and technical capacity; increase training on the processing of letters of response; amend legislation where necessary to enable certain foreign authorities to seek data stored in other countries through the domestic judicial processes of the requesting country; improve transparency, for example by creating an online MLA template and submission form (and thereby eliminating paper-based MLA requests); and amend or adopt multilateral agreements to facilitate information sharing related to e-evidence and stored data, with robust human rights safeguards. The US-UK Agreement on Access to Electronic Data for the Purpose of Countering Serious Crime (the so-called Cloud Act Agreement) of 2019 is a useful precedent, as is the second additional protocol to

the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime of 2022, which includes provisions for a more efficient MLA regime for parties to the treaty.

- › **Expedite processes for requesting and exchanging electronic evidence.** It is estimated that currently 85 per cent of criminal investigations in the EU involve digital evidence (such as emails, text messages or content from messaging applications, audiovisual content, or information about a user's online account).⁸⁰ According to the European Commission, a cross-border request to obtain e-evidence is made in over 50 per cent of all criminal investigations.⁸¹ However, the processes for requesting and exchanging e-evidence are often slow; direct cooperation, either between jurisdictions or between public officials and service providers, is often unreliable; there is legal fragmentation; and the increasing volume of cases leads to backlogs and bottlenecks. It is therefore essential to improve and speed up access to digital data for the investigation and prosecution of criminal offences by developing protocols for the collection, retention and sharing of e-evidence that include strong human rights and data protection safeguards.⁸²

- › **Improve civilian oversight of law enforcement.** While criminals operate in the shadows, in many societies law enforcement responses to organized crime are also opaque. Specialized police and prosecution units should be free of political interference. At the same time, there is a need for greater civilian oversight of law enforcement related to organized crime, for example when it comes to setting priorities, measuring law enforcement

performance in combating transnational organized crime, and ensuring accountability.

- › **Strengthen cooperation with the private sector.** More effectively fighting cyber, financial and environmental crime, as well as counterfeiting, and identifying and disrupting professional facilitators will require police to work more closely with the private sector, including through sharing threat assessments, conducting joint research, establishing contact points and developing tailored technological tools.

Regional responses

As emphasized throughout this report, organized crime is a global problem that necessitates a global response. However, as The World Atlas of Illicit Flows⁸³ and the Global Organized Crime Index show, the problem manifests itself in different ways in different parts of the world. It is therefore important to have regional strategies, agencies and cooperative networks for targeting it. For example, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) adopted a Crime and Security Strategy in 2013, the OAS has a Hemispheric Plan of Action against Transnational Organized Crime, the African Union has a Plan of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention (2019–2023), ASEAN has a Plan of Action to Combat Transnational Crime 2016–2025, the EU has a Strategy to Tackle Organized Crime 2021–2025 and, in June 2023, heads of state and government of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) tasked its secretariat with developing a policy and strategy on transnational organized crime. Such strategies

The global law enforcement community needs to be united and take decisive action.

**INTERPOL, Vienna Declaration,
27 November 2023**

and action plans should be formulated in response to publicly available serious organized crime threat assessments. Furthermore, adequate metrics are needed to measure effectiveness.

Ideally, the next time such regional strategies are drafted, they should be aligned with a global strategy. Indeed, experts involved in formulating the regional strategies mentioned above could provide valuable input to the process of developing a global strategy.

At the regional level, there are a plethora of anti-crime agencies, such as the CARICOM Implementation Agency for Crime and Security, ASEANAPOL, EUROPOL and AFRIPOL, as well as departments or units dealing with transnational threats, for example in the OAS or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). However, some of these bodies are more active in holding meetings and issuing declarations than in promoting operational responses. There is plenty of scope for using regional or subregional arrangements more effectively to share information, conduct joint operations and enhance cross-jurisdictional cooperation. This could be done in a more coordinated way through the global framework of a common strategy. In addition, these regional bodies could be more joined up through contributing to the publication of a periodic global organized crime threat assessment.

There is also an urgent need for inter-regional cooperation. Smuggling networks span the globe: they are not confined to particular regions. Therefore, there is a strong need to strengthen practical cooperation between, for example, Latin America, West Africa, the EU and Eastern Europe to disrupt the flow of cocaine; between Africa and Europe to more effectively manage the flow of people, weapons, natural resources and waste; between Latin America and North America to tackle the flow of drugs, people and weapons; between Asia and Africa to reduce the illicit flow of flora and fauna, counterfeit medicines and illicit drugs; and between financial centres on all continents. Again, this could be better coordinated and given greater political urgency if it were framed as part of a global strategy based on common interests and objectives. A useful precedent is the ASEAN-EU Work Plan to Combat Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime (2022–2024), although the effectiveness of this partnership has yet to be measured.

National responses

There are a wide range of measures that states can adopt to reduce the harm and threat posed by organized crime drawing on the ideas and priority actions outlined in this report. Some of the most salient include the following:

- Paying greater attention to the threat of organized crime to national security (including by synthesizing municipal threat assessments), and reflecting this in national security strategies and policies. Organized crime and grand corruption should not be viewed just as normative transgressions but rather as threats to national security, foreign policy and economic interests.
- Developing national anti-organized crime strategies drawing on the UNODC Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit for Developing High-Impact Strategies,⁸⁴ while recognizing that national responses alone are insufficient to deal with this transnational threat. These strategies should be regularly evaluated and sustained over time, with civilian oversight.
- Elevating environmental crime to a high political priority.
- Devoting more resources to attracting, retaining and training law enforcement specialists in financial intelligence, cybersecurity, and the use of big data and advanced data analytics.
- Promoting digital literacy among criminal justice professionals, public administration and the general public to reduce their vulnerability to organized crime.
- Providing greater support for community development and civil society organizations combating organized crime, including through the GI-TOC Resilience Fund.
- Imposing anti-money-laundering compliance obligations on professional facilitators.
- Adopting genuinely transparent beneficial ownership registries.
- Mainstreaming protection of human rights into anti-crime strategies and operations.
- Putting more attention and resources into the recovery of the assets of organized crime.
- Enhancing whistle-blower protection.
- Creating a national fund to support victims of organized crime.

- › Adopting laws to ensure data protection to safeguard individuals' privacy rights.

However, as noted, national responses are insufficient to deal with threats that do not respect borders. Moreover, an effective national anti-crime strategy could have the unintended consequence of simply displacing the problem elsewhere. Regional coordination and actions plans are therefore essential.

Cities

Cities play a key role in the global fight against organized crime because they concentrate the economic wealth that underpins many organized criminal activities and have large populations that suffer the consequences – often the poor and vulnerable. Global illicit flows pass through urban transport hubs, such as ports and airports, with potential implications for the cities that host them. Urban authorities and civil society are usually at the front lines of responses to security threats, including criminal violence linked to gangs and mafia-style groups.

Although many of the commodities that supply illicit economies are sourced in rural communities, numerous transnational illicit flows depend on urban spaces for operation and distribution. These include drugs, counterfeit goods, weapons and even stolen cattle, which in West Africa are typically laundered and sold in urban markets. Extortion is another major criminal economy plaguing big cities. Urban real estate is an increasingly lucrative area for criminal actors due to the ever-rising value of land in rapidly growing cities – from conflict settings such as Mogadishu to global financial hubs such as London.

Rapid and unmanaged urbanization exacerbates many of these challenges, creating a sense of urgency for local governments unprepared to deal with the criminal actors eyeing opportunities in their growing communities. For example, rapid urbanization has produced vast informal settlements in some parts of the world where the rule of law is tenuous at best. In these areas, the governance of security and public goods often assumes a hybrid form. While the state's presence is never completely absent, criminal groups may sometimes become the dominant force, imposing arbitrary and frequently threatening or violent rules on local communities. This trend is expected to increase, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, as two-thirds of the world's population is forecast to become urban by 2050, up from half at the start of this century.⁸⁵

Fighting organized crime in cities should go much further than simply police deployment. It also extends beyond the local government sphere, requiring national and international actors to understand the spatial dynamics of organized crime, and local actors, including civil society, to provide the governance, rule of law and urban development that are so often lacking in vast urban settlements. Municipal governments have a major role to play in preventing crime and the recruitment of young people into criminal groups, owing to their granular understanding of the socio-economic vulnerabilities in each neighbourhood and the infrastructure of local leaders, service providers and policies. Crime prevention and reduction strategies should integrate these municipal assets with local civil society actors, national governments and the business community.

Private sector

Almost every strategic action identified in this report is dependent on the private sector. Furthermore, private sector actors are either victims of or accomplices to most types of crime. The role of the private sector will therefore be crucial in formulating and implementing a global strategy against organized crime.

Nevertheless, despite the centrality of its role, the private sector is seldom engaged in crime prevention or anti-organized-crime strategies, nor is it represented in major forums on illicit economies. Some industry sectors and associations have been involved in the elaboration of guidelines, for example against human trafficking – but they are usually talked about rather than talked to. This needs to change. One way to promote more effective cooperation would be through public-private partnerships in the form of, for example, coalitions such as Tech Against Trafficking. Such an approach could be applied to other markets, including cybersecurity, financial crime (building on the Wolfsberg Group of banks), environmental crime, waste trafficking, counterfeits and illicit trade in licit goods (for example, through the creation of a global anti-counterfeiting network). The UN Global Compact could also be a useful platform to galvanize public-private partnerships against organized crime, as its principles include protecting human rights, eliminating forced labour, promoting greater environmental responsibility and fighting corruption.

Civil society

This report was developed by civil society, in particular experts from the Global Initiative Network. It has highlighted the important role that civil society plays in strengthening resilience to organized crime. We therefore hope that civil society actors will support the call for a global strategy against organized crime. This would include highlighting the urgent need for a strategy; emphasizing the harms of organized crime; showing solidarity with colleagues such as human rights defenders, investigative journalists and activists who face the daily challenge of working on this issue; advocating for enhanced international governance against organized crime and insisting that civil society be part of the conversation; championing the inclusion of gender and minority perspectives, ensuring a focus on youth as well as the victims and survivors of organized crime; promoting the social reuse of confiscated assets; bringing ideas and a constructive attitude to the table; and being a driver for change. Emphasizing this call to action is a movement, not a moment.

No silver bullet

There is no silver bullet against organized crime. Rather, there are many building blocks or possible interventions for dealing with it. They all have their place, whether it is focusing on strengthening community resilience, improving research and analysis, using technology more effectively, focusing on development or following the money. But none of them will work in isolation. The right tool

needs to be used in the right place at the right time, and in combination with other elements. After all, the problem is global and complex. It is impossible to address it everywhere all at once. This is the logic behind the intersections approach put forward here.

Furthermore, the approach should be tailored to the needs of the specific market or location. In some places, for example where there is a high volume of flows and considerable technology, the challenge is to govern or operate at speed and take into account complexity. In other places, there may be an absent government, a shortage of resources and only basic infrastructure. In some cases, organized corruption may be so endemic that only a bottom-up approach is possible, whereas in others a weak state may actively seek assistance in ridding its country of the threat posed by illicit economies. In some contexts, organized crime may be considered a threat; in others, communities may see few alternatives to the illicit economy. Therefore, it is important to understand the context in each case, to be sensitive to local conditions and the links to global flows, and to be strategic and targeted in considering possible responses. However, a problem that is, by its nature, complex and transnational will require a comprehensive, global strategy if there is to be real change.

The glue that can hold the building blocks together is trust. This includes:

- building trust within communities, particularly by strengthening the social contract between citizens and the state;
- increasing trust in politicians and public institutions through enhanced measures to

Artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) is a good example of the entanglement of licit and illicit economies.

To reduce the negative effects of this trade, the highest impact can be brought to bear on the points where the licit and illicit intersect. Focusing the interventions on local and regional buyers, wholesale dealers and refineries allows for targeting a smaller pool of actors rather than the millions of artisanal miners and consumers at the two dispersed ends of the supply chain.

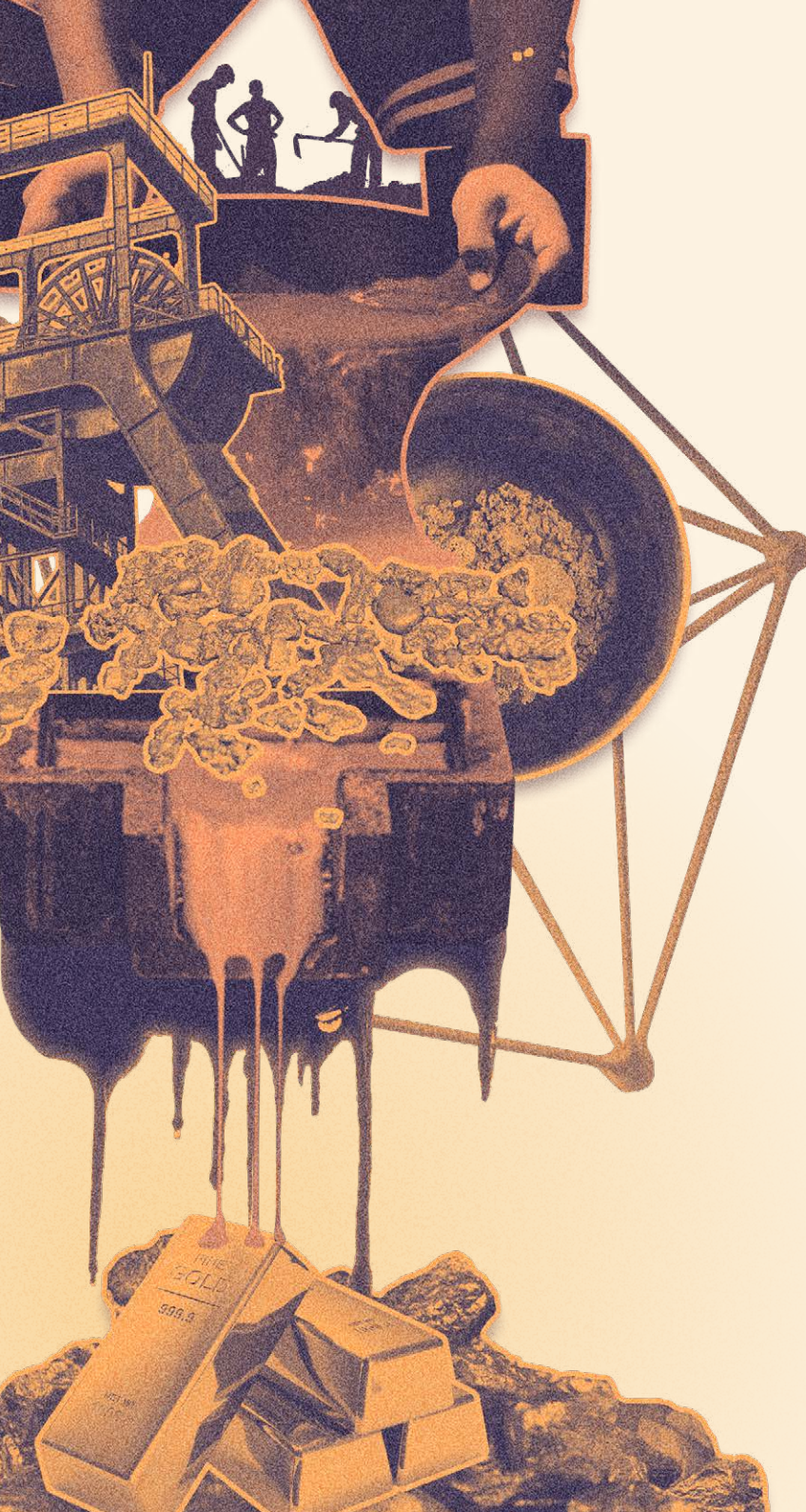
Criminal convergence

The informal nature of mining sites and the high potential profits can be a magnet for other illicit activities and flows such as migrant smuggling, drug production and trafficking, arms trafficking and sex trafficking, which result in criminal convergence. Profits from organized crime can be used to buy gold, either as a money laundering method or to diversify income streams.

Corruption

Corruption is heavily intertwined with most flows and networks, taking a variety of forms, and is critical to the operation of criminal networks exploiting ASGM and the gold trade.





ASGM

People are drawn into ASGM by opportunity - for example, weak regulation, weak or corrupt governance, or instability enabled by conflict. Those who work in the mines (diggers) are often driven by poverty, no access to finance, and a lack of alternative livelihoods. In some cases, the miners are migrant workers operating in exploitive conditions. Mine owners or managers may own the land and hold a licence, but given the informality of the sector, the owner does not necessarily possess formal mining rights or a permit. As a result, owners may engage with traditional authorities or rely on links to those who can provide protection such as gang bosses, private security companies, violent non-state actors or corrupt government actors, including the police, army and/or local officials.

Disruptive interventions

Adopt more robust oversight of the local gold trade and improve access to finance for miners and local traders.



Local and regional buyers

Local and regional buyers often supply financing, equipment or services to secure gold supply chains even before gold leaves the ground.

Increase capacity and coordination of monitoring and regulation of transnational gold flows and associated illicit financial flows in source, transit and destination countries.



Wholesale dealers

Bulk buyers can have links to the underworld but mask their activities behind licit businesses such as scrap metal dealerships, pawnshops or jewellery businesses. Gold produced by illicit mining operations or traded illicitly can be laundered into the legal supply chain. This is the key link between the illicit and the licit.

Increase oversight of the gold declared as recycled as part of more stringent overall due diligence measures (such as OECD due diligence guidance).



Refineries

Once gold is melted down, it can be combined with gold from other sources, making it virtually impossible to determine its origins or previous owners.

International buyers

Gold can be used in trade-based money laundering schemes. In this process, gold is smuggled abroad, sold and the profits are used to buy goods. Goods are imported or smuggled into the country and sold for profit, and the cash is used to buy gold. The goods are then imported into the country where the gold was purchased, with the potential for under-declaring or smuggling goods into the country.

Consumers

Consumers buy gold as an investment or for jewellery. Businesses use gold for decorative items, electronics, medical products and building materials.

prevent and counter corruption, and ensuring freedom of the media and space for civil society;

- increasing trust between law enforcement personnel within and between states, particularly in relation to sharing information and joint operations; and
- using technology to verify the authenticity of information and products, and protecting data.

A golden rule

While there is no silver bullet for reducing organized crime, there should be a golden rule: do no harm. After all, the point of controlling crime is to reduce the harm that it causes, and not to cause more harm. In addition to addressing the perpetrators of crimes, a major responsibility lies with those who enable illicit economies to function, either as consumers or enablers – but who may not regard themselves as part of the problem. The priorities and recommendations in this report have been crafted to shrink this opportunity space.

A community of action

To transform the ideas outlined in this report into action will require a concerted effort from many sides. Top-down approaches will be difficult in the current geopolitical environment and from states that do not want to internationalize this issue – despite its transnational and global character. Some organizations, being intergovernmental, may be risk averse.

The GI-TOC will seek to mobilize a critical mass of UN member states to champion the need for a

global strategy. These ‘friends’ could put the issue on the agenda and start a discussion. There will also have to be an engagement strategy to involve all interested and relevant stakeholders.

International organizations with crime-fighting mandates, such as the UNODC, INTERPOL and the UN leadership in New York, can champion the cause and provide convening power.

Regional organizations could play a key role, especially those that already have crime reduction strategies in place.

Criminal justice officials and law enforcement agencies are major stakeholders in a global strategy: they are on the front line and therefore need to be consulted on what works and what does not.

The media can help shed light on the harms caused by organized crime, help to change social attitudes and behaviour, and create awareness of the need for new thinking and whole-of-society approaches.

Civil society is an important catalyst. Members of civil society can rally behind the call for a strategy, disseminate its priorities and recommendations, share good practices, identify needs at the community level, and push governments and societies to take action.

Youth groups can mobilize for change, as they have demonstrated in the climate change debate, for example.

The private sector must also be involved, not only for the sake of corporate social responsibility but to protect the integrity of their businesses, reputations and supply chains.

The general public should advocate for change and show policymakers that they will no longer tolerate the violence and corruption that plague their communities.

Only together can we build a community of action to effect change. The challenge will be to design an inclusive yet dynamic and change-oriented process that can galvanize all relevant stakeholders and shift policy.

A call to action

Dealing more effectively with organized crime will not be easy, especially with all of the other threats and challenges on the international community's agenda. But ignoring the problem or continuing with the same approaches that have not worked in the past is not going to make the problem go away. On the contrary, it will make it worse.

We have reached an inflection point where assumptions about international law and international relations are being challenged. The unthinkable has occurred, including a global pandemic and wars that threaten to spiral into

wider conflicts. Geopolitical rivalries and global fragmentation are increasing as a result. Inequality is growing, compounded by the financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic and rising inflation. Illiberal forms of government are on the rise. Meanwhile, the rich and corrupt game the system to their advantage, creating what has been described as an 'age of impunity'.⁸⁶ Our planet is reaching a tipping point as a result of global warming, while climate change has a growing impact on the security and survival of our species.

Many of these shocks to the global system have been caused by organized crime and corruption. And criminals and kleptocrats will be quick to try to profit from seismic shifts in the global order. At the same time, traditional levers of power are being challenged by misinformation and rapid

technology growth. And people are coming together in ways that state authorities are finding difficult to manage. This creates space for civil society, but also for malign actors such as populists, extremists – and criminals.

In this time of rapid and dramatic change, anticipatory adaptation is vital. Returning to normal is insufficient, especially as 'normal' has failed to solve the problem. This is certainly the case when it comes to dealing with transnational organized crime. The time has come to take the initiative. It is time to act.

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Organized crime is one of the greatest threats to humanity. It spreads violence, weakens governance and fuels corruption. It both contributes to and benefits from the destruction of our planet. It endangers health and welfare, violates human rights and exploits migrants and victims of human trafficking. Furthermore, it undermines development and increases inequality, and it profits where there is conflict.

Organized crime intersects with politics and business as well as international relations. The distinction between the underworld and the upperworld has become blurred, often thanks to corrupt officials or facilitators in the private sector.

Yet, as serious as the problem has become, there is no global strategy to address it. Most current responses depend on national means or limited international cooperation, but this does not stop criminals without borders. Failure to enact more effective responses will make the problem worse – increasing harm and making it more difficult to dislodge.

This report argues that it is time for a global strategy against organized crime. It identifies possible building blocks of such a strategy and outlines the important roles to be played by law enforcement agencies and governments as well as civil society and the private sector.

Intersections is designed to provoke conversations and debates about more effective approaches to preventing and dealing with organized crime. It is a call to action for all those who seek change for more resilient communities and a safer world.



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