

# 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 instil 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.