PRESS RELEASE

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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

New research into West Africa drug markets: at least 30% of Europe's cocaine is believed to be routed through the region; Synthetic drug markets have diversified and expanded, driving growing harms

Two studies by the GI-TOC track a sharp expansion in cocaine trafficking and synthetic drug markets in West Africa, shaping an urgent security, public health, and human rights challenge.

Geneva, March 2026 — Produced by the GI-TOC West Africa Observatory (WEA-Obs), the reports map trafficking routes, actor typologies, supply chains, protection frameworks, and response shortcomings across West Africa. Complementing years of research with over 190 interviews in 2025, the reports seek to establish an evidence-based, consensus baseline of the threat posed by cocaine and synthetic drug markets in West Africa.

Key points:

- West Africa's cocaine market has surged since 2019, and the region is a growing warehousing, redistribution and containerization point in international cocaine trafficking routes.
- The unprecedented scale and profitability of the cocaine market makes it a powerful corrupting force, undermining governance. In turn, corruption - rather than violence - is a key enabler of cocaine trafficking in West Africa.
- Since 2019, existing evidence indicates that European criminal networks have expanded operations in West Africa.
- West Africa's synthetic drug markets are expanding, diversifying and driving escalating harms. Powerful synthetic opioids are having particularly devastating impacts.
- Digital technology and globalized supply chains tie West Africa's synthetic drug markets to global trends, underpin the emergence of new psychoactive substances and drive market expansion.
- Data gaps present a key obstacle to evidence-based and effective public health and criminal justice responses.

"Across markets the evidence points significant expansion of the criminal markets, driving escalating harms, while the response falls further behind," said Kingsley Madueke, Nigeria Research Coordinator at the GI-TOC. "The findings underscore the need for interventions that integrate public health, governance and criminal-justice priorities."

The reports were tabled for consultation at a high-level dialogue titled "Mapping the future of drug markets in West Africa - Synthetics, cocaine, criminal money, and strategic responses", jointly convened by the Government of Ghana, the Government of the Netherlands, and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), in Accra, Ghana in November 2025. The published studies integrate feedback received across these consultations. Findings will be presented at the Commission on Narcotic Drugs at UNODC in Vienna, 9–13 March 2026, followed by a GI-TOC webinar series.

The volumes of cocaine trafficked through West Africa are unprecedented. State-embedded actors, foreign criminal actors and regional intermediaries form a triangle of players coordinating bulk cocaine flows through West Africa. Armed groups, including violent extremist groups, and some of the most sophisticated organized crime groups in the world are benefitting from the region's cocaine trade. Cocaine does not transit the region with no trace: its effects on governance, public health and security are significant and escalating.

Between 2023 and 2025, the synthetic drug trade became the fastest-growing criminal market across West Africa, according to the Organized Crime Index. Methamphetamine markets are entrenched in Nigeria, where consumption has surged, and spreading to other states including Sierra Leone. Kush, an often deadly mix of synthetic cannabinoids and nitazenes, continues to drive fatalities in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, and is spreading fast into Senegal. Ecstasy markets have mushroomed in Senegal, Gambia and Sierra Leone, and captagon is starting to infiltrate the region. Low barriers to entry, partly due to expanding online wholesale drug markets, mean criminal actors in the synthetics market are multiplying.