



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

WIND OF CHANGE

THE 15TH CRIME CONGRESS AND THE
REPOSITIONING OF THE UNODC AND UNTOC

Ian Tennant

MAY 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank all the GI-TOC colleagues who contributed to the data and thinking that informed this document, including Mark Shaw, Tuesday Reitano, Walter Kemp, Jason Eligh, Sophia Schärer and Daniel Brombacher, as well as the Global Organized Crime Index, Resilience Fund and ECO-SOLVE teams, and the Publications team for bringing it to life. The author would also like to thank all the UN officials, diplomats, civil society representatives and others, discussions with whom over many years have informed the conclusions reached in this brief.

© 2026 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means without permission in writing from
the Global Initiative.

Cover: © *Daniel SLIM / AFP via Getty Images*

Please direct inquiries to:
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland
www.globalinitiative.net

CONTENTS

- Acronyms and abbreviations ii
- Summary..... 1**
- The UN Crime Congress..... 3**
 - Increasing intergovernmentalism.....4
 - Civil society at the Congress4
- Priority issues..... 7**
 - Transnational organized crime at a crossroads.....7
 - State-embedded actors9
 - Plateauing resilience..... 10
- State of the UN’s response..... 11**
 - How can civil society engage and support UN efforts? 15
- Broader reforms to UNODC policymaking and programming..... 17**
 - Policymaking..... 17
 - From policy to programming..... 20
 - Impact evaluation and external engagement..... 21
- Conclusions and way ahead for the UNODC 22**
- Notes 24

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CCPCJ	UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice
CND	UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs
COP	Conference of the Parties
COSP	Conference of the States Parties
Crime Congress	UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice
ECOSOC	UN Economic and Social Council
UNCAC	UN Convention against Corruption
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime
UNTOC	UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime



SUMMARY

The expected 15th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (Crime Congress) and the transition to a new executive director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) make 2026 a golden year of opportunity to recognize and respond to the ongoing increase in transnational organized crime and its harms, and to upgrade multilateral responses that have long been hampered by structural and strategic weaknesses. At the same time, however, the UN and the UNODC face unprecedented challenges in the form of political fragmentation, budget cuts and the ongoing UN80 reform process.

In this context, it is important to recognize and utilize the increasing interest, experience and capacities of non-governmental stakeholders and to ensure that they are effectively supported and protected.

In November 2025, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) published the third edition of its Global Organized Crime Index.¹ Once again, the Index presents a stark picture of rising levels of organized criminality and plateauing resilience to it. In the same week, the second International Day for the Prevention and Fight against All Forms of Transnational Organized Crime marked the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC, also known as the Palermo Convention).

Meanwhile, government delegates in Vienna were beginning their preparations for the 15th Crime Congress, expected to take place in Abu Dhabi in September 2026.² In a sign of the uncertain and unstable times in which we live, the Congress has already been delayed from April 2026 in light of the conflict in the Middle East, with the United Arab Emirates having faced significant missile and drone attacks.

The Crime Congress is a high-level consultative body of the UN that sets the agenda of the UN's work across its crime prevention and criminal justice mandates. It has convened every five years since 1950.³ However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this will be the first in-person gathering of the Congress in 11 years, since the 13th Congress in Doha in 2015, if it goes ahead as planned. The 2020 Kyoto Congress was postponed to 2021 and then held in a hybrid online format, with limited in-person participation, particularly for civil society.⁴

This policy brief explores the implications of three key trends that have emerged since the last Congress, drawn from the Index findings and from the GI-TOC's experiences in engaging on transnational

organized crime in the multilateral system, as well as working with partners in civil society around the world:

- **Worsening transnational organized crime and stagnating resilience.** During the COVID-19 period, transnational organized criminal groups changed, reorganized and capitalized on the related crises and instability. Since 2021, they have continued to do so, including by taking advantage of further rapid advances in technology. The Index, which collected data up to the end of 2024, once again shows how organized crime has expanded its power and influence, while state resilience has not kept up.⁵
- **Fragmented and strained multilateralism, including its tools to prevent and counter transnational organized crime.** Multilateralism is under unprecedented strain to respond to transnational organized crime and to sustain the architecture that has been built up over decades to address it. The UNTOC review mechanism's failure to produce results,⁶ along with the faltering start to the UN's new Convention against Cybercrime, provides clear evidence of this lack of political will and common purpose.⁷ Such problems are compounded by the ongoing lack of strategic direction across the UN system and the systemic funding and political challenges facing the UNODC. Amid the uncertainty, however, there are opportunities to forge more strategic and effective paths forward.
- **An increasingly active and organized civil society response to transnational organized crime, but one that is threatened and under pressure.** The Kyoto Congress was marked not only by a restrictive pandemic environment, but also by low civil society attendance in its preparatory process and a downgrading of its role in the final Kyoto Declaration.⁸ Since then, civil society around the world has mobilized on an unprecedented scale to engage with transnational organized crime issues. Yet civil society actors face more pressure and threats than ever.⁹

In addition to assessing these three trends, this brief recommends ways for the new executive director and member states to make use of upcoming key moments in the political calendar of UNODC, including the Crime Congress, in both its deliberations and the resulting Abu Dhabi Declaration that is planned to be adopted. State delegates in Vienna are already negotiating the outcome document, and therefore have an opportunity to reflect these realities, and position the UN system to respond more effectively, as a bridge between local circumstances and multilateral policymaking.

Central to the UNODC's ability to shape a new agenda will be the approach of the new executive director, Monica Kathina Juma of Kenya, who is due to take up the position on 11 May 2026, following Ghada Waly's departure in November 2025. The UNODC has been without a permanent leader for many months, and has been led in a relatively conservative and cautious manner for the last 15 years. A bold approach will be required to position transnational organized crime and the UNODC effectively in a rapidly changing UN ecosystem.



THE UN CRIME CONGRESS

The GI-TOC has previously analyzed the history and impact of the UN Crime Congress,¹⁰ but its role and potential have since developed, with changing geopolitics and shifting practices in Vienna. This is particularly relevant as the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) plays a key role as the preparatory body for the Congress, and with the Congress being a consultative body of the CCPCJ.

As mandated by the UN General Assembly, the Congress is a 'forum for (a) the exchange of views between States, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and individual experts representing various professions and disciplines; (b) the exchange of experiences in research, law and policy development; and (c) the identification of emerging trends and issues in crime prevention and criminal justice'.¹¹

It includes thematic workshops, ancillary meetings of civil society organizations and plenary meetings, which are open to government delegates, civil society participants, representatives of international organizations and individual experts. One of its key differences from other UN processes is an open application procedure for a broad range of NGOs that may not normally attend UN processes – including those without accreditation from the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) – and 'individual experts', which is unique within the UN system. This practice has been in place since 1950 and, before that, in the conferences of its pre-UN predecessor, the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission. These always included deliberations with practitioners, academics and other experts sitting as participants. Until 1970, NGOs could even vote on the resolutions at the Congress.¹²

Although the Crime Congress remains a consultative body that does not make decisions on policy, the agreements reached in its outcome declarations have a clear impact on the work of the UN, especially the CCPCJ and the UNTOC Conference of the Parties (COP). They have led to major innovations and developments in the international response to organized crime, including the adoption of the UNTOC, the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and the UN Convention against Cybercrime, as well as ongoing discussions towards a new protocol to the UNTOC to address environmental crimes.¹³

While all of these processes require formal UN decisions or resolutions, the Congress indicates which way the political wind is blowing and gives weight to the statements agreed to in its declarations. Likewise, resolutions of the CCPCJ tend to reflect positions previously adopted in the Congress Declaration.¹⁴

Increasing intergovernmentalism

The Congress originally adopted resolutions to set out its intentions and decisions, which allowed all participants a vote. In 1970, this was replaced by an outcome declaration from the proceedings at the Congress. This continued until 2015 and the 13th Congress in Doha, when the outcome declaration was first agreed upon in advance, divorcing it from the discussions that took place at the Congress. This process continued at the Kyoto Congress and is meant to be used again in Abu Dhabi. This time round, due to the delay of the event, delegates are expected by the Emirati chairmanship to agree to the declaration many months in advance – creating further distance between the Congress and its outcomes.

The practice of advance agreement has freed up government delegates, who would in other circumstances have been busy negotiating the outcome declaration, to attend ancillary meetings and thematic workshops during the Congress itself. It has also meant that, with the declaration the result of a closed-door intergovernmental process, civil society and experts cannot participate in the deliberations that feed into it.

This is one of the ways in which the Congress has become increasingly intergovernmental in nature over the years, especially since its formal connection with the CCPCJ in 1992.¹⁵ As largely the same diplomats participate in the annual CCPCJ, the Crime Congress has inevitably become more closely associated with the Commission's workings.

Another factor in rising intergovernmentalism is the growing number of governments represented, from 51 in 1955 to 149 in 2015. This is a welcome indicator of increased interest in the key issues on the table at the Congress. As is the growing number of attendees overall: from just over 500 delegates to 4 000.

Civil society at the Congress

In comparison, the number of non-governmental organizations attending had been relatively stable until recently. There are now clear signs that civil society engagement is drastically increasing, despite – and in response to – the increasingly intergovernmental focus of the Congress.

The 2025 regional preparatory meetings for the upcoming Congress have shown a major increase in NGO attendance. More than 100 NGOs participated across the five regional meetings, up from 15 in the preparations for the 2021 Congress.

This increase was spurred on by coordination between the UNODC Civil Society Unit and the Alliance of NGOs, as well as by international NGOs who mobilized their own resources (the GI-TOC, for instance, attended all regional preparatory meetings) and member states who financially supported attendance, primarily Canada.

In addition to the approximately 300 ECOSOC-accredited organizations that receive invitations, more than 500 others have applied to attend the Abu Dhabi Congress itself. This is a more than 30-fold increase from the number of non-ECOSOC-accredited NGOs that applied to attend Doha in 2015.

High levels of participation in the UNTOC Constructive Dialogues and the 12th UNTOC COP also register a remarkable uptick in interest from civil society actors around the world in the issues on the Congress agenda, and in the Congress itself. The challenge will be to ensure that this interest can be translated into actual attendance at the Congress, in light of short resources in the NGO sector and the ongoing instability in Middle East.

Doha 2015	12
Kyoto 2021	67
Abu Dhabi 2026	520

FIGURE 1 Number of non-ECOSOC-accredited NGOs applying to attend the Crime Congress.

Despite the closed negotiation process of the outcome declaration, non-governmental stakeholders are also contributing written contributions this time round. These are published on the Congress preparatory website, courtesy of the Congress secretariat.¹⁶ However, there is still no official process for member-state delegates to engage with civil society on the declaration. The negotiations are held in closed-door sessions, and there have been no multi-stakeholder briefings at the time of writing. And, as the declaration does not take officially incorporate the views and perspectives of non-governmental attendees, it is an outcome of the Congress's governmental delegates rather than the Congress as a whole.

While the Crime Congress is displaying increased intergovernmentalism in its characteristics and outcomes, it is, conversely, attracting a broader range of civil society, for reasons that will be explored later in this brief.

Civil society's changing role in Crime Congress declarations

The language used in Congress outcome declarations to describe the role of civil society charts a gradual but stark deterioration. In addition, the number of mentions declined from 11 in Vienna to just one in Kyoto. The characterization of civil society as a 'partner and actor' in 2000 was most recently replaced by a strong affirmation of the primary role of governments, with civil society to be supported 'as appropriate'.

States have yet to agree the declaration for Abu Dhabi in 2026, but the GI-TOC hopes that they will recognize the role of civil society and the sacrifices it makes in responding to organized crime.

High point: Vienna, 2000 (11 mentions of civil society)

'We emphasize that effective action for crime prevention and criminal justice requires *the involvement, as partners and actors*, of Governments, national, regional, interregional and international institutions, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and various segments of civil society, including the mass media and the private sector, as well as the recognition of their respective roles and contributions.'

Bangkok, 2005 (two mentions of civil society)

'We recognize the role of individuals and groups outside the public sector, such as civil society, non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, in contributing to the prevention of and the fight against crime and terrorism. We encourage measures to strengthen this role *within the rule of law*.'

Salvador, 2010 (five mentions of civil society)

'We recognize that the development and adoption of crime prevention policies and their monitoring and evaluation are *the responsibility of States*. We believe that such efforts should be based on *a participatory, collaborative and integrated approach that includes all relevant stakeholders* including those from civil society.'

Doha, 2015 (five mentions of civil society)

'We also recognize that, to enhance the effectiveness and fairness of such strategies, we *should take measures to ensure the contribution of civil society*, the private sector and academia, including the network of institutes of the United

Nations crime prevention and criminal justice programme, as well as the media and all other relevant stakeholders, in the development and implementation of crime prevention policies.'

Kyoto, 2021 (one mention of civil society)

'We emphasize our primary role and responsibility as States and Governments for defining crime prevention strategies

and policies. [...] We undertake to enhance multidisciplinary efforts to prevent and combat crime through cooperation and coordination between law enforcement and other criminal justice institutions, and other governmental sectors, as well as to support their work, by engaging in and fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships with the private sector, civil society, academia and the scientific community, and with other relevant stakeholders as appropriate.'

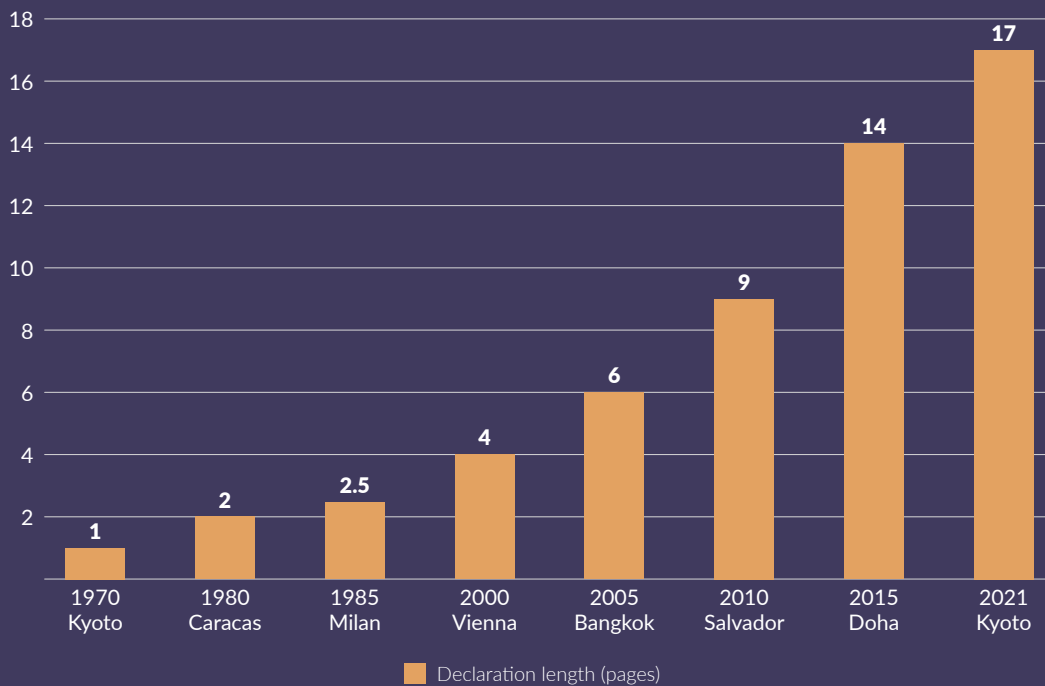


FIGURE 2 Comparative length of the Crime Congress declarations, 1970–2021.

The declarations have also grown longer and less focused over the years, showing an increased interest in the Congress's diversity of issues, but also making it harder to follow up in a strategic way. In contrast with the first declaration, from the 1970 Kyoto Congress, which had only one page, the 2021 Kyoto Declaration, at 17 pages, is the longest in Congress history. The outcome declaration has become more of a catch-all omnibus resolution, rather than a clear political statement of priorities. Delegates had been given until the end of April 2026 – when the Congress was originally set to take place – to finalize the negotiations this time, but as consensus could not be found by this deadline, talks are predicted to continue into the coming months.



PRIORITY ISSUES

The remainder of this policy brief outlines some of the priority issues that should be addressed at the Congress, and other upcoming meetings, including the CCPCJ and the 13th UNTOC COP, to better reflect the realities of modern transnational organized crime and what is needed to enhance the UN's response and support civil society's role.

This is especially relevant for the incoming executive director and leadership team of the UNODC, as the secretariat of the Congress and the guardian of all the legal instruments that underpin the UN's responses to organized crime. The UNODC also oversees the implementation of the Drugs and Crime Commissions, and the capacity building and programming that takes place to implement all of the agreements, commitments and resolutions that are made under those processes. The 15th Congress offers an opportunity to take the temperature of what is happening on the ground in terms of crime and justice issues and to take stock of the UN's range of mandates and activities in these areas, assess their effectiveness and identify existing and emerging gaps and challenges. An inherent part of this is the role of the UNODC as the central hub of the UN system responsible for these issues, in the context of broader UN80 reforms.

In the GI-TOC's view, the outcome declaration of the last Crime Congress did not adequately grasp the scale of the challenge of transnational organized crime, in particular by not venturing beyond a reaffirmation of existing instruments for what is needed to respond.¹⁷ Although there was some recognition of the transnational and complex nature of modern organized crime, not enough attention was given to the need for holistic and development-centred responses, nor to the need to address the fundamental issue of the weakening of the rule of law and its institutions that allows organized crime to thrive.

As government delegates debate new agreements for the 2026 Abu Dhabi Declaration, which will consequently be taken on board by the new UNODC leadership, the new realities of transnational organized crime must be recognized now in order to give the incoming executive director the best grounding for an ambitious response into the future.

Transnational organized crime at a crossroads

At the time of the last Congress, the world did not yet fully grasp how quickly transnational organized crime groups had moved to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic in the service of expanding and diversifying criminal activities already taking place. Their ability to leverage both the increased online activity of many people and institutions and the social and economic changes and fractures has since become clear.

Leaps in AI, financial technology and cryptocurrency have enabled criminals to communicate and move money more covertly, as well as target victims online through various scams. Less skilled operators have become capable of carrying out cybercrime and other harmful online activities.¹⁸ Organized criminal groups can now connect with each other more efficiently and leverage complementary skills and networks. Offenders, such as those who perpetrate the abuse and exploitation of children and disseminate associated abuse material online, are able to work with criminal groups more easily.¹⁹ As more people, including children, gain access to online spaces, they quickly move beyond the remit of outdated legislation and safeguards.

Furthermore, the world was a more peaceful place in 2015 than it is today. In the past decade, the number of violent conflicts has increased dramatically, creating space and opportunities for illicit economies. Indeed, 2024 marked a historic peak in conflict since the Second World War,²⁰ and ACLED's Conflict Index reports this peak as continuing into 2025, resulting in a 'conservative' estimate of more than 200 000 deaths.²¹ Geopolitical competition and fragmentation have increased the weaponization of organized crime.

In this time of dramatic change, organized crime has quickly adapted and regrouped, accompanied by a worsening outlook for societies all over the world. Geopolitical fragmentation, conflicts and instability. Worsening gang violence. Sustained and growing illicit economies in both the physical and digital worlds. The list goes on.

The 2025 Global Organized Crime Index, as numerous other recent research and reports have also done, explicitly reveals the escalation, transformation and diversification of illicit economies. It shows that a shocking 82.7% of the world's population now live in countries categorized as being affected by 'high criminality'. Of the 193 UN member states, 66 were designated as having 'high criminality and low resilience', the worst possible combination. And the impact of this is deadly. The UNODC's most recent global homicide report (from 2023), estimates that 'from 2015 to 2021, organized crime caused around 700 000 deaths, comparable to casualties resulting from armed conflicts'.²²

In more than half of the world's 22 subregions, organized crime is expanding, particularly in financial crime, cyber-dependent crime and synthetic drugs, and thus creating deeper and more systemic effects and undermining governance and the rule of law. This indicates that illicit economies are reorganizing and transforming rapidly: taking advantage of technology, cracks in our societies and geopolitical turmoil.

The synthetic drug market is one example of how quickly and profoundly criminal economies have changed. Driven by the explosion of commercial sectors, capabilities and digital marketplaces, diverse criminal groups have gained the ability to mass produce and traffic substances on a large scale. The synthetic drug market has been described as the future of organized crime, but it has quickly become its present.²³

Take another example: that of fraud, which is shown to be a serious concern in the Index. In the view of our analysts, it is propelled by the explosion of so-called cyber 'scam centres', most prominently in South East Asia, but now increasingly as a global phenomenon.²⁴ For a variety of reasons, a very high percentage of cyber-related frauds are not reported by ordinary victims or recorded by states. In some cases, people are turned away from police stations when they try to report such crimes. In others, the police are overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of this relatively new type of crime. It is a revolution in criminality that has caught us unprepared.

Another growing concern is the mobility and growth of criminal actors acting outside of their own countries and regions. This is evident, for example, in criminal groups from the Western Balkans

developing strong alliances in Latin America and West Africa, and also in the emergence of Latin American criminal groups in Europe. The Index suggests that the presence of foreign criminal actors is one of the strongest areas of growth in recent years.

Over the past few years, almost unnoticed, organized crime has become rooted in public life. The most obvious manifestations are seen in fragile or crisis-prone states, which are key arenas for the wider dispersal of criminal disorder, such as Venezuela, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Myanmar. In each case, instability is closely linked to illicit economies, whether because of armed groups or state-embedded actors (or both).

Therefore, to fully understand the political economy of local or national conflict and instability, the international community needs to take cognisance of links to illicit supply chains, trade routes and critical resources, and the infrastructure and enablers that bridge the underworld and the upperworld.

Current regulatory and compliance frameworks around the world simply do not do enough to rein in the private sector when it is complicit in criminal activities, whether as an enabler, vector or indeed facilitator. Similarly, private sector entities can too easily become unwittingly involved in supporting criminal activities. The spectrum of complicity varies from sector to sector, but an increasingly blurred distinction between the licit and illicit contributes to the ever-closer relationships that characterize modern illicit economies.²⁵

Consider gold, for example. With prices having risen above US\$5 000 per ounce in recent times, illegal gold mining has become a major driver of instability and conflict in parts of Latin America, Africa and South Asia.

Gold is no longer just a financial asset or commodity; it has also become a strategic financial tool for organized criminal actors of all kinds, who generate billions of dollars a year in illicit proceeds, which they then launder through our shared global financial system. This causes untold environmental damage.²⁶

Then there is the growing harm that organized illegal logging, poaching and fishing and the illegal dumping of waste does to our planet. Much of this destruction is happening in plain sight. For example, enormous quantities of protected wildlife products are openly traded on the internet.²⁷

The expansion of global infrastructure in technology and financial technology has widened the operational opportunities for organized crime. In this chaotic environment, breaking the rules and exploiting opportunities seem to be keys to wealth and success.

In short, we are living in a period of reconfiguration in our societies and in the world order. In this process of fragmentation, organized crime grows in the cracks.

State-embedded actors

It should be pointed out that the profiteers of illicit economies are not only in the underworld, but also sit firmly in powerful and influential positions in formal economies and structures. Think of the corrosive impact of crime-related corruption and money laundering on politics, governance and business.

Indeed, one of the most shocking findings of the Index – found in every edition since the first in 2021 – is that the most pernicious type of criminal actor is not mafia groups or foreign criminal networks. It is state-embedded actors, those within the state's apparatus who, instead of combating criminal markets, protect or co-opt them.

One expression of this is what we term 'geocriminality': when states weaponize or exploit organized crime for political or economic interests abroad.²⁸ This may include hiring or colluding with criminals to commit assassinations or sabotage, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, or the use of smuggling to generate hard currency or subvert sanctions.

The growing impact of state-embedded actors in organized crime has serious implications for public policy. This is because open societies provide access for trade, financial flows and immigration, both licit and illicit, which is precisely what makes them vulnerable to organized crime. The good news, perhaps counterintuitively, is that democracies are also more resilient to organized crime than authoritarian regimes, at least in the medium term. Why? Because of the checks and balances provided by a free media, effective governance institutions, transparency, accountability and – a key theme of the Congress – the rule of law.

For member states that believe in the value of the rule of law as a bedrock of peaceful societies, a key question will be how to translate this into commitments to enhance the international response to organized crime. This is especially challenging in a situation where the rule of law is under threat. However, the Congress has an opportunity to send a strong message about the central role that corruption plays in facilitating organized crime (and vice versa).

Plateauing resilience

The Index also includes measures of resilience, such as political leadership, transparent and accountable governments, economic regulation, law enforcement, judicial systems and victim and witness support.

While volumes and systems of organized crime have grown, adapted and diversified, the resilience markers measured by the Index have either stayed much the same or shown slight declines over the five years the GI-TOC has gathered this data. People in affected communities, especially those in countries with high levels of criminality and low levels of resilience, are scared and frustrated by the threat posed by crime and violence. This is why there is a degree of public support for more radical security-focused solutions.

Current crime-fighting approaches are not working in many countries. Crime has thus become a key populist agenda item, with harsh crackdowns receiving wide public support. Public dissatisfaction rises and politicians are pressed to deliver 'get tough' solutions, but the Index data suggests there is still a lack of effective policies.

If existing responses are inadequate or insufficient, the Congress is well placed to muster new ways of thinking and doing, driven by a critical mass of countries that are concerned about the national and transnational impacts of organized crime. Experience suggests that the chances of success will be higher if such approaches involve other key stakeholders within the private sector and civil society. Indeed, in the few places where positive change is occurring – although not fast enough – new constellations of actors and approaches draw on the experience of the state, business and civil society.

As the threats posed by organized crime grow, more actors need to be drawn into the responses, including at the multilateral level. Therefore, the Crime Congress has a serious responsibility, and work to do, to highlight these issues in a world that is more fragmented and contested than at any time in the last three decades. And the new executive director of the UNODC will have a responsibility to take on board the issues raised, and drive forward a new agenda for action from the UN.



STATE OF THE UN'S RESPONSE

Which path will the UNODC take in 2026? The tools that are available through the multilateral system are, at worst, not up to the task and, at best, not being implemented properly. The international cooperation needed to deal with this issue is also lacking, just as transnational responses are so badly needed.

The problem of organized crime is not new: the international community has come together before to address this common concern. Thanks to past action, the international community has a number of mechanisms to tackle the issue, such as INTERPOL, the UNODC, the UNTOC and drug control conventions. There is also the new UN Convention against Cybercrime, as well as momentum towards a protocol to the Palermo Convention that will strengthen action against environmental crime.

In 2023, INTERPOL marked its centenary with a general assembly in Vienna. Its Declaration, titled 'Challenging the rise of transnational organized crime', stated that 'law enforcement in many countries cannot cope as criminals buy political influence, launch cyberattacks from different continents or operate transnationally'. It concluded, unambiguously, 'We are at a tipping point. Action needs to be taken now.'²⁹

But the UN system is not answering this call to action. Organized crime was hardly mentioned in the 2024 UN Pact for the Future, nor does it feature in ongoing debates about reforming peace operations and peacebuilding. The 25th anniversary of the UNTOC has not been an occasion to celebrate. Indeed, at the commemorative event to mark the anniversary in October 2025, the then-executive director of the UNODC, Ghada Waly, said that it was time to 'breathe new life' into the UNTOC,³⁰ but did not offer a new solution to the inertia surrounding implementation.

While serious questions are being asked about whether the Palermo Convention is still fit for purpose,³¹ UN channels for cooperation are hampered by geopolitical wrangling, and the UNODC faces serious budget cuts and operational challenges. Crucially, the UNODC has been without a permanent executive director since November of 2025, until the new executive director arrives in May 2026, arguably the most challenging period in the organization's history.

The remainder of 2026 will be a defining moment in how the UN responds to illicit economies. Either the UN innovates and adapts now, through innovative reforms and statements of action at the Congress as well as under the new executive director, or the escalation of organized crime and its consequences will be increasingly hard to reverse.

Challenges within the UN system

- The funding, politics, purpose and operations of the UN are under unprecedented strain as it struggles to fulfil its core mandates and functions, including getting to grips with growing transnational organized crime threats.
- Due to US funding cutbacks and overall UN budget-reduction measures, the UNODC has already announced budget cuts totalling US\$130 million for 2026/27.³² No one expects this trend to be reversed.
- The existing organized crime mandates are spread across the UN system with no central overarching strategy. GI-TOC research shows that 79 of the UN's 102 entities, bodies and agencies have some relation to the issue, with 52% of the Security Council's 2024 resolutions referencing at least one illicit market.³³
- There are few new peace missions, and many have been withdrawn, and there is a lack of organized crime focus despite the centrality it plays in such crises.³⁴
- The impending election of a new secretary-general at the end of 2026 will shape the future of the UN, but it will take time for their vision to be shaped, implemented and translated into action at the level of the UNODC under its new executive director.
- Awareness of the UNTOC is low among practitioners and within the UN system. The UNTOC's review mechanism is slow, under-resourced and under-funded, rendering the central evaluation process irrelevant, having only produced a handful of country reviews. There is no equivalent impact assessment process for the UNTOC or capacity building carried out to implement it. This means that the instrument at the heart of the UN's response to organized crime is little known, understood or prioritized by the UN system.³⁵
- The UNODC has lacked executive directors with strong connections or leverage in New York to upgrade the cross-UN response to organized crime. This was compounded by a period of six months without a permanent executive director, during a time in which UN reforms have moved fast and unpredictably. Despite the efforts of the acting leadership, concerns about this situation were raised in the letter sent on 13 February 2026 to the UN Secretary-General by the chair of the UNODC's finance and governance working group, before Juma's appointment was announced on 6 March.³⁶ This letter exemplifies the growing concern within the diplomatic community in Vienna about the position of the UNODC within the UN system. ■



Vienna, 13 February 2026

Distinguished Secretary-General,

It is my duty as Chairperson of the **Standing open-ended intergovernmental working group on improving the governance and financial situation of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (FINGOV)** to make you aware that the member States of the United Nations represented in Vienna believe that the prolonged absence of an Executive Director for UNOV / UNODC has contributed to place this duty station at a disadvantage during administrative discussions to address the dire financial situation of the Organization.

Not having in place the highest-ranking official in Vienna has diminished the capacity to convey the specific conditions and particular situations that prevail in this post during decision-making discussions on administrative, financial and reform issues. I am convinced that this situation has even been far from ideal regarding the need to achieve a balanced administrative and financial reform process within UN80.

Additionally, we recently experienced a very unfortunate situation stemming from the fact that initially there were absolutely no funds allocated for interpretation services at UNODC. This represented a serious problem, given that the regular sessions of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ), both ECOSOC bodies, are among the most relevant meetings in Vienna; and the United Nations Crime Congress, which is held only every five years, is set to meet in April in Abu Dhabi. At this stage, I have been informed that funds for interpretation on four of the five days scheduled for the CND session have been allocated. The problem persists for the other two fora.

The Executive Director, had that person been already in office, could have resolved some issues related to the above-mentioned problem, since part of it was the result of lack of coordination among the agencies and organizations based in Vienna.

With the expressed considerations in mind, and recognizing that it is your prerogative and responsibility to decide on the person to be entrusted with leading UNOV and UNODC, I request that you do not further delay your decision and designate the person you consider best suited to lead the United Nations in Vienna during these very complex and trying times.

Respectfully,

José Antonio Zabalgoitia
Chairperson of the standing open-ended
intergovernmental working group on improving the
governance and financial situation of the United Nations
Office on Drugs and Crime
Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Mexico to the
United Nations in Vienna

His Excellency
Mr. António Guterres
Secretary-General
United Nations
New York

Letter sent by the chair of the UNODC's finance and governance working group (the Mexican permanent representative to the UN in Vienna) to UN Secretary-General António Guterres in February 2026.

UNTOC: the promise of Palermo remains unfulfilled

The UNTOC is the UN's central tool for addressing transnational organized crime, but its trajectory and impact have been increasingly called into question as the years have passed.³⁷ While its widespread ratification continues to be a remarkable achievement, its impacts are more difficult to quantify, and opinion has hardened in recent years from various sectors that it has sorely underachieved (albeit in challenging circumstances).

In 2025, to mark the 25th anniversary of the UNTOC, the *Transnational Criminal Law Review* published a special issue featuring reflections from a range of experts on the impact of the convention and its three supplementary protocols.³⁸ But far from celebrating the UNTOC's achievements, experts highlighted a consistent set of challenges that are hampering the instrument's success. The GI-TOC's own report, 'Is the UNTOC working?', published at the same time, was seen as controversial by some in the secretariat.³⁹

However, it is widely accepted by all concerned that the review mechanism is not working properly and will never progress at the envisaged pace (only two reviews have been completed so far). It is difficult to imagine when the process will move on to the next stage, which requires 75% of states parties to have completed their first review. Its funding situation has also been worsened since the last UNTOC COP.

Basing hopes for evidence of impact on the mechanism in its current guise is not a smart strategy; what is needed is to reinject political interest and momentum into the UNTOC process. If the UNTOC is allowed to continue along its current trajectory, it will fade further into insignificance.

Conversely, it should more clearly form the core of the UN's response to organized crime, providing the legal and international cooperation framework for data-sharing and analysis, strategic interventions, and political and multilateral initiatives.

A call to action

Based on the urgency of this situation and the continuing lack of progress, states should explicitly centre transnational organized crime and the UNTOC in the Abu Dhabi Declaration of the 2026 Crime Congress. In addition, the new executive director should clearly prioritize transnational organized crime as the growing security threat it represents, and position the UNTOC as a platform for responding more effectively.

First, the Declaration should acknowledge that the state of implementation of the UNTOC is a cause for serious concern, and make a call to action in the form of a high-level review conference or process, as part of the 2026 13th UNTOC COP, or a standalone special session, using the following proposed language for enhanced strategic action, coordination and increased civil society access, to enable stronger and more effective outcomes:

'Recommends that the UNTOC COP convene a high-level multi-stakeholder review segment [as part of its 13th Conference] to take stock of the implementation of the UNTOC in light of the lack of progress in the review mechanism and the subsequent lack of data; the growing success and diversification of transnational organized crime; and the urgent need for a more effective and strategic response.

'Further recommends that the UNODC holds regular joint briefings on the outcomes of the Implementation Review Mechanisms of the UNTOC and the UNCAC and on the implementation progress of the new UN Convention against Cybercrime to ensure coordination between the different treaty bodies and for learnings and commonalities to be shared between the different processes, so as to enhance collective implementation and maximize efficiency.

'Further recommends, given the shortfall of data and analysis from the review mechanism, that the COP make fuller use of data and analysis produced by civil society, academia and the private sector; increase the opportunities for civil society participation in the review mechanism; and increase transparency in its operations, meetings and outputs.'

How can civil society engage and support UN efforts?

The role of civil society in addressing organized crime is multifaceted and multilevel; its insights support more effective multilateralism. At the community level, civil society groups address the root causes of crime by focusing on prevention and support, as recognized in a resolution tabled by Finland at the 34th CCPCJ.

Education and awareness form another cornerstone of civil society's efforts. These organizations promote civic engagement by encouraging citizens to participate and interact with each other, and with the authorities, in seeking justice. Education programmes aimed at young people can reduce their vulnerability to criminal recruitment. Crucially, civil society can act as a watchdog, monitoring activities, a particularly important role in contexts where corruption and a lack of capacity hinder the state's ability to address organized crime.

There is no question that civil society provides valuable action on the ground, as part of whole-of-society responses to organized crime – and this is well documented. Whether in providing support to victims and witnesses, running youth support groups to deter young people from criminality, offering psychosocial services and livelihood skills training, mediating between gangs, or reporting on and analyzing criminality, there is no shortage of ways in which civil society is involved.

Indeed, in his introduction to the UNTOC, Kofi Annan, then secretary-general of the UN, referenced the forces of 'civil society' against the forces of 'uncivil society'.⁴⁰ In the year 2000, this was already an expression of what had been learned so far – in the same year that the Congress had adopted the Vienna Declaration, which confirmed civil society's role as partners and actors. Over the years, however, the UNTOC process has shut out civil society involvement through its restrictive practices, particularly with regard to participation in its substantive working groups. Consequently, the UN is not making the best use of civil society's experience: the data, expertise and insights gleaned from collective efforts to address organized crime.

Despite the challenges, the 12th session of the UNTOC COP in 2024 was notable for the participation of over 200 NGOs,⁴¹ including the first-time attendance of indigenous leaders who highlighted environmental and social damage caused by organized crime in their communities. The increased attention from civil society indicates growing awareness of these harms and the urgency of responding more effectively.

Yet, as described above, their substantive contribution to the UNTOC conference has not always been well coordinated and organized, and has been increasingly restricted in recent years, even as the space for civil society engagement more broadly has shrunk around the world.⁴² In response to this, the Vienna-based NGO alliance published its own declaration to set out their interests and common priorities on the implementation of the UNTOC.⁴³ Depressingly, and despite its extensive references to external stakeholders, the new UN Convention against Cybercrime has seen reluctance from some states around civil society participation become central to early negotiations in its rules of procedure.⁴⁴

Civil society participation is consistently a contested political topic at the UN in Vienna, increasingly so in recent years. However, despite the challenges, interest and engagement are growing, not fading.

In 2025, the GI-TOC published a policy brief for the 34th CCPCJ and the Crime Congress that sets out the perspectives of community groups fighting organized crime on the front lines.⁴⁵ It outlined the following key points, which should be borne in mind as states finalize their deliberations on the Abu Dhabi Declaration and the new executive director begins her term in office:

- Civil society plays a vital role as a first line of defence against organized crime, particularly in contexts where state presence is weak or compromised.
- Civil society contributes through direct action, education, monitoring, international cooperation and policy advocacy.
- Targeted support and international solidarity can empower local actors, turning victims of organized crime into agents of change.
- As organized crime expands, exploiting digital tools and governance gaps, civil society must be equally supported to adapt and respond effectively.
- Shrinking civic space threatens the sustainability and effectiveness of community-based responses to organized crime. Strengthening civil society networks and creating counter-narratives to criminal governance are essential, while making impact visible through strategic communication and advocacy.
- Policymakers should recognize civil society actors as strategic partners in combating organized crime and include them in national and international strategies against organized crime with proper protection and sustained resources.
- Long-term, flexible funding is crucial for sustaining resilience-based strategies globally.
- Governments, international organizations and the private sector all have roles to play in supporting community-based crime-fighting initiatives.

As the world continues to become more contested and complicated, these perspectives will be vital for the Congress and the UNODC to consider as it sets agreements on the way ahead.

More partnership and engagement with the rich experiences of civil society could be what is needed to breathe new life into the UNTOC process for the future. And, what's more, it would save money, by reducing the administrative burden of the separate and siloed meetings under the UNTOC.

As a concrete recommendation for the 35th CCPCJ, with the Abu Dhabi Declaration negotiations not being concluded, it is recommended to take advantage of the CCPCJ to hold a multi-stakeholder dialogue on the content of the Declaration, to ensure civil society's views can be aired with member states in advance of the Congress.



BROADER REFORMS TO UNODC POLICYMAKING AND PROGRAMMING

Enhanced implementation of the UNTOC should be a clear priority for the Crime Congress and the new executive director of the UNODC. However, the need to reform the UNODC's policymaking and programming infrastructure is much broader and deeper.

It is not realistic to expect the Congress to be able to come to a radical conclusion or consensus on what reform should look like, but it is an important staging post to air views amid the wind of change blowing strongly through geopolitics and multilateralism. Indeed, member states in the UNODC's working group on finance and governance issues have made various attempts and submissions within the UN80 reform process.⁴⁶ And the new executive director of UNODC will need as much as advice as she can get as she starts the process of reform at the institutional level.

Policymaking

The GI-TOC previously highlighted inefficiencies and duplications in the UNODC's governing and treaty bodies in 2020,⁴⁷ and recommended some streamlining and synergy-building across its mandates. The need for reform is now much more urgent. With resources stretched to breaking point, the UNODC has been assigned to act as the secretariat of the new UN Convention against Cybercrime alongside its existing mandates. These challenges will be further extended should the much-needed UNTOC protocol on crimes that affect the environment come into effect.⁴⁸

At the time of writing, budget-tightening measures have not curtailed planning for the UNODC's packed policymaking agenda. The annual CCPCJ will take place in June, with the rescheduled Congress to take place in September/October, and the regular pattern of UNTOC conference subsidiary bodies is planned for mid-2026, leading up to the 13th UNTOC COP in October 2026.

However, there have been telltale signs of the system creaking. Regular budget allocations for the UN Convention against Cybercrime planned secretariat were sacrificed early, leaving its January 2026 ad hoc committee meeting without enough funding to provide sufficient interpretation. In that case, the government of Vietnam stepped in to make up the shortfall.

In another worrying sign, the first concrete casualty of budget cuts has been the Constructive Dialogues of the UNTOC review mechanism: the sole part of the process that incorporates civil society. Having previously been funded by voluntary contributions from the US – and apparently without other member states willing to fill the void – the dialogues will take place only online in 2026.

Given the current realities of geopolitics and funding, the system is clearly not set up to maintain the current level of activity.

Mandate bottlenecks

The UNODC acts as the secretariat of the international drugs conventions, and of the UNTOC, the UNCAC, some counter-terrorism legal instruments and now the UN Convention against Cybercrime. It has two governing bodies – both ECOSOC subsidiaries – the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and the CCPCJ.

The CND acts as the implementation review body of the drug control conventions, alongside the International Narcotics Control Board. The CCPCJ has no such function for the crime conventions, but has joint reconvened sessions with the CND every year to deal with budgetary and administrative issues.

The UNTOC and UNCAC secretariats take care of their respective conventions, and each has a biennial COP and a wide range of annual subsidiary body meetings, alongside permanent review mechanisms. The Convention against Cybercrime does not yet have a COP – but member states will soon have to work out how to fit into the schedule of treaty conferences. Parallel to this, the Crime Congress takes place every five years, as both a consultative body of the CCPCJ and a higher-level multi-stakeholder strategic body.

For delegates in Vienna, the workload is constant. Figure 3 outlines the periods set aside for the decisions and resolutions that are passed each year to guide the work of the UNODC. Each set requires weeks, if not months, of informal consultations before they are again negotiated at the relevant conference.

In addition to this, delegates primarily based in Vienna participated in 11 sessions of the ad hoc committee to negotiate the UN Convention against Cybercrime, alternating between Vienna and New York, as well as meetings of the annual subsidiary bodies of the UNTOC and UNCAC COPs and the additional intergovernmental expert group under the UNTOC on environmental crimes.

Delegates in New York negotiate annual omnibus resolutions on drugs and crimes, as well as other UNODC regular resolutions on trafficking in persons and the UN's counter-terrorism mandates.

The inevitable crossovers and duplication among the different policymaking and treaty bodies are plain to see. Resolutions on all types of organized crime may be tabled and negotiated at both the annual CCPCJ and the biennial UNTOC COP. Issues of corruption, for example, cannot be reserved for the UNCAC because they are also in the UNTOC and part of the CCPCJ's agenda. Drug trafficking could be discussed at the CND, CCPCJ and the UNTOC.

Resolutions on the finance and administration of the UNODC have to be adopted twice, at the reconvened CND and CCPCJ sessions, which meet one after another. The exclusive nature of the UNTOC and UNCAC review mechanisms also requires meetings on the same topics to be held twice: once with external stakeholders and once without.

Year	CND	CCPCJ	UNCAC	UNTOC	Totals per year
	1 week each year; several weeks of informals; 3 days of thematic discussions per year; 2 days of joint reconvened sessions for admin/finance issues	1 week each year; several weeks of informals; 3 days of thematic discussion per year; 2 days of joint reconvened sessions for admin/finance issues	1 week every two years; several weeks of informals every other year; 3 weeks subsidiary bodies per year	1 week every two years; several weeks of informals every other year; 3 weeks working groups and Constructive Dialogues per year	
2022	6 resolutions; 7 decisions (6 on substances)	9 resolutions; 2 decisions		6 resolutions	21 resolutions; 9 decisions
2023	6 resolutions; 7 decisions on substances	9 resolutions (including one to prepare for the Crime Congress)	12 resolutions; 2 decisions (1 decision on the review mechanism)		27 resolutions; 9 decisions
2024	6 resolutions (including 1 political declaration); 26 decisions (including 25 on substances)	6 resolutions (including one to prepare for the Crime Congress); 2 decisions		4 resolutions	16 resolutions; 28 decisions
2025	7 resolutions (including one setting up a new CND high-level panel); 7 decisions on substances	9 resolutions (including one to prepare for the Crime Congress); 1 decision	11 resolutions (including one on the next phase of the review mechanism); 1 decision		27 resolutions; 9 decisions
Totals per meeting	25 resolutions; 47 decisions	33 resolutions; 5 decisions	23 resolutions; 3 decisions	10 resolutions	91 resolutions; 55 decisions

FIGURE 3 Periods set aside for the decisions and resolutions passed each year to guide the work of the UNODC.

As well as these complicated resource constraints, the strain is also starting to show politically. At the 67th and 68th sessions of the CND, substantive resolutions were voted on, breaking the practice of 'Vienna spirit' consensus-based decision-making. While this has not yet caught on in the UNODC's other bodies, the cracks are very visible, including states' growing use of 'position explanations' to disassociate themselves from the decision-making. Delegates in Vienna are beginning to use tactics much more in line with the practices of UN bodies in Geneva and New York, where preparations include planning for voting scenarios.

Given the current geopolitical context and the increased use of voting, rather than consensus, at the UN in Vienna, it is far from guaranteed that an advance agreement will be made for the Congress. The delayed Congress could well open, and indeed close, without any agreed declaration, although the procedures for voting in such a situation are not clear. A lack of agreement on strategic issues will not help the new executive director with prioritization, and will send a message of inertia in the face of the threats of organized crime.

As recent events have shown, it is unlikely that the UN will be able to continue to finance this pace and level of policymaking. There is a clear need for streamlining and more efficient ways of working, which will need support and leadership from the new executive director of UNODC.

The following suggestions are offered to begin to turn the tide and reduce the number and frequency of meetings, while at the same time improving the focus and quality of outputs:

- Joint sessions of UNTOC and UNCAC subsidiary bodies, which have overlapping agendas but meet separately.
- Avoid duplicative meetings. For example, the UNTOC Constructive Dialogues could be merged with the standing working groups to ensure that all participants can attend the relevant meetings. The UNCAC Conference of the States Parties (COSP) civil society briefing could similarly be integrated into the agenda of the UNCAC COSP working groups, to again avoid the same issues being discussed at separate meetings.
- A biennial grand conference of the UNODC. This would allow for a joined-up set of discussions integrating all the treaty bodies and the governing bodies of the UNODC. A limited set of resolutions on key strategic issues would be passed during the grand conference, ideally following up on the priorities identified by the Crime Congress. Intersessional meetings of the separate bodies could be convened as required, and as resources allow.
- A more independent way to assess the growth and threat of organized crime, including drawing on the inputs of outside actors, with the results presented to the conferences described above. UNODC research often forms the basis of research inputs to UNODC conferences, but the member states (and the leadership of UNODC) would benefit from comparison with external information and analysis that does not have to adhere to the same political considerations as the UNODC.
- Implement the recommendations of the UN's transnational organized crime common framework, to help to reduce inefficiencies and draw on diverse data and skillsets from across the UN.⁴⁹

From policy to programming

This streamlining is not just needed for the sake of overworked delegates and under-resourced secretariat staff: it must also serve to strengthen resolutions and decisions. UNODC programmes in the field are overwhelmingly funded by voluntary contributions from member states. This allows the UNODC to be flexible, but it also relies on the sustainability of funding, including the presumption of more funding to keep up with the proliferation of mandates agreed to by its various treaty and governing bodies every year. The current budget cuts show that this presumption is no longer tenable.

Most adopted resolutions aim to support a programme of capacity building or technical assistance, to be delivered by the UNODC. They outline key issues and 'call upon' member states to support such activity, as well as 'requesting' (i.e. mandating) the UNODC to carry out the work required. The likelihood of these mandates being fulfilled gets slimmer as the budgets of both the UN and donor governments shrink, and the volume of resolutions continues on current trajectories.

A limited and focused number of resolutions could be more effective under a reformed and streamlined policymaking process, as envisaged by the UN80 mandate review resolution.⁵⁰

- Such resolutions should be proposed by a cross-regional group of countries, including countries that want to fund the activity and those that want to receive the assistance rendered.
- The secretariat's involvement in the development and discussion of resolutions should be further encouraged and required to include financial and feasibility assessments at an earlier stage.

- The expertise of relevant non-governmental bodies should be integrated into the preparatory phase of each resolution, through structured engagements led by the resolution's co-sponsors.

The existence and activities of UNODC field operations are particularly vulnerable to the current headwinds. It will have a smaller footprint in the future, but a more strategic and long-term policymaking process should give the field offices – and the countries that depend on them – more predictability with which to plan their work.

Impact evaluation and external engagement

A more streamlined system of policymaking to guide programming should include monitoring and evaluation more prominently and openly. With its large field presence and diverse policy and treaty bodies, the UNODC is a particularly decentralized organization. This makes it difficult to review the delivery and impacts of its mandates and capacity-building work, and therefore to justify further activities and funding.

The lack of external engagement in the official review mechanisms of the UNTOC and the UNCAC is another vulnerability and source of weakness. External non-state engagement has for too long been seen as a peripheral issue for the UNODC, to be left to the Civil Society Unit rather than being mainstreamed across the organization – although certain teams and units have taken up such engagement. Still, it does not include the diversity from which the UNODC could benefit. Private sector actors have the access and abilities to help implement the Convention against Cybercrime and address cyber scams, independent research institutions have much-needed non-state data, and academic institutions can be vital partners.

The current time of uncertainty and change provides an opportunity, even a necessity, for the UNODC and potential partners to seek innovative partnerships to better fulfil the mandates that the UNODC has been given – and will continue to be given – with limited resources.



CONCLUSIONS AND WAY AHEAD FOR THE UNODC

This brief has set out some key priorities for the UNODC in an era of reforms and challenges for the UN. It is hoped that these perspectives will be of use to the UNODC and member states as they carry forward the implementation of all existing treaties and processes, as well as the new Common Approach to Prevent and Address Transnational Organized Crime across the UN system.⁵¹

The need for more cross-UN coordination is essential, including maximizing synergies across the work of the UNODC, but the role of civil society must not be forgotten as cuts are made and efficiencies found. A more inclusive integration of civil society will, in fact, make the UNODC's work more efficient and effective. Keeping civil society separate, as currently happens in the official UNTOC and UNCAC review processes, is a fundamental weakness that needs to be addressed.

Ultimately, the UNODC should work with the most committed member states to develop a new vision and strategy for achieving the promise of the Palermo Convention, including its potential new protocol on environmental crimes and the new Convention against Cybercrime, making best use of the work of the new Common Approach. This strategy should be based upon the following:

- Reconfiguring the UN response to organized crime as a policy issue of relevance to people across societies, who are facing its harms every day, and not a distant or abstract process.
- Reinventing and elevating the UNTOC as the central political engagement platform on organized crime in the UN system, not just a legal instrument.
- Supporting the establishment of a new protocol to the UNTOC to address environmental crimes, as an impetus to reinvigorate the treaty.
- Making use of external data and analysis to help drive discussions and reforms on transnational organized crime, in recognition of the limitations of official UNODC research and the lack of data coming out of the UNTOC process.
- Reducing the number of meetings and processes to ensure a rationalized and reformed agenda, including a more open approach to civil society engagement to reduce duplication.
- Reforming the approach to capacity building in the field network of the UNODC – making it better integrated within the UN system and focused more on outputs rather than on activities.

- Rethinking approaches to member states who are either not doing enough to implement the UNTOC and address organized crime, or who are actively engaged at different levels. Some form of diplomatic sanctions and incentives should be instituted by the UNODC to ensure that support and engagement go to the countries most committed and in need, and that those countries promoting organized crime cannot unduly influence the UN processes designed to fight it.

Over the longer term, these elements will help to put in place the building blocks of a more integrated, efficient and effective UNODC, in terms of both policymaking and programming, that will have more impact on people's lives as they face the growing harms of organized crime in their communities.

The current ways of working are under fundamental strain. Reform is not an option but a necessity if the UNTOC, the UN Crime Congress and UNODC itself are to have impact in the future.

NOTES

- 1 GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index 2025, <https://ocindex.net>.
- 2 UNODC, Preparations for the Fifteenth Crime Congress, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/crimecongress/preparations.html>.
- 3 Ian Tennant, The road to Kyoto: The evolving influence of the UN Crime Congresses, GI-TOC, 2019, September 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-road-to-kyoto>.
- 4 The Kyoto Congress, 14th UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, <https://www.moj.go.jp/KYOTOCONGRESS2020/en>.
- 5 GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index 2025, <https://ocindex.net>.
- 6 Mark Shaw et al, Is the UNTOC working? An assessment of the implementation and impact of the Palermo Convention, GI-TOC, October 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/is-the-untoc-working>.
- 7 See the GI-TOC's reporting on the process at <https://globalinitiative.net/initiatives/un-cyberwatch>.
- 8 Ian Tennant, Kyoto Declaration: States affirm their primacy in crime prevention and criminal justice amid downgraded role of civil society, GI-TOC, 5 March 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kyoto-declaration>.
- 9 UNODC, Preparations for the Fifteenth Crime Congress, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/crimecongress/preparations.html>.
- 10 Ian Tennant, The road to Kyoto: The evolving influence of the UN Crime Congresses, GI-TOC, 2019, September 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-road-to-kyoto>.
- 11 UNODC, The 15th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Abu Dhabi, 2026, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/crimecongress/about.html>; UN General Assembly resolution 46/152, Creation of an effective United Nations crime prevention and criminal justice programme, <https://undocs.org/A/Res/46/152>.
- 12 Matti Joutsen, *The UN Programme on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice*, London: Routledge, 2024, p. 214.
- 13 Ian Tennant, The road to Kyoto: The evolving influence of the UN Crime Congresses, GI-TOC, 2019, September 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-road-to-kyoto>.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Matti Joutsen, *The UN Programme on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice*, London: Routledge, 2024.
- 16 UNODC, Written contributions to the 15th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Abu Dhabi, 2026, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/crimecongress/resources/written-contributions.html>.
- 17 Ian Tennant, Kyoto Declaration falls short of addressing the real challenges of organized crime, GI-TOC, 9 March 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kyoto-declaration-2>.
- 18 GI-TOC, Democratizing cybercrime: How sophisticated AI systems are empowering a new generation of cybercriminals, 31 March 2026, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/democratizing-cybercrime-ai-empowering-cybercriminals/>.
- 19 Virginia Comolli, Connected but not protected: Online child sexual exploitation in the Pacific and why Fiji's numbers matter for the region, GI-TOC, 10 March 2026, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/online-child-sexual-exploitation-in-the-pacific-and-why-fijis-numbers-matter-for-the-region/>.
- 20 The Peace Research Institute Oslo, Conflict trends: A global overview, 1946–2024, <https://www.prio.org/publications/14453>.
- 21 ACLED, Conflict Index, <https://acleddata.com/series/acled-conflict-index>.
- 22 UNODC Global homicide report, 2023, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/2023/GSH23_ExSum.pdf.
- 23 Jason Eligh, Global synthetic drug markets: The present and future, GI-TOC, March 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/global-synthetic-drug-market-the-present-and-future/>.
- 24 Kristina Amerhauser and Alex Goodwin, A world of deceit: Mapping the landscape of the global scam centre

- phenomenon, GI-TOC, March 2026, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/mapping-global-scam-center-phenomenon>.
- 25 GI-TOC, Intersections: Building blocks of a global strategy against organized crime, July 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/global-strategy-against-organized-crime-intersections/>.
 - 26 GI-TOC, Civil society policy recommendations on illicit gold: UK Illicit Finance Summit – June 2026, 28 April 2026, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/civil-society-policy-recommendations-on-illicit-gold/>.
 - 27 Russell J Gray and Simone Haysom, Wildlife has a Facebook problem: Evidence of platform-scale facilitation of criminal trade in wildlife, GI-TOC, April 2026, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/wildlife-has-a-facebook-problem>.
 - 28 Martin Thorley, Of kingdoms and crooks: The rise of geocriminality, GI-TOC, 17 March 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-rise-of-geocriminality>.
 - 29 INTERPOL, The Vienna Declaration: Challenging the rise of transnational organized crime, 27 November 2023, https://www.interpol.int/en/content/download/20615/file/GA%20-%20Declaration_27-11_EN.pdf.
 - 30 Ghada Waly, High-level event commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, UNODC, 11 November 2025, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/speeches/2025/111125-untoc-25th-anniversary.html>.
 - 31 *Transnational Criminal Law Review*, 4, 1 (2025): The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime turns 25: Challenges, celebrations, and controversies, <https://ojs.uwindsor.ca/index.php/nlj/issue/view/860>.
 - 32 Ian Tennant, Ongoing uncertainty and an unrelenting agenda: The UNODC in 2026, GI-TOC, 23 January 2026, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/ongoing-uncertainty-and-an-unrelenting-agenda-the-unodc-in-2026>.
 - 33 GI-TOC, 2000-2024: Charting organized crime on the UN Security Council agenda, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/sresolutions>.
 - 34 Sophie Rutenbar, Peace operations in Haiti: Lessons from two decades of UN engagement, GI-TOC, January 2026, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/peace-operations-and-transnational-organized-crime-considerations-from-haiti>.
 - 35 Mark Shaw et al, Is the UNTOC working? An assessment of the implementation and impact of the Palermo Convention, GI-TOC, October 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/is-the-untoc-working>.
 - 36 UN Secretary-General, Personnel appointments: Ms Monica Kathina Juma, 6 March 2026, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/personnel-appointments/2026-03-06/ms-monica-kathina-juma-of-kenya-executive-director-united-nations-office-drugs-and-crime-and-director-general-united-nations-office-vienna>; UNODC, Letter sent by the chair of the UNODC's finance and governance working group to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, 13 February 2026, https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/FINGOV/archive/archive/2026/1st_meeting/Letter_FINGOV_Chair_SG_Signed_260213.pdf.
 - 37 *Transnational Criminal Law Review*, 4, 1 (2025): The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime turns 25: Challenges, celebrations, and controversies, <https://ojs.uwindsor.ca/index.php/nlj/issue/view/860>.
 - 38 Ibid.
 - 39 Mark Shaw et al, Is the UNTOC working? An assessment of the implementation and impact of the Palermo Convention, GI-TOC, October 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/is-the-untoc-working>.
 - 40 UN, The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html>.
 - 41 Ghada Waly, Opening of the 12th session of the Conference of Parties to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, UNODC, 14 October 2024, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/speeches/2024/141024-untoc-cop12-opening.html>.
 - 42 Ian Tennant, UNCivil society: Addressing the diminishing space for civil society in UN policymaking bodies on transnational crime, GI-TOC, October 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/un-civil-society-untoc-cop-11>.
 - 43 The Alliance of NGOs on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, A civil society declaration for more effective implementation of the UNTOC, October 2024, https://crimealliance.org/resources/documents/80_CSDeclaration.pdf.
 - 44 Ian Tennant, Deadlock for UN cybercrime treaty: Familiar issues derail discussions in Vienna, GI-TOC, 10 February 2026, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/deadlock-united-nations-cybercrime-treaty>.
 - 45 GI-TOC, Resilience in action: Civil society's role in preventing and combating organized crime, May 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/resilience-in-action-civil-society-combating-organized-crime>.
 - 46 UNODC, Outcome of the consultation process on the future of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 20 November 2025, https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND_Sessions/CND_68Reconvened/ECN72025_CRP14_ECN15_2025_CRP13.pdf.
 - 47 Ian Tennant, Detour on the Road to Kyoto: Making the UN Crime Congress relevant under the shadow of COVID-19, GI-TOC, May 2020, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/un-crime-congress-covid>.
 - 48 Ian Tennant, Simone Haysom and Tiphaine Chapeau, A new Protocol for the UNTOC? A guidance note for the 1st meeting of the new Intergovernmental Expert Group on crimes that affect the environment, GI-TOC, June 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/new-protocol-untoc-crimes-that-affect-the-environment>.

- 49 UN Chief Executives Board for Coordination, United Nations system common approach to prevent and address transnational organized crime, Report of the High-Level Committee on Programmes at its fiftieth session, 2 and 3 October 2025, https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2026-01/CEB_2025_2_Add.1%20%28TOC%20Common%20Approach%29.pdf.
- 50 International Service for Human Rights, UN80: Member States agree on modalities for review of UN mandates, 1 April 2026, <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/un80-member-states-agree-on-modalities-for-review-of-un-mandates>.
- 51 UN Chief Executives Board for Coordination, United Nations system common approach to prevent and address transnational organized crime, Report of the High-Level Committee on Programmes at its fiftieth session, 2 and 3 October 2025, https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/2026-01/CEB_2025_2_Add.1%20%28TOC%20Common%20Approach%29.pdf.



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with 800 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

www.globalinitiative.net