The Impact of Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking on Governance, Development & Security in West Africa

"The cartels have not yet corrupted the government’s senior levels, but sooner or later they will, because they have millions of dollars and you need to be a saint to reject them."¹

Summary

In less than one and a half decades West Africa has become a major transit and repackaging hub for cocaine and heroin flowing from the Latin American and Asian producing areas to European markets.² While organized crime and drug trafficking already existed in the region, the phenomenon rapidly expanded in the mid-2000s as a result of a strategic shift of Latin American drug syndicates towards the rapidly growing European market in part due to the operational ‘successes’ of U.S. law enforcement agencies in mitigating the flow of drugs into the United States.³ West Africa presented an ideal choice as a logistical transit center: its geography makes detection difficult and facilitates transit; the region boasts well-established networks of West African smugglers and crime syndicates; and a vulnerable political environment. The latter has its roots in the region’s colonial history and includes endemic poverty as well as a combination of weak institutions and systems, instability, and ill-equipped and corruptible political party representatives, law enforcement and intelligence officers, and judicial authorities.

In some countries, the legacy of civil wars led to diminished human capital, social infrastructure and productive national development assets. They also gave way to a rise in the number of armed groups operating in the region and the circulation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). Many of these challenges are slowly being overcome, with countries across the region enjoying transitions to, and consolidation of democratic rule in addition to positive economic growth. Yet, at the same time, new threats have emerged, compounding existing political and security challenges in West Africa. These threats include drug trafficking, and increasingly, drug consumption, broader organized criminal activity such as human trafficking, illicit logging, illicit capture of resources, piracy, money-laundering, and terrorism. Combined with intense urbanization and youth unemployment, these threats and challenges are having a corrosive effect on democratic institutions and processes, security and economic development across the region and driving violence and reemergence of conflict.

Conversely, research shows that the evidentiary base underpinning perceptions of challenges remains weak, as do mechanisms to assess and respond to vulnerabilities, threats and challenges that enable organized crime and drug trafficking. Indeed, despite several positive developments, there is still limited evidence of effective, strategic responses to the multi-faceted challenges posed by organized crime and drug trafficking in the region. While declarations and action plans from within and beyond the region abound, many continue to lament the absence of a comprehensive strategic framework that goes beyond mere technical assistance to more effectively encompass the underlying global, regional and national political economy factors that enable organized crime and drug trafficking in the region. Operational level strategies are also

¹ The Minister for Foreign Affairs of a West African country (Feb. 2009).
² West Africa includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.
³ According to recent research, it appears to have stabilized today at some 50-60 tons annually, with a wholesale value of close to US$ 2 billion, representing some 25-30% of the European cocaine market.
said to be weak, not least because they are developed on the basis of weak and siloed analysis. Existing strategies tend to omit the importance of ensuring that security centered efforts are accompanied by efforts aimed at strengthening political institutions and processes, justice and health institutions, and responding to widespread youth unemployment. Even less focus and investment is being placed on developing the capacity of civil society and academia to monitor and analyze trends and effects of organized crime and trafficking across the region. Meanwhile, the private sector remains largely removed from current debates on the issues.

In this regard, the objective of the expert meeting will be to focus on the impact of organized crime (and drug trafficking in particular) on governance, security and development across West Africa in order to:

i) Garner a better understanding of the perceived impact of drug trafficking and organized crime on governance, security and development in West Africa; and identify gaps in knowledge.

ii) Assess the effectiveness and/or shortcomings of different policy and operational responses currently being implemented by different actors in relation to identified and emerging challenges.

iii) Identify potential entry points and key components of a renewed strategy to address the problems identified, for example, through the establishment of a regionally-led mechanism; and discuss different options for moving forward.

More specifically, the meeting will focus on responding to several questions that remain unanswered. For example, what mechanisms and tools are currently being used to track, monitor and assess the impact of organized crime and drug trafficking on key areas such as governance, security and development? How are the findings of these processes used to inform the development of integrated strategic and operational responses at the national and regional levels (particularly regarding law enforcement, citizen security, justice, and health)? How do academia, civil society and the private sector engage with public policy makers to inform decisions? What gaps in knowledge and strategic and operational responses currently exist, and how might they be more effectively addressed and supported? By whom (international, regional, national levels) and how?

The meeting is a joint effort of the Kofi Annan Foundation, ECOWAS-GIABA, NYU’s Center on International Cooperation (CIC), and the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center (KAIPTC). Participants will include experts from West Africa, Latin America, North America and Europe.

Background

Neither organized crime nor drug trafficking are new to West Africa, yet the degree to which they have grown in the region over the past decade is. Indeed, the enormous value of drugs and other illicit goods and services vis-à-vis the value of local economies in West Africa has allowed traffickers to penetrate the very highest levels of government, the justice and security services and the economy, and are said to be wreaking havoc on already weak political, economic and social structures. In response to strong evidence that in some countries drug money was

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4 For example, as much as 80 metric tons of cocaine, worth $1.2 billion, might pass through West Africa to Europe this year, Manuel de Almeida Pereira, legal adviser to the Vienna-based anti-crime unit of the UN, said in an interview on May 17. Bloomberg News, "West Africa’s Cocaine Trade Has Doubled in Five Years, UN Agency Estimates." Drew Hinshaw - May 25, 2011.
transnationally, the highest levels of power, in 2007 the African Union adopted an Action Plan and accompanying Mechanism on Drug Control and Crime Prevention. The stated primary goal of the Action Plan was to reverse “the current trends of drug abuse and trafficking, organized crime, corruption, terrorism and related challenges to socio-economic development and human security and to achieve tangible improvement in the social and personal well-being of the people of Africa and their communities.”

Spurred by the growing number of drug seizures in the region (which indicated the degree to which West African countries were serving as cocaine and heroin transit routes), ECOWAS shortly followed suit, adopting a range of declarations, action plans and policies to respond to the growing threat of drug trafficking in the region. More recent evidence points to the progression of the West African drug scene from a mere transit hub for cocaine to processing and amphetamine production; to the expansion of the trade routes through the Sahel and Sahara and a purported increase in cooperation between drug-traffickers and terrorist groups such as AQIM.

Over the past few years, the UN Security Council has been periodically appraised of the growing threat posed by drug trafficking in Africa and more recently, West Africa and the Sahel Region, leading to several important UN Security Council Presidential Statements (PRSTs). The latter include the PRSTs of December 2009 (under Burkina Faso), February 2010 (under France) and February 2012 (under Togo). Each has highlighted the danger that drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime represent for regional and international security. Meanwhile, the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) has increasingly used its convening authority, political leverage and transnational reach to raise awareness of the impact of transnational threats in West Africa, especially drug trafficking, and to broker support from the international community for responses designed to mitigate those threats. Other UN agencies such as UNODC continue to develop assessments and provide technical assistance to institutions across West Africa. In addition to these efforts, many bilateral donors have launched different initiatives to support the region either at the multilateral or bilateral levels. Some of the initiatives such as the West Africa Coastal Initiative (WACI) are being implemented in partnership with ECOWAS, while others are being implemented directly by the supporting partners. The African Union, the European Union, AFRICOM, a range of bilaterals from Western Europe and North America, private and semi-private security actors are also engaging in some form or other.

Yet, despite all these efforts to respond to organized crime and drug trafficking, concerns continue to be raised in the region and beyond, suggesting that efforts to respond to challenges to

5 CMDCCP/EXP/3 (III) Para. 1.1 Fundamental Objectives.
6 Between 2001 and 2007, cocaine seizures in West Africa increased from approximately 273 kilos to an estimated 47,000 kilos (see Cockayne 2011). ECOWAS has taken a number of policy and operational steps to address many of the challenges enumerated above. For example, in 2008, ECOWAS, in collaboration with the UNODC and other partners, organized a Ministerial conference to consider and approve a regional action plan (The Praia Plan of Action) and a political declaration against illicit drug trafficking and organized crime for the region. The action plan and the political declaration were adopted and endorsed by the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of States and Government in December 2008. Another initiative developed in the wake of the increased infiltration of drug-related monies in politics in the region and the lack of relevant regulatory frameworks and accountability mechanisms is the Praia Declaration on Elections and Stability in West Africa which includes a provision on preventing the financing of political parties and their campaigns by criminal networks, particularly drug trafficking networks.
8 Encouraged through the 2010 PRSTs to ensure that drug trafficking is “mainstreamed as a factor in conflict prevention strategies, conflict analysis, integrated missions assessment and planning and peacebuilding support” in February 2011, the UN Secretary-General established a Special Task Force on Organized Crime and Trafficking co-chaired by the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and UNODC. It is still early days to determine whether the Task Force will provide the much-needed support suggested in the PRSTs, particularly since it is quite removed geographically from the crux of the problem (West Africa, Central Asia, Central America etc.). Notwithstanding, it could provide much needed support and analysis to UN offices strategically placed in the region such as UNOWA, and potentially support the development of a similar capacity within ECOWAS.
9 James Cockayne and Camino Kavanagh (2011). The WACI is a program co-led by UNODC, UNDPA, UNDPKO and Interpol. The WACI is helping ECOWAS establish Transnational Crime Units in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, and Guinea-Bissau.
date have had limited impact. For example, concerns regarding the criminalization of politics have not dissipated.\textsuperscript{11} In settings such as Guinea-Bissau, the highest levels of political and military leadership became embroiled in a fight over access to resources, including the spoils of cocaine trafficking, resulting in the assassination of the President in 2009.\textsuperscript{12} Across the region, political parties are increasingly accused of using illicit monies emanating from the drug trade to fund electoral campaigns. Weak or in-existent party campaign financing, asset disclosure and anti-money laundering regulatory frameworks and implementation mechanisms make it extremely difficult to confirm these claims, providing even more fodder for political polarization.\textsuperscript{13}

Underpinning some of these political challenges is the reality that in some West African states the underlying political settlement is still relatively weak, in the sense that different stakeholders have not been able to devise an acceptable system through which “competing political and economic interests are channeled by means of state institutions in a routine, smooth and violent-free manner.”\textsuperscript{14} In this regard, the easy access to resources that drug trafficking and other forms of organized criminal activity allow can place additional pressures on vulnerable political and social systems and has the potential of increasing the risk of polarization and violence, including around electoral contest and particularly in countries that have recently emerged from conflict.\textsuperscript{15} In addition, in settings where access to power and resources is still limited to informal and clientelistic relations, the spoils of drug trafficking can inadvertently enhance the legitimacy of both formal and traditional political and economic elites. In many cases the absence of the state and weak service delivery means that organized crime and drug-related rents represent the only source of resources and therefore a blind eye is turned to their illicit nature. Such important subtleties in state-society relations make it all more difficult to assess impact and formulate coherent and effective policy responses.

Meanwhile, drug trafficking and associated corruption is perceived to be having an increasing impact on economies in West Africa. The size of the informal sector across the region and the fact that most of the economies function on a cash basis presents significant challenges to assessing impact. Notwithstanding, there is increasing evidence that vast sums of money have been laundered in real estate, tourism and casinos in Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal, for example, and that most of the other countries in the region are also being flooded by illicit funds stemming from drug trafficking and other illicit activity. As a recent ECOWAS/GIABA report highlighted, the main problem appears to stem from the top of the pyramid, where large quantities of funds fall into the hands of important political operators who are aided by external groups such as Diaspora communities, and work with intermediaries such as large scale cash smugglers, banks, businesses and important international traders. In the long run, economic dependence on illicit drug money and the penetration of drug trafficking into the highest levels of power leaves few incentives to combat the trade, even if legitimacy vis-à-vis the general population is low.

While the security, economic and political impacts of organized crime and drug trafficking have been discussed in many different forms and fora over the past decade, much less is known about their longer-term developmental impacts. For example, increasing concern is being voiced

\textsuperscript{11} Across the region, parties are increasingly accusing each other of using drug-related monies to fund their campaigns and gain advantage over their adversaries. See, for example, the polarization that has emerged in Ghana following suggestions by the head of the Narcotics Control Board that some political parties have been using drug-related monies to bolster their position ahead of the 2012 elections. No progress has been made in the country to adopt party financing legislation despite the challenges the lack of legislation gives rise to.

\textsuperscript{12} James Cockayne (2011).

\textsuperscript{13} Kwesi Aning, Comprehending West Africa’s Security Dilemmas: State Fragility, Narco-Terrorism and Oil Politics. Forthcoming.

\textsuperscript{14} See, for example, Lassana Gbérie (2010), ISS Situation Report on Sierra Leone.

in relation to the increase in actual drug consumption in countries across the region. Until recently, drug consumption in West Africa and in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa had been linked to either marijuana and/or khat, and was officially recognized as a problem and one of seven actionable priorities in the African Union’s 2007 Revised Plan of Action on Drug Control and Crime Prevention.\textsuperscript{16} Since then, however, consumption of cocaine and heroine on the continent is said to have spiraled, not least because many of the cartels operating in the region prefer to pay for services in kind.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, the UNODC has noted a “tremendous increase” of drug use in the region, estimating that a third of the cocaine that passed through the region was being consumed locally and that by mid-2011 as much as 400 kilograms (880 pounds) of heroin had been consumed in West Africa in 2011. According to the regional representative, these levels of consumption have become “a huge issue for public heath.”\textsuperscript{18} The health and welfare problems associated with drug consumption have been prioritized in different policy frameworks. Conversely, the region (and broader continent) currently lacks national level policies that focus on harm reduction as well as the necessary treatment centers, and the resources necessary to establish and sustain them. This situation is exacerbated by a serious lack of data on consumers across the region, including the degree to which drug consumption is exacerbating existing health problems such as HIV-AIDS.

Underpinning many of these challenges is a weak empirical base. Policy and operational responses should be developed on the basis of a sound understanding of the nature and extent of organized crime and trafficking across the region. They should also be based on a sound understanding of their structural impact, particularly on political and economic governance, citizen security and development and in relation to specific contexts. However, most assessment and analysis has been narrow in focus. For example, policy-oriented organized crime literature generally fails to make reference to how organized crime interacts with formal political institutions (forms and structures of government, political parties, legislatures etc.) or traditional decision-making structures. Meanwhile, studies of democracy and political transitions have “traditionally sidestepped the question of organized crime and drugs and have focused primarily on the emergence of formal democratic institutions …and markets…as well as the relationship between them.”\textsuperscript{19} To many, this has produced “an analytical and political myopia when it comes to studies of, and responses to topics such as organized crime and drug trafficking that operate outside this formal arena.”\textsuperscript{20} Similarly, over the past decade, strategic and security experts have increasingly focused on the study of organized crime, particularly its transnational dimension and potential linkages to transnational terrorism. However, they appear to be equally myopic on the political dimension of these issues, leading to policy and operational responses grounded in a narrow interpretation of security, and limited consideration of the political, social and economic aspects of organized crime and drug trafficking.\textsuperscript{21}

This ‘myopia’ means that international and regional initiatives often fail to consider the aforementioned issues. When they are considered, it is usually through the prism of one of the many conflict and political economy analysis tools developed over the past decade. For understandable reasons, not least the firewall of sovereignty, operational responses seldom touch on the structural political issues that tend to be at the core of the problems at hand. A brief review of some of the judicial processes or commissions of inquiry that have been implemented to address several of the high-profile cocaine smuggling cases in West Africa has shed light on the fact that

\textsuperscript{16} See Priority Area 2.5 in CMDCCP/EXP/3(III), p.9.
\textsuperscript{17} CPPF Summary Note, Meeting on Drug Trafficking in West Africa, July 2009.
\textsuperscript{18} Bloomberg News, \textit{West Africans Consume One-Third of Trafficked Drugs, UN Drugs Office Says}, 20 June 2011.
\textsuperscript{19} Yashar (2010).
\textsuperscript{20} Yashar (2010).
very few political actors have been tried and sentenced for their involvement in drug trafficking even when there is sufficient evidence pointing to their involvement. When important political figures involved in illicit activity are eventually caught, it is often due to the policies and pressures implemented and exercised by third countries.

Conversely, responses continue to be formulated from a security/law enforcement perspective, with little consideration for a state’s underlying political and cultural dynamics, questions of oversight, legitimacy, and the potential impact of different responses on state-society relations or on general health and welfare. In relation to post-conflict settings, more recently analysts have stressed the need to engage in longer-term initiatives, including strengthening institutions such as political parties as a means to “ensure structural and normative transformation of the political economy and remove the comparative advantage that violent criminal entrepreneurs and organizations enjoy.” However, most actors engaged in peacebuilding or statebuilding efforts fail to consider these institutions in their program activities. On the other hand, political party assistance providers rarely coordinate some of the important work they have carried out on issues such as political corruption and party campaign financing with actors involved in investigating organized crime. Many of the same critiques can be made in relation to the manner in which key social issues, particularly health, tend to be omitted from any of these efforts.

Finally, there is a broad perception in the region that many of the existing initiatives are broadly conceived outside West Africa and that there is limited ownership of the existing policy framework and operational responses in the region. Both civil society and the media have had limited opportunity to discuss these challenges with key decision makers in the region hence further reducing ownership of and response to the issues.

Conclusion

Regional actors and the broader international community continue to issue statements and declarations on organized crime and drug trafficking in the region suggesting that despite efforts to date, significant concerns remain. This lack of progress recently led the Permanent Representative of Togo to the United Nations to lament in February 2012 that “none of these efforts appears to have had a major deterring impact on the development of trafficking networks in West Africa and the Sahel region. On the contrary (…), the situation may have now become worse than before these initiatives were carried out.” He also acknowledged though that “many officials across the region who are concerned about the effects of the drug trade have their hands tied, not least because they “are often confronted by people and networks more powerful than they are, and with other priorities.” A sounder and more comprehensive base for monitoring and assessing the impact of drug trafficking and organized crime across the region might help ensure that efforts are more effectively channeled, and that leaders, both traditional and formal, governmental and non-governmental, are more strategically accompanied in their efforts.

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22 For example, in Sierra Leone the former Minister of Transport and Aviation was alleged to have been linked to a broad cocaine network that his brother was involved in, including in relation to the seizure of 700 kilos of cocaine in 2008. The Attorney General and Minister of Justice allegedly blocked his arrest after it had been ordered. In his report on the case in which 16 people, including several Latin Americans, were sentenced, Judge Nicholas Browne-Stone implied that the government had been guilty of obstruction of justice in preventing the trial of the former Minister and noted that in his view “the state prosecution was withholding vital evidence and was prepared to jeopardize the case in order to save one person [the minister], constituting an act of perjury.” See Lansana Gberie (2010), ISS Situation Report, Sierra Leone: Business More than Usual.

23 Cockayne (2009).

24 See S/2012/83, Letter dated 8 February 2012 from the Permanent Representative of Togo to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General.
In this regard, in June 2011 and in reference to the situation in West Africa, the Global Commission on Drug Policy stressed that for responses to be effective, they need to “integrate existing approaches (security and judicial) with social, development and conflict prevention policies – and involve governments and civil society alike.”\textsuperscript{25} Over the past five years, the UN Office in West Africa has made several calls for such a strategic shift. In light of more recent developments in West Africa and the Sahel region and in a letter addressed to the President of the Security Council, the President of Togo recently reiterated these calls. A regionally led and multifaceted mechanism may indeed help secure these necessary shifts.

\textsuperscript{25} Global Commission on Drug Policy, p. 14.