

Overview of Serious and Organised crime in West Africa

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Key Findings.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Scope & Methodology	7
Analysis and Findings	7
Criminal Organizations or Networks.....	7
Trafficking and Illicit Markets	8
Drug Trafficking	8
Financial Crimes.....	10
Human Trafficking	11
People Smuggling	13
Counterfeit goods	14
Organized Theft & Robbery.....	15
Stolen Motor Vehicles (SMV)	15
Stock Theft	16
Works of Arts and Cultural Heritage Theft	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Environmental Crimes	16
Maritime Piracy.....	19
Enabling Crimes and Criminal Convergences.....	20
Cybercrime	20
Small Arms and Light Weapons.....	20
Money Laundering.....	21
Alternative Remittances	22
Illicit flow of money derived from the use of natural resources	23
Conclusion.....	24
References	25

Executive Summary

Transnational organized crime in West Africa is a persistent threat. As a result, INTERPOL, under the European Union funded ENACT Project, has sought to catalogue and assess organized crime in the region in order to drive a more strategic law enforcement response.

International criminal organizations continue to target the region especially because of the significant illicit wealth that can be generated, stemming from criminal market opportunities that exploit various social and political vulnerabilities, state fragility, limited policing capacities, and corruption.

International criminal organizations or networks operate everywhere in the region via key facilitators and bring together a significant array of crime syndicates that provide illicit goods and services everywhere. Crime syndicates remain highly connected across borders and are active in a number of illicit markets, notably drug trafficking, financial crimes, human trafficking, people smuggling, counterfeit goods, organized theft and robbery, environmental crimes, and maritime piracy. In addition, there are a number of enabling crimes such as cybercrime, and the trade in small arms and light weapons that are supporting organized criminality throughout the region, which overlap with all illicit markets noted in complex ways.

Organized crime in the region generates huge profits for all involved and there are substantial illicit interregional financial flows and illicit profits heading offshore, plus money laundering occurring on a global scale. The threat from organized crime in West Africa is substantial yet there is limited capacity amongst law enforcement to manage this complex issue. Organized crime is going underreported and undetected, but various data sources reveal the following major activities and dynamics of groups and networks active in the region, which need to be addressed strategically and through building greater partnerships amongst all law enforcement agencies in the region.

Key Findings

- ❖ Syndicates form trans-border criminal elements in the region, which are expanding their operations into diaspora communities to mitigate the risk of exposure and prosecution.
- ❖ Criminal networks benefit from a wide range of criminal markets in West Africa and the region is increasingly connected to the world's illicit markets via various international criminal organizations that are targeting the region specifically to maximize illicit gains.
- ❖ A number of international criminal elements from Europe and the Americas have links to criminal markets ongoing in the region and these elements are suspected to be active in most countries, beyond the rates of detection.
- ❖ International criminal organizations active in the region are able to exploit a range of socio-economic dynamics in the region to maximize illicit profit and are able to manage a number of illicit markets facilitated through corruption and with limited law enforcement response.
- ❖ Cocaine is the most trafficked narcotic in West Africa and can be found in most countries throughout the region. West Africa's geographic location along major and well established trafficking routes makes the region a major transit hub for drugs moving from South America onward to other global markets, notably Europe.
- ❖ Human trafficking, most often in the form of sexual and labour exploitation, is an ongoing issue in the region, yet is often hidden from law enforcement's view which typically focuses only on illegal migration issues.
- ❖ Counterfeit goods are frequently trafficked in the region. This type of criminality is often a convergence of contraband and financial crimes. This criminal market links almost all countries from the region with the rest of the world and counterfeit goods are often manufactured in one country and assembled in another, to be illegally transported through or to a third country.
- ❖ Organized theft and robberies that target a wide variety of property for resale is an ongoing crime issue in the region, and syndicates target select high-value items to theft.
- ❖ Violence is a systemic aspect of organized theft across West Africa. This type of crime is often linked to most other criminal markets, such as drug, human and firearms trafficking, as a means of control over members of the network, over a community in which syndicates operate, or as a way of protection against rival organizations or even law enforcement action.

- ❖ Major economic, social and environmental impacts in West Africa stem from the clandestine trade in endangered species, unsustainable logging, and illegal fishing, with many estimating that environmental crimes are on the rise.
- ❖ Maritime piracy continues to affect the security and economic development of the region. The attacks, hijackings and kidnapping of crews for ransom continue to affect these countries and analysis suggests that pirate groups will continue to target vessels and their crew in the immediate future.
- ❖ Illicit firearms are significantly fuelling organized crime in the region. They come from a diverse range of sources, driving armed conflict, exacerbating levels of violence and enabling many other crimes.
- ❖ The traditional cash-based nature of the economy in the region places significant volumes of transactions outside the reach of government regulators or law enforcement. Due to its complex cross-border nature, and limited police knowledge on money laundering schemes, this type of crime is usually underreported in the region.

Introduction

Organized crime is a global issue, leaving no jurisdiction unaffected. This crime phenomenon is defined by groups of individuals, working in concert to generate illicit profits and like all regions of the world organized crime is systemically in control of several aspects and the majority of criminal enterprises. They seek to grow their contraband markets and illegal services wherever possible and perform a wide range of criminality anywhere opportunity exists.

Groups and gangs will exploit any aspect of society that is either by convention or law deemed illegal, and therefore it poses a direct threat to governments and civil society. Organized crime groups and networks jeopardize the consolidation of sustainable peace and political stability, erode trust in public institutions, nurture corruption, fuel violence, disrupt democracy and undermine real economic potential and growth.

Criminal organizations or networks form and organize themselves in different ways around the world given various cultural, economic, and political realities. Organized crime will operate in ways reflective of the jurisdiction they are based in, exploiting and entrenching themselves in any way possible.

The phenomena of organized crime in any domain therefore is responsive to what is explicitly illegal or illicit, given the local set of laws and regulations, and thus will take on different forms, norms, and practices depending on where they are in the world. It will operate at a level commensurate with the state's ability to respond, and it will be accepted in specific and differing ways, given cultural and individual necessity. It will differ and take on unique systems and practices from country to country, and region to region. Africa is not immune to organized crime and in fact may be at even greater risk of the harm arising from organized crime activities, given a unique set of socio-economic conditions.

In order to understand the phenomena of organized crime in the African context, and combat it effectively, a thorough understanding of how it is functioning must be established. Law enforcement agencies need to understand how it is working locally and transnationally, what markets it is involved in, the various enabling crimes that are being committed, and must understand the flow of illicit funds.

Therefore African Network of Young Leaders for Peace and Sustainable Development (ANYL4PSD) has undertaken this assessment of serious and organized crime in the West African region. This project will aid law enforcement in better understanding how organized crime operates and carries out its criminal activities.

Two versions of this report exist. This report is the public version of the completed analysis, which included police information; where specific police information was used, this information has subsequently been sanitized for public distribution.

Scope & Methodology

The objective of this report is therefore to provide a comprehensive assessment of organized crime in the West African region, which includes the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo with a focus on the January 2015 – December 2017 period. This assessment draws upon an analysis of available data and presents conclusions about the current nature, scope, dynamics, and activities of organized crime in the region.

This assessment follows an all-source intelligence analysis methodology. It is the result of integrating multiple data sources. The integration of multiple data sources provides the most accurate picture of what is occurring in the region. Only when various data are used in conjunction, an accurate picture of complex issues can emerge, seeing them beyond any constituent part or perspective.

Multiple data sources allow for cross-referencing and information verification or corroboration. All data sources herein are combined through analysis; analytical judgments were made throughout the analysis

based on all facts available at the time of writing.

Analysis and Findings

The following analysis is broken down into four parts as per ANYL4PSD organized and emerging crime strategy, covering criminal organizations or networks, illegal trafficking and illicit markets, enabling crimes and criminal convergences, and finally illicit flow of money and assets.

This analysis first covers criminal organizations and networks and their various structures and dynamics. It then covers the array of criminal markets detected in the region in depth per criminal market type. It explores cybercrime as a major enabling crime and highlights where various criminal markets overlap; and finally, the report explores the various dynamics of illicit profit and financial flows.

CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS IN WEST AFRICA ARE FLEXIBLE NETWORKS OF ASSOCIATES EXPANDING THEIR OPERATIONS INTO DIASPORA COMMUNITIES TO MITIGATE THE RISK OF EXPOSURE AND PROSECUTION

Many of these sections have several subsections and are arranged according to those patterns and trends detected through analysis or in a logical flow reflecting analytical findings in terms of scope or severity of a crime issue.

Criminal Organizations or Networks

This section identifies the dynamic of those crime syndicates found to be engaged in serious and transnational organized crime in the West Africa region.

It highlights how criminal syndicates connect across the region and how they function. It reveals the core criminal activities that groups or gangs are involved in, and how they remain active and sustainable, given the unique socioeconomic conditions of the region.

This analysis also draws attention to specific international criminal organizations when identified and outlines how they form and operate locally, regionally, and transnationally.

Criminal organizations differ from each other according to specific geographical and national elements. They benefit from areas where state control is weak and resort to corruption to conduct their operations.

International criminal organizations operate all over the world, controlling the global criminal markets, as well as supply and demand. Many of these groups or cartels link to and operate in the West Africa region.

The general connectivity analyzed through INTERPOL information links the region globally to North America and Europe. Notable links with international criminal organizations from South America, Asia and Europe have been reported in the region. Typically, criminal groups are thought of as cohesive systems, with clear and established hierarchies and membership, especially in their countries of origin. But in West African countries, these groups are becoming vast transnational flexible networks of associates expanding their operations into diaspora communities to mitigate the risk of exposure and prosecution.

Criminal groups based exclusively on familial or ethnic lineage have also been detected in the region. West African diaspora in other regions of Africa and overseas has been used by organized crime networks for the recruitment of gang members or the facilitation of transport of illicit goods all over the world.

Available data in West Africa is unfortunately insufficient to establish a clear link between local criminal groups and syndicates, and well established international criminal syndicates in other regions. Although, some of these links may be identified through the existing criminal and illicit commodities being exchanged in the region.

Trafficking and Illicit Markets

As it has been noted, syndicates are active in a range of criminal markets in the region and are exploiting a variety of social and economic elements in the jurisdictions across West Africa.

Moreover, terrorist groups might turn to criminal networks in order to have access to goods and human resources to carry out their operations.

This section highlights major criminal markets underway in order of magnitude and priority for the region. In order to highlight what trafficking in illegal commodities and what illegal trade of illicit goods are occurring and how, each criminal market will be assessed separately and in detail.

Even if criminal organizations are concurrently engaged in multiple markets, each criminal market will be assessed separately given each has unique and distinct aspects.

This section therefore highlights the many aspects or elements of each criminal market broken down into specific commodities where applicable, transportation routes, countries affected, key actors, modus operandi etc.

The following analysis covers the most significant criminal markets currently detected and ongoing in the region: drug trafficking, financial crime, trafficking in human beings, counterfeit goods, organized theft and robbery, environmental crimes and maritime piracy.

Drug Trafficking

Every country in the region is affected by the illicit drug trade and the significant challenges related to an array of narcotics. The region is emerging as a global hub for international drug smuggling, distribution, and trafficking, with each country being affected in its own way.

The geopolitical circumstance of the region, the way in which each country within the region links to the other, combined with porous borders, are all facilitating and driving the global trade in narcotics. Telecommunications and developing globalized transport and trade capabilities alongside various levels of financial infrastructures are enabling criminal syndicates and attracting international criminal organizations to the region to operate and to launder the proceeds of their illicit drug operations.

West Africa has been perceived as a major transit hub for drugs moving from South America with destination to Europe. Law enforcement continues to face challenges as a result of limited resources, growing drug demand and corruption, making the region vulnerable to organized crime. These factors, combined with West Africa's geographic location along major and well-established

trafficking routes make the region attractive to organized crime¹

THE GEOPOLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCE OF THE REGION, THE WAY IN WHICH EACH COUNTRY WITHIN THE REGION LINKS TO THE OTHER, COMBINED WITH POROUS BORDERS, ARE ALL FACILITATING AND DRIVING THE GLOBAL TRADE IN NARCOTICS

Analysis suggests that cocaine is one of the most trafficked narcotic in the region, followed by heroin. Cannabis continues to be trafficked between West Africa countries, and is largely cultivated across the region.² The following map estimates cocaine routes through the West Africa region:



Cocaine major transshipment routes

Besides cocaine and heroin, the region sees trafficking, selling, distribution and consumption of several types of narcotics including Khat, cocaine, cannabis, methamphetamine and controlled drugs. Analysis shows that the region is connected with other jurisdictions around the world, notably Europe and Asia, and that nationals from West African countries have an active role in the smuggling, distribution and trafficking of narcotics onward to international markets.³ The following map shows how the West African region connects the heroin trade to the rest of the world:



At present there are very few distinct criminal organizations being detected in the region involved in drug trafficking and most frequently they are individual traffickers being sought by the police. The transnational aspect of this criminal market shows that no country of this region is unaffected and that criminal networks operate at the local, regional and international levels.

Analysis of all sources suggests that Nigeria is a major hub for the trafficking of narcotics in the region. Analysis indicates that nationals from Nigeria are involved in illicit drug related activities, not only in the region but in different regions of the world as well. The Nigeria National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) has reported that Nigerian nationals, men in most of the cases, were deported from other countries over drug related offences, notably from Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America⁴.

There are indicators that drug trafficking to Africa is no longer solely regarded for transit to other regions, but is also feeding a growing domestic consumer market⁵. In the NDLEA 2015 Annual Report, Nigerian authorities reported three clandestine laboratories uncovered in the South East region of the country. The proliferation of local clandestine laboratories suggests that countries that used to serve only as transit points for drug trafficking are developing production capabilities and could become a new source.

Criminal syndicates use different routes and methods of concealment to introduce narcotics in the West Africa region. Traffickers continue to experiment with different transit routes, combining air, land, and sea smuggling. The most frequent concealment methods detected are internal (swallowing/ingestion), hiding drugs into different parts of vehicles, hiding or packing into false compartments of bags, on persons through the use of artificial hair wigs, and false bottoms of cooking pots.⁶

Previous research has also indicated West Africa as a transit region for cocaine and other drugs moving to destination markets in Europe. Analysis of all sources of information suggests that cocaine enters the region from South America and is then moved throughout West Africa to reach European countries as final destination. In this context West African countries served both as transit and destination point of cocaine and heroin trafficking from Latin America⁷.

Connections with Asian criminal syndicates have also been detected in the region with West African drug syndicates involved in flowing of heroin and cocaine in South East Asia⁸.

Methamphetamine trafficking has also been detected in the region. This drug is inexpensive and easy to manufacture, resulting in high profit margins for traffickers.

Analysis suggests that West Africa criminal syndicates operate in connection with criminals from Latin America for the production of this narcotic. In 2016, a laboratory for the illicit production of methamphetamine was uncovered in Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria.⁹

Besides the described link with syndicates from Latin America, the traffic of this type of drug also connects the region with Asia. Analysis suggests that there is a large scale of criminal activities across Latin America and West Africa carried out by a network of West African and Asian organized crime groups behind methamphetamine trafficking, often being trafficked by air to Asian destinations¹⁰.

Although not illicit themselves, a range of pharmaceutical drugs are bought, sold, diverted, trafficked, and manufactured in the region, causing harm to both the economies and public health. Controlled drugs including Diazepam, Ephedrine/Pseudoephedrine, and Tramadol have been identified as substances subject to abuse in the region¹¹. Tramadol is an opioid painkiller often prescribed after surgeries and obtainable from pharmacies. Previous research has reported that different dosages of Tramadol are trafficked or legally imported from production centers in India to user markets in West Africa¹².

Financial Crimes

Every country throughout West Africa is experiencing fraud in one form or another and complex financial crime schemes are being perpetrated everywhere, generating enormous profits for syndicates and all those linked to organized crime via corruption. Various schemes are being carried out across the public and private sectors, victimizing communities and individuals throughout the region and beyond.

The little awareness of society and law enforcement agencies concerning financial crimes together with corruption and the informal aspect of West Africa's economy are the most common driving factors for this criminal market.

Law enforcement agencies nationally and internationally face serious incidents involving Card-Present Fraud (CP), Card-Not-Present Fraud (CNP), and other offences (such as cyber and malware attacks) targeting banks, financial services and payment systems. Such criminal activities are by nature often committed via the internet and have a major impact on the financial (including banking) service sector.

Within the region, Nigeria has been identified as a hub for the "CEO-Fraud" scheme (also known as "Director-Fraud", "Supplier-Fraud", "Email Scam") as well as the Business Email Compromise (BEC) scheme. CEO fraud and BEC are an emerging financial cyber-enabled threat in which organized groups have targeted various institutions, including companies, nonprofits and government organizations.

The scheme relies on deceiving the victims through a multifaceted, sophisticated fraud using social engineers (CEO-Fraud), hackers (Business Email Compromise), pre-established bank accounts and employees that have access to an institution's finances. The suspect(s) are then able to deceive the victim through CEO/director/supervisor/supplier impersonation, altered email accounts, fake invoices and other means to convince the victim to wire money to another subject's controlled bank account.

Nigerian criminal syndicates have developed several methodologies to lure victims and earned billions of US dollars in the last decade. Analysis suggests that this trend is on rise and several countries in the region are vulnerable to this type of crime¹³.

Another type of financial fraud is the commonly known “Romance Scam”. For INTERPOL and many other law enforcement agencies, it refers to a very specific kind of cyber-enabled crime modus operandi in which the victims are lured to perform sexual acts in front of their webcam. Unknown to the unsuspecting victims, their lewd acts are video-captured by the criminals who then use it to extort the victims and threaten them that if they do not comply with their demand, their footages would be sent to the victims’ friends or family. While almost all countries in the region are vulnerable to this fraud, intelligence suggests that Côte d’Ivoire represents a hub for criminals active in the scheme of targeting nationals from the Americas and Europe mostly¹⁴.

The region is facing financial (including banking) fraud, commercial fraud and fraud against government. In most cases criminals have developed money laundry patterns and resort to the use of threats, coercion, extortion mechanisms and falsification of official documents (such as travel documents, diplomatic cards, residence permits, etc.) and cyber-attacks/hacking across the public and private sectors. This type of crime links the region worldwide and notably with the Americas, Asia and Europe¹⁵.

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking, or trafficking in persons, is a global crime in which men, women and children are bought and sold as commodities and exploited for a range of purposes. This crime type is more prevalent in areas where persons are susceptible to schemes devised around economic opportunity and where limited job prospects are available, which is prevalent in West Africa. The issue of human trafficking in the region is of significant concern since there are many vulnerable populations living proximal to major advanced economic centers and wealth, which may be enticing for those seeking greater financial opportunity.

It is estimated that the exploitation of persons for sexual purposes and labor continue threatening West African countries, but it remains largely under-detected and under-reported. The detection of syndicates across international boundaries is increasingly difficult for law enforcement, with

identification rarely going beyond the victims at the local level.

The nature of this criminality, almost inevitably implies higher level arrangements being made. This criminality requires complex logistics, recruitment efforts, trafficking routes, and reliable systems to launder the proceeds, and all of these aspects need to be detected and then targeted to have an effect on the overall syndicate’s activities.

Human trafficking is generally a difficult crime type to detect and investigate given the psychological effects it has on victims, where they may not completely understand that they have been exploited or victimized. It is a crime where victims are either deceived or forced against their will into situations where they are exploited for sexual purposes, for labor, or for the removal of organs, but may be unaware of the complex criminal nature of their situation. Exploitation is hard to prove given that the victims may not realize or understand the circumstances in which they find themselves. In some cases, the victims may even perceive close bonds with those who are exploiting them.

The most common human trafficking cases investigated by law enforcement in the region target sexual exploitation given the links to other criminality and the nature of victimization. Although frequently underreported, both men and women are also victims of human trafficking for labor purposes in the region.

*CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS MAY
BENEFIT FROM DIASPORA
COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE
WORLD TO RECRUIT, MOVE AND
EXPLOIT VICTIMS OF HUMAN
TRAFFICKING*

Following the regional economic integration and economic cooperation, a growing number of West African nationals left their home countries in search of better opportunities ¹⁶. Previous research suggests that the greatest number of internally trafficked persons in West Africa were found working in the farming and fishing sectors, followed by working in servitude and subjected to sexual exploitation¹⁷.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has reported that unaccompanied migrant children are a common feature in the West Africa region and are often at risk of abuse, exploitation or trafficking¹⁸. Child workers are trafficked from several West African countries to the urban centers and agricultural sites of countries including Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Nigeria and Senegal¹⁹.

Trafficking for labor often contributes to the supply chains of several international industries, as the cocoa market where only West African countries supply more than 70% and Côte d'Ivoire alone represents 40% of the world's cocoa market²⁰.

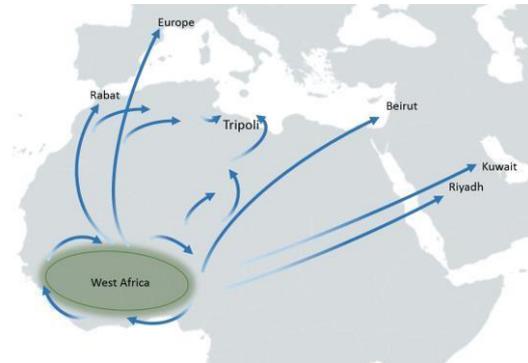
Analysis suggests that almost all countries of the region are affected by this type of crime and it is most likely that children will continue to be forced to illegally work in the gold mining and farming sectors due to the natural resources wealth in the region, porosities of West African borders and spread poverty.

Human trafficking has been found to link West Africa with many international jurisdictions, noting Europe, Asia and North Africa. This criminal market is facilitated in the region either at the regional level or can be part of larger international criminal organizations. Criminals from the region have been noted in human trafficking rings specifically tied to trafficking of young women to Middle East countries²¹.

It is believed that this type of crime affects the entire region despite the efforts made by local authorities to protect vulnerable populations of this type of crime. Togo, for instance, has issued in 2014 an Official Statement that prohibits women to travel to Middle East countries without prior authorization from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a preventative measure against human trafficking. Analysis suggests that traffickers use several routes and methodologies to succeed in their activities and therefore, in order to avoid Togolese legislation, criminals may use neighbor countries routes to traffic women from West Africa to Middle East.

Intraregional human trafficking has also been detected whether as an intermediate step as part of a trans-regional human trafficking chain or as part of regional trafficking networks frequently linked to forced labor and sexual exploitation.

The following map highlights the predominately detected human trafficking routes, yet is not necessarily inclusive of all activity:



Regional and International Human Trafficking routes

Open-source information suggests that criminal organizations may benefit from diaspora communities across the world to recruit, move and exploit victims of human trafficking. The singularities shared by these communities, such as language and culture, make them difficult to penetrate and criminal syndicates take advantage of it to build defense mechanisms and to extend their networks across the world.

All countries in the region are affected by this criminal activity, with some countries forming different aspects of the trade in total. Although most countries are in some way identified as source, transit, and/or destination countries, specific dynamics are present for each distinct jurisdiction. Some countries in the region have larger populations of vulnerable persons, while some offer better transit routes. Other countries are final destination markets for a range of exploitation purposes.

Open sources indicated that in the region Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Togo have particularly high rates of trafficking in the region²². People from these jurisdictions are consistently trafficked and have been detected as victims of human trafficking throughout West Africa.

Criminal networks associated to human trafficking related crimes have been reported to use high-levels of violence and perpetrate sexual gender based violence (SGBV) to intimidate and threaten their victims. In the region, syndicates have deceived victims with false promises of work opportunities, once in the destination country the victim is in complete vulnerability without money or legal residence permit. This situation leaves the victim at the mercy of the traffickers.

Besides falsification of travel documents, one modus operandi includes the use of voodoo practices to assure the payment of debts allegedly contracted by the trafficker for logistics purposes, and intimidation to force victims into prostitution. Another modus operandi detected in Belgium as being used by Nigerian syndicates is the “Yemeshe System” whereby the victim (usually a young girl) has no fixed place of prostitution, but is offered the possibility of using a regular prostitute’s window for a few hours. In exchange, the girl must give 50 % of her earnings from prostitution to the regular prostitute. Transnational connections of this criminal network were also detected in Italy where three other girls had arrived in order to be taken to Belgium²³.

Beyond the individual victimizations, this crime type has indirect impact on public health through spread of communicable disease. It also has an impact on the economy, disrupting the real value for labor, with illicit businesses undercutting legitimate industries by saving costs on labor.

Moreover, human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation has been linked to a range of other crimes, noting drug trafficking, extortion, physical and psychological coercion and money laundering.

Adding complexity to this crime in the region is the propensity of law enforcement to focus on illegal migration. Given the extent of largely porous borders, and the mass movement of persons from country to country, illegal migration is a major issue for law enforcement in the region, although this criminality is not always linked to human trafficking. Human smuggling is indeed a criminal issue of note in the region, but it must be dealt with in a separate and distinct manner, in order to address human trafficking specifically as a violent and pervasive crime, centered on exploitation. Human smuggling is linked to human trafficking only when it leads to or includes elements of manipulation and abuse.

A major challenge in the region is that these issues are typically treated as the same, and exploitation often gets overlooked in favor of illegal migration issues, sometimes leading to re-victimization of those who have been trafficked across borders. Often police agencies will not investigate further to uncover potential human trafficking activity.

In West Africa, criminal syndicates also traffic individuals from the region with human smuggling and illegal immigration purposes, mainly young women from West Africa to Europe, using Libya as a transit point. Upon arrival, victims receive forged documentation and are forced into prostitution through intimidation and coercion to reimburse their travel costs.

People Smuggling

As previously reported in this assessment, the movement of people occurs at high levels in the region. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported about 8.4 million migrants, representing 2.8% of the global population, move around West Africa internally, intra-regionally, continentally and internationally. The region also concentrates the highest number of intra-regional migrants and, in a lower level, migrants moving towards Northern Africa and Europe²⁴.

In this context, West African countries are vulnerable to people smuggling and illegal migration and several sources indicate the presence of smugglers to cross regional borders, including within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) free movement areas²⁵.

As indicated above, the distinction between trafficking in human being and migrant smuggling remains blurred. Illegal migrants are often being targeted by syndicates for exploitation because of their illegal status in host countries. Persons within migrant communities or diaspora are more vulnerable to exploitation, yet often law enforcement will target these persons on immigration charges instead of discerning if exploitation is occurring. The issue of illegal migration, which often involves human smugglers, obscures the issue of human trafficking.

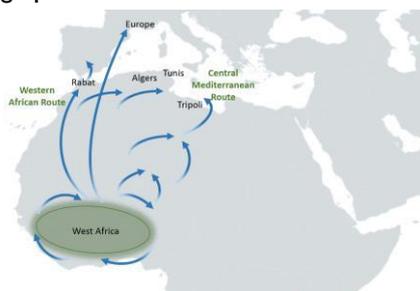
This type of crime links the region with other jurisdictions, notably Europe and North Africa. Almost all countries in the region are linked to this criminal market whether as source, transit or destination country. The main driving factors of people smuggling in the region are social and economic in nature: youth school dropout, poverty, unemployment, or search for better life. These factors together with corruption and the porosity of West African borders make the region highly vulnerable to people smuggling.

The security situation in northern Mali has led to the displacement of people internally and regionally, with consequences for regional migration, border management and community stabilization. Niger is also a destination country for migrants from around the region attempting to reach Libya as well as returnees fleeing insecurity in northern Nigeria.

The modus operandi detected include the use of smugglers (often from the same village of the victims), falsification of travel documents, the use of voodoo practices to threat victims and assure the payment of debts related to the transportation, temporary accommodation and forgery documentation.

Several transportation methods have been used by criminals to smuggle people noting air, boat and land. Another trend identified within the region consists of crossing land borders during the night, in an attempt to avoid law enforcement detection.

Open sources analysis suggests that there is a broad diversity of nationalities involved in people smuggling in the region and this may suggest a growth in smuggling networks. The information shows that smugglers from North African countries (notably Egypt, Morocco and Libya) recruit unemployed youth in Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, to serve as recruiters in their local communities²⁶.



Regional and International people smuggling major routes

Counterfeit goods

The frequent seizure and destruction of counterfeit goods and particularly fake medicines by law enforcement agencies illustrate the prevalence of this crime in the region.

This type of criminality is often a convergence of contraband and financial crimes. Information suggests that criminals also resort to falsification of documents to smuggle counterfeit products in the region. While a wide range of products are

counterfeited in the region, tobacco, fraudulent food and pharmaceutical products are the most frequently smuggled commodities generating a strong impact on public health.

This criminal market links almost all countries from the region with the rest of the world. Counterfeit goods can be manufactured in one country, assembled in another to be illegally transported through a third country.

Trade fraud of counterfeit medications in the region generates illegal financial flows and undermines economic growth. Open source information suggests that a large share of the goods consumed in the region (including significant volumes of contraband products) are sourced from the informal economy²⁷.

The traffic of counterfeit pharmaceuticals poses a serious risk for West African countries. This illicit activity provides high income to traffickers and associates involved in the importation, storage, distribution and trade network. It is most likely that criminals will profit from these elevate revenues to organize, finance and even diversify other illicit activities.

TRADE FRAUD OF COUNTERFEIT MEDICATIONS IN THE REGION GENERATES ILLEGAL FINANCIAL FLOWS AND UNDERMINES ECONOMIC GROWTH

Analysis of all sources of information shows that criminals involved in the counterfeit pharmaceutical products trafficking follow three different patterns: importation from outside of the region, especially from China and India, redistribution within the region benefiting from the porosity of borders and local manufacturing or repackaging to export outside the region²⁸.

There is limited evidence of the existence of organized syndicates leading this criminal market. Authorities have reported that the illicit trading of this good is mainly done by female traders operating in large markets such as Adjame Roxy Market in Côte d'Ivoire, the largest parallel market in the country²⁹.

While criminal syndicates operate at the international level to introduce these products in West Africa, their destination - and presumably consumption - remains regional.

Counterfeit goods converge with most other criminal markets, linked to the trafficking of drugs, human beings, theft, and wildlife crimes. Although underreported, illicit cigarettes are smuggled in West Africa and open sources have revealed that the region serves as transit point for the traffic of this commodity to North Africa. The World Customs Organization reported a seizure of more than 220 million counterfeit cigarettes in Benin, Ghana and Togo in 2015 destined for Burkina Faso and Niger, which suggests that this commodity enters West Africa through the ports in Benin, Ghana and Togo.

Open sources have previously reported that in Nigeria, illicit cigarettes are smuggled by land from the north of the country by car drivers locally known as “Yan-Pitos”. It is believed that the drivers collect the illegal cigarettes as well as other counterfeit goods such as electronics and food. Once the cigarettes have entered the port of the mentioned countries they are transported by road to Nigeria, either directly or via Niger³⁰. Although data is limited, analysis suggests that Yan-Pitos benefit from northern Nigeria’s porous border and resort to corruption to smuggle the counterfeit goods in the country.

Organized Theft & Robbery

Theft of a wide variety of property is an ongoing crime issue in the region. Syndicates are routinely involved in cross-border theft rings that target select high-value items for smuggling, trafficking, and resale.

Theft is a driver of organized crime, as theft will generate initial capital to purchase other more high-value illicit products such as drugs or weapons.

Organized theft and robbery of motor vehicles and stock has been detected in the region. Moreover, there is a wide range of works of art and cultural heritage that are at risk of theft in some West African countries as described in this this section.

Stolen Motor Vehicles (SMV)

Trafficking in stolen vehicles covers two dimensions in West Africa, the international trafficking from Western Europe and North America and the illicit traffic through the

region. Syndicates are responsible for the movement and resale of stolen motor vehicles throughout the region, which often link to the rest of the continent and the world. This criminal market links individuals from the region with associates from different nationalities and with members of West Africa diaspora living abroad forming regional and international networks.

All information assessed indicate that this type of crime connects almost all countries in the region and that West Africa is an outlet for criminal networks operating in these countries. Criminal syndicates take advantages from the freedom of movement of goods within the ECOWAS region which enables them to move stolen vehicles (complete or in parts) across borders easily using forged or altered documents.

The use of violence is almost systematic during vehicle theft and usually involves the use of firearms for intimidation. Vehicle crimes also involve frauds and the use of forged documentation, particularly false Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) which make them difficult to detect by customers and resellers. Syndicates involved in this criminal market also use illegitimate websites to deceive genuine buyers who after dealing with fake companies would pay online for non-existent vehicles.

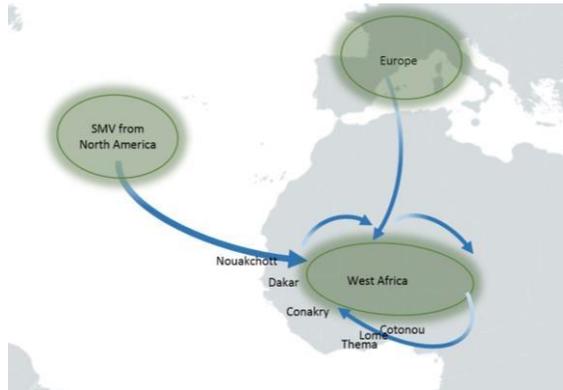
A wide range of vehicles, including Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs), high-end, mid-range and other entry-level vehicles, are stolen in the region and abroad to be sold in West Africa’s illicit markets or to serve as an instrument for the commission of other crimes, such as drug trafficking, people smuggling and counterfeit goods trafficking.

WEST AFRICA IS AN OUTLET FOR STOLEN MOTOR VEHICLES CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The region represents the main hub for stolen vehicles exported from Western Europe and North America. Vehicles coming from Europe are illegally exported via land and container whilst stolen vehicles illegally exported from North America enter West Africa region mainly by land³¹.

Within the region, vehicles are transported by land and can cross several borders before reaching their destination.

The most popular ports exploited by syndicates operating in this criminal market in West Africa are Tema (Ghana), Cotonou (Benin), Lome (Togo), Dakar (Senegal), Nouakchott and Nouadhibou (Mauritania). The port of Conakry (Guinea) is also a destination for vehicles coming from Europe and in transit to other countries in the region.



Regional and International SMV trafficking routes

Limited or no access to the INTERPOL Stolen Motor Vehicle (SMV) database, West Africa's porous borders, the high demand and high prices of this good in the region are among the most common driving factors of this criminal market in West Africa.

Stock Theft

Livestock theft is a criminal market present in the rural areas of West Africa. This criminal activity generates high profits for syndicates and has a significant impact on the livelihood and development of local communities. Criminals involved in this activity usually operate at the local and regional level, often limited to bordering countries.

Open sources have indicated that terrorist groups, notably Boko Haram, may resort to cattle rustling as a source of financing their activities but also to terrorize the local population and deprive them from well-being³².

Several countries in the region - being either a source, transit and/or destination country for cattle rustled - have identified livestock theft as a high threat. It is most likely that syndicates operate in rural areas to steal livestock and have links in cross-border countries in order to sale the stolen good

afterwards and to avoid law enforcement detection.

All sources assessed suggest that criminals usually operate during day time or night time at grazing and they frequently resort to inter-group violence and use of firearms to commit the crime or solve disputes.

There are several factors driving livestock theft in the region. Poverty is one of the principal reasons, people resort to cattle rustling for economic gain. In rural and remote areas the control and possession of livestock may affect social cohesion and local population livelihood. Access to weapons is also enabling this activity along with weak law enforcement capabilities and resources to effectively control borders.

As noted before, the presence of terrorist groups in the region have had an impact in the cattle markets and therefore in the communities' economy and access to food. In January 2016, the chairman of a local cattle association in Borno State, Nigeria estimated that 200,000 head of cattle had been stolen, though not all could be attributed to Boko Haram. The group's involvement in this criminal activity have had a strong impact such that major cattle markets in Borno State have been temporarily shut down.

Open sources have also reported that Boko Haram uses several methods to profit from this activity, such as creating its own cattle markets in their controlled territories, selling the stolen cattle in smaller numbers at distant markets to avoid detection by law enforcement or hiding the cattle in neighboring countries to be sold at a later stage.

Environmental Crimes

West Africa has traditionally been known for its wealth of natural resources and for possessing a great diversity of flora and fauna. The region alone is home for more than 1,800 endemic species of plants.

Almost every country in the region is threatened by wildlife crimes, ranging from poaching and hunting to general resources exploitation. The many crimes related to the exploitation of the environment and its natural resources have implications for every aspect of people's lives.

In West Africa, environmental crime is carried out by organized criminal groups operating at local, regional and international levels. The region is linked with Southern and Eastern Africa, Europe and Asia.

Analysis suggests that syndicates involved in wildlife crimes work with local criminals, responsible for providing the resources and in many cases the related forged documentation, and are connected with regional and international criminal networks to move the illegal wildlife products through borders and coordinate the selling and final distribution in several jurisdictions around the world. Although information illustrates the high involvement of nationals from the region, links with Asian countries, notably China, Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia, have been identified by several sources.

Even though this criminal market operates at the international level, some countries in the region have identified that poaching cases, mostly antelopes, remain domestic and is related to local consumption of wild animals.

It has been noticed that criminal syndicates in West Africa use internet to offer and sell their illegal products and resort to corruption and extortion to carry out their activities. Also, wildlife traffickers usually operate in coordination with an illegal zoo. Within this methodology a local criminal is in charge of providing the animals to the zoo owner, he then will counterfeit official documents and illegally export the animals to different jurisdictions around the world.

Syndicates take advantage of the informal economy in the region and benefit from the proliferation of money transfer agencies to conclude the payments related to their illicit activities without recurring to the formal banking system.

ALMOST EVERY COUNTRY IN WEST AFRICA IS THREATENED BY WILDLIFE CRIMES, RANGING FROM POACHING AND HUNTING TO GENERAL RESOURCES EXPLOITATION

Elephant poaching has increased in the last decade and according to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals approximately 90 per cent of the elephant range has been destroyed in West Africa. Elephant population in the region represents nowadays only 2 per cent of the total number of elephants on the continent (from an estimated total of 419,000 to 650,000 elephants). The region serves as a transit point for elephant trafficking routes coming from Central and Eastern Africa countries with destination to Asia³⁵.

Ivory is prized for ornamental purposes and symbolic value. This reputation has increased its demand and, in consequence, its price. The ivory typically transits through African countries before being shipped to Asia and West Africa have been identified as source and transit destination. Furthermore, several ivory seizures carried out in the region and in other jurisdictions involving West Africa nationals evidence the prevalence of this crime in the region.

Criminals experiment several transportation methods for trafficking ivory from the region to other jurisdictions, notably Asia and Europe. Nevertheless, air and sea routes have been detected as the ones most frequently used.

Analysis suggests that criminal syndicates from West Africa are connected with vast rings of organized wildlife criminals in Africa, allegedly supplying rhino horns and elephant ivory to criminals in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam³⁶.

In 2017 the Eco Activists for Governance and Law Enforcement (EAGLE) network reported that Côte d'Ivoire authorities dismantled a criminal syndicate involved in an international network which trafficked ivory between Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea. During the operation, 400 pieces of carved ivory, 40 kg of raw ivory and 7 leopard skins were seized showing the magnitude of the criminal network.

Great ape, a designation that covers bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans, are particularly endangered in West Africa for a variety of reasons, including self-defense from local communities and loss of habitat due to deforestation. Their illegal poaching and trafficking, however, is mainly driven by the demand for bush meat trade, traditional African medicine, and the market for live animals (e.g. pet collectors, breeding centers, zoos, amusement parks, and circuses).

Analysis of all sources assessed suggests that the region serves as a source in the trafficking of great apes to Asia. Besides forged official documentation, criminals recur to corruption, extortion and the use of shell societies, to traffic apes.

Pangolins are the most trafficked mammals and have become a highly endangered species. They are especially wanted for their scales, but also for their skin and meat, and are viewed as an exotic and delicacy product. Due to the resulting shortage, prices for their parts are skyrocketing on the illicit market (e.g. several thousand dollars per kilogram in some Asian countries).³⁷

Analysis shows that West Africa is a source for pangolins illegally trafficked to Asia, facilitated by the porous borders and weak law enforcement capability to control entry points, notably airports and ports. An international criminal network dedicated to the traffic of pangolin scales was dismantled in Côte d'Ivoire in July 2017³⁸ and analysis suggests that criminals work in connection with nationals from China to illegally export pangolin scales from Abidjan to Asia. Criminal syndicates use several concealment techniques, such as hiding in fake luggage compartments or declaring it as another good and mix it with licit items in shipping containers.

The region is also threatened by illegal logging. Besides the tremendous environmental impacts, illegal logging has a dramatic economic effect in West African countries' economy. High value timber species are particularly vulnerable to illegal exploitation across various countries in West Africa.

Despite the efforts made by most of the countries in the region to regulate and ban the harvest and export of high value and endangered timber species, criminals have developed different techniques to deceive and avoid official detection. Information assessed suggests that syndicates use tanker trucks to originally carry food products from West African ports and fill them with timber once the original product was unloaded from the truck. Criminals would resort to the use of fictitious number plates to conceal the identity of those responsible for the transport from several countries in the region to West African ports and usually transport illegal timber during night to avoid detection.

Among the described environmental crimes, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is also a significant issue in West Africa. The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that about 7 million people depend directly on fishing as a source of income in the region and that illegal fishing is worth USD 2.3 billion in the waters of Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea and Sierra Leone³⁹.

The vast West Africa coastal waters represent a great opportunity for criminals that are driven by the high demand of fish species from this region and the related economic profit. The intrusion of industrial trawlers on inshore areas designed to protect artisanal fisheries threatens food security and affects local employment. The tuna species caught, landed and processed in this region are destined for markets in the developed world.

The major modus operandi enabling illegal fishing in West Africa include surveillance avoidance, such as interfering with electronic monitoring systems and intentionally obscuring vessel markings and identity; transshipment at sea which can facilitate the laundering of illegally caught fish by transferring catch to cargo vessels which then offload at distant ports; abuse of vessel registries within the region and elsewhere to facilitate illegal fishing activities globally; licensing abuses such as fishing with fraudulent licenses; collusion with the artisanal sector, including illegal transshipment from artisanal to industrial fishing vessels. It has also been reported that criminals may use sea routes and transport the fish illegally in refrigerated containers to Europe and Asia⁴⁰.

As widely known, West Africa's natural resources wealth includes a large deposit of diamond. Diamonds are a unique commodity in the world, and one of the only ones that can be stored, easily moved, and generate wealth, all while remaining completely untraceable.

In an effort to regulate the commerce of diamonds and other precious stones, many countries in the region have become parties to the Kimberley Process. Nowadays, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Togo, Ghana, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire are part of this certification scheme that regulates and requires licenses for all diamond related activities.

Despite national efforts, the region is still at risk of illegal mining, smuggling and commerce of

diamonds. Illicit diamond activity has been detected in all of these countries in some form, and also links to other countries in the region and beyond.

Analysis shows that criminals use various methods to legalize illegally mined diamonds such as the creation of shell companies, the use of forged documentation, corruption and financial fraud. Syndicates operate in coordination with licensed dealers to illegally trade the product either inside the country or abroad. Once an authorized dealer buys the mineral it enters the legitimate market and becomes very difficult to trace and to detect the illegal aspect of the transaction.

Criminal syndicates resort to fraud schemes with gold and diamonds and they operate at the regional and international levels. The United State Customs and Border Protection has reported⁴¹ that criminals use forged Kimberley Process Certificates from Guinea, Ghana and Sierra Leone in advance-fee schemes to defraud people worldwide. Usually the victims are invited to Sierra Leone to view rough diamonds that were later evaluated as fake stones and are provided with a false Kimberley Certificate. Analysis of all sources of information indicates that criminals continue to implement diverse and increasingly sophisticated mechanisms to deceive victims⁴².

Moreover, analysis suggests that the illegal exploitation of these natural resources may be linked to human trafficking with nationals from the region being forced to work in artisanal diamond mining sites across the region⁴³.

Maritime Piracy

Acts of maritime piracy affect all the West Africa basin countries of the Gulf of Guinea (Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria) together with Guinea and Senegal. The attacks, hijackings and kidnappings of crews continue to affect these countries and analysis suggests that pirate groups will continue to target vessels and their crews in the immediate future.

In a region where international maritime trade is critical for West Africa's economies, this type of crime poses a great risk for security and development. According to data provided by the International Maritime Bureau for the period of 2015 - 2017, from the 617 global cases of maritime piracy (both actual and attempted attacks) 105 have been reported in West Africa, amounting to 17% of all maritime piracy acts

recorded in the world. From the attacks documented for the region, close to 80% occurred in the coasts of Nigeria, followed by Guinea (8%) and Ghana (5%)⁴⁴. In terms of legitimate global shipping West Africa represents 12% of global activity.

*IN A REGION WHERE
INTERNATIONAL MARITIME TRADE
IS A KEY SOURCE OF INCOME,
MARITIME PIRACY POSES A GREAT
RISK FOR THE SECURITY AND
DEVELOPMENT OF THE ECONOMY.*

During attacks in West African waters, pirates employ the kidnap for ransom model with attacks occurring at both anchorages and off the coast, usually during night time. Another trend detected is the hijacking of ships for several days to sail to unknown locations in order to steal oil cargo and other high value assets after disabling tracking devices. Cargo is then syphoned onto smaller ships and sold in the black market. Within both of these common tactics pirates resort to the use of firearms, notably AK47 rifles, and violence, especially to kidnap crew members⁴⁵.

The Niger Delta, in Nigeria, is one of the largest deltas in the world, strewn with thousands of crude oil tankers and scene of a constant influx of vessels importing refined fuel to the country. In this context, the country is a hotspot for violent piracy and armed robbery⁴⁶. Pirates attack oil tankers to steal the crude oil, or as commonly called "illegal oil bunkering", which may be sold to refineries inside the country or illegally exported to other West African states.

Although this type of crime goes often underreported and therefore data on syndicates and modus operandi is limited, it is believed that pirates operate in connection with the operators of the illegal refineries on shore as providers of raw oil. All sources of information suggest that nationals from Nigeria and other neighbor countries, such as Ghana, Benin and Togo, are involved in the handling of local tapping and loading whilst the transportation, financing and money laundering activities related with the illegal oil operations may be in charge of criminals from other jurisdictions, notably Eastern Europe and Asia⁴⁷.

Despite the efforts made by national authorities in the region to eradicate and prevent this crime, these practices would still threaten the region. It is expected that bunkering businesses in West Africa, and notably in Nigeria, will continue to grow in the upcoming years⁴⁸.

Enabling Crimes and Criminal Convergences

Moving beyond the details of each distinct criminal market detected in the region, this subsequent section assesses the links between various organized criminal activities, and identifies 'enabling crimes'. An enabling crime is any crime that further empowers criminal organizations to grow and prosper, such as the use of cyber capacity and firearms in the commission of various offences.

Syndicates have been found to be active in various criminal markets at the same time and many enabling crimes are driving organized criminality further, generating even greater profits.

In addition, cybercrime greatly enhances the scope of the operations of groups, and firearms increase the level of violence used by groups to further their criminal objectives across all criminal markets. These types of crimes may vary from country to country, but are important to assess because they may be important areas for law enforcement to focus on and combat directly in order to prevent additional criminal elements from growing or becoming more entrenched.

Cybercrime

Cybercrime is a form of organized crime in its own right, but it also significantly enables illicit trade. The internet has changed the nature of criminal markets all over the world and West Africa is no exception. It allows people to connect in new ways, facilitating all forms of crime, from drug to human trafficking and money laundering. It allows greater degrees of anonymity, making detection difficult or impossible. Criminal groups can make transnational connections easily and have access to new victims, associates and markets.

The prototypical cybercriminal profile in West Africa is a young male (aged between 19 and 39 years old) with basic technical know-how and skills and a flair for showing off wealth in real life

and on social media⁴⁹. Analysis suggests that cybercriminal groups operating in West Africa commit multiple types of fraud at the same time and they take advantage of the proliferation of money transfer agencies and the easy and anonym access to SIM cards to perpetrate their acts.

As described in the Financial Crimes section of this report, Nigeria has been identified as a hub for the "CEO-Fraud" scheme (also known as "Director-Fraud", "Supplier-Fraud", "Email Scam") as well as the Business Email Compromise (BEC) scheme. Intelligence suggests that Côte d'Ivoire represents a hub for criminals active in the scheme of "Sextortion" targeting nationals from the Americas and Europe mostly. The platforms used are mainly Facebook, but also websites and social media platforms like Lovoo, Adoptauntio, Badoo, LinkedIn etc.

Although this type of crime has been detected in almost every country in the region, analysis of all sources of information indicates a prevalence of romance scams perpetrated by students from francophone countries living in Accra.

Malware attacks on mobile banking applications, cyber-attacks and hacks on banks and financial institutions and Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) attacks have been identified as cyber-related crimes that have the potential to affect West African countries in the near future.

Small Arms and Light Weapons

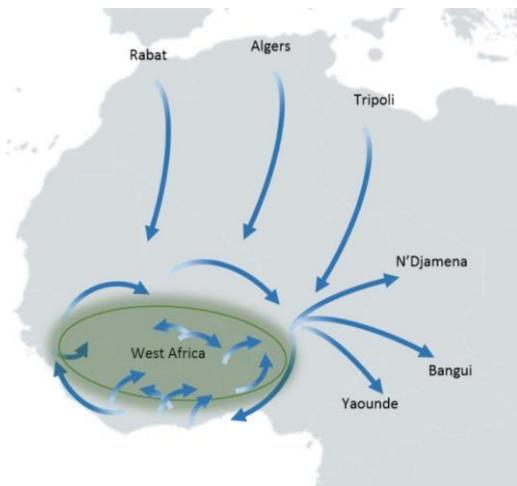
Firearms and ammunition are legal goods that become illicit when diverted from the legitimate supply chain and traded and trafficked to/ by criminal elements. In the region illicit weapons come from diverse sources, driving armed conflict, exacerbating levels of violence and enabling many other crimes. Their use facilitates all violent crimes from armed robbery, kidnapping, hijacking, to serious criminality tied to terrorism, piracy, human trafficking, drug trafficking and crimes against humanity. Around 160 million Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) circulate illegally in West Africa.

The offence type most linked to firearms offences in the region is theft, aggravated theft and armed robbery followed by drug trafficking. Furthermore, in the region, firearms are most commonly used for kidnapping, illegal oil bunkering, cattle rustling and assassinations. Also, terrorist groups turn to criminal networks

to supply and distribute firearms and other resources they need to conduct their acts.

Criminal syndicates' and armed groups' scope of activities shift over time in most West African countries. The recirculation of small arms stockpiles among conflict areas remain substantial for criminals to have access to firearms.

Another illegal source of armament in the region is the theft of official government weapons or the seizure of crafted weapons, such as revolvers, shotguns and rifles, usually demanded by the local population for selfprotection purposes⁵⁰.



Small Arms and Light Weapon major routes in West Africa

In West Africa, criminal and non-state actors were supplied with firearms and ammunition coming from countries that have experienced internal conflicts, such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire. Libya was a main source for illicit firearms in the region, especially during the 2011-2014 period. Since the start of the second Libyan Civil War in 2014, and the related rise of domestic demand, armed groups started to use firearms looted or transferred from the stockpiles of other African states.

ILLICIT WEAPONS COME FROM DIVERSE SOURCES, DRIVING ARMED CONFLICT, EXACERBATING LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND ENABLING MANY OTHER CRIMES IN WEST AFRICA

There are several actors involved in the trade of illicit small arms in West Africa. All sources assessed indicate that groups actively fighting in armed conflicts in the region participate in the smuggling of weapons. Also the region is scenario for weapons dealers that smuggle firearms across West Africa for economic profit.

Firearms being seized have included AK47 rifles, various pistols, and a range of other light weapons.

Illicit flows of money and assets

This section covers detected aspects of illicit finance in the region as it links to organized crime. As organized crime is ultimately crime for profit, law enforcement needs to disrupt illicit profits by tracing and preventing the movement of illicit money and assets within West Africa and abroad.

This section explores and assesses first money laundering issues in the region as an aspect of all those criminal markets highlighted.

Subsequently, this section also covers money movement or alternative remittances beyond money laundering. This is because the movement of illicit money or offshoring of illicit wealth may not necessarily link to or be an aspect of money laundering per se, but is an aspect of organized crime. Alternative remittances are an important aspect of illicit flows of money and assets in the region because the simple movement of money across borders within the region or to other international jurisdictions may suffice in driving organized crime activities

Money Laundering

An estimated 40-80% of economic activity in the region takes place outside of the formal banking sector, which holds significant potential for laundering the proceeds of crime. This particular situation favors those transactions are often conducted in cash, or through informal systems of value transfer, placing significant volumes of transactions outside the view of government regulators.⁵¹

In this context, criminals regularly launder their illicit proceeds outside the formal financial system making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to detect. Due to its complex nature and limited policing capacity to detect various money laundering schemes, it is believed that this type of crime is underreported in the region.

Criminals benefit from the cash based nature of West Africa's economy to transfer illicit funds from one country to another within the region and it is believed that syndicates use genuine businesses, such as real estate investments, to incorporate for example the illicit funds derived from the counterfeit goods' sale in the legitimate economy⁵².

In this context, criminals regularly launder their illicit proceeds outside the formal financial system making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to detect. Due to its complex nature and limited policing capacity to detect various money laundering schemes, it is believed that this type of crime is underreported in the region. It is most likely that law enforcement agencies in West African countries may misinterpret cases of fraud and financial crime with money laundering, adding complexity to the traceability of this crime.

This type of crime affects the majority of countries in the region and connects West Africa with Europe, Asia and North America where nationals from West African countries operate. All information sources suggest that the most likely forms of predicate offences for money laundering in the region are banking fraud, theft, corruption and tax evasion.

Globally, the banking sector and formal remittance businesses are the most vulnerable sectors prone to money laundering in West Africa. The high amount of cash transactions occurring daily makes it difficult to record sources and the flow of money.

Among the most vulnerable products and services of the banking sector, there are current Account Products, Foreign Exchange Account Products, Savings Account Products, Trade Finance Services, Private Banking, Investment Accounts and International Money Transfers.

*CRIMINALS BENEFIT FROM THE
CASH BASED NATURE OF WEST
AFRICA'S ECONOMY TO TRANSFER
ILLICIT FUNDS FROM ONE
COUNTRY TO ANOTHER WITHIN
THE REGION*

Beyond the banking system there are other sectors that remain unregulated and vulnerable to the placement, laying, and integration of illicit profits back into the legitimate sector in West Africa. These are most notably real estate agencies, casinos, dealers of precious metals and stones and mobile money services.

Across the region the purchase and sale of real estate property is often conducted in cash and therefore these transactions are not registered. This phenomenon, together with a weak regulation of the real estate sector and a lack of adequate supervision of the source of funds before the transactions are sealed, facilitate fraudulent practices and make the industry vulnerable to money laundering schemes.

Casinos are also vulnerable to money laundering activities due to weak regulation and the high cash based nature of transactions. In the region, as the rest of the world, it is difficult to determine the volume of transactions undertaken by casinos and this sector is often disregarded when tracing money laundering schemes in West African countries. In Ghana, the local population has a limited participation in this sector since all registered casinos are owned by foreigners, notably Chinese and Lebanese nationals⁵³.

The mining industry is also prone to money laundering in West Africa. By performing price manipulation or false invoices, syndicates could cover fictitious sales of gold, whereas the money has been generated by various crimes.

Although underreported, sources of analysis show that syndicates resort to several illicit activities but also use traditional channels of the formal economy to launder the money earned from the trafficking of counterfeited goods, notably pharmaceutical products.

It is believed that criminal groups use the illicit gains from counterfeit goods trafficking to expand the production, importation, storage or movement of counterfeit goods, which are then fed into legitimate supply chains in order to convert their illicit proceeds in legal incomes⁵⁴.

Alternative Remittances

Alternative remittances are an important aspect of illicit flows of money and assets in the region because the simple movement of money across borders within the region or to other international jurisdictions may suffice in driving organized crime.

Syndicates use different patterns to move their illicit gain within West African jurisdiction and offshore. Remittances, understood as money or material goods sent from one entity to another, include any informal movement of money between family members or friends who live elsewhere, any payments for debts, goods and services.

In the region criminals use money remittance businesses, such as Western Union and MoneyGram, and mobile money services for illicit purposes. This methodology is being used at both local and international levels to move money in small and large transactions. The movement of money through money transfer operators is frequently used to move the money obtained by performing fraud schemes, often advance-fee scams that link the region to other jurisdictions, notably Europe and North America, and usually involve the use of forged documentation.

Although money transfer operators are persistently used in West Africa, the cost of the transactions are prohibitively expensive for most of the local population. Previous report indicates that the disproportionate cost for the transactions is favoring monopolies and encouraging the use of informal systems of money transfer, which also may be exploited by criminal elements, or will be run by criminal elements directly⁵⁵.

The proliferation of this informal solutions poses a high risk for the economies in the region and although data is very limited, it is believed that criminals may control and use them for transfers related to illicit activities or terrorist financing⁵⁶.

In a region where the formal financial system is not accessible to wide segments of the population, mobile financial services and mobile banking have emerged as an alternative solution for financial inclusion and are now changing the threats and nature of crime financing and illicit transactions.

This financial instrument has rapidly grown in the region, through providers such as *MTN Mobile Money* and *Orange Money*, allowing people to send and receive money and perform payments. Criminality or terrorism linked to these types of transactions is often undetected by financial intelligence units, but analysis of all sources suggests that this sector is at risk of being exploited by criminals or terrorist

organizations to move money domestically and internationally⁵⁷.

Illicit flow of money derived from the use of natural resources

West Africa's rich extractive industry is vulnerable to illicit financial flows as well. In countries with high natural resource dependence such as Nigeria, where the oil and gas sector accounts for about 35 per cent of gross domestic product and petroleum exports revenue represents over 90 per cent of total exports revenue⁵⁸, the risk of illicit financial flows has a greater negative impact on the economy and development.

The illicit flows in this sector may derive from corruption (such as money embezzled from tax collection or undeclared corporate revenues), illegal resource exploitation (such as extraction of crude oil beyond the licensed amount or use of forged invoice) and from tax evasion⁵⁹.

Theft of natural resources, as crude oil, is used by criminals to obtain illicit revenues too. Analysis of all sources of information shows that in the region criminals use different methodologies to divert this natural resource wealth, from stealing from pipelines to illegal trade in local and international markets to embezzlement.

As earlier described in this report, criminals also attack tank vessels to steal crude oil and sell it to illicit refineries across the region. Another practice is the smuggling of subsidized oil to countries where its price is much higher, depriving the country from the revenues from the oil trade.

All of these practices highly affect the West African economic growth by depriving countries of tax revenues and have an impact on the employment and social dynamics.

Illicit revenues can be laundered through the purchase and sale of gold, diamonds and precious stones. The transactions of these commodities are frequently concluded in cash with very limited traceability.

Gold can be used as an alternative currency for the purchase of other licit and illicit goods or it can be used for stocking the wealth generated by illegal activity⁶⁰. As described previously, criminal syndicates also resort to fraud schemes with gold and diamonds.

Whilst diamond and gold are the most notorious commodities linking extractive industries and illicit trade, open sources suggests that other mineral resources such as iron, uranium and oil are also sources of illicit wealth.

The systemic movement of money is ultimately hard to track and trace in the region, and is likely to continue to pose a major challenge to law enforcement agencies.

Conclusion

The purpose of any threat assessment is to identify any current or emerging organized crime group trend or activity that could pose a threat to any country's security and development. The analysis contained in this report highlights the current threats stemming from criminal networks and criminal markets across West Africa.

This report systemically assessed drug trafficking, financial crimes, human trafficking, organized theft and robbery, environmental crimes and maritime piracy. It looked at the most significant enabling crimes and criminal convergences affecting the region, noting cybercrime, and the trafficking and trade in small arms and light weapons.

Finally, it covered the illicit flow of money and assets, looking at core money laundering activity taking place throughout the region and also the way funds get moved around the region and offshore.

Criminals use several modus operandi and routes to traffic narcotics in the region and it is expected that they will develop more and more sophisticated mechanism to avoid law enforcement detection.

Criminal groups will continue to traffic persons across the region for sexual or labor exploitation. Syndicates will continue to steal and traffic motor vehicles and moreover they will benefit from the works of art and cultural heritage wealth of the region to obtain profits to finance other criminal activities.

The criminal groups will continue to exploit natural resources and target wild animals to enrich themselves illicitly. More than all other markets however, criminal syndicates, groups, and gangs will continue to grow their capacities in fraud and a range of financial crimes. They use cyber capabilities, and can access firearms to drive violence and control. They are able to

corrupt the public sector, as well as advantage businesses and the private sectors.

As groups grow more sophisticated over time, and learn from law enforcement interventions, they will continue to be involved in more than one criminal market at the same time, maximizing opportunity and profits, while ensuring they are more resilient to law enforcement actions.

Organized crime has a direct impact on civil society and economic progress. Criminal syndicates operating in West Africa have the intent and capabilities to continue exploiting the region for criminal gain and to grow their illicit enterprises in almost every country in the region. As they grow, their unfair and unscrupulous business practices will hinder legitimate business, depriving government from sources of income and deteriorating real economies.

This analysis and assessment provides increased awareness of the problem of organized crime in the region in terms of intent and capacity, which should help foster information sharing and police cooperation across national boundaries.

This report, aims at providing new insights for decision makers to anticipate future threats stemming from current organized crime activity and to estimate how the threat from organized crime will potentially change or grow in the near future.

This assessment may now guide law enforcement in designing strategies to address the many challenges they face regarding transnational organized crime affecting the West Africa region.

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