

The Need for New Approaches to Organised Crime in West Africa

LSE's Sasha Jespersen argues that international organisations will need to vary their strategy in the war on drugs if they are to gain ground on adaptable narco-traffickers.

The war on drugs has increasingly come under scrutiny. At this year's Summit of the Americas a number of Latin American presidents declared the war on drugs a failure. Similarly, the **2011 report of the Global Commission on Drugs Policy** opened with the statement "The global war on drugs has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world".



A plane used to transport cocaine at Lungi Airport, Freetown, discovered after its cargo had been removed Copyright UNIPSIL

These critiques have sparked new debates on how to address drugs and drug trafficking. Despite fluctuations, demand for drugs remains high. New trafficking routes have opened up to meet those demands. While international actors are taking action to address the growth of narco-trafficking, local nuances are not always taken into account.

West Africa is a case in point. The region has become a key trade route for cocaine being trafficked from Latin America into Europe by organised crime networks. **Antonio Mazzitelli** of UNODC has described West African drug trafficking as "a new challenging and successful model of an organised crime network". While traditional models of organised crime do exist, with South American cartels setting up branches in West Africa, much of the work in the drug trade is being outsourced to locals in exchange for in kind payments. This practice has fostered "freelance" traffickers who transport cocaine to Europe independently.

The UN has launched a joint initiative to address organised crime in the region, the **West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI)**, which brings together UNODC, UNOWA, DPKO, Interpol and ECOWAS. While the new forms of organised crime have been recognised, there is a tendency to adhere to standard strategies employed to address organised crime: strengthen law enforcement.

Law enforcement strategies are essential. An effective intelligence sector can work with other countries to trace and pre-empt traffickers, particularly as many West African countries have long coastal borders that cannot be adequately protected. However, the presumption that arresting individuals engaged in drug trafficking will deter others from becoming involved is flawed.

Particularly in countries with a high unemployment rate, like many West African states, organised crime can offer lucrative income-generating opportunities. When arrests are made, a long line of

unemployed youth is waiting to take their place.

For instance in Sierra Leone a law enforcement officer witnessed how “those who have successfully trafficked cocaine to Europe, they come back with big cars, they live glamorous, they’re role models and an inspiration to those who haven’t”.

The rise of freelance traffickers also undermines the effectiveness of a punitive approach. As the most visible part of the drug trade, freelance traffickers are the easiest targets for arrest. However, freelancers are not part of an organised crime network, at most they have only come in contact with one or two other people involved in the drug trade. As such, they cannot provide inroads into the drug “kingpins”.

A law enforcement approach to organised crime prioritises the security threats of organised crime. This is not unreasonable, as the security threats of organised crime have been well-documented. A recent post by [Philip Gounev](#) outlines the role of organised criminals in murder and kidnapping; as war profiteers; as service providers to terrorist and separatist movements; and of course their role in state capture.

Organised crime also impacts on the development of affected states. The presence of organised crime may deter investment in the country, detract resources from small and medium enterprises and undermine competition, hampering economic security. As mentioned above, organised crime also attracts unemployed people into the illicit sector. Security measures alone are unlikely to deter individuals from engaging in organised crime in these circumstances.

Development strategies become a valuable companion to security measures, providing alternative sources of income and rebuilding essential services and institutions. The security-development nexus, which brings together security and development aspects, provides an innovative approach to organised crime. The traditional law enforcement elements can be combined with income generating activities to develop a multifaceted approach to organised crime.

Many actors are now incorporating the security-development nexus into their work, particularly following the 2011 World Development Report: Conflict, Security and Development. For instance, Sierra Leone’s WACI fits under Priority 1 and 3 of the UN Joint Vision for Sierra Leone: consolidation of peace and prosperity, and economic and social integration of youth. Despite this shift, the preoccupation with security remains, with the majority of activities focused on strengthening law enforcement.

As the debate over the war on drugs broadens into a discussion on new strategies to address drug trafficking and organised crime, it is important that local nuances are taken into account. Addressing organised crime purely as a security problem does not address the issue as a whole. Understanding how organised crime operates in countries is essential for developing effective strategies to address it.

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