

IMPACT OF TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME ON STABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE SAHEL

TOCTA
Sahel
Transnational Organized
Crime Threat Assessment



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Transnational Organized Crime
Threat Assessment – Sahel



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Key takeaways

► This report considers the multifaceted impacts of transnational organized crime on four pillars of stability and development in the Sahel region: 1. peace and security; 2. human rights; 3. governance and rule of law; and 4. sustainable development. It draws from the analysis of six illicit market reports published separately, namely: trafficking in drugs, fuel, gold, firearms, medical products, and smuggling of migrants. This study seeks to provide policymakers with a better understanding of how organized crime undermines efforts under the four

pillars. The goal is the implementation of more evidence-based stabilization and sustainable development strategies in the Sahel.

► The Sahel countries have experienced an upsurge in organized crime since the 1990s, with a diversification and increase in types, volumes and values of illicit products trafficked through the region. The rising transit of high-value and strategic commodities across the Sahel has driven the evolution of some of the existing informal trading routes



and networks into a more criminalized ecosystem and triggered competition between criminal groups over access to significant profits. The markets around these commodities – whether they are produced, trafficked or used in the Sahel or destined to other countries – have short and long-term impacts on the region.

➤ Overall, transnational organized crime negatively impacts stability and development in the Sahel at a systemic level and constitutes a major obstacle to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Criminal groups find traction in communities because they exploit the structural vulnerabilities of the region and unmet needs of the population.

On peace and security

➤ Organized crime can fuel armed conflicts by increasing tensions, violence and competition for illicit profits and territorial control. This contributes to the weaponization of illicit activities and the establishment of a protection economy in which combat skills are developed among criminal groups. This has a high human cost, though the exact scale is difficult to accurately estimate for the Sahel. For instance, firearms trafficking underpins a significant proportion of deadly violence across the region. Competition for control over gold mining sites in Chad has also fuelled tensions between workers in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM), law enforcement agents and non-state armed groups, leaving many dead and many

more displaced. In northern Mali, competition to exert control over illicit markets fed into long-standing intercommunal tensions, including between and amongst Tuareg and Arab groups.

➤ Organized crime provides financial and human resources to conflicting parties and delays conflict resolution. Incomes generated from illicit markets have played central roles in resourcing conflicts. Income drawn from illicit markets – both directly and indirectly – is reinvested in weapons and vehicles, increasing groups' capacities to fight. The ability of armed groups to derive financing from illicit markets enhances their economic resilience. Firearms trafficking, for example, was an important enabling ingredient for the onset of conflict in the Sahel. The influx of weapons into the region in the wake of the 2011 Libyan revolution made weapons readily available to different groups, contributing to the fragmentation of conflict and weaponization of existing trafficking routes. The ongoing conflicts around key strategic trafficking spots in northern Mali also illustrate how organized crime may delay conflict resolution.

➤ Illegal economies can bolster the legitimacy of non-state armed groups operating as organized criminal groups through the distribution of benefits from illegal markets. This legitimacy among elements of communities underpins the ability of armed groups to sustain conflict. Consequently, organized crime benefits from sustaining a climate of

violence and fear at the expense of efforts to significantly reduce conflict, disrupting social cohesion and long-term stability.

On human rights

► Where illicit economies are governed by organized criminal groups, individuals and communities are vulnerable to human right abuses, including through poor working and exploitative conditions, substandard medical care, and environmental degradation. Some illicit activities, such as artisanal gold mining without a licence, can be a source of livelihood in communities where alternatives are scarce, thus contributing to local peace and stability. However, when transnational organized crime is involved, most profits tend to be made by a few individuals who undermine the sustainable development of communities, instil fear in residents and impose labour conditions that can be abusive.

► Organized crime exploits and exacerbates vulnerabilities of individuals in the Sahel. The lack of access to basic services and recourse to the rule of law by individuals and communities facilitates the exploitation of vulnerabilities, both at the hands of those involved in coordinating criminal markets and by others. Different forms of trafficking in persons, such as slavery, sexual exploitation, child labour or forced labour, amount to human rights abuses. Smuggling practices can lead migrants to contexts of exploitation constituting trafficking. Refugees and migrants may be held captive in “credit houses”

in transit or destination countries until their outstanding debts are settled, making them vulnerable to trafficking in persons for the purpose of forced labour. At informal Sahelian ASGM sites, where organized crime groups and non-state armed groups source gold, labour conditions may expose workers to considerable risks. Child labour in ASGM also can lead to cases of abuse, exploitation, trafficking, violence and torture of children. It is estimated that children constitute a third of ASGM workers in Kidal and Gao, Mali.

On rule of law and governance

► Organized crime fuels corruption, erodes trust in state institutions and undermines state legitimacy. Organized crime groups operating across the Sahel appear to have used the income generated by illicit economic activities to attempt to infiltrate state structures. Criminal rents can be tempting for some individuals within state institutions, driving the expansion of far-reaching protection mechanisms of transnational organized crime. For example, bribes paid to law enforcement officials at the border between Burkina Faso and Benin to facilitate fuel trafficking range from 350,000 to 700,000 CFA francs per truck (between \$553–\$1,106 United States dollars (\$)), which is more than a monthly salary for high-ranking law enforcement officials in the Sahel.

► Electoral financing regulations in the Sahel, and West Africa more broadly, allow private sources of funding, leaving electoral processes vulnerable to corruption. The use

of profits from illicit markets for electoral financing creates indebtedness to criminal actors, which is repaid through protection and facilitation of the market, distorting the incentives for good governance.

On sustainable development

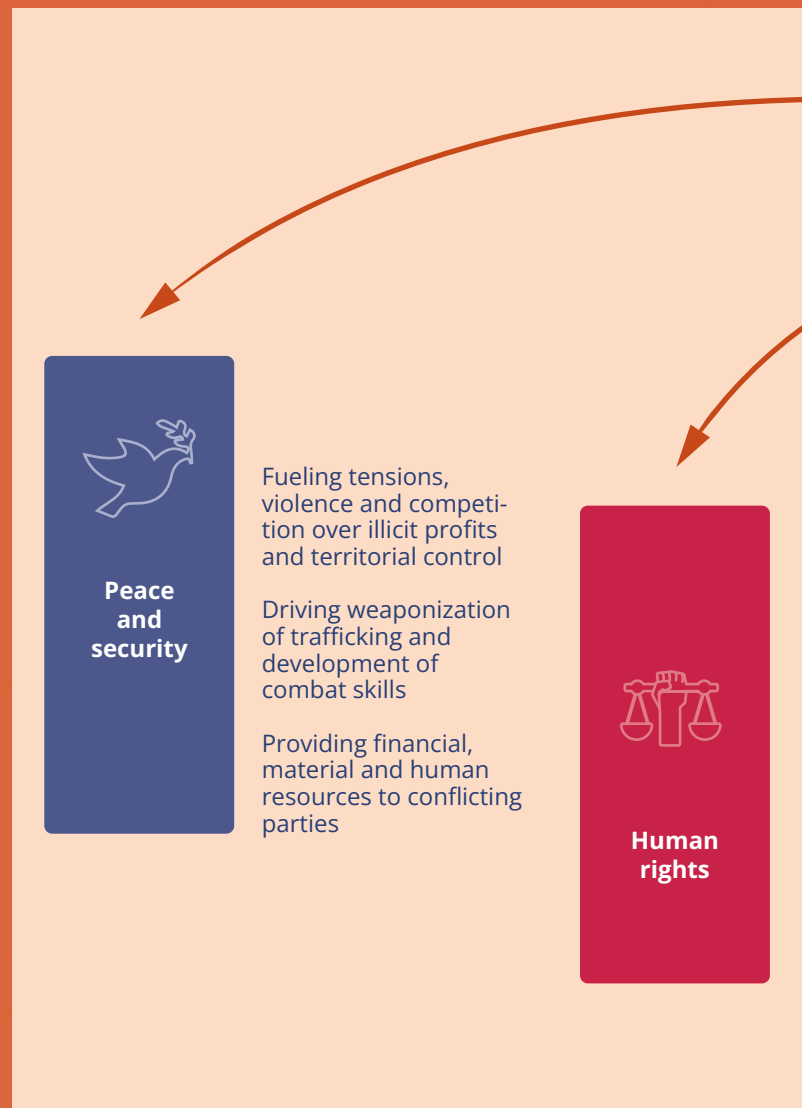
While difficult to quantify, the cumulative impact of organized crime on economic growth and formal economic development is believed to be significant, undermining the achievement of SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure) and SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production). Crime deters national and foreign investments. Attracting skilled workers and investing in economic activities – including small businesses – are challenges in high-crime areas. The laundering of illicit proceeds through the formal economy undermines formal financial systems. For example, in the gold sector, prices offered on illicit markets in the Sahel reportedly exceed the international spot price, outstripping those offered on the formal market. Distorted pricing fuels a vicious cycle in which high prices on the black market drive more gold into illicit supply chains, which are untaxed and benefit criminal networks and some non-state armed groups. Consequently, organized crime delays the development of resilient infrastructure, inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and innovation in Sahelian economies.

Organized crime also hampers efforts to end poverty (SDG 1) as well as to build peaceful and inclusive communities (SDG 16). Criminals provide non-sustainable local livelihood at the expense of sustainable economic, social and environmental development. The Tibesti Region in northern Chad is an example of a major trafficking hub in the Sahel that provides non-sustainable livelihood for individuals with criminal capital. Organized criminal groups prevent communities from exercising their rights to access economic resources, including ownership and control over land and other forms of property or natural resources.

Organized crime directly reduces state resources that could be otherwise deployed for social protection. Smuggling of goods – such as gold and fuel – deprives Sahelian countries of significant tax revenue, limiting the resources available to fund welfare systems and drive economic development. In Burkina Faso, for example, a parliamentary commission estimated that gold trafficking fraud amounted to a fiscal loss of over \$490 million per year, which represents more than the budget spending allocated to the Burkinabé public health sector in 2023 (294.5 billion CFA francs, equivalent to about \$479 million). In the Niger, Haute Autorité de Lutte contre la Corruption et les Infractions Assimilées (High Authority for Combatting Corruption and Related Offences (HALCIA)) calculated that round tripping of fuel between 2017 and 2018 amounted to a fiscal loss of over \$15.8 million.

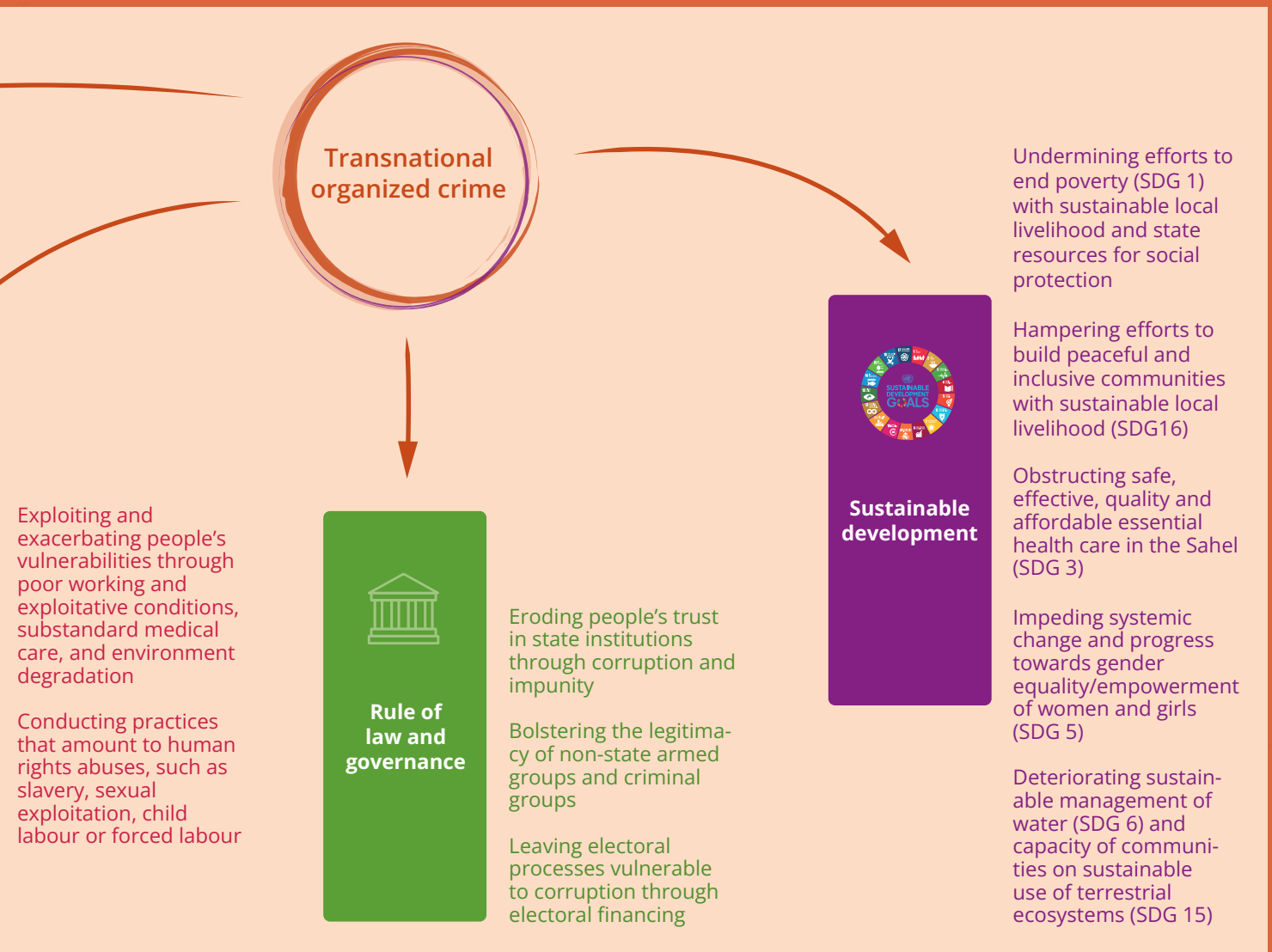
➤ In a region affected by high mortality rates due to preventable communicable diseases, including malaria, and with limited health infrastructure and coverage, trafficking in medical products has a major human cost and constitutes an obstacle to the achievement of safe, effective, quality and affordable essential health care (SDG 3). In sub-Saharan Africa, 430,000 deaths per year are linked to falsified and substandard anti-malarial medicines and pediatric antibiotics. The negative impact on health can also be observed in the operations of illicit gold mining, where exposure to mercury carries significant health risks for miners and nearby communities. Drug trafficking also directly threatens the health of individuals, particularly young people, fueling drug use in the region, including the non-medical use of pharmaceutical opioids such as tramadol. An increasing number of female and youth patients for drug-use disorders were reported in Burkina Faso in 2022. Crime-related violence and certain types of trafficking, such as smuggling of migrants, trafficking in persons and drug trafficking, can also create long-term trauma both for victims and criminal actors, undermining mental health and well-being.

➤ Overall, the impact of organized crime on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in Sahelian countries remains difficult to measure due to the lack of gender-disaggregated crime data in the region. However, certain organized crimes – such as smuggling of migrants – clearly



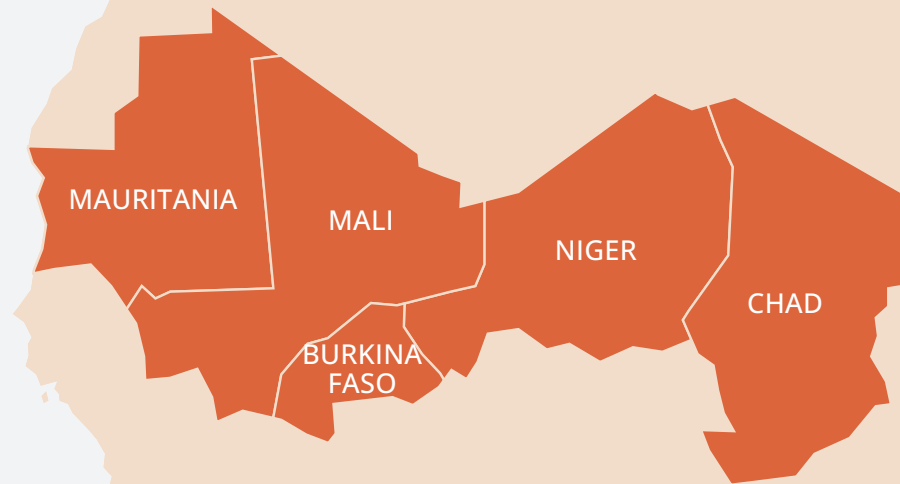
hamper systemic change and progress towards gender equality and empowerment of women and girls (SDG 5). Some women smuggled in the Sahel fall victim to sexual violence and exploitation. In surveys conducted by the Mixed Migration Center between 2017–2021, both smugglers and migrants reported rape as the most common form of sexual and gender-based violence.

FIG 1. Detected impacts of organized crime on the four UN pillars framework



➤ In the Sahel, trafficking also negatively affects the sustainable management of water (SDG 6) and the capacity of communities to protect, restore and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (SDG 15). For example, cyanide and mercury are often used for processing at ASGM sites in the Sahel, which leads to significant contamination of water and land. Fuel leaks and explo-

sions arising from poor regulation of fuel in transit and storage in the illicit markets have widespread environmental impacts. Other illegal economies unaddressed by this study, such as trafficking in illegal pesticides, animal vaccines or wildlife, are likely to have a direct impact on the Sahelian environment.



For the purpose of this report, "Sahel countries" refers to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger.

Impact of Transnational Organized Crime on Stability and Development in the Sahel

Introduction

Context

The Sahel region is characterized by difficult access to and increasing public demand for basic services such as drinking water, hygiene facilities, health care and education.¹ The Sahel countries rank low on most human development and economic indices, with populations experiencing multidimensional poverty and insecurity.² In certain areas such as borderlands and hard-to-reach areas, public authorities face particular challenges to provide essential services.³ Additionally, these areas are also affected by violent conflicts and high unemployment rates for youth. For example, in the Gao Region of Mali, unemployment was as high as 55 per cent among people between ages 15 and 35 in 2018, while the Nord and Sahel regions in Burkina Faso recorded respectively 60.8 and 75.6 per cent of people between ages 15 and 34 who were unemployed and out of the education system.⁴ Poverty and lack of opportunity are some of the root causes of instability that arguably constitute significant obstacles to peace and security. Indeed, economic opportunities, social inclusion and environmental sustainability can help reduce the risk of conflict and enhance stability in the political and socioeconomic fabric of the entire region.⁵

Sahel countries have experienced an upsurge in organized crime since the 1990s, with a diversification in the types, volumes and values of illicitly sourced commodities trafficked through the region.⁶ Different illicit markets have developed for trafficking in both controlled products, such as drugs or firearms, and legal products that are moved illegally, such as fuel or gold, and for illegal services, such as for the smuggling of migrants. Regular supply chains have also been disrupted as evidenced by the selling of falsified medical products in official outlets. It is thus essential to identify what aspects of economic activities and which

steps in the supply chains do not comply with legal frameworks: the goods or services that are produced/disseminated, or the processes by which they are produced/disseminated.

The rising transit of high-value commodities – most prominently cannabis resin, cocaine, fuel and gold – across the Sahel has in the past two decades driven the evolution of the network of informal trading routes and alliances into a more criminalized ecosystem, triggering competition over access to significant profits.⁷ As criminal rents increase, they may become more tempting for state officials, driving the expansion and entrenchment of far-reaching protection structures. Within this context, transnational organized criminal groups have burgeoned and played an important role in shaping the Sahel's political and security landscape.⁸

Demand on the international markets for the high-value commodities produced in or transiting through the Sahel continues to grow, driving market expansion and corruption. Yet while the ultimate consumers for many of the commodities transported through the Sahel are overseas, Sahelian illegal markets have myriad regional impacts. The Sahel's acute structural vulnerabilities⁹ – including low levels of economic resilience among communities, the high perception of corruption in state institutions, limited state capacity to redistribute resources and significant informal economic sectors – exacerbate the negative impacts of illegal markets associated with organized crimes.¹⁰ This report aims to provide evidence-based understanding of these impacts in order to inform possible responses.

Approach

This report considers the multifaceted impact of six illicit markets associated with organized crimes – namely trafficking in drugs, fuel, gold, firearms, medical products and smuggling of migrants – on stability

BOX 1: DEFINITIONS OF ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE SAHELIAN CONTEXT

There is no universally accepted definition of transnational organized crime. The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime does not contain a precise definition. The Convention instead refers to an “organized criminal group” as “a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established in accordance with this Convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefits.”^a This leaves the notion of organized crime open to a wide range of criminal activities that can be conducted transnationally in an organized fashion. “Transnational” is cast broadly under the Convention. It covers not only offences committed in more than one state, but also those that take place in one state but are planned or controlled in another. Crimes committed in one state by criminal groups that operate in more than one state and crimes committed in one state that impact other states are also considered in the Convention.^b

Informal economy refers to all economic activities undertaken by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements.^c Illicit economy

can be broadly defined as all economic activities relating to goods or services whose sale, distribution or possession is forbidden by law and activities that are usually legal but become illegal when carried out by unauthorized producers or through illegal means.^d

Illicit and informal economies are two distinct concepts and informality cannot be equated to illegality, particularly in the Sahel countries where informal employment is prevalent, with rates ranging from 94.7 per cent in Mali to 96.9 per cent in Chad in 2018.^e In practice, however, the distinction can be blurred in some sectors. The informal sector is diverse, dynamic and evolving faster than formal economic regulations. When illicit markets are driven by small-scale actors, illegality and informality can be difficult to differentiate.^f

a United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, article 2.

b United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, article 3.2.

c International Labour Organization (ILO), *Informal Economy and Atypical Forms of Employment*, 2012

d This definition is loosely based on the concept of illegal production, as defined under: United Nations, European Commission, International Monetary Fund, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and World Bank, *System of National Accounts 2008, 2009*, para. 6.43.

e Burkina Faso: 95.7 per cent in 2018; data for Mauritania and the Niger are not available for 2018; ILO, ILOSTAT, Statistics on the informal economy.

f The distinction between informal mining and illegal mining is explored in: UNODC, *Gold Trafficking in the Sahel*, 2023; UNODC, *Responding to Illegal Mining and Trafficking in Metals and Minerals: A Guide to Good Legislative Practices*, 2023.

ty and development in the Sahel. The analysis builds on the findings of the studies on these illicit markets produced as part of a transnational organized crime threat assessment in the Sahel (TOCTA Sahel). These studies involved interviews with key informants, the collection and analysis of data, and the review of existing scientific literature.¹¹

Defining and measuring the wide-ranging impacts of transnational organized crime in the Sahel is challenging because impacts differ depending on perspective. Stakeholders are affected differently based on their vulnerabilities and socioeconomic agency. In addition, while some impacts manifest immediately, others may only become apparent over time.¹² Where the earnings of illegal markets are accrued and reinvested, for

example, the full scale of their impact will only be apparent in the long run. This report focuses on impacts on all types of stakeholders and seeks to take a longitudinal approach to analysing impacts in the present while also looking towards the future. Geographically, the analysis focuses on impacts within the Sahel region as well as border areas.

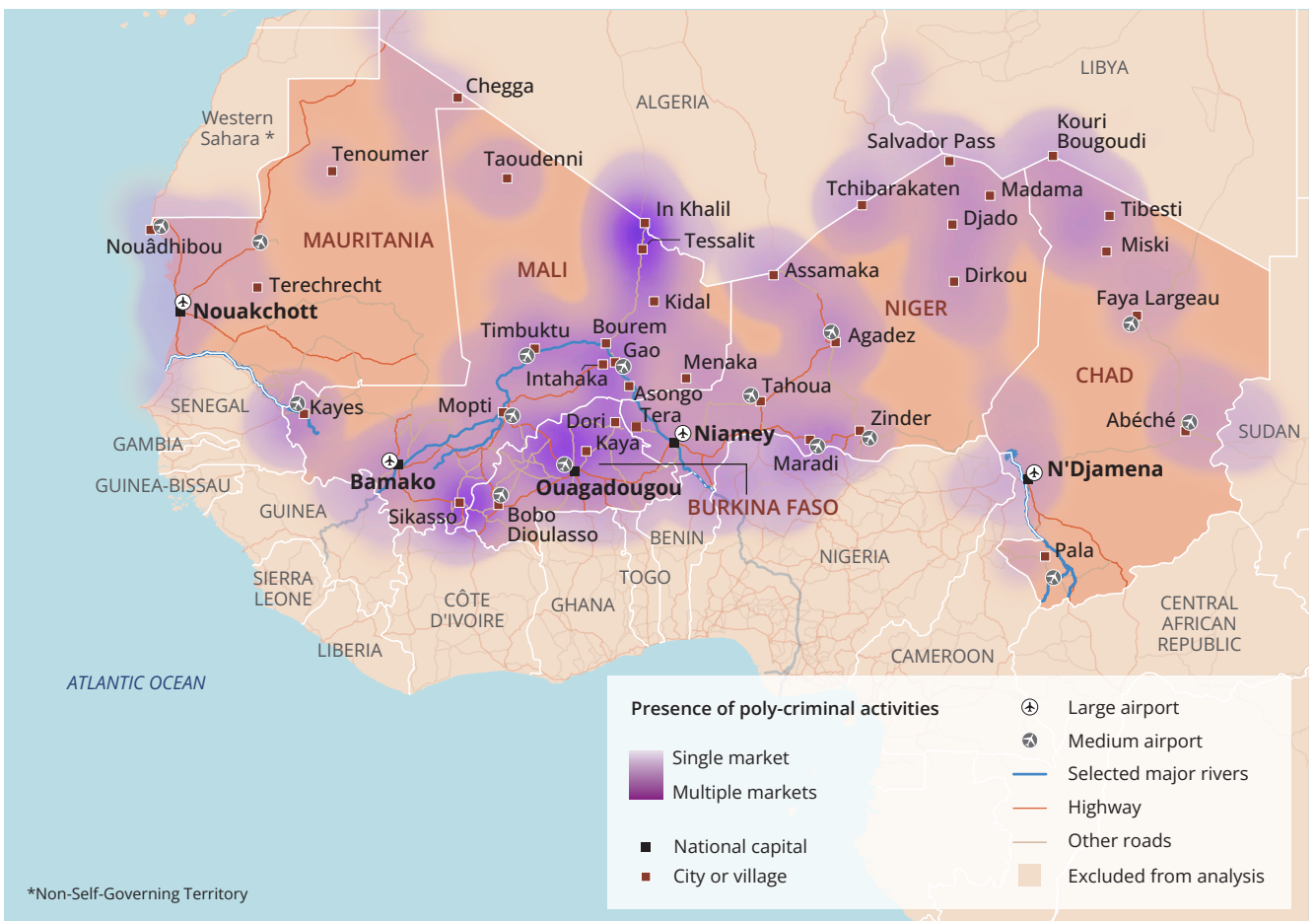
The United Nations defines “development” as “a multidimensional undertaking to achieve a higher quality of life for all people. Economic development, social development and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development.”¹³ The definition also refers to the following fundamental principles: transparent and accountable governance in all sectors of society with

effective participation of civil society, empowerment of women and their full participation on a basis of equality in all spheres of society, sustained economic growth which benefits all people, and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms.¹⁴

In considering the impact of transnational organized crime on development, this report relies on the frameworks of the SDGs. Organized crime impacts the promotion of peace and access to justice and accountable institutions (SDG 16). It affects health, increases inequality and undermines economic development (SDGs 3, 8, 10). It promotes illegal exploitation of natural resources and affects life on land and under water,

biodiversity, and climate change (SDGs 13, 14, 15). Illicit economies, create unfair competition, crowd out licit activities and negatively affect direct foreign investment (SDGs 1, 8, 9, 12). Conversely, reduced socio-political inequality (SDG 10), increased well-being (SDGs 1, 2, 8), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5) and fairer access to resources (SDGs 7, 13) are important aspects of crime prevention and are known to improve the resilience of communities and individuals against transnational criminal networks.

MAP 1. Heatmap of detected poly-criminal markets areas in the Sahel



The boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined.

Methodology: Detected poly-criminal market areas' refers to localities where multiple criminal market activities were identified by UNODC through triangulation of sources (official data from national authorities, complementary reports from law enforcement authorities, open-source information and literature review) and based on the TOCTA Sahel criminal market reports – namely trafficking in fuel, firearms, gold and drugs, and smuggling of migrants. Current data is limited, and the list of detected trafficking areas is therefore neither exhaustive nor comprehensive. The level of poly-criminality in some localities – particularly in hard-to-reach areas where data is scarce – is likely to be underestimated due to unavailability of data.

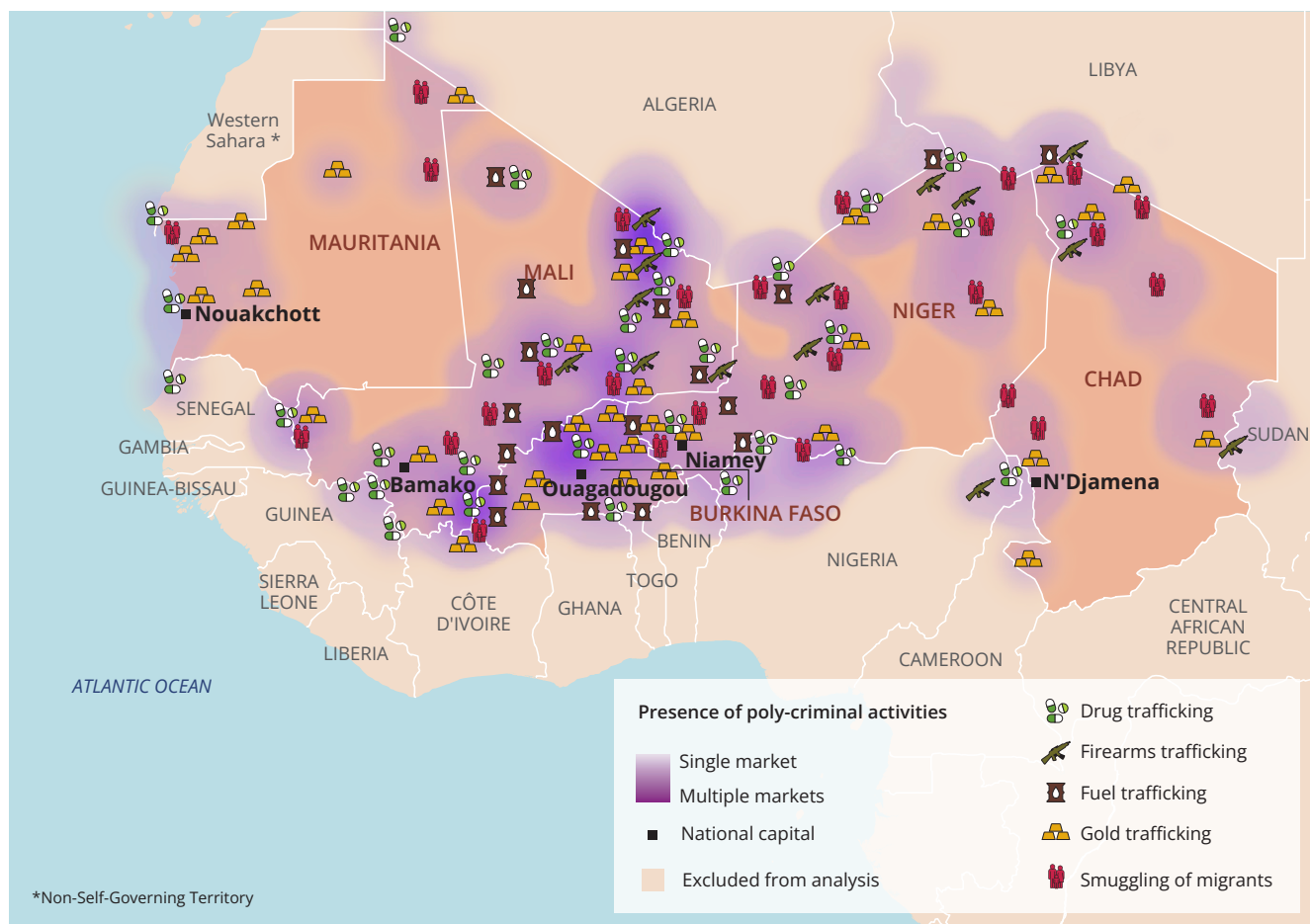
This report adopts a holistic approach to analysing the impact of illicit markets on four pillars:

- **Pillar 1 – Peace and security**, by contributing to the enabling environment for violence and conflict, exacerbating societal tensions, and possibly driving instability and violence.
- **Pillar 2 – Human rights**, by leaving victims without recourse to the rule of law to enforce breached rights, including regarding impacts on labour rights and decent working conditions for all.
- **Pillar 3 – Rule of law and governance**, by undermining the legitimacy, authority or public perception of the state, in large part through corruption,

thus posing a threat to peace and security, human rights and development and eroding the rule of law.

- **Pillar 4 – Sustainable development**, by diverting funds from the legitimate economy and social development, by damaging the economic climate and functioning of the private sector (SDGs 8, 9), by preventing the development of sustainable patterns of consumption and production (SDG 12), and by challenging progress towards social protection and reduction of inequalities (SDGs 1, 10), health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and sustainable environment and use of water (SDGs 6, 15).

MAP 2. Types of detected trafficking in poly-criminal areas



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined.

Methodology: Detected trafficking areas refers to localities which were identified by UNODC through triangulation of sources (official data from national authorities, complementary report from law enforcement authorities, open sources information, literature review) and based on the TOCTA Sahel criminal market reports – namely trafficking in fuel, firearms, gold and drugs, and smuggling of migrants. The current data remains however partial, and the list of detected trafficking areas is thus not exhaustive and comprehensive. The level of poly-criminality in some localities - particularly in hard-to-reach areas where data is scarce – is likely to be underestimated due to unavailability of data.



The sequencing above is not intended to suggest a prioritization between the categories of impact, neither does it ignore the densely interconnected and mutually reinforcing nature of the obstacles illegal markets pose to development in the Sahel. While each is considered separately, in practice impacts intertwine and are difficult to disentangle. Human rights and SDGs, in particular, cut across all the pillars.

Impact of organized crime on peace and security (Pillar 1)

Too often, the relationship between organized crime and conflict is treated as though it is linear. This fails to recognize the nuanced and complex role crime and conflict play in communities' socioeconomic fabrics.¹⁵ Organized crime can be an enabling factor for generating violence and conflicts while it can undermine efforts to resolve conflicts. However, organized crime actors may also play important roles as livelihood providers in contexts where alternatives are scarce. In the short term, they may therefore act as a stabilization factor, although this comes at the expense of sustainable development in the medium to long term.^{16, 17} This is true of a range of illicit activities associated with organized crime within the Sahel, including artisanal gold mining without a license and smuggling of migrants, as explored further below.¹⁸

Organized crime fuels violent and armed conflict by exacerbating competition over illicit markets

In the Sahel, illicit markets have provided an enabling environment for conflict.¹⁹ Since the 1990s, violence has repeatedly flared over competition for control of trafficking routes, particularly over higher-value commodities. These clashes are often deadly.²⁰ The increased profitability of the illicit commodities transiting the region has fuelled competition, contributing to

the weaponization of illicit activities and the creation of a protection economy, leading to the development of combat skills among the groups involved (see Box 2 below).²¹

Organized crime has driven weaponization and armed violence, at high human cost, though the death toll is difficult to accurately estimate for the Sahel.²² Firearms trafficking underpins a significant proportion of deadly violence across the region.²³ In a self-reinforcing cycle, communal self-defence groups gain popularity and in turn further fuel the regional market for firearms. Firearms trafficking is also closely linked to illicit gold trade and violent crimes characterized by a high degree of weaponization – namely kidnap for ransom and cattle rustling – which feed into conflict dynamics, notably in the Liptako-Gourma Region.²⁴ Although no data on homicides related to organized crime is available for Sahel countries, intercommunal violence fuelled by organized crime is reported to have caused more deaths than Boko Harm and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the North East of Nigeria.²⁵ Globally, organized crime is estimated to have caused the same number of deaths as armed conflict between 2015 and 2021.²⁶

Certain crime groups make use of violence as a mechanism for illicit market control and regulation. Stepping into spaces left by weak or absent rule of law, violence often plays a regulatory function, particularly where states are fragmented or unstable.²⁷ The use of armed violence by criminals is often a sign of growing competition between groups.

Additionally, criminal groups operate through kidnapping, robbery and racketeering (see box 3 below).²⁸ Cattle rustling, for example, became a significant driver of conflict across the Sahel in the past decade. Non-state armed groups use stolen cattle to feed combatants or sell them on for financing.²⁹ In the Mopti Region (central Mali), the estimated number of stolen cattle almost doubled between 2019 and 2021 (from 78,000 to 130,000).³⁰ Similarly, in Gao, where the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has been increasingly active since 2022, cattle thefts in the first nine months of 2022 exceeded total figures recorded in 2019 according to official data.³¹ The surge in cattle rustling was accompanied by an escalation in violence and has deprived many people of their source of livelihood.

BOX 2: MAIN NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS ACTIVE IN ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE SAHEL

In Sahel countries, many actors are involved in trafficking and smuggling, and their affiliations and networks are constantly evolving. Traffickers may be part of armed groups outlined below, loosely affiliated with them or simply pay taxes or levies in return for uninterrupted passage through their territories of influence. For example, a limited number of individuals are involved in large-scale arms trafficking in the Sahel. Weapons are exchanged in an opportunistic way depending on shifts in supply and demand.^a Cocaine trafficking in West Africa involves both highly organized transnational groups and a constellation of smaller, more fluid networks.^b Non-state armed groups that play myriad roles in organized crime and illicit markets, including protection, include but are not limited to:^c

Political armed groups: In Chad, Mali and the Niger, competing trafficking networks often align and directly involve armed groups or former armed group members operating in the area. This includes armed groups in Mali that were signatory to the 2015 peace accords, including the Coalition des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) and Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger (Plateforme).^d Very few of the members of these signatory armed groups have been disarmed and demobilized, and elements of many are allegedly involved in a range of illicit economic activities.^e In northern Chad, political armed groups active in trafficking include the Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (CCMSR), Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT), Front de la Nation pour la Démocratie et la Justice (FNDJT), and Union

des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Développement (UFDD). A majority of the members of these groups were previously mercenaries in the war in Libya and became involved in trafficking in the Sahel due to their operational skills and knowledge of the border areas in Libya, the Niger or Sudan.^f Members of armed groups are often bound by the same ties of kinship and alliances.

In Mali, for instance, traffickers from the Lehmar Arab community are connected to groups affiliated with Plateforme, particularly the Groupe d'autodéfense des Touaregs Imghad et leurs alliés (GATIA) and the Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad – Plateforme (MAA – Plateforme).^g Some of these traffickers were also close to Al-Qaida-affiliated groups including Mouvement pour l'unification et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) and Al-Mourabitoun.^h On the other hand, traffickers from the Kounta Arab community and their Ifoghas Tuareg associates tend to rely on groups associated with the CMA, another coalition of signatory armed groups, including the Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA), the Mouvement national pour la libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) and the Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (MAA-CMA).ⁱ In the Niger, some of the main drug traffickers are former leaders of the Mouvement Nigériens pour la Justice, an armed group active during the Tuareg rebellion between 2007 and 2009.^j Some Tebu armed groups also traffic drugs across the borders between the northern borders of Chad and the Niger and the southern border of Libya, where they operate.^k

Violent extremist groups: Groups include Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), which swore allegiance to Al-Qaida and was formed in 2017 through the merger of Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, Al Mourabitoun and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.^l Elements of JNIM and affiliated groups currently

operate across a significant proportion of central and northern Mali, as well as in Burkina Faso and the Niger. They have spread their activities southwards into parts of southern Mali, northern Benin, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire.^m The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which is currently active in Mali, the Niger, Burkina Faso and Benin, was established in 2015 and officially recognized by the central Islamic State organization one year later.

There appears to be less evidence of the involvement of violent extremist armed groups in trafficking, with two notable exceptions. One is the documented reliance of some drug traffickers on MUJAO during its occupation of Gao in 2012.ⁿ The other is related to a firearms and cash seizure in the Niger in February 2015, when nine individuals involved in drug trafficking were charged with criminal association in relation to a terrorist enterprise, possession and transport of firearms and ammunition, money laundering, and terrorist financing.^o

Violent extremist armed groups also engage in trafficking in fuel and firearms to source their operations. The fact that there appears to be limited evidence of violent extremist groups' direct involvement in trafficking in Sahel countries does not mean that they are not involved, but only that little evidence has been found so far. They are also likely to benefit from trafficking indirectly, for instance through the payment by traffickers of zakat, a form of wealth tax imposed by JNIM and ISGS, or by taxing convoys that cross areas under their control.^p

Self-defence militias or vigilante groups have become increasingly important players in the region's security landscape, with some falling along pastoralist or herder lines. Self-defence militias provide, for example, security at many mine sites in the region.^q

a UNODC, *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel*, 2023.

b UNODC, *Global Cocaine Report*, 2023, p. 149.

c This is not an exhaustive list of all actors involved in organized crime but is meant to provide a broad overview of the main non-state actors involved in organized crime.

d UNODC, *Drug Trafficking in the Sahel*, 2024.

e ICG, *Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On: An Uneasy Calm*, 2020; The Carter Center, *Report of the Independent Observer: Observations of the Implementation on the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, Resulting from the Algiers Peace Process*, 2022.

f UNODC, Interview with a high-ranking law enforcement official in Chad, June 2023; Jérôme Tubiana and Claudio Gramizzi, *Tube trouble: State and statelessness in the Chad-Sudan-Libya triangle*, Small Arms Survey, 2017; Alexandre Bish, *Soldats de fortune : L'avenir des combattants tchadiens après le cessez-le-feu libyen*, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021.

g UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali, S/2018/581, 9 August 2018, para. 131. Other Plateforme-affiliated groups notably include Ganda Izo, Ganda Koy, and the Mouvement pour le Salut de l'Azawad (MSA).

h UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali, S/2018/581, 9 August 2018, para. 131; UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and extended pursuant to resolution 2432 (2018), S/2019/636, 7 August 2019, para. 111.

i UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali, S/2018/581, 9 August 2018, para. 131.

j UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed pursuant to resolution 2484 (2019), S/2020/785/Rev.1, 7 August 2020, para. 86.

k UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011), S/2018/812, 5 September 2018, para. 184; UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed pursuant to resolution 2484 (2019), S/2020/785/Rev.1, 7 August 2020, para. 81.

l Reuters, "A Qaeda branch rallies jihadists to join forces after Mali merger", 17 March 2017.

m ACLED, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, "Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2022", February 2022.

n UNODC, *Drug Trafficking in the Sahel*, 2024; UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali, S/2018/581, 9 August 2018, para. 131.

o Groupe Intergouvernemental d'Action contre le Blanchiment d'Argent en Afrique de l'Ouest (GIABA), *Terrorist Financing in West and Central Africa*, 2016, p. 22.

p UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed pursuant to resolution 2541 (2020), S/2021/714, 6 August 2021, para. 148.

q UNODC, *Gold Trafficking in the Sahel*, 2023.

Competition over illicit markets and the higher rents they represent fuel existing tensions. For example, competition for control over gold mining sites has fuelled tensions between ASGM miners, law enforcement agencies and non-state armed groups, including violent extremist groups. Once triggered, violence can easily spiral. For example, an altercation between two gold miners in the informal Kouri Bougoudi gold fields in northern Chad escalated in May 2022, leaving many dead and many more displaced.³² Chadian authorities have on several occasions closed and bombed mining sites in the Tibesti Region following intercommunal clashes between ASGM miners and after attacks by armed groups against government forces.³³ In northern Mali, the competition to exert control over illicit markets fed into long-standing intercommunal tensions.³⁴ Consequently, organized crime in the Sahel can foster a culture of violence, fear and competition at the expense of efforts to significantly reduce all forms of violence (SDG 16, target 16.1), which disrupts social cohesion and stability in the longer term.

Organized crime provides resources to conflict-ing parties and delays conflict resolution

Incomes generated from illicit markets have played central roles in resourcing conflicts. Income derived from illicit markets – both directly and indirectly – is reinvested in weapons and vehicles.³⁵ As such, the ability of armed groups to derive financing from illicit markets enhances their economic resilience in times of conflict. Firearms trafficking, for example, was an important enabling ingredient for the onset of conflict in the Sahel: the influx of weapons into the region in the wake of the 2011 Libyan revolution made weapons readily available to different groups, contributing to the weaponization of existing trafficking routes.³⁶ Since then, the Sahel has appeared to be mired in conflicts and unprecedented levels of armed violence. The 2015-2022 period was the most violent on record across West Africa, with a continuously increasing number of casualties.³⁷ Governments have struggled to respond to accelerating conflict, and the formal political landscape remains volatile at national and regional levels: between August 2020 and December 2023, power changed hands six times in four Sahelian countries leading to political transitions.³⁸ At the regional level, Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger announced their withdrawal from the G5 Sahel and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), leaving uncertainty over the reconfiguration of cooperation mechanisms.³⁹

Once conflict is triggered, illicit activities can contribute to resourcing conflict actors, and feed into governance strategies of non-state armed groups operating across the Sahel.⁴⁰ These groups can profit through taxation of licit and illicit flows or activities in the territories over which they exert influence. There are limited options for traversing the Sahara Desert, and control of key transportation corridors therefore translates into significant financial gains, some of which are reinvested in the purchase of weapons, further fuelling conflict.⁴¹

In Mali, for example, the cities of Gao and Timbuktu lie on major crossroads in the Sahel and are key nodes in smuggling routes for migrants, fuel, medical products and a wide range of other commodities.⁴² JNIM exerts influence over territories around these major towns and levies taxes on many of the illicit flows. Throughout 2018 and 2019, JNIM members were, for example, reported extorting fuel traffickers operating in these regions.⁴³

Similarly, migrant smugglers travelling the route northwards from Gao liaise with armed groups and pay taxes to these groups on northbound roads at various checkpoints before reaching Algeria.⁴⁴ The need to transit territory under armed group control makes connections with armed groups through northern Mali essential to migrant smugglers.⁴⁵

As armed groups expand their territorial areas of influence, they increase their potential tax base. For example, a JNIM cell took control of the Burkinabé town of Nadiagou, a strategic location due to the cross section of roads connecting this city with the border of Benin.⁴⁶ A state border post existed in this town prior to JNIM taking control. The border area near Nadiagou is a key transit point on one of the three main corridors for fuel trafficking into the Sahel and for other commodities flowing into the Sahel from coastal countries where they are cheaper.⁴⁷ Control of Nadiagou allowed JNIM to occasionally levy taxes at checkpoints and inspect those who passed through.

The artisanal gold mining market stands out as a particularly important source of financing for non-state armed groups in Sahel countries. The Panel of Experts on Mali has repeatedly documented the expansion strategies of armed groups, including violent extremist groups, towards artisanal gold mining areas.⁴⁸ It is not possible to accurately assess the illicit net income generated by armed groups in the Sahel from artisanal

gold mining, but production estimates indicate these groups could be generating billions of dollars in revenue across the Sahel. In Burkina Faso alone, it was estimated that ASGM produced around 49.5 tons of gold in 2018. This quantity would be worth around \$2.7 billion in 2022.⁴⁹

Trafficking can bolster the legitimacy of non-state armed groups operating as organized criminal groups

Where trafficking generates local income, regulation or distribution of benefits accrues local legitimacy. This legitimacy among elements of communities underpins the ability of armed groups to sustain conflict. When armed groups operate as gatekeepers for resources, as it is the case in ASGM areas across the Sahel, they are positioned as providers of economic opportunities and alternative governance.⁵⁰ The dynamics of the illicit fuel and gold markets illustrate how profits from trafficking empowered a new class of political actors and, in the eyes of many elites in northern Mali, disrupted traditional social hierarchies and weakened the role of traditional leaders in mediating conflicts.⁵¹

An example of a non-state armed group involved in illicit markets and taking a governance role is JNIM, which has arbitrated communal tensions and provided alternative justice functions, including by protecting herds from cattle rustling.⁵² In northern Mali, major drug traffickers have acquired local and national influence and have invested in their communities to gain political capital.⁵³ The long-term impacts of the erosion of state legitimacy in favour of alternative governance providers – namely armed groups in the Sahel – are significant.

With the growing presence of armed groups in the area, smuggling networks have also played a role in supplying recruits for Mali's armed groups, with migrants joining their ranks in some cases.⁵⁴ Similarly, armed groups rely on illicitly sourced fuel for their mobility.⁵⁵

However, there are instances where the ASGM sector has clearly offered communities alternatives to banditry and insurgency. In northern parts of the Niger, ASGM is reported to have increased resilience against recruitment into armed rebellions.⁵⁶ Similarly, according to the United Nation Panel of Experts on Mali, the gold rush in Mali has been “draining essential human resources, vehicles and potential recruits” from armed

groups. It also noted the role of artisanal gold mining in “absorb[ing] ex-combatants and draw[ing] youth away from joining armed groups.”⁵⁷

Organize crime has thus a myriad of effects on stability in the Sahel. It can fuel conflict by providing resources to armed groups as well as sources of economic and social resilience to populations in the short term.

Impact of organized crime on human rights (Pillar 2)

Where illicit economies are governed by organized criminal groups, individuals and communities are vulnerable to human right abuses

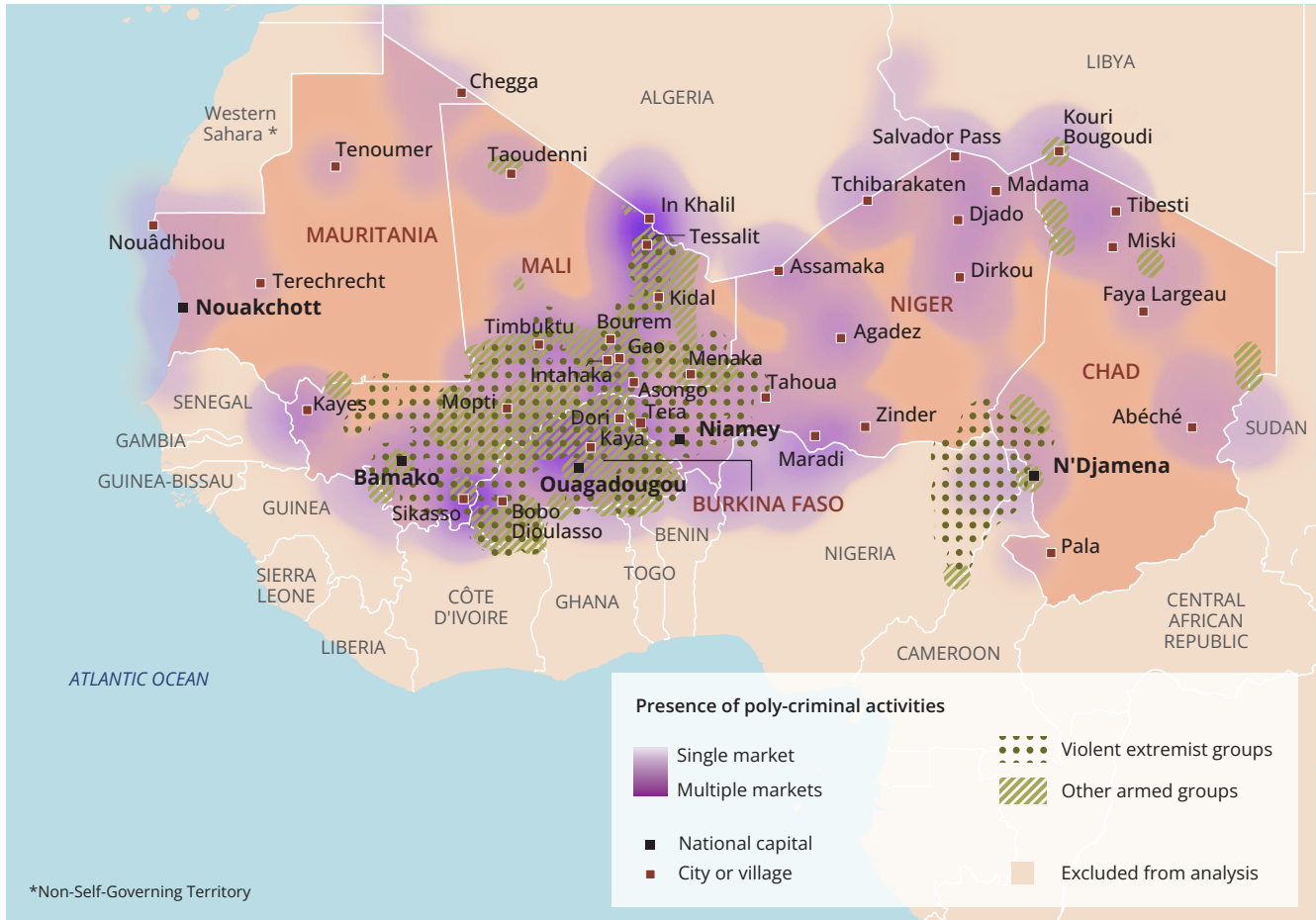
The challenges Sahelian countries face in enforcing the rule of law and combatting organized crime, particularly in areas of conflict, leave individuals vulnerable to human rights abuses. In addition to the right to life and physical integrity covered in the earlier sections of this report, organized crime undermines the right to health, decent work, and a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Furthermore, victims of organized crime in conflict and remote areas also have limited access to justice and effective remedy.

Organized crime exploits and exacerbates vulnerabilities of individuals in the Sahel

Organized crime is not simply a driver of human rights abuses; it may also benefit from and exploit human rights violations, including when states experience difficulties in meeting the needs of their population.⁵⁸ For instance, migrant smugglers exploit the lack of legal migration pathways and the vulnerabilities of migrants.⁵⁹ Along migratory routes in the Sahel, abuse of refugees and migrants, including sexual abuse and extortion, is widespread.⁶⁰ Perpetrators of violence are not only smugglers, but also officials, bandits and other actors.⁶¹ According to the surveys conducted by the MMC in 2021 in Libya, Mali, the Niger and Tunisia, three quarters of surveyed refugees and migrants stated they needed additional assistance regardless of whether they used a smuggler.⁶² This highlights that, in general, refugees and migrants have unmet basic needs throughout their journey.

In turn, smuggling of migrants can lead to trafficking in persons, which violates individuals' human rights. In one payment modality practiced in the Sahel – in which refugees and migrants pay 50 per cent of the

MAP 3. Detected poly-criminal markets areas and presence of armed groups



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined.

Methodology: Detected trafficking areas refers to localities which were identified by UNODC through triangulation of sources (official data from national authorities, complementary report from law enforcement authorities, open sources information, literature review) and based on the TOCTA Sahel criminal market reports – namely trafficking in fuel, firearms, gold and drugs, and smuggling of migrants. The current data remains however partial, and the list of detected trafficking areas is thus not exhaustive and comprehensive. The level of poly-criminality in some localities - particularly in hard-to-reach areas where data is scarce – is likely to be underestimated due to unavailability of data. Data on the presence of armed groups is derived from analysis by the European Council on Foreign Relations and ACLED data between 1 January 2019 and 7 October 2022, available at <https://acleddata.com> (accessed 7 October 2022).

total smuggling fee at the beginning their journey and the rest at the end – refugees and migrants may be held captive in “credit houses” in transit or destination countries until the outstanding debt is settled, making them vulnerable to trafficking in persons for the purpose of forced labour.⁶³

At informal Sahelian ASGM sites, labour conditions pose a range of threats to human life, including collapsing mines, and employment frameworks often constitute trafficking for forced labour.⁶⁴ Child labour in ASGM can notably lead to cases of abuse, exploitation, trafficking, violence and torture of children. For instance, child labour is prevalent at the I-n-Tillit-Nord

mine in Mali, exposing children to significant risks.⁶⁵ In 2022, the Panel of Experts on Mali expressed concerns about the recruitment of children on ASGM sites in northern areas of Mali that are not covered by the National Action Plan. According to the Panel of Experts on Mali, it is estimated that children constitute a third of ASGM workers in Kidal and Gao. Some children, especially those arriving from Burkina Faso and the Niger, work on credit to repay their transport and food, and some work unpaid for days or even for the full duration of their time at the mines.⁶⁶

Human rights abuses prevalent in illicit markets have detrimental effects on the achievement of decent work for all, as pursued by SDG 8, including target 8.7 (eradicate forced labour, modern slavery, human trafficking and child labour) and target 8.8 (protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants). This leads to the creation of precarious informal jobs, leaving workers without social protection and at the expense of progress towards increasing national compliance with labour rights, which is already low in the Sahel.

Obstacles to access to justice, including corruption, also limit people's ability to respond to human rights abuses related to organized crime. For example, shortfalls in implementing the provisions of the Smuggling of Migrants Protocols affect the human rights of people who are smuggled. In some cases, heavy-handed criminal justice responses can be a push factor towards the use of more dangerous and clandestine means of travelling, including the use of smugglers.⁶⁷

BOX 3: OTHER CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES PROVIDING RESOURCES TO CONFLICTING PARTIES IN THE SAHEL: THE CASE OF CATTLE RUSTLING AND KIDNAPPING

Cattle rustling, which typically operates across ethnic lines in the Sahel (both within herder communities and between herder and sedentary communities), is intricately tied to intercommunal conflicts. It drives spiralling violence and grievances that can propel recruitment into armed groups. For example, raiding of Fulani cattle by the Tuareg-dominated MNLA during the 2012 insurgency was a driver for recruitment of Fulani into MUJAO.^a In central Mali, Fulani from Mopti Region have joined the Katiba Macina in self-defence against other armed groups – including the MNLA – that were stealing Fulani cattle. Livestock can also constitute an element of armed group governance, with groups gaining legitimacy by protecting livestock and actively pursuing thefts by other groups, establishing themselves as alternative governance providers.^b Notably, in the Inner Niger Delta, where the Katiba Macina appears to have consolidated control, interviews indicate that cattle rustling has dropped significantly, and that the group protects cattle from theft. The expansion of cattle rustling in the Sahel has had significant impacts on stability in the region, including loss of livelihoods and extremely high levels of violence. Several distinct illicit markets similarly amplify pre-existing intercommunal tensions, which not

only foment violence but can also be exploited by conflict actors.

Kidnapping is another criminal activity that provides profits to non-state actors involved in conflicts. The geographies of conflict and kidnapping areas overlap, and armed groups are important actors in the kidnapping economy. From the early 2000s until around 2012, kidnappings were located mostly in northern Mali, foreigners were the dominant target and their kidnapping represented a central source of revenue for AQMI.^c However, as foreigners left the region, kidnapping increasingly focused on local communities – according to ACLED data, since 2012 around 97 per cent of the targets of kidnappings in Mali have been local citizens.^d The kidnapping economy in the Sahel region is growing: in Mali alone the number of individuals kidnapped rose eight-fold (from 22 to 184) between 2017 and 2021.^e

a UNOWAS, *Pastoralism and Security in West Africa and the Sahel Towards Peaceful Coexistence*, 2018, p. 46.

b Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, "Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 46, No. 1 (2019), pp. 1–20.

c Serigne Bamba Gaye, *Connections between jihadist groups and smuggling and illegal trafficking rings in the Sahel*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018.

d ACLED data: 1,315 kidnappings in 2021, representing a two-fold increase from 2020; in 2021, 2,354 fatalities, exceeding that of Mali for the second time in the last three years.

e ACLED data. The ACLED data on kidnappings in Burkina Faso is not included as the authorities questioned its accuracy.

BOX 4: TRAFFICKING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION – THE CASE OF MALI'S PEACE TALKS

Trafficking interests have shaped the alignment of signatory armed groups during peace negotiations in the Sahel and have exerted significant influence over their implementation or lack thereof.^a

Despite the known involvement of some conflicting parties in drug trafficking and the acknowledgment by many Malian and international actors that drug trafficking contributes to Mali's instability and conflict, trafficking was discussed only on the sidelines of the Ouagadougou (2013) and Algiers (2014-2015) peace talks, which sought to end the crisis in Mali that began in 2012. Discussion related to drug trafficking was largely excluded from the final peace agreement.^b However, addressing violent competition over trafficking routes was central to local mediation initiatives – known as Anéfis 1 (2015), Anéfis (2017) and Anéfis (2021). These sought to address criminal market control in order to diminish clashes between signatory armed groups.^c

The withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the end of the UN Security Council sanction regime on Mali in 2023, coupled with the

end of the peace agreement in 2024, will have an impact on the security situation in Mali. Trafficking activities are likely to play an increasing role in funding operations of armed groups competing for control over territories. Trafficking routes could evolve in response to changed security dynamics. At the end of 2023, conflicts arose around former MINUSMA bases such as Aguelhok, Ber, Kidal, Léré, Tessalit and Kidal, all which this study has identified as trafficking hotspots (see map 1).^d

- a This is tracked extensively throughout the reports of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali, including, but not limited to: UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed to resolution 2484 (2019), S/2020/785, Rev.1, 6 August 2020, para. 76; UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed to resolution 2484 (2019), S/2021/714, 6 August 2021, paras 81-83.
- b References to organized crime are found only in the Agreement's preamble and in three articles (article 1, article 29 and article 30), *Accord Pour la Paix et la Réconciliation au Mali – Issu du Processus d'Alger*, 20 June 2015; ICG, *Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali*, 2018.
- c UNSC, Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali S/2016/819, 29 September 2016, para. 19; Joint statement by the CMA and the Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger, Déclaration d'Adjelhoc, 1 December 2020.
- d Manon Laplace, "La bataille de Ber signe-t-elle le retour de la guerre entre Bamako et les anciens rebelles ?", *Jeune Afrique*, 22 August 2023; ICG, "Nord du Mali : une confrontation dont personne ne sortira vainqueur", 13 October 2023; UNSC, Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed to resolution 2484 (2019), S/2021/714, 6 August 2021, para. 32.

Impact of organized crime on rule of law and governance (Pillar 3)

The income generated by illicit activities can facilitate the infiltration of organized criminal groups into layers of state systems – from public officials in the judiciary, law enforcement and border control – entrenching impunity and fundamentally undermining good governance and the rule of law.⁶⁸ This can lead to the institutionalization of corruption, a phenomenon that maintains a mutually reinforcing relationship with illicit markets. Corruption can facilitate the operations and growth of illicit markets, but it is also fuelled by illicit markets.⁶⁹

Criminal groups take advantage of corrupted practices

While measuring levels of corruption is difficult, illegal economic activities associated with organized crime in the Sahel seem to be facilitated by corrupt public officials.⁷⁰ Illicit cross-border activity is notably facilitated by the corruption of border officials and security forces.⁷¹

In the case of migration, refugees and migrants across the Sahel are repeatedly asked to pay bribes, regardless of their status and formally processed paperwork.⁷² Public officials' attitudes can push migrants to seek out smuggling services. For example, two thirds of smugglers interviewed and surveyed in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger reported being in touch with police

and border officials to facilitate smuggling activities.⁷³ As a smuggler in the Niger reported: “Before when it [smuggling] was legal, we had contact with them [authorities] but now we stay in touch only with those who take bribes.”⁷⁴ Smugglers in Burkina Faso most commonly reported that public officials “guide[d] migrants across the border.”⁷⁵

The 2022 arrest of eight police, gendarmerie and customs officials for enabling cross-border fuel trafficking into Burkina Faso illustrates how criminal groups leverage their proceeds to pressure law enforcement officials. The trial revealed the network to be highly organized, transporting up to 30,000 litres of fuel per trip. Some of the most organized traffickers used several trucks and were able to smuggle more than 3 million litres per year over a three-year period. The traffickers were able to pass multiple checkpoints by paying bribes ranging from 350,000 to 700,000 CFA francs per truck (between \$553–\$1,106) to law enforcement officials, which is often more than their monthly salary.⁷⁶

Organized crime fuels corruption and impunity

The increased profitability of trafficking activities in the region has also empowered those in key political or security positions to offer protection for trans-Saharan trafficking operations in exchange of profits.⁷⁷ Higher-value illicit markets – such as cocaine, cannabis resin and gold – appear to have fuelled income opportunities at different echelons of state institutions.⁷⁸

Successful court investigations into criminal networks have revealed the prevalence of corruption among state officials in law enforcement and border security.⁷⁹ Systems of payment to state security officials providing impunity for traffickers of drugs and smugglers of migrants have been repeatedly documented by the Panel of Experts on Mali.⁸⁰ Some traffickers are said to have become “untouchable” due to their connections.⁸¹

Vested interests among corrupt officials and some community leaders involved in organized crime promote impunity to such a degree that the criminal justice system itself and its overall ability to protect the rule of law are undermined.⁸² For instance, the Panel of Experts on Mali has documented former parliamentarians and members of armed groups involved in the peace and reconciliation agreement while conducting various forms of trafficking, including cocaine, gold and smuggling of migrants, without fear of arrest.⁸³

In the Niger, investigations by the Nigerien authorities into significant drug seizures have repeatedly resulted in the arrest and detention of state officials and influential community leaders. For example, the seizure in Niamey of 17 tons of cannabis resin in 2021 led to the arrest of an armed group leader who was charged with drug trafficking. This individual – who was, according to the United Nations Panel of Experts for Mali, closely connected to a high-level Nigerien drug baron and former member of parliament – was released in November 2022 on a procedural breach.⁸⁴ In another example, the seizure of 214 kg of cocaine in the region of Agadez, the Niger, in January 2022, led to the arrest of the mayor of Fachi.⁸⁵

Organized crime erodes people’s trust in state institutions and undermines electoral politics

Intersections between electoral politics, political elites and illicit markets have profound implications for governance. Perceptions of impunity of state officials for involvement in illicit markets undermines the social contract between governments and populations.⁸⁶ Protection payments to representatives of state institutions operating as gatekeepers for illicit activities entrench the positions of those corrupt individuals, drive underinvestment in development and feed into political processes, including elections.⁸⁷

In a context of limited state resources, illicit markets undermine people’s trust in public health systems. Contamination of medical product supply chains can lead to public loss of confidence in state health services, eroding the perceived legitimacy of the state as a service provider, with long-reaching consequences for public health.⁸⁸ Gaps in drug treatment accessibility and quality may lead people to not trust the public health system and not comply with public health measures.⁸⁹

In the Sahel countries and West Africa more broadly, electoral financing regulations that permit financing through private resources without adequate accountability mechanisms leave processes vulnerable to corruption by criminal actors.⁹⁰ There is a risk that when profits from illicit markets are fed into electoral financing, elected officials may become indebted to illicit actors, which could be repaid through protection and facilitation of illicit activities. This could divert policy-making towards protecting criminal markets instead of striving for development, peace and stability.⁹¹

The judicial system is often perceived by communities in Sahelian states to be vulnerable to corruption, damaging access to justice and contributing to a widespread context of impunity for criminal actors.⁹² The corrupting influence of illicit markets at different layers of these institutions damages their integrity, undermining the legitimacy of state officials in the eyes of the population, with far-reaching consequences for the rule of law.

Impact of organized crime on sustainable development (Pillar 4)

Across the Sahel countries, illicit economies can be a source of livelihood where alternatives are scarce.⁹³ However, in the long run, these economies hamper efforts to reduce social and economic inequalities⁹⁴ and undermine sustainable development and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals for Sahelian countries – notably, SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 4 (Quality education), SDG 5 (Gender equality), SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities), SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), SDG 15 (Life on land) and SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). The impacts of organized crime on SDG 16 have also been discussed extensively under Pillars 1, 2 and 3.

Organized crime provides livelihood to local communities at the expense of long-term development

In a region affected by multidimensional poverty, generating an income is a challenge for many communities. The income generated by illicit markets can also feed into and support subsistence livelihoods and operate as an economic safety net. This has been documented, in particular, with the income generated from the smuggling of migrants, gold trafficking and fuel trafficking.

Illicit markets, such as gold trafficking, can be critical for certain communities that rely entirely on local economic opportunities generated by ASGM.⁹⁵ While ASGM is not illicit per se in Sahel countries, barriers to formalization, in particular access to licences, push ASGM communities towards illegal trading hubs and fuel organized crime.⁹⁶ Estimates suggest that around 10 per cent of the populations of Burkina Faso, Mali

and the Niger could have been directly or indirectly employed by artisanal mining in 2016.⁹⁷ The importance of ASGM as a central element of Sahelian states' economies, and as an economic safety net for vulnerable populations, is only expected to grow as climate change poses an increasing threat to traditional livelihoods, including agriculture and pastoralism.⁹⁸

Certain areas in the Sahel – mostly in border and hard-to-reach areas – are characterized by poly-criminal market activities (see maps 1 and 2). In these high-crime environments, criminal activities may yield higher returns than legal productive activities, discouraging individuals from investing in human capital accumulation and skill development. Instead, individuals tend to invest in combat skills, acquired from past conflicts such as in Libya, which could also be labelled as criminal capital.⁹⁹ This is particularly applicable to trafficking hubs located in rural areas or at borderlands such as the Tibesti Region in Chad, where the local economy appears to rely on illicit trafficking (see box 5 on pages 28–29). However, these short-term and local economic opportunities are often created at the expense of long-term development to promote peaceful and inclusive communities (SDG 16) as they generate violence, conflict and health challenges.

Organized crime takes away resources for sustainable and inclusive economic development while undermining formal economic systems



While difficult to quantify, the cumulative impacts of organized crime and illicit economies on SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure) and SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production) are believed to be significant. The diversion of legitimate trade flows alone has been identified as a possible factor shaping the relatively low contribution of West Africa to global legal imports and exports.¹⁰⁰

Crime-related violence has tremendous economic costs¹⁰¹ and drives away foreign and national investments. The perceived loss of security caused by weakened law enforcement and diminished protection of private property rights notably creates unfavourable conditions for entrepreneurial activities. Sahelian

economies all rank low on the World Bank of Ease of Doing Business – with the Niger and Chad respectively ranking 132 and 182 out of 190 countries – notably due to the difficulty of enforcing contracts and security risks.¹⁰² Additionally, criminal violence negatively affects a state's capacity to attract skilled workers. It also leads to a reduction in competitiveness between companies and an increase in uncertainty among businesses, which make conducting economic activities – including tourism (indicator SDG 8.9.1) – in high-crime areas particularly challenging.¹⁰³

The smuggling and illicit sale of licit goods deprive the Sahel countries of significant funds, shrinking already low revenues and further limiting the resources available to states to fund welfare systems and drive economic development.¹⁰⁴ Given the heavy reliance on external exports by states across the Sahel, the ability to fund development is contingent on capturing a fair share of export revenues, generated to a significant extent from natural resources.¹⁰⁵ Smuggling of goods such as gold and fuel undermines a state's potential to capture those export revenues. For instance, investigations by the HALCIA in the Niger provide insights into the scale of evasion of fuel export taxes through fraudulent practices. The HALCIA found that traffickers commonly purchased fuel marked for export at lower prices, which was then sold on the domestic market, or to other regional states, evading tax.¹⁰⁶ Cumulatively, the HALCIA estimated such practices presented a loss in excess of 10 billion CFA francs (over \$15.8 million) to the Nigerien state.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, the vast majority of gold exports from the Sahel are undeclared or under-declared, with a significant proportion trafficked to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹⁰⁸ United Nations Comtrade data shows, for example, a vast discrepancy between Malian exports of gold to the UAE (567 kg in 2019) and the UAE-declared imports of gold from Mali (circa 81 tons in 2019), indicating undeclared exports and lost tax revenues for Mali.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, the Niger reported exporting approximately 2.9 tons of gold to the UAE in 2021, while the UAE reported 34 tons of gold imports from the Niger.¹¹⁰ While applying discrepancy analysis to the gold trade (comparing export and import data between trade partner countries and measuring the difference) can reflect statistical gaps, it provides an indication of the level of smuggling and fraud taking place in gold flows, including from Sahel countries to the UAE.¹¹¹ Gold supply chains are also shaped by national export taxes,

with smugglers targeting points of export with low taxation rates.¹¹² Notably, export taxes are only one of the direct and indirect taxes levied at each stage of the formal gold supply chain; consequently, they constitute only one element of the total revenues lost through informality.

Organized crime undermines the ability of the state to promote formal and sustainable economic development in an inclusive manner. Trafficking in goods and resources such as fuel, medical products and gold distorts competition for stakeholders operating in the formal sector, corrupting and hampering growth of the private sector.¹¹³ The laundering of illicit proceeds through the formal economy undermines formal financial systems.¹¹⁴ For instance, distorted pricing fuels a vicious cycle in which high prices on the black market drive more gold into illicit supply chains – which are untaxed and benefit only a small group actors, including criminal networks and, in some cases, armed groups – instead of benefitting entire communities.¹¹⁵ High prices are in part due to the widespread use of gold as a tool to evade taxes on other business activities, including by importers seeking to avoid import taxes and repatriation requirements or to launder proceeds from other illicit markets.¹¹⁶ This can inflate the value of gold beyond its commodity pricing. Reflecting this, ASGM has been repeatedly identified as a central money laundering risk by international financial regulatory authorities.¹¹⁷ Regarding Mali specifically, both the IMF and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) have highlighted this risk, with Mali placed on FATF's grey list in 2019, which called for greater scrutiny of financial dealings in the country.¹¹⁸

While it is difficult to assess how criminal groups invest their proceeds, significant profits are believed to be spent locally rather than being funnelled into protection payments or laundered into financial institutions.¹¹⁹ This includes expenditure on real estate, construction and the purchase and import of luxury vehicles.¹²⁰ This form of investment of illicit proceeds can suppress legitimate business, which underpins economic growth, and can inflate prices of housing and other resources, making them less accessible to local communities.

Overall, organized crime impedes the development of resilient infrastructure, inclusive and sustainable industrialization and innovation (SDG 9), and the development of sustainable patterns of consumption and

BOX 5: THE TIBESTI REGION: A TRAFFICKING HUB THAT PROVIDES NON-SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD FOR INDIVIDUAL WITH CRIMINAL CAPITAL^a

Bordering southwestern Libya, the Tibesti Region of northern Chad has emerged as a trafficking hub where several illicit markets are concentrated, and law enforcement officials have limited access due to high insecurity.^b It is a strategic location where trafficking flows from North Africa, West Africa and Sudan converge. The Tibesti Region is an example of an area where illicit economies provide economic opportunities and livelihood in a region suffering from multidimensional poverty and where alternatives are scarce.^c

In 2012, the region emerged as a gold trafficking hub with estimates of 300,000 ASGM miners.^d While gold mines are officially closed, miners operate clandestinely. In June 2022, according to media reports, President Mahamat Idriss Déby estimated that 57 billion CFA francs worth of gold (about \$90 million) was smuggled out of Chad weekly to Libya.^e Armed groups are reportedly protecting mining sites and recruiting at them.^f Gold trafficking is suspected to fund one of the main non-state armed groups, the Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République.^g

Migrant smuggling dynamics are intertwined with illicit artisanal gold mining in the Tibesti, which has been a transit and migrant smuggling hub since 2016.^h Chad's gold fields are economically attractive for Chadian nationals as well as for migrants from the Central African Republic, Mali, Mauritania and Sudan.ⁱ Migrants commonly work in gold mines to pay for onward migration, but the proportions of those staying or continuing their trips are unknown. In 2022 and 2023, migration flows fluctuated based on factors such as easing of patrol checks on ve-

hicles heading to mines, armed clashes in Kouri Bougoudi and increasing mining taxes imposed by self-defence groups in Minski.^j The recent Sudanese crisis is expected to increase the number of migrants transiting through Chad and vulnerable to traffickers.^k

Additionally, according to a Chadian senior law enforcement official, the Tibesti Region constitutes a key transit and consumption area for drugs. Due to severe working conditions in gold sites, drug consumption – particularly opioids, such as tramadol, and cannabis – is common among miners.^l Tramadol seized in Chad mostly comes from South Asia and transit through coastal countries of West and Central Africa.^m If not consumed locally, drugs – mainly cannabis resin and cocaine – are trafficked to Libya, Egypt and Europe.ⁿ Armed groups present in the Tibesti Region support drug trafficking through transport and protection services.^o

Tibesti is also key for firearms trafficking, particularly in Kouri Bougoudi at the border with Libya.^p Once in Chad, weapons moving from Libya may continue to Sudan or the Central African Republic.^q Following violent clashes in June 2022, the Chadian government ordered the evacuation and disarmament of gold mines.^r According to media reports, around 100 arms were seized.^s

While ASGM may provide people with livelihoods, labour conditions threaten miners' health or even lives and may often amount to forced labour. In September 2019, for example, 52 people died in a landslide at a gold mine in Kouri Bougoudi.

Competition over illicit trafficking control has fuelled conflicts between locals against authorities and against "foreigners" (either Chadians from other regions or non-Chadians).^t For example, a clash between miners in Kouri Bougoudi in May 2022 led to deaths and displacements.^u

The situation in the Tibesti illustrates the limited options certain communities have in contexts where economic and social development is limited, where economic opportunities are intertwined with criminal group activities, and where human rights are abused. Combating organized crime in these communities becomes particularly challenging if not combined with alternative livelihoods. Past responses harmed the most vulnerable in these communities – including people who were relying on in-

formal and at times illicit activities – which further undermined people’s trust in the state. Chadian authorities have, on several occasions, closed and bombarded mining sites following clashes between miners and armed groups, forcing thousands to flee in search of humanitarian assistance.^v The Chadian government has, however, recently announced measures to facilitate access to basic services including the construction of a hospital.^w

- a One of the most difficult areas of the Sahara Desert to access, the Tibesti Region is particularly isolated, mountainous and arid, which exacerbates poverty and leads to an absence of basic services and a lack of economic opportunity. In 2018, Chad’s National Institute of Statistics, Economic and Demographic Studies counted 35,000 inhabitants in Tibesti, mostly from the Tebu community (one the three main nomadic populations of the Sahara Desert, present in southern Libya, the Niger and northwestern Sudan).
- b Interview with a law enforcement official from Chad, Niamey, June 2023.
- c Very rare local development opportunities have been reported. For example, a tourism initiative was launched in 2012 and ended in 2014 with little success. Between 2000 and 2012, no more than 800 tourists reportedly passed through Faya-Largeau, the main town to the south of the massif; See: Julien Brachet and Judith Scheele, “L’envers Du Tourisme Au Sahara Tchadien: Entre Jeu Politique National et Indifférences Locales”, *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, vol. 55, No. 217 (2015).
- d UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), Chad ASM Profile.
- e Dawn Nagar, “United Nations Role in the Economic Community of Central African States: Central African Republic and Chad”, *Challenging the United Nations Peace and Security Agenda in Africa*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2022, pp. 75–119, 2022; Katarina Hojje, “Gold Mines in Lawless Region Targeted in Chad’s Revenue Search”, *Bloomberg*, 11 June 2022.
- f UNECA, Chad ASM Profile; Chad, Ministry of Environment of Chad, Plan d’action national pour l’extraction minière artisanale et à petite échelle d’or au Tchad, conformément à la convention de Minamata sur le mercure, 2021, p. 76.
- g Raphaëlle Chevrillon-Guibert, Laurent Gagnol and Magrin Géraud, “Les ruées vers l’or au Sahara et au nord du Sahel. Ferment de crise ou stabilisateur?”, *Hérodote*, vol. 172, No. 1 (2019), pp. 193–215.
- h UNODC, Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel, 2023, p. 17.
- i IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, “Mobility mapping in Chad”, 2022.
- j IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, “Tchad — Rapport sur le suivi des flux de populations 53 (Janvier - Mars 2023)”, 2023.
- k Interview with a law enforcement official from Chad, Niamey, June 2023.
- l Interview with a law enforcement official from Chad, Niamey, June 2023.
- m UNODC, Chad Annual Reports Questionnaire (ARQ), 2022.
- n Interview with a law enforcement official from Chad, Niamey, June 2023; UNODC, Chad ARQ, 2022.
- o Interview with a law enforcement official from Chad, Niamey, June 2023; UNODC, Chad ARQ, 2022; UNODC, Drug Trafficking in the Sahel, 2024.
- p Alexandre Bish, “Soldiers of Fortune: The Future of Chadian Fighters after the Libyan Ceasefire”, *Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime*, 2021; *Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime*, “Observatory of illicit economies in West Africa”, *Risk Bulletin: Issue 2*, 2021.
- q Nicolas Florquin, Sigrid Lipott and Francis Wairagu, “Weapons Compass: Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa”, *Small Arms Survey*, 2019.
- r Chad, Présidence de la République du Tchad, “Sécurité : le PCMT rencontre les Chefs militaires du Tibesti”, June 2023; Available at: <https://presidence.td/securite-le-pcmt-rencontre-les-chefs-militaires-du-tibesti/>.
- s Alwihda, “Tchad : une importante saisie d’armes de guerre au Tibesti”, 7 June 2022.
- t Madjiasra Nako, “Tchad : quand la ruée vers l’or provoque des tensions intercommunautaires”, *Jeune Afrique*, 15 August 2014; See example of Facebook post: Ahmat Goukouni, “Tibesti : les masques sont tombés”, Tchadhanana Facebook page, 31 December 2017, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Tchadhanana/photos/a.231052996987614/1596648387094728/>.
- u La rédaction des Observateurs, “Affrontements entre orpailleurs au Tchad : ‘Jamais la violence n’avait atteint un tel niveau’”, *France 24*, 1 June 2022; IOM, “Thousands Need Urgent Help as Gold Rush Fuels Clashes in Northern Chad”, 23 June 2022; “Clashes between Chad gold miners leave 100 dead”, *BBC*, 30 May 2022; IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, June 2022.
- v UNSC, The situation in Central Africa and the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2018/1065, 29 November 2018, para. 7; UNSC, The situation in Central Africa and the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2020/1154, 1 December 2020, para. 19; IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, “Situation des orpailleurs bloqués au Nord du Tchad, après les affrontements de Kouri Bougoudi”, 2022; Raphaëlle Chevrillon-Guibert, Laurent Gagnol and Magrin Géraud, “Les ruées vers l’or au Sahara et au nord du Sahel. Ferment de crise ou stabilisateur?”, *Hérodote*, vol. 172, No. 1 (2019), pp. 193–215.
- w Madjiasra Nako, “Tchad: après les affrontements de Kouri Bougoudi, Mahamat Idriss Deby annonce des mesures”, *RFI*, 10 June 2022.

production (SDG 12) in the countries of the Sahel. A good example is illicit trafficking in medical products. The Sahel countries rely heavily on imports of medical products because their pharmaceutical industries are in early stages of development. Of the total pharmaceutical expenditure in sub-Saharan Africa in 2019, imports represented as much as 70 to 90 per cent (valued at roughly \$14 billion). The saturation of trafficked medical products deters the development of a local pharmaceutical industry across the region.¹²¹

Organized crime has negative human and social costs



Organized crime directly hampers efforts to end poverty and to build resilience of the most vulnerable to economic, social and environmental shocks (SDG 1) by limiting available state resources for social protection for all (SDG 1, target 1.3) and for the reduction of social inequalities (SDG 10).¹²² For example, in Burkina Faso, a parliamentary commission estimated that gold trafficking fraud amounted to a fiscal loss of over \$490 million per year, which represents more than the budget spending planned for the Burkinabé public health sector in 2023 (294.5 billion CFA francs, equivalent to over \$479 million).¹²³

The social costs of organized crime are more difficult to quantify but are no less harmful. The illicit market for medical products results in indirect treatment costs for those who use falsified or substandard medical products. As of 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that for malaria treatment alone these totals were between \$12 million to \$44.7 million annually across sub-Saharan Africa.¹²⁴

In a region largely afflicted by malaria and with limited health infrastructure and coverage, trafficking in medical products constitutes a major obstacle to the achievement of universal health coverage, access to quality essential health-care services, and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines (SDG 3, target 3.8). Trafficking in medical products aggravates health challenges by contaminating formal medical supply chains and damaging their efficacy.¹²⁵ Medical products circulating

outside the regulatory oversight of the state expose Sahelian populations to health risks.¹²⁶ Breach of regulatory requirements at any point in the supply chain – manufacture, transport, storage and sale – can render medical products ineffective or harmful.¹²⁷ Medical products on the illicit market often contain insufficient active ingredients, leading communities to develop of antimicrobial resistance.¹²⁸ The impacts of this are severe: falsified and substandard antimalarial drugs alone lead to between 72,000 and 267,000 deaths per year across sub-Saharan Africa, according to WHO estimates.¹²⁹

Similarly, drug use fed by drug trafficking further strains scarce state health resources, which cannot meet the demand for prevention and treatment of drug use disorders (SDG 3, target 3.5). In 2022, Burkina Faso, Chad and the Niger reported large increases (of greater than 10 per cent) in the prevalence of cannabis herb use.¹³⁰ Significant levels of trafficking in pharmaceutical opioids have flooded consumption markets across West Africa, including areas of the Sahel.¹³¹ From 2017 to 2021, 49.73 per cent of the pharmaceutical opioids seized globally were seized in Africa, with tramadol being among the main types of pharmaceutical opioids seized. West and Central Africa accounted for 97.22 per cent of all tramadol seized worldwide in 2021.¹³² In the Niger, tramadol misuse has surged since the mid-2000s, including in artisanal gold mining hubs across the Tillabéri and Agadez regions.¹³³ In 2022, Burkina Faso reported an increase in the number of female patients with drug use disorders, as well as an increase in young people entering treatment.¹³⁴

While Sahelian countries have basic medical services treating people for drug use disorders, no specialized services providing integrated treatment and care – as defined by international standards – of drug use disorders exist in the Sahel.¹³⁵ Furthermore, these basic services are often concentrated in the capital cities and do not reflect national realities, as many users may not be able or willing to seek medical treatment.¹³⁶ For example, Mauritania only has one health facility in the capital city that treats drug use disorders. Most treatment for drug use disorders is provided by religious associations or civil society organizations in these countries.¹³⁷

Illicit gold mining also poses significant health risks. Exposure to mercury, either directly or indirectly through contamination of food chains, carries significant health threats for miners and surrounding communities, in-

cluding risks of movement disorders, various psychoses and renal failure.¹³⁸ Similarly, research regarding the impacts of combined cyanide and mercury use in ASGM points to potentially significant health impacts on mining populations.¹³⁹ During a mission to I-n-Tillit-Nord mine in northern Mali, the Panel of Experts on Mali confiscated 100 kg of cyanide and observed the use of mercury without protective equipment.¹⁴⁰

Some acts of violence perpetrated by organized criminal groups – particularly in the context of certain types of trafficking such as smuggling of migrants, trafficking in persons and drug trafficking – undermine the promotion of mental health and well-being in Sahelian societies (SDG 3, target 3.4). Violence and the threat of violence are often traumatic and, as such, are major drivers of mental distress.¹⁴¹

Overall, the impact of illicit markets on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in Sahelian societies remains difficult to measure due to the lack of gender-disaggregated crime data. However, certain organized crimes – such as smuggling of migrants – clearly hamper systemic change and progress towards gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in the region (SDG 5). According to surveys of refugees, migrants and smugglers conducted between June 2017 and September 2021 in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger, rape is the most frequently reported form of gender-based violence, with around 60 per cent of interviewees reporting this type of abuse.¹⁴² For example, in Mali, a member of HCUA controlling the movement of migrants in and through Talhandak near the border with Algeria was implicated in the sexual exploitation of female migrants, allegedly holding women in captivity for the purposes of sexual exploitation until payments of up to \$350 were made for their release. In certain cases, smugglers encouraged women to submit to rape in order to facilitate groups' onward passages along transit routes.¹⁴³ Research also highlights gold mining sites where women, often from Nigeria, are trafficked for sexual exploitation.¹⁴⁴ Some smugglers in Burkina Faso were reported to be implicated in sexual exploitation, which is also likely to be connected to gold mining sites or to brothels in towns and in border areas.¹⁴⁵ The reported instances of exploitation and abuse were perpetuated by smugglers – amounting to aggravated smuggling – as well as by other actors. The true magnitude of sexual and gender-based violence committed by organized crime groups in the Sahel, however, remains largely un-

known because many events are not recorded – due to diverse factors including sociocultural norms, lack of gender-sensitive national law enforcement capacities, and lack of sex-disaggregated data on the victims or perpetrators of violence.

Organized crime contributes to environmental degradation in the Sahel



Organized crime activities can lead to environmental degradation, slowing progress towards the achievement of SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation) and SDG 15 (Life on land).

On SDG 6, trafficking can negatively affect sustainable management of water resources, wastewater and ecosystems, safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene. For example, ASGM sites in the Sahel typically use mercury and cyanide in amalgamation and leaching processes,¹⁴⁶ wreaking significant environmental damage through the contamination of water supplies and agricultural land.¹⁴⁷ Gold extraction and processing require significant volumes of water, contributing to water stress. Contamination of already limited water supplies puts greater pressure on competition for natural resources and interlinked social grievances, which have also been central factors driving conflict in the Sahel.¹⁴⁸ For example, in northern Mali, the United Nations Panel of Experts reported the use of “chemicals [that] contaminate the water” on the I-n-Tillit-Nord mine, and “following that visit, a health crisis was reported in the village of Ti-n-Tarkat, caused by water scarcity and toxic chemicals.”¹⁴⁹ Similarly, evidence regarding the impacts of combined cyanide and mercury use in ASGM points to potentially significant health impacts on mining populations.¹⁵⁰

Illicit trafficking also indirectly hinders communities' capacities to protect, restore and promote the sustainable use of ecosystems (SDG 15). Fuel leaks and explosions, arising from poor regulation of fuel in transit and storage in illicit markets, have widespread environmental impacts. Other types of crimes unaddressed by this study, such as trafficking in illegal pesticides, animal vaccines or wildlife trafficking, are likely to have a direct impact on SDG 15. The environmental threats caused by these forms of trafficking require further study.

Environmental damage works as a force multiplier, amplifying other harms of illicit markets on conflicts. For example, in the Kayes Region of Mali, environmental impacts have fuelled tensions between mining and farming communities, sparking conflicts.¹⁵¹ The OECD identified unregulated mining as a key driver of environmental fragility in the Sahel, labelling it a ‘risk multiplier’ that has an important indirect effect on overall fragility in the region.¹⁵²

While this section focuses on the environmental impacts of organized crime, it is important to recognize that the intersection of both phenomena is complex and that environmental factors such as climate change can also shape organized crime and drive greater reliance on illicit market activities.

Policy implications

While the 2023 SDG Summit in September 2023 marked the half-way point to the deadline for achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, the Secretary-General of the United Nations called for the acceleration of progress towards the goals. As part of this effort, this study thus outlines the multifaceted impacts of organized crime in the Sahel and seeks to provide policymakers with a better understanding of how organized crime can undermine efforts to achieve SDGs, peace and security, and human rights.

This report identifies 18 policy implications to inform trafficking responses in the Sahel. The goal is to shift how policymakers conceptualize and plan their efforts against organized crime, employing more evidence-based and efficient stabilization and sustainable development strategies (policy planning, programming, research and knowledge management, awareness raising, legislative assistance, capacity building, and partnership). As of 2024, stabilization efforts in the Sahel have predominantly focused on security and terrorism, largely underestimating the role that transnational organized crime plays in driving the current situation in the Sahel, a region affected by high levels of instability and violence, struggling to make progress towards the SDGs.

Policy planning

1. **Adopt integrated approaches to organized crime across pillars (peace and security, human rights, rule of law and governance, and sustainable development).** Transversal strategies could involve coalitions of actors across the health, environment, justice, law enforcement and development sectors. Responses to organized crime in the Sahel could better promote human rights and mitigate negative impacts on communities. The United Nations system can offer Sahelian countries and communities implementation of rapid strategic assessments and comprehensive multi-stakeholder strategies to prevent and combat organized crime and trafficking in all its forms. In pilot countries and regions that request United Nations support, United Nations Country Teams may support in the coordination of joint implementation across sectors.
2. **Offer alternative sustainable development options to communities that rely on trafficking activities.** Dismantling organized crime groups is not effective if efforts are not combined with the creation of alternative livelihoods for affected communities. Sustainable development is an essential component of crime prevention in the most vulnerable areas. In the Sahel, the provision of essential services, such as affordable and safe healthcare, education and legal migration pathways — including complete application of ECOWAS Free Movement Protocols — and licit economic opportunities grounded in human rights (notably in the ASGM sector) are key to preventing local communities from developing economic reliance on organized crime. Good practices among law enforcement include engagement with communities at border areas on sustainable natural resource management and income-generating activities. In the Hodh Ech Chargui, at the border between Mali and Mauritania, Mauritanian Meharist units (the national guard units that traditionally patrol on camels) are engaging with nomadic populations to develop income-generating activities – such as planting vegetable crops – facilitate access to health through the regular deployment of mobile nurse officers, and to provide basic education through the deployment of mobile teachers. They also support sustainable natural resource management through community conflict management

and the maintenance and securing of water wells to allow livestock breeding.¹⁵³ This type of intervention reinforces the economic resilience of communities in desert areas with limited state presence.

Programming

3. **Balance efforts across all types of trafficking, focusing on geographical areas affected by crimes and conflicts.** Certain types of trafficking tend to be overlooked. For example, current interventions to prevent and deter trafficking in flora, fauna and other natural resources (SDG 14) focus primarily on wildlife (flora and fauna) while intervention on the prevention of trafficking in natural resources (metals, minerals and precious stones) is also required. Few UN entities address trafficking in falsified medical products or illicit toxic waste. However, evidence shows that these types of trafficking are harmful to populations, affecting health, access to clean water and a safe environment, and the ability to grow as sustainable communities. Additionally, certain trafficking hubs in hard-to-reach areas – such as the Tibesti Region in Chad – often face challenges in enforcing the rule of law due to the limited presence of law enforcement. United Nations Country Teams could support Member States in identifying main trafficking issues by location, assessing their potential to negatively impact SDG progress, and ensuring that these are reflected in strategic planning processes, joint programming and workplans at the national and regional levels.
4. **Based on targeted priorities, monitor and coordinate resources – including funding and human capacities – in communities that rely on trafficking to ensure efficient and adequate resource allocation.** A coordinated funding strategy on trafficking and a tracking matrix of current interventions could ensure that responses are informed by priority needs on the ground, rather than responses that are donor driven. The unreliability of data tends to invisibilize the extent of crime-related problems in the Sahel, which then fail to be classified as priorities for resource allocation or targeted interventions. For example, due to the lack of data on drug consumption, existing treatment facilities in the Sahel remain largely inadequately funded and staffed to respond to increasing consumption

trends. The newly established Integrated Border Stability Mechanism – led by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Interpol, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and UNODC – notably offers a multilateral coordination platform on cross-border governance and security interventions in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, the Niger and Togo.

Research and knowledge management

5. **Support Member States in producing, collecting and analyzing reliable drugs and crime data.** Member States in the Sahel have recently increased their efforts to produce and collect data on drugs and crime. For instance, as of July 2023, all Sahel countries have focal points responsible for ensuring annual contributions to UNODC data-collection cycles on drugs. However, major challenges remain in ensuring the production, centralization, quality control and analysis of data. International partners could support Member States across all sectors (national authorities, statistics institutes, academia, civil society and the private sector) to improve national capacities for the standardization, management, ethical and safe collection, storage, and use of data on victims of trafficking, perpetrators and other aspects of the crime. United Nations-mandated data collection tools such as the Annual Report Questionnaire (ARQ), the Individual Drug Seizures (IDS), the Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire, the Questionnaire for the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, and the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals indicators, provide frameworks that can help establish or strengthen national data systems and facilitate the exchange of information between Member States at sub-regional and regional levels. Member States may then integrate crime figures as part of governments' impact assessments and progress towards SDGs.
6. **Build capacity to produce, collect and analyze disaggregated data on drugs and crime – including data disaggregated by gender, age and disability.** The production and collection of disaggregated data are essential to ensure data granularity and inclusivity. The lack of disaggregated data in

the Sahel on topics such as drug use significantly hinders the formulation of effective and evidence-based policy responses. It limits the ability to assess and to address the differentiated impacts of organized crime by age, gender, ethnicity, disability status and socioeconomic background. With this data, integrated responses to organized crime could be designed more inclusively, notably by using intersectional lenses to consider the differentiated social impacts on people's lives.

7. **Centralize and coordinate knowledge management on drugs and crime to inform evidence-based policies and programming aimed at combatting organized crime in the Sahel and globally.** Member States in the Sahel, and more generally in West and Central Africa, have reported the need to harmonize international data collection tools on crime to ensure efficient reporting. A coordination mechanism could enable UN entities engaged in data and research on different forms of trafficking to better support Member States in anticipating trends and crime convergence and provide more comprehensive and predictive analysis. The United Nations system could propose a platform to centralize resources (data and collection tools, existing databases, analysis, mapping, intelligence products, publications, capacity-building opportunities, and more). Existing knowledge management portals (SHERLOC and the UNODC data portal, for example) constitute a solid base to further develop a more granular inventory of available trafficking-relevant data in the United Nations system and better inform assessments and risk analysis at the country, regional and global levels.

Normative assistance

8. **Consider legislative and policy changes to reflect the increasingly complex nature of organized crime and its impacts.** The United Nations system can strengthen legal and policy frameworks to better address changing transnational organized crime trends, such as by supporting legislative reforms to prevent and prosecute all offences, notably for drug trafficking in the pharmaceutical and mining sectors and related to money-laundering and corruption. The United Nations can also support risk assessments for legislative reforms with

a do-no-harm approach towards identified sectors such as the illicit trade in gold and fuel. Legal frameworks could propose effective, proportionate and dissuasive penalties, protect victims and witnesses, promote international cooperation, and advance the prevention of those crimes, including through regulatory improvements in supply chain due diligence and transparency.¹⁵⁴

9. **Coordinate and prioritize legislative assistance interventions to ensure coherent support to Member States and avoid duplications.** With almost all international entities engaged in technical assistance and normative work, a coordination mechanism could prevent duplication at a minimum and ideally encourage joint action. The multilateral framework around the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, ratified by 191 State Parties, and its protocols, provides a critical normative basis for United Nations system responses against trafficking in all its forms. Interventions may particularly focus on supporting Member States in adapting their legislation to criminalize various serious crimes, as defined in article 2 of the Convention, to trigger criminal justice procedures and prosecute these more effectively, including through increased international judicial cooperation.
10. **Increase efforts on systemic reforms to address institutional corruption and strengthen the judicial response to corruption.** The recent adoption of National Anti-Corruption Strategies in Mali and Mauritania demonstrate the commitment of Member States to combat corruption. However, additional efforts are required to address all layers of corruption, including by conducting corruption risk assessments in critical sectors such as border control and the judiciary, as well as in the supply chains of medical products, fuel and gold. In line with the United Nations Convention against Corruption, appropriate legislative and administrative measures may be put in place to enhance transparency in the funding of candidatures for elected public office and, where applicable, the funding of political parties. The Manual on Corruption Surveys provides countries with practical guidance for developing, planning and implementing sample surveys on households and businesses in order to measure the prevalence of bribery at the national level, the modalities and scope of bribery, public

attitudes towards corruption, and anti-corruption measures. Additionally, in-person capacity-building is provided to help Member States implement corruption assessments.

- 11. Introduce robust regulations detailing corporate obligations on human rights and environmental due diligence, including targeted sanctions against those responsible and import restrictions.** Sahelian Member States have highlighted the need for increasing accountability of foreign stakeholders operating in illicit markets such as gold or medical products at different stages of supply chains. Robust legal frameworks could help prevent illicit trafficking by mitigating supply chain disruption at the production or transportation stages for medical products, or at the trading stage for gold, for instance.

Capacity-Building

- 12. Support Member States to raise awareness and educate actors in the law enforcement and criminal justice sectors as well as the wider public regarding the impact of organized crime on sustainable development — notably on health and the environment — to reduce the demand for and supply of criminal good and services.** The United Nations system can provide technical support to organize awareness campaigns at technical levels and within communities, particularly among youth.
- 13. Support Member States in building detection, investigation and prosecution capacities to disrupt transnational organized crime.** Criminal justice systems in the Sahel are often poorly resourced. Capacity-building on detection, disruption and prosecution of illicit arms flows could help reduce violence and related deaths. Enhancing financial investigation capacities would provide legal ground to seize assets and accounts owned by criminals, thus mitigating economic harm and negative impacts on rule of law and governance. In order to address impacts on health, the Sahel countries would benefit from programmes focusing on drug profiling and detection as well as identification of falsified medical products. Mauritania has already requested capacity-building assistance on crimes that affect the environment and falsified
- medical products for its national guard operating in desert and border areas. In parallel, increasing prosecution capacities is required to bring members of transnational organized crime to justice in order to effectively disrupt criminal networks and restore trust in national institutions, particularly in remote and conflict areas.
- 14. Support Member States in building technical capacities to better investigate sexual and gender-based violence related to organized crime and mitigate the harms to gender equality and empowerment of women.** While some cases of Sahelian traffickers involved in sexual and gender-based violence have been reported – particularly related to sexual exploitation – investigations and prosecutions of organized crime rarely focus on gender. Good practices include Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and the Niger establishing investigative units trained on gender issues, including on sexual and gender-based violence identification, related legal frameworks, and protection of victims of sexual and gender-based violence. Further support to Member States – including the deployment of mixed units of trained officers in the field of operations – is required. Indeed, Member States have regularly reported challenges deploying female officers in the field.
- 15. Expand the level of assistance to victims of trafficking.** A key area of crime prevention is victim support. Assistance and protection to victims ensure that victims of organized crime groups do not suffer further harm, are protected from other forms of violence and abuse, have access to justice during investigation, prosecution and adjudication of criminal cases, and are supported during their reintegration into society. This requires building and/or strengthening cross-sectoral national referral mechanisms – such as asylum and temporary protection systems, child protection systems, migrant protection systems, and specialized treatment programmes for drug users – to assist victims of all forms of trafficking through integrated responses combining legal, health, psychological, social and economic support. This approach places human rights, access to justice, equality, and health and well-being at its core and encourages trust in public authorities.

Partnership and international cooperation

16. Strengthen international cooperation at the law enforcement and prosecutorial levels for proper investigations of organized crime groups active in the Sahel region. All Member States in the Sahel reported that international cooperation was lacking. Regional cooperation could be strengthened to systematically produce data on trafficking flows, enhance timely information-sharing and collaborative action, and to facilitate enforcement and judicial responses. Judicial cooperation could be established between the Sahel countries and key destination markets for illicit goods, such as drugs destined for Europe or gold destined for the Middle East. The international cooperation provisions of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the United Nations Convention against Corruption, in applicable and appropriate cases, provide cooperation frameworks to investigate and prosecute high-level perpetrators.

17. Cultivate partnerships with the private sector, which is often overlooked when designing responses to trafficking in the Sahel. Collaboration with the private sector is critical for ensuring that ambitious goals such as SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure) are matched by ambitious investments. Partnership with private sector players is also crucial for ensuring that economic development does not lead to human rights abuses or social or environmental harms, but instead contributes to the achievement of SDGs. It is essential that national and foreign businesses operating in the Sahel adhere to basic human rights due diligence. Private stakeholders could include transport and shipping companies to flag high-risk consignments and technology developers to assess unintended and targeted uses of technology in the context of trafficking. This could be done by organizing workshops, awareness-raising campaigns on money laundering/terrorism financing risks and anti-money laundering/counter-terrorism financing obligations, and engaging with public/private partnership platforms and financial institutions for evaluating money laundering risks. Facilitating collaboration between private sector and law enforcement, with due consideration to protection of privacy rights, could open opportu-

nities to reinforce information-sharing and operational capacities leveraging new technologies.

18. Increase engagement with civil society actors and communities – in particular in border communities. In hard-to-reach and remote areas, state authorities often struggle to intervene while civil society actors, due to their ethnic, tribal, family or religious backgrounds, may be able to operate more safely. In this context, engaging with civil society and community-based organizations is essential for gathering early warning information and supporting community resilience against trafficking. However, clear guidance on such community-based engagement at the country level and protection measures for whistle blowers and witnesses are often lacking. Integrating community policing initiatives into national strategies on organized crime and conducting training with law enforcement agencies could provide some initial structure for community-based engagement. United Nations Country Teams could continue to actively promote the engagement of civil society in the implementation of the strategies to prevent and combat organized crime.

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IMPACT OF TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME ON STABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE SAHEL

TOCTA
Sahel
Transnational Organized
Crime Threat Assessment

This study – *Impact of Transnational Organized Crime on Stability and Development in the Sahel* – is part of a series of transnational organized crime threat assessment (TOCTA) reports on the Sahel. It explores the multifaceted impacts of transnational organized crime in the region on: 1. peace and security; 2. human rights; 3. governance and rule of law; and 4. sustainable development. The purpose of this report is to provide data and analysis to Member States and international organizations to develop evidence-based and efficient stabilization and sustainable development strategies in the Sahel.



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