

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Understanding the nature and threats of drug trafficking to national and regional security in West Africa<sup>1</sup>

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Several West African states are threatened by increasingly powerful transnational organised criminal networks. Yet, scholarly work on the nature, characteristics and strength of these groups and how their activities threaten states remains sparse, leading to misunderstandings and inadequate appreciation of the precise nature of the threats they pose to West Africa. This paper seeks to fill these lacunae in our knowledge. It focuses on the nexus between drugs, crime and terrorism. It argues that, the financial spin-offs from criminal activities contribute to the development of opportunistic relationships between criminals and extremist groups that threatens West Africa's fragile states. The analyses are based on evidence from several West African states, but employ the ongoing crisis in the Sahel, particularly Mali, as an empirical case, to demonstrate how 'profitable collusion' among different actors permits hollow states to become edifices that allows corruption, criminality and impunity to flourish.

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## Introduction

Since the 1990s, West Africa has become a major transit and repackaging hub for cocaine and heroin originating from the Latin American and Asian producing areas to European markets. Drug trafficking is far from new to the region. However, the phenomenon rapidly expanded in the mid-2000s as a result of a strategic shift of Latin American drug syndicates towards the rapidly growing European market and in response to more robust U.S. anti-narcotics strategies. This strategic shift led the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to state in 2008 that '...the crisis of drug trafficking ... is gaining attention. Alarm bells are ringing ... West Africa has become a hub for cocaine trafficking. This

is more than a drugs problem. It is a serious security threat' (UNODC 2008: 1).

West Africa presents an ideal geographical choice for the narcotics trade. First, it serves as a logistical transit center for drug traffickers: its geography, particularly, Guinea Bissau with its numerous uninhabited islands and archipelagoes makes detection difficult and facilitates transit; the region boasts well-established networks of West African smugglers and crime syndicates, leading international analysts to conclude in 2004 that there are definitive African criminal networks emerging; and a vulnerable political environment that creates opportunities for such operations. In several countries, civil wars, insurgency operations, and coups d'état have led to diminishing human capital, social infrastructure and productive national development assets. They have also generated instability, with an increase in

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the number of armed groups operating in the region and an increase in flows of small arms and light weapons (SALW). Instability in North Africa has also seen flows of heavier weapons entering through the Sahel region (Aning and Amedzator 2012). As in the case of Mali, drug traffickers have often exploited such instability to further their own interests. While violence on the scale of Latin American drug trafficking is yet to manifest itself, the potential for the drug trade to become a source of violent political competition in some countries nonetheless exists.

More recently, and as reports on drug use in the region increase, experts have highlighted the human security threats posed by drug trafficking, for which institutions and policy makers are particularly ill-prepared to respond to. One of the main challenges lies in the fact that the predominant approach to drug trafficking in the region to date has been based on the international narcotics control regime which is centered on stemming the supply of drugs through law enforcement efforts. Limited focus has been placed on the health and developmental aspects of the spillover effects of drug trafficking, which over time could constitute a greater security threat to West Africa than currently acknowledged.

This paper examines the impact of drug trafficking on national and regional security in West Africa. It begins by providing an overview of the main security threats that drug trafficking poses to states and the sub-region, including the possible links between drug trafficking and terrorism. Subsequently, the paper provides an overview of how the incidence of drug trafficking and perceived threats are being articulated in policy circles; and the nature of UN, AU and ECOWAS policy responses to drug trafficking and the security threats it poses. In the final section, the paper identifies knowledge gaps in the existing literature on drug trafficking in West Africa.

Over the past few years, the UN Security Council has periodically discussed the growing threat posed by drug trafficking in Africa,

and more recently, West Africa and the Sahel Region. The latter has led to the adoption of several important UN Security Council Presidential Statements (PRSTs) in which the UN Secretary-General was urged to consider mainstreaming the issue of drug trafficking as a factor in conflict prevention strategies, conflict analysis, integrated missions' assessment and planning and peace building support.<sup>2</sup> In February 2012, the president of the Council issued a statement '... calling for system-wide United Nations action to help combat the spread of illicit weapons and drug trafficking, piracy and terrorist activity in a cross-section of fragile countries already struggling to overcome the consequences of years of civil war and instability.'<sup>3</sup> The Secretary-General's July 2012 report on the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) activity stated that the region continues to be a transit point for cocaine and heroin and countries in the region are not prepared to deal with the related rising consumption rates. The existence of trafficking routes through the Sahel has also generated concern, because it remains outside the control of most government forces, elevating the fear that insurgent and terrorist groups reap the rewards of trafficking there.

### **Threats Posed by Increasing Drug Consumption**

The West African sub-region is no longer just a transit route for hard drugs but also a final destination. The 2012 World Drug Report (WDR) highlights the association of drug users with acquisitive crime as well as behavioral challenges including aggression or violence. While the above revelations question the nature, effectiveness and resilience of the existing legal and institutional framework for responding to drug trafficking in West Africa, the emerging drug consumption levels in the sub-region suggests the potential impact of drugs on human security in West Africa (Wabala 2013).

Moreover, in West Africa, policies towards drug users are centered predominantly on

punitive measures, with tough sentencing for first-time users. Limited steps are taken to treat users while in prison, or support reintegration and rehabilitation efforts upon release.<sup>4</sup> According to the Global Commission on Drug Policy, evidence has shown that repressive drug law enforcement practices can drive users from accessing public health services, possibly pushing them into environments with elevated risk for diseases, including HIV. In this regard, there are increasing calls for treatment rather than imprisonment for drug users. Conversely, treatment for drug addiction across West Africa is generally under-resourced and under-funded, with institutions ill-prepared to deal with rising levels of dependency, and potential spillovers such as increases in HIV-AIDS.<sup>5</sup> Health facilities across the region are either non-existent or under-equipped, and staff are not trained to deal with the consequences of drug dependency. Indeed, a dearth of specialized units and medical professionals hinders proper treatment, and no West African country has apparently implemented systematic reintegration schemes.<sup>6</sup> Generally, a small number of people are treated through hospital psychiatric wards or via international and national NGOs (Obot 2013). However, human rights organizations have critiqued many of the existing psychiatric facilities for overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, and for their inhumane and degrading treatment of patients. A 2013 AU Conference of Ministers of Drug Control stressed that grouping drug users together with people having major psychiatric disorders runs the risk of turning people off from seeking treatment and obfuscates the specificity of care that drug addiction requires. In addition, in some countries, human capital is being affected by increasing levels of consumption. For example, in Ghana, security officials have observed that many of the locations where illicit drugs are used are either commercial or mining centers where there is easy access to money either through legitimate work or robbery to sustain the addiction habit.<sup>7</sup> Com-

bined, these issues pose a significant human security threat to the region.

### **Threats Posed by Prevalent Norms of Behavior**

During a briefing to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in July 2012, Mr. Yury Fedotov, Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), expressed concern about drugs and crime in West Africa. According to Fedotov, some 30 tons of cocaine and almost 400 kg of heroin were trafficked through West Africa in 2011, and methamphetamine laboratories had been discovered in the sub-region (Skelton 2013). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for its part acknowledged that, '...drug trafficking is an enemy of the state and the rule of law, existing as a parallel power that rivals the legal system and we are compelled to fight it' (ECOWAS 2009; UNSC 2009; UNSC 2012).

Recent seizures and arrests in several West African countries have shed light on how the work of trafficking networks is facilitated by a range of actors, including businessmen, politicians, members of the security forces and the judiciary, clergymen, traditional leaders and youth (Aning and Amedzrator 2013). In addition to the general physical and social conditions in West Africa such as porous borders, weak institutions, corruption and political patronage, poverty and ethnic identities, traffickers easily connect with local leaders and are able to establish and operate informal social networks, allowing them to avoid detection by the formal security apparatus (Lacher 2012). In some cases, the formal security apparatus also provides cover for traffickers.

For example, high level elected officials and security personnel were found to be involved in a range of cocaine and heroin trafficking seizures in the late 2000s, indicating that both formal and traditional governance and security systems of many West African countries are at risk from international drug trafficking cartels (Aning 2010).

More recently, five Ghanaian police officers were arrested in September 2012 for their role in the transport of 1.5 tons of cannabis (valued at £4.3 million) to the United Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> In other cases, drug trafficking incidents has served to bolster the legitimacy of formal and traditional leaders involved in drug trafficking. The reinvestment of drug-related proceeds in the community not only provides them with significant social and political capital, but much needed support and services in areas where the government has been markedly absent. The latter can be of particular incidence at the local level, where government services and resources are limited and citizens seek to sustain themselves through whatever means possible.

Another of the main security threats arising from the growing incidence of drug trafficking in the West Africa sub-region stems from the ability of criminal networks and illicit funding to infiltrate security and government agencies, transform or influence the motivations of its members, reorient objectives towards the spoils of drug trafficking activity thus influencing questions of state legitimacy and the legitimacy of democratic processes. The question of who elected officials are beholden to – governments, electoral constituencies, criminal organizations or even terrorist groups – is becoming increasingly important, not least because an important threat posed by drug trafficking is its ability to reshape relational dynamics between and among political and security actors, the citizenry, and the business community within and beyond borders (Cockayne 2012). The infiltration and potential weakening of military, police, and customs and border agencies by criminal organizations in countries across West Africa is a real threat.

Many of the conditions that facilitate drug trafficking in and through West Africa are however, a lot more nuanced than habitually described. They tend to be rooted in the nature of the states located in the region and the characteristics of sub-state actors (Aning 2011). For example, some accounts suggest

that community leaders, particularly in the Sahel region of West Africa, participate in the drug trade as a means to sustain their livelihoods (Lacher 2012). Other accounts regarding the involvement of elected officials in Ghana and Sierra Leone in the drug trade link their participation to development concerns as well as systemic corruption and patronage systems. Meanwhile, an earlier profile of drug users in Ghana and (to a lesser extent) Nigeria has highlighted class undertones (Beinstein 1999; Famuyiwa et al 2011). Other accounts in parts of Nigeria claim that local participation in the drug trade is a response to the perceived alienation of particular groups from official roles of the state after the Biafra War of the late 1960s (Shaw 2001). The latter coincided with the economic down-turns of the 1980s following the implementation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)–sponsored Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) which ushered in a period of sustained under-investment in key social and economic sectors, impoverishing individuals and communities in many parts of Africa.<sup>9</sup> Hence, for some, turning a blind eye on drugs transiting through Africa to Europe and North America thus offered opportunities for West Africans to return a version of hardships on citizens of Western countries (at least before it starting impacting on African states) (Shaw 2001). Another historical account proposes a triangular connection among ethnic groups in West Africa with similar groups in South America from the period of the slave trade (Akyeampong 2005). That same account links West African drug trafficking networks with other African Diaspora communities in Europe, North and South America from as early as the 1980s when economic hardships and repressive political conditions in the sub-region generated an exodus of West Africans to Western countries.

Properly examined, a deeper understanding of these characteristics could help generate a better appreciation of some of the reasons why West Africans participate in the

drug trade as a basis for the design of appropriate national, regional and international policy responses to drug trafficking and drug use in West Africa.

### **Threats Posed by Linkages between Drug Trafficking, Violence and Extremism**

Drug trafficking in West Africa has not yet spurred significant levels of violence.<sup>10</sup> Most cases have hinged on corruption and bribery rather than violent coercive methods. Where violence has existed, it has tended to erupt when government and security officials compete for access to drug-trafficking-related rents. For example, in Guinea-Bissau where there has been a documented relationship between senior government and security officials and drugs cartels, strong ties between political actors and criminal groups have allegedly played into political and military upheaval. A series of assassinations and arrests in 2009 and 2010, involving the army chief of staff and the president, are believed to have direct links to struggles over control of trafficking. At the time of the April 2012 coup d'état, claims were made that the president and vice-president were arrested because of their connections to drug trafficking. Over the past couple of years, Northern Mali has also experienced drug-related violence involving different groups operating in the region.<sup>11</sup> Much of this violence appears to have stemmed from rivalries between different groups involved in the drug trade, allegedly contributing to the instability that led to the UN-backed French military intervention in January 2013.<sup>12</sup>

There is also concern that as competition for access to routes, product and profits of trafficking increase, West Africa might experience an increase in violence similar to that in the Caribbean and parts of Latin America. Moreover, if production grows in the region – exhibited by the discovery of methamphetamine, cocaine, and ecstasy processing equipment<sup>13</sup> – conflicts may develop over control of this production. Therefore, the security

threats caused by drug trafficking can impact all levels of society, from state apparatuses, such as the military, down to the family.

Beyond the Guinea-Bissau and northern Mali cases though, in West Africa there is still limited evidence linking drugs and political violence or drugs and the type of urban violence experienced in parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. It is however important to acknowledge that drug trafficking, like other forms of organized criminal activity, generally only draws attention when connected to overt violence (Kavanagh 2013). The tendency to assess the impact of drug trafficking by the degree of violence it provokes or its links with terrorist groups means that important structural relationships between drug traffickers and political and business elites are overlooked. Mali provides an excellent example of how external actors either 'underestimated or ignored the destabilizing impact of these types of relations' (Lacher 2012). According to Gastrow, 'governments that lack the capacity to counter such penetration, or that acquiesce in it, run the risk of becoming criminalized or "captured" states over time.' The latter can have a significant impact on stability and general human security if left unchecked (Gastrow 2012).

### ***The Sahel region***

West Africa's structural challenges such as porous borders, weak institutions, corruption, political patronage, poverty, ethnic or informal social networks are prevailing conditions that run through almost all existing reports on drug trafficking in the region. Most experts agree that these conditions are exploited by transnational criminal networks for the transfer of all kinds of illicit commodities including drugs, cigarettes, fake medicines, small arms and light weapons, human organs, and trafficking in persons. Territories with a history of state neglect and different sources of tensions in particular represent havens for drug traffickers, facilitating these kinds of transnational activities across national and international borders

and at times, providing havens for radical groups. Recent incidents in northern Mali for example, highlight the extent to which drug trafficking, smuggling and other forms of organized criminal activity can be taken advantage of to finance the activities of some of these groups, who over time, have come to 'wield decisive political and military influence' (Lacher 2012).

Regarding drugs, a range of trafficking routes exists across the Sahel: cocaine is trafficked from the coastal countries into the Sahel and onwards towards Europe via both land and air transit (Lacher 2012). Cannabis resin is trafficked from Morocco towards Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula via Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Algeria and Libya (Lacher 2012). Investigations into the 'air cocaine' case in which a burnt out Boeing 727 was found in the Malian desert in 2009 alleged to be carrying ten tons of cocaine revealed the level of sophistication of trafficking in the region and the involvement of a complex and diverse group of actors (News 24).

In 2009, UNODC highlighted the shifting priorities in the region, noting that while coastal countries appeared to be on a more positive trajectory, there was increasing evidence that the northern part of the region was under increased pressure from terrorist groups that appeared to be building links with criminal organizations. Similarly, a Wikileaks cable cited in *The Telegraph* of 4 February 2011 stated that the United Kingdom believed narcotics trafficking was the largest threat to stability in West Africa with specific regard to the possibility of increased terrorist funding in the Sahel and gang-style activity as was seen in the Caribbean (The Telegraph).

Indeed, groups such as al Qaeda in the Islamist Maghreb (AQIM) are alleged to be engaging in criminal activity in the Sahel, notably kidnapping and drug smuggling, to finance operations. According to Lacher, AQIM has accumulated between US\$40–65 million since 2008 through kidnapping ransoms, and protecting the smuggling

rackets of Tuaregs in the Sahel enabling it to become a major political and military force in the region (Lacher 2012). Furthermore, until the coup d'état staged by Mali's army in 2012, state complicity with organized crime (particularly kidnapping) was the main factor enabling AQIM's growth and a driver of conflict in the north of the country. It allowed AQIM to expand its spheres of influence and activities beyond the Sahel to the more southern states of West Africa. The group has supported recruitment, training and radicalization of other groups (Aning 2011),<sup>14</sup> and due to its decentralized nature, the organization has been able to shift from one activity to another whenever national and international actors attempt to disrupt its activities. In 2006, the US DEA arrested and charged three Malian nationals for allegedly conducting drug smuggling on behalf of al Qaeda. In Ghana, three nationals were arrested and charged with 'plotting to transport cocaine across Africa with the intent to support al Qaeda, [and] its local affiliate AQIM and [the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] FARC (CNN 2009). During the same period, alleged AQIM operatives from Mauritania, Niger, Mali and Ghana, were also arrested, initially on drugs charges, although terrorism charges were subsequently added. Despite these arrests, there is limited if any evidence underpinning many of the alleged links between AQIM and al Qaeda to drug trafficking (Lacher 2012: 8).

In 2011, the UN inter-agency assessment of the impact of the Libyan crisis on the Sahel region stated that AQIM may be involved in illegal taxation schemes with drug smugglers in Mali, noting also that since the Libyan crisis, there has been a growth in the number of terrorist groups operating in the region (UNSC 2012a). The report also noted that the Nigeria-based Boko Haram has received training from AQIM. More recently, the 2012 US International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) stated that some actors involved in air and land trafficking in Northern Mali may have connections to ethnic

militias and/or extremist elements operating in the Sahel. And at a February 2012 Security Council meeting, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed concern about potential alliances between terrorist groups, drug traffickers and other criminal groups and their ability to destabilize conditions further. If reports of increasing interdependence among traffickers and extremist and radicalized groups are true, these links pose a significant challenge to West African states (This Week 2010: 8).<sup>15</sup> In reality however, rising insecurity in West Africa and particularly the Sahel, coupled with the intersection of drugs, extremism and fragile states hinges on poor political and economic governance, and the use of organized crime as a political resource, which over time, has allowed political allies to benefit from criminal activities (Lacher 2012).

In this regard, efforts to respond to these challenges need to be located within a broader political economy framework. Such a framework should allow for a deeper understanding of the interests of the multiplicity of actors involved in trafficking, smuggling and extremist activities in the region. It should also explore the nature of financial networks and fundraising activities that support such activities, focusing on 'how the potentially divergent interests of the key actors engaged in the raising, distribution, and spending of funds – and the institutional settings in which decisions about financing are made – might affect outcomes' (Aning 2012).

### **Current Policy Responses to the Threats Posed by Drug Trafficking in West Africa**

For more than two decades, governments in the region have been attempting to respond to the threats posed by drug trafficking and organized crime in the sub-region. In response to their earlier commitment to the 1988 UN Drug Convention, the 1971 UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances and the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, as amended by the 1972 Protocol,

many of the West African countries already have basic laws - many of which are quite draconian - that deal with drug trafficking and consumption.<sup>16</sup> The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries are also members of the UN Convention against Corruption and the UN Convention against Transnational Crime and its three supplementary protocols. Specifically, many West African states, such as Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Gambia have drug law enforcement legislation dating as far back as the 1930s, dealing mostly with cannabis use and cultivation and more recently, cocaine (Aning 2008). Nigeria, for example, has a National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), while Ghana has a Narcotics Control Board (NACOB). Liberia and Sierra Leone have similar agencies, which lead the fight against drug trafficking. However, these interventions are mainly law enforcement-driven and face challenges as a result of persistent under-funding, internal corruption and turf battles that undermine the principles of coordination and cooperation between relevant services such as the police, immigration, Customs, Excise & Preventive Services (CEPS), public health authorities, NGOs and other specialized institutions that should be working together to respond to trafficking and consumption challenges at the national and regional levels (Aning 2008).

In addition, ECOWAS had championed several strategies in the context of its commitment to international norms and standards regarding narcotics control. Almost two decades ago, the 21st Summit of Heads of State and Government in Abuja, Nigeria 30 – 31 October 1998 issued a declaration entitled 'Community Flame Ceremony – the fight against drugs.' Some of the additional earlier steps included:

- Resolution relating to Prevention and Control of Drug Abuse in West Africa (ECOWAS 1997);
- Recommendation C/98 on the establishment of a Regional Fund for Financ-

ing of Drug Control Activities in West Africa;

- Decision on the establishment of a Regional Fund for Financing Drug Control Activities (ECOWAS 1998); and
- Decision on establishing the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (ECOWAS 1999).

With the exception of activities undertaken by ECOWAS's Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA) that has been engaged in combating the activities of money laundering through its capacity-building and training programmes,<sup>17</sup> limited progress was made during the early 2000s in stemming the rise in drug trafficking. This lack of progress led to the adoption of a sub-regional initiative at an ECOWAS Ministerial Conference in Praia, Cape Verde, in 2008. The initiative includes a Political Declaration – the Abuja Declaration – and a Regional Action Plan<sup>18</sup> to address the security threats posed by drug trafficking in the sub-region. Building on these steps and as a means to accompany implementation of the Political Declaration and Action Plan, in February 2010, ECOWAS adopted the Dakar Initiative signed by seven countries in the region. A critical aspect of ECOWAS's approach was to ensure the responsibility of each individual state in implementing the Action Plan. Overall, the perception is that the overall impact and effectiveness of the regional architecture has been low. The ECOWAS Action Plan ran until 2011, and while it remains unclear whether implementation was reviewed, it was formally extended at the 42nd Ordinary session of the ECOWAS Heads of State and Government held in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire in February 2013.

Additionally, as part of the implementation of the Declaration, UNODC, DPKO, DPA, INTERPOL, UNOWA, and ECOWAS facilitated the design and implementation of the West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI) – a multi-stakeholder initiative aimed at providing equipment, technical assistance, and

specialized training for law enforcement officials in selected ECOWAS countries. The first step of the programme was to establish transnational crime units (TCUs) in four pilot countries – Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Meanwhile, the UNODC-WCO Container Control Program aims to strengthen container surveillance in Ghana and Senegal, as well as Ecuador and Pakistan.

UNODC has also developed National Integrated Programmes (NIPs) for all the ECOWAS countries. However, implementation of the NIPs remains a challenge with limited progress registered thus far, not least because funding of the programmes has been difficult to anchor. Other complementary processes resulting from the international Financial Action Task Force (FAFT) mechanism are finding expression in the establishment of Financial Intelligence Centers at the national level to combat financial fraud. Some of the countries have followed up by establishing financial courts to combat money laundering and other financial crimes. However, most of the Centers require substantial improvement in technical capacity. Others require support and cooperation from the traditional national law enforcement agencies such as the police and the other investigative and prosecution services.

Countries across the region have also entered into bilateral agreements with certain countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom in the areas of training, logistical support and extradition protocols. Ghana and Nigeria have such arrangements with the United States and the United Kingdom. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, national level interventions led to several seizures and arrests particularly in Nigeria and also in Ghana (Aning 2008). Counter-narcotic support from the United States alone totaled approximately US\$50 million per annum (p.a.) in 2010 and 2011, whereas support in 2009 had been approximately US\$7.5 million (Savage and Shanker 2012). This six-fold increase in annual funding shows a dramatic



increase in attention being paid to West African drug-related issues.

Despite these developments, in February 2012, the President of the United Nations Security Council issued a statement expressing concern that 'transnational organized crime, including illicit weapons and drug trafficking, piracy and armed robbery at sea, as well as terrorism and its increasing links, in some cases, with transnational organized crime and drug trafficking' pose a direct security threat to peace and stability in the region (UNSC 2012b). Meanwhile, UNODC raised the concern that in addition to trafficking, seizures of processing equipment for cocaine, ecstasy and methamphetamine indicate the region's role in production may be growing (UNODC 2010–2014). The Secretary-General's July 2012 report on UNOWA activity stated that the region continues to be a transit point for cocaine and heroin, and that countries in the sub-region are ill-equipped to deal with the related rising consumption rates (UNSC 2012c). Particular concern regarding trafficking routes through the Sahel was also noted in the report.

Finally, many of the existing initiatives aimed at stemming drug trafficking and its impacts on the region are aimed at addressing important gaps in response capacity. However, the paucity of information regarding the real impact of these efforts, coupled with the diversity of threats posed by drug trafficking outlined earlier, point to the need for deeper analysis of the challenges, and more effective monitoring mechanisms as a means to support more effective and regionally driven policy interventions.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

What does the narrative above tell us about the threats posed to domestic and regional security? Firstly, is that there is very little factual knowledge about the extent of the threat, thus deepening knowledge and raising awareness about this emerging threat is key.

Initiatives to stem the tide of drug trafficking in West Africa have been developed

and implemented at the national, regional and sub-regional levels. As noted above however, these efforts stem predominantly from the existing international counter-narcotics regime. In addition, the deepening links between drug trafficking and extremism, especially in the Sahel region, have resulted in the placement of foreign national security interests at the center of many responses. The latter trends tend to leave limited room (and funds) for developing multi-dimensional citizen-centered approaches to drug trafficking and related challenges and securing ownership of the problems at hand. In this regard, the WACD should advocate to ensure that efforts to respond to drug trafficking are based on an understanding of multiple processes. These include, but are not limited to a comprehension of the dynamics of the formal and informal political economy in West Africa, and how different groups involved in drug trafficking benefit from it.

This is important because as has been argued earlier, such an approach contributes to appreciating how public officials and local authorities benefit from their links with drug traffickers and vice versa. Equally critical with such an approach is the manner in which criminal actors are increasingly taking on ideological platforms to advance their interests in regions like the Sahel. Such an approach is important because it provides opportunities appreciating the processes through which security and political institutions and core democratic processes (e.g. elections) can be better protected from the drug trade and also supports an environment within which public health services can be strengthened to provide stigma-free, effective and humane treatment to drug users, including in corrections systems.

Because the paper argues that the challenges posed by drugs are more encompassing than individual states can handle, inter-regional cooperation and collaboration has become a critical fulcrum upon which responses can and ought to be designed. ECOWAS and its member states recognize

the magnitude of the drug trafficking challenge in the West Africa sub-region, evidenced by the range of initiatives developed and implemented over the years. However, the political will that supports the design phases of such interventions is often not transferred to support their implementation, leading to situations of operational level turf battles among technical agencies in addition to the deployment of inadequate resources for specific agencies. In addition, national level implementation mechanisms established by ECOWAS member states lack the needed implementation technical, political or financial support. This was one of the core issues raised at an expert meeting jointly organized by the Kofi Annan Foundation, NYU's Centre on International Cooperation, GIABA and the KAIPTC in Dakar, Senegal in April 2012.

In this regard WACD can advocate for/and or support efforts aimed at rallying the interest and support of ECOWAS member states and national level political actors around issues pertaining to drug trafficking and drug consumption, including public sector corruption linked to the drug trade. Equally important is determining where implementation challenges have most been felt and how it can re-energize support for their effective implementation. Since information-sharing has been part of the weakness in the broader ECOWAS effort at tackling the drugs menace, ECOWAS can be supported to serve as a hub for information gathering and sharing on drug trafficking and consumption among member states. In this regard, the WACD can also support on-going efforts to establish a sub-regional observatory on drug trafficking and consumption. Improving intra- and inter-agency collaboration and coordination on issues pertaining to drug trafficking and consumption will be a critical plank in ensuring coordinated responses, and by extension, promoting the strengthening of operational level cooperation and coordination among existing actors both at the national and sub-regional levels as a means to ensure the required integrated approach

to address the multi-faceted dynamics of the illicit drugs trade.

Throughout the paper, the argument has been that there is an apparent 'citizen disconnect' in terms of the 'official' statements and 'citizen perceptions' about drugs. The arguments here are that citizen participation in efforts to combat drug trafficking and respond to drug use will be key in getting stakeholder buy-in and support for a concerted effort at designing effective responses.

Finally, while some international organizations have actively sought to promote the involvement of national and regional actors in the development of their regional programmes, public perceptions rarely form part of this participatory process. Deeper insights into indigenous perspectives of drug trafficking related problems could help provide the basis for more effective and locally owned prevention and response strategies, not least because when local perspectives are incorporated into locally targeted interventions, it becomes easier for locals to identify and with and support such interventions. The physical and social conditions in the sub-region require innovative strategies that invite local people and communities to develop a common perspective to the challenges of drug trafficking in the sub-region. West African voices need to form part of the rationale for interventions aimed at countering drug trafficking implemented in West Africa. That way, the needs of the youth, for example, could be addressed in a comprehensive approach to drug trafficking in West Africa. There are resource implications for such a participatory approach to strategy and policy development, but the return on investment is sure to be significant. In this regard the WACD should advocate for the conduct of citizen perception surveys on drug trafficking and its related security and governance impacts in a sample of countries/ locations across the region. Potential funders/ partners for such an initiative could include entities working with big data and participatory data gathering. Finally, there is the need for sustained support for the efforts

of specialized agencies such as UNODC aimed at strengthening regional capacity to capture, analyze and regularly monitor base-line data and trends on drug consumption and drug trafficking.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper prepared for and presented to the West Africa Commission on the Impact of Drug Trafficking on Security, Governance and Development in West Africa (WACD) in Accra, Ghana on 31 January 2013. The views expressed in this paper do not reflect those of the WACD. We are grateful to Ms. Camino Kavanagh for intellectual inputs and other forms of support in the preparation of this paper and the suggestions of the anonymous reviewers.
- <sup>2</sup> (S/PRST/2012/2).
- <sup>3</sup> Several other presidential statements have been made, namely the statements of 8 December 2009 (S/PRST/2009/32), 24 February 2010 (S/PRST/2010/4) and 21 January and 25 April 2012 (S/PRST/2012/2 and S/PRST/2012/16). The latest briefing on these issues was 18 December 2013 when the UNSC held a briefing and issued a presidential statement on 'Drug trafficking in West Africa and Sahel' and expressed concern about a '...spillover effect of drug trafficking, also demonstrated in Mali, has been its role in financing other illicit activities, including terrorism, an increasingly worrying link'
- <sup>4</sup> Interviews in Kumasi Central Prison, Ghana, August and November 2013. Other studies from Nigeria and Mali show similar results.

- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> Interviews in Accra and Kumasi, Ghana between August and November 2013.
- <sup>7</sup> Interviews with police officers in Kumasi, capital city of Ashanti in Ghana in April 2012.
- <sup>8</sup> See: [www.myjoyonline.com](http://www.myjoyonline.com) (accessed 27 September 2012) and [Radioxyzone.com](http://Radioxyzone.com). (accessed September 2012).
- <sup>9</sup> The SAPs were considered as Western-inspired economic interventions that contributed to the collapse of West African economies triggering hardships and vulnerabilities for millions of West Africans.
- <sup>10</sup> There are some indications that ultra-violent gangs from Mexico, such as Los Zetas, are in West Africa, though there is as of yet no appreciable increase in violence and that '...At least nine top-tier Latin American drug cartels have established bases in 11 West African nations.' See <http://allafrica.com/stories/200909230169.html> (accessed 31 December 2013).
- <sup>11</sup> See USAID (forthcoming report on Drug Trafficking and Development).
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Also, on 15 July 2009, the authorities of Guinea raided a suspected drug processing facility, seizing equipment and toxic chemical substances. Reports about drug processing facilities in Guinea had been circulating among the intelligence community since 2007, as well as rumors about the attempt to introduce opium poppy cultivation in the highlands of Guinea. A later UNODC- INTERPOL mission visited the eight seized facilities located in Conakry and in the nearby native village of former President Lansana Conte, some 100 kilometers north of Conakry. The UNODC -INTERPOL mission confirmed that the equipment and the chemical substances seized which included among other: including ether, sulfuric acid, sassafras oil, and acetone enabled manufacturing to go on. Also, traces of cocaine were detected, the processing of cocaine and heroin and the production of methamphetamine and

MDMA (ecstasy). See Mazzitelli 2009 and UNODC 2010–2014.

- 14 The recent August 2011 and 2012 murder and kidnappings in Northern Nigeria and the assertion by the kidnapped that they were being held by Boko Haram in conjunction with AQIM created a new dimension to terrorism in West Africa.
- 15 Three suspected al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) members were charged with plotting to traffic cocaine in order to fund Islamic terrorism. These 3 Malians were arrested in Ghana and extradited to the US. See *Khaleej Times* 2010: 24.
- 16 See United Nations Treaty Collection website (2013).
- 17 The GIABA programmes are aimed at improving the capacity of member states to respond to the threats of drugs and money laundering.
- 18 The Regional Action Plan to fight drug trafficking, organized crime and drug abuse in West Africa consists of five thematic areas: 1) mobilizing ECOWAS political leadership and addressing the need for adequate national budget allocation by ECOWAS member states for preventing and combating illicit drug trafficking, related organized crime and drug abuse; 2) effective law enforcement and national/regional cooperation against the high-level increase in illicit drug trafficking and organized crime; 3) developing and strengthening appropriate and adequate legal frameworks for effective criminal justice; 4) confronting emerging threats of increased drug abuse and associated health and security problems; and 5) creating valid and reliable data to assess the magnitude of the drug trafficking and abuse problems affecting the region on a sustainable basis.

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**How to cite this article:** Aning, K and Pokoo, J 2014 Understanding the nature and threats of drug trafficking to national and regional security in West Africa. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 3(1): 8, pp. 1-13, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.df>

**Published:** 18 February 2014

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 *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press

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