Institute for Security Studies
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People's perspectives of organised crime in West Africa and the Sahel

INTRODUCTION

The greater Western Africa region – which runs from the coastal West African states up through the Sahelian band to the borders of the Maghreb countries in the north and includes all those states that fringe the vast Sahara desert – is judged by many to be in a period of unprecedented vulnerability and instability. The five-fold threats of political instability, humanitarian crises, conflict, organised crime and terrorism have resulted in the erosion of human security and statehood across the region. Particularly since the collapse of the Malian state in 2012, this has resulted in a proliferation of international efforts to engage with, as well as studies that focus on, the intersection of organised crime, governance and insecurity. However, no review or intervention has yet sought to canvas the views of ordinary citizens and local communities as to the scope of the problem from their perspective and the impact it is having – both positive and negative – or to understand their priorities in terms of a response.

Since 2010, extremist and terrorist groups in the region have increased in number and potency, threatening international interests and foreign personnel in the region, and combining with and fuelling long-standing separatist and insurgency movements. This eventually contributed to the collapse of the state in Mali in 2012. Organised crime, including drug trafficking, particularly cocaine from the Andes bound for Europe and hashish from Morocco, have been widely reported as promoting instability. Drug trafficking is considered to enable terror, corrupt governments and state officials, and shift local power dynamics.

While doubts have been expressed as to the numbers provided by a number of international actors, most notably the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), on levels of illicit trafficking in the region,[1] interviews with regional decision makers indicate concern at the challenge. This has been particularly notable in the wake of the coup and political crisis in Mali.

Organised crime has become a key cross-cutting phenomenon that must be dealt with in debates on peace, development, governance, security, resource allocation and community cohesion across greater West Africa. However, despite the tacit recognition of both the interdependencies of crime, governance and development, and the cross-border nature of the threats, responses have typically remained siloed within the independent frameworks of law enforcement security, peacebuilding, governance and classic development.

What has been consistently missing from the debate is an engagement driven by the priorities of those most affected. The overriding perspective on responding to security threats in the region has been state-centred: improving institutions of law enforcement, consulting with and pressuring government entities, and attempting to improve cooperation between regional (state) actors. There seems to be little knowledge of or interest in what communities have to say about a phenomenon that is occurring in their midst.

This study recognises that if a credible attempt is to be made to build communities that are more resilient to organised crime, an effort must be made to consult ordinary people, to understand their perspectives and to proactively engage them in identifying priorities and proposing solutions to counter crime and its most deleterious effects.

It is only by properly understanding and accounting for the impact of organised crime and illicit trafficking and the way it engages with individuals, communities and local

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sources of power and influence, that the international community can begin to play a constructive role in creating an environment where threats can be mitigated, and democratic governance, rule of law and citizen security can take root and endure.

'Lives built on trafficking lines':[2] *communities sustained on trafficking routes*

Organised crime, illicit trafficking and the smuggling of migrants have become increasingly potent negative forces across West Africa, and trafficking routes cross the sub-region. While the view of regional elites is often that this is an externally driven threat given that illicit commodities are trafficked from other regions, threat assessments and intelligence reports have observed that West Africans are becoming increasingly active players in the criminal economy chains both sourced from and traversing the regions. Communities along these routes build their lives and livelihoods around the illicit flows.

Over time, criminality and governance have become intertwined in the countries of the Sahel and West Africa, and the systems of security and justice have been orientated to protect and facilitate illicit trade, creating an aura of impunity

In less than a decade, West Africa and the Sahel have emerged as major transit and re-packaging hubs for cocaine flowing from Latin American producing areas to European markets. Furthermore, as state institutions have become more complicit, criminal products and activities have increased and diversified: drugs ranging from hashish, methamphetamine and precursor chemicals to cocaine and heroin have all been seized in recent years. West African countries are reportedly leading the field in cybercrime; weapons and ammunition from Libya in particular have moved into the region, exacerbating conflicts; people are smuggled and trafficked; counterfeit medicine, toxic waste, oil and natural resources from lumber to minerals all move freely across the sub-region.[3]

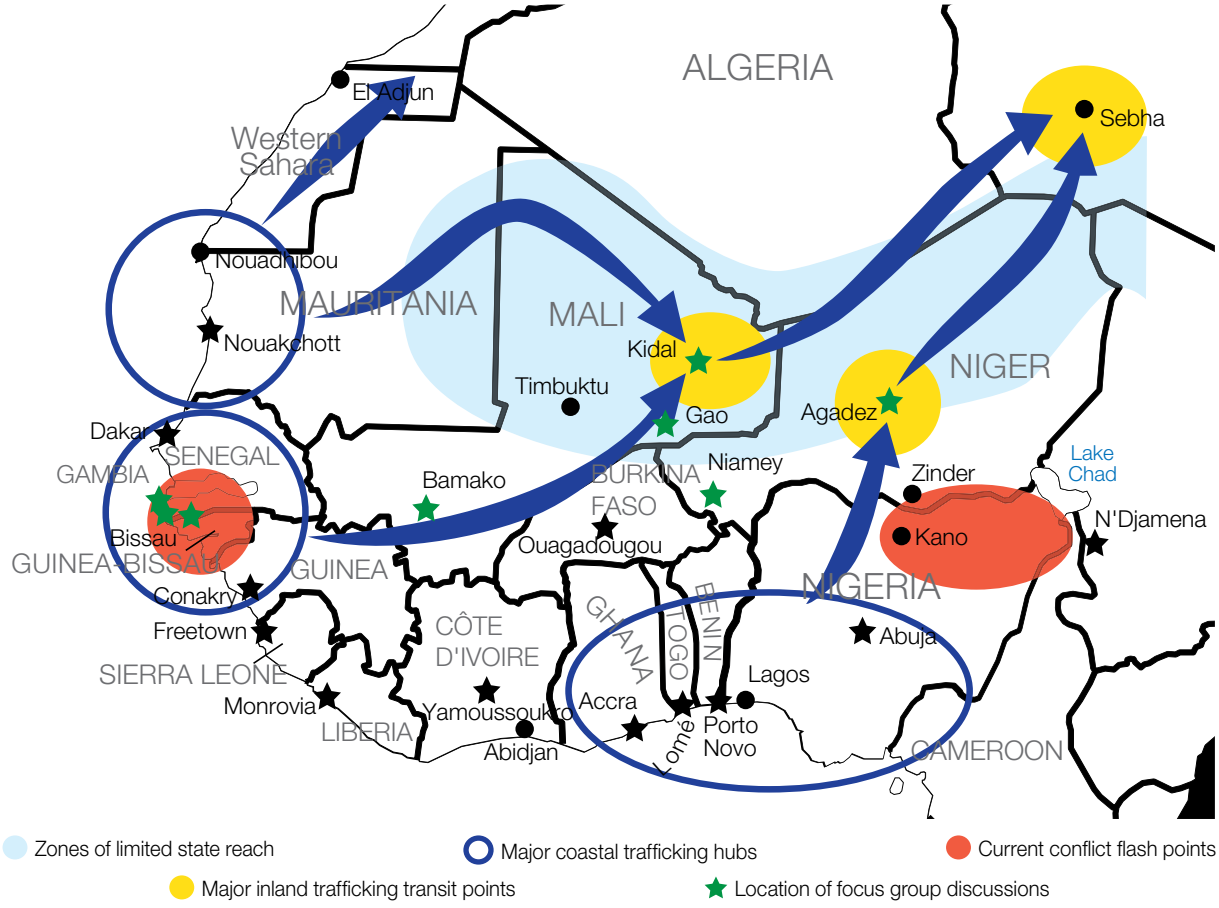
Major illicit trafficking routes, both from the west to the east, and from the north and south, intersect in the vulnerable Sahelian region, where the writ of the state is either weak or missing altogether. As Figure 1 illustrates, three states in particular – Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Niger – sit astride the main trafficking routes. For different reasons, and in different ways, the cities of Bissau, Kidal, Gao and Agadez form hubs in the regional trafficking economy. The illicit transfer of goods may sometimes skirt their perimeter, but money made from these activities is invested there and the impact of trafficking is most likely to be felt in those places by the people who live there. Understanding their opinions should be a starting point when seeking to craft a response.

What the findings of this and similar studies have made clear is that the growth of criminal influence in the Sahel and West Africa is a process intrinsically linked to the state and its capacity. Crime warps the core principle of democratic processes: instead of earning popular trust through legitimate economic and social policies, the path to power lies in securing revenues through criminal practices. The profits made from illicit activities buy political influence, to the extent that participants in criminal activities may have multiple (sometimes reinforcing) identities within state institutions and criminal networks. Over time, criminality and governance have become intertwined in some countries of the Sahel and West Africa, and the systems of security and justice have been oriented to protect and facilitate illicit trade, creating an aura of impunity. This further exacerbates the divide between citizens and the state at the same time as organised crime and illicit trafficking project themselves into the vacuum left by the state to become another source of legitimacy and service provision at the local level. A longer-term focus on community resilience and local-level responses to organised crime is therefore crucial. This has so far has attracted little attention in the region.

The methodology for this study, which began in July 2012, focused on three countries in West Africa and the Sahel: Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Niger. An effort was made to draw from a combination of available secondary literature and some targeted interviews to identify the prevalent trafficking routes across the greater West African region, encompassing the zone of fragility that runs from coast to coast from West to North Africa.

These three countries were selected as they sit at the heart of the nexus between criminality and conflict, with the aim being to identify communities that have been most affected by the illicit transit trade. As shown in Figure 1, the study identified seven communities sitting along the three major trafficking routes. An effort was made to select communities that could serve as indicators of prevailing attitudes and trends across the region, and to provide a balanced perspective of coastal states and those countries that sit on the Sahelian band bordering North Africa. While Guinea-Bissau's involvement in the drug

Figure 1 Trafficking flows through West Africa and the Sahel



Source: Map compiled by the authors based on data collected during field research, drawn by Isabel Kruger

trade was already notorious, in particular as an *entrepôt* for cocaine trafficked from Latin America, at the time that the countries for the study were selected, the extreme vulnerability of the Malian state was yet to become apparent. Niger remains stable, but caught between the growing violence in northern Nigeria, and the instability in northern Mali and southern Libya.

The research methodology consists of two strands: focus group consultations and key informant interviews. The ISS conducted nine in-country, community-level focus group sessions in both capital, rural and urban locations that were reputed to have a criminal presence or to be affected by criminal activity. All focus group sessions were conducted in an informal roundtable setting. As the discussions held in the focus groups covered sensitive topics, the meetings were not recorded and a note-taker took as close as possible a record of the discussions in the form of a report, which was then translated into English. Participants who attended the focus groups received no payment.

The locations of the focus groups are indicated with green stars in Figure 1. In Mali, focus groups were conducted in Bamako, the capital; with citizens from Kidal, an important trafficking hub in the north of the country; in Gao, a trafficking hub to the East; and with a group of mayors and mayoral aides from across the country. In Niger, focus group discussions were held in Niamey, the capital; and Agadez, a trafficking hub on the route north from Nigeria. Finally, in Guinea-Bissau, focus groups were conducted in the capital of Bissau; in São Domingos, a small coastal town on the border with Senegal; and in Bubaque, an island off the coast, where it is said significant quantities of drugs have landed.

In order to get a broader representation of community perspectives, the focus groups comprised mid-level opinion makers, community leaders and representatives at local level, and offered a diverse selection of gender, age and income levels. Participants were therefore broadly representative of communities and different ethnic groups, although in one case in Mali the focus was exclusively on one ethnic group, given the regional location.

The focus group discussions were complemented with key informant interviews in each country. These included government officials; criminal justice officials (judges, police and legal practitioners); community leaders; mid-level opinion makers, including independent journalists;

businesspeople; non-governmental organisation (NGO) leaders; and academics. The research sought to understand community perspectives on:

- Trafficking and organised criminal activities in general
- The impact of these activities on a local and regional level
- Any sources of resilience or coping mechanisms
- Possible solutions to counter organised crime and bolster democratic governance

The findings of the community focus group discussions are presented in the next section of the report, followed by the strategies and priorities that were identified and proposed by community and national participants. The final section briefly presents key conclusions and implications for the international response.

UNDERSTANDING ORGANISED CRIME AND ITS IMPACTS

Having a discussion on organised crime and illicit trafficking in West Africa and the Sahel is to enter a debate that lies at the centre of a nexus of issues around identity, statehood, security and development in the sub-region. The specific nature of illicit trafficking and the associated organised crime is driven by context: a combination of the extent of state weakness and/or inefficiencies, what is defined as illegal by the state, and the degree to which the state is able to both protect legitimate economic activities and take action against illegal ones.

... illicit economies, and those who protect them, have an increasingly significant impact on social, economic and political dynamics across the continent...

Analysts have long debated whether the term 'organised crime' is meaningful within the African context, given the degree to which the activities of criminal networks are synonymous or synergise with those of warlords, insurgent groups, terrorist organisations or political, military or community organisations. However, illicit economies, and those who protect them, have an increasingly significant impact on social, economic and political dynamics across the continent, and are undermining investments in peace consolidation, state building and democracy. There is, therefore, considerable value in knowing how communities themselves understand organised crime and illicit trafficking and the way these are vested in the framework of the community and the state.

There are differing views on whether communities make a distinction between transporting licit and illicit goods. However, the research makes it clear that, while illicit trafficking and organised crime may not be well understood or recognised, their impact in terms of fuelling corruption, undermining state legitimacy and exacerbating conflict and insecurity is central to the future of the greater West African region.

How organised crime and illicit trafficking are understood in the community

The first critical point that the focus group discussions highlighted is that illicit trafficking and organised crime are not considered criminal behaviour in the communities interviewed: they are merely *modes de vie* – ways of life. In fact, the capacity to smuggle contraband, derive profit from trafficking, and migrate across the porous borders of the region is the resilience strategy that most communities employ to survive.

The greater West African region hosts many of the poorest and most vulnerable countries in the world, ranking at the very bottom of human development indicators. Poverty is widespread and increasing as a result of drought-induced food insecurity, undiversified economies and political crises. The dearth of sustainable and legitimate livelihoods in this region makes trafficking and smuggling a required default option to make an income, as it has been for many decades.

The majority of the participants interviewed in the course of the study did not understand organised crime to involve any activities with only economic implications. Organised crime, in the understanding of most of the community-based discussions, did not include trafficking or smuggling, regardless of the commodity, but was restricted to murder, violent crime, road banditry, burglary, and armed robbery in the street by small gangs, or possibly motor vehicle theft.[4]

Across the greater Saharan region, legitimate economic opportunities are scarce, and the countries of this study rank lowly on most human development and economic indices (Niger ranks 186/186 in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Index; Guinea-Bissau at 176 and Mali at 182)[5] and their populations experience chronic poverty, food and insecurity. The semi-nomadic communities that straddle the hinterlands of the Sahel and the Maghreb have long trafficked commodities between states and across borders, and used migration as a means to survive conflict or drought. Low-level transnational trafficking and smuggling activities have always been a necessary livelihood strategy, and the area has been marked as a major trade route

comparable to the historical Silk Road in Asia, where there was also free movement of people and goods.

Following the decolonisation of the countries in the region, the absence of customs and border controls allowed for continued smuggling of a sizeable quantity and range of illicit goods. This historical evolution has resulted in an understanding of the economic enrichment resulting from trafficking as being a normal and acceptable way of life that is generated by the economic policies of neighbouring states. For example, the fiscal policies of Algeria, and the subsidies and taxes imposed on different commodities, determine the flow of goods trafficked through Kidal in northern Mali. Across the Sahara, entire economies are based on arbitrage and the smuggling of commodities, be it subsidised powdered milk, petrol, diesel or other consumable goods. Criminalising trafficking is a Western and externally imposed concept, and participants in the focus groups were both aware of this characterisation and critical of the international community as a result. As the community discussion in the Gao region observed: 'Smuggled goods that come from Algeria are some of the only products we can afford – without them we would probably die.'[6]

A number of participants in Mali and Niger described how the smuggling of commodities gave way to the higher-income trafficking of illicit commodities: 'Caravan trade was a means of sustaining life, and evolved – and continues to evolve – according to increasing margins of profitability.'[7] This was reinforced by international ethnographic studies. The move from smuggling commodities to trafficking cigarettes took place in the early 1990s, which in turn established the necessary connections and modes of operation now used by cocaine and hashish traffickers in the Sahel and North Africa. One of the Niger participants explained how cigarette smuggling began a process of criminal evolution: 'Cigarettes were extremely expensive in Libya, which would provide an incentive to smuggle these to Libya. Smugglers would be paid with the vehicles that were used in the operations. Since then, and especially after 2006, nomadic populations would move cocaine and hashish through the desert.'[8]

Participants in the focus groups emphasised that the kind of commodity being transported mattered less than the fact that a living could be earned. The Gao focus group further emphasised the irrelevance of the nature of the trade beyond its economic value, as 'our people rarely consume these illicit products, therefore they are not detrimental to our communities'.[9] One participant reported that the average trafficker in the region would probably not even know what goods he was transporting, and would facilitate its transit without ever having seen the product. The size of the payout determines its value: 'Convoys move through the desert, and the drivers are generally not told what they are moving. The sum of cash after the fact would indicate that they had indeed trafficked a particular kind of illicit product ... Drivers are paid at least $6 000 for trafficking cigarettes along one route. For hashish or cocaine they are paid a minimum of $14 000.'[10] Drug trafficking and smuggling have been trivialised across the region by the communities dependent on them for an income.

An anecdote of social legitimacy

A local from northern Mali gave this account: 'I was in Ber, in the region of Timbuktu, with the town's mayor. A young Arab man came to the mayor to acquire a national ID card. The young man was illiterate and the mayor needed to ask him questions to fill in the application form. When the mayor asked the young man his profession the young man calmly responded, "drug smuggler", which he felt was the truthful and appropriate repose to be listed on a government form in order to acquire a national ID card.'[11]

Although poverty is prevalent in the entire region, its cultural makeup is extremely diverse. Several ethnic groups and clans are dispersed throughout these countries, including the Tuareg, Mandinga, Bambara, Songhai and Fula, and for historical reasons some are better placed than others to profit from cross-border trade. Typically, local businessmen of Arab descent, as well as the Tuareg and Tabu, are known for being traffickers of first licit and then illicit goods.

The Gao focus group explained that the Songhais in Gao did not have the extended regional networks required to facilitate such operations, as 'few Songhai have gone *à l'aventure* in the region in countries with substantial Songhai communities such as in Niger or Libya'. That said, however, the group implied that few would turn down an opportunity to partake in trafficking ventures if it were offered to them. 'Young Songhai attempt to foster relationships with Arab patrons or their children, in order to be asked to participate in trafficking opportunities…'[12] The participants in the Agadez focus group in Niger were similarly unanimous that they would also participate in trafficking if they had the chance. One participant explained, 'Even if you are a thief, but you can mobilise a group of thieves, and acquire resources, we don't consider you a thief, but as a successful man – someone brave.'[13]

Trafficking creates livelihoods and wealth, and the community discussions emphasised that the wealth earned through trafficking would broadly be considered a sign of success, not a crime. One of the key informants

interviewed in Mali, a senior civil servant in the administration of President Amadou Toumani Touré, spoke of a visit to Gao in 2009. 'I arrived in the city with the Governor of Kidal, and together we went to visit and have a working meeting with the Governor of Gao. Once all three of us were in the car, a friend of mine stopped the car to say hello. She was wearing the traditional dress of an African woman preparing to attend a baptism or a marriage. I asked where she was going, and without hesitation, in front of the two governors, she explained with pride that she was going to attend the wedding of a girl from Gao who was marrying a very successful narco-trafficker.'[14]

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The upward creep of licit to illicit trafficking is less applicable in Guinea-Bissau, where local communities may engage in smuggling at the lower levels, but the high-value traffic is largely controlled by those in the upper echelons of the state. While community focus groups described migrant smuggling or cattle rustling, all mentions of drug trafficking were made with reference to key figures in the government: 'Nino Vieira introduced drug trafficking to Guinea-Bissau,' reported one community participant. 'He offered the air trade to the Chief of the Armed Forces, and controlled the maritime traffic with the help of the Chief of the Navy, that was the exchange.'[15] That said, smuggling and drug trafficking have trickled down, and have achieved social legitimacy at the community level in Guinea-Bissau: 'Guinea-Bissau promotes rich people, not wealth. You must take advantage of the circumstances that you can – then we consider you a smart man!'[16]

The impact of organised crime on community dynamics

While the community in general may not consider smuggling or trafficking as a crime, there is a recognition that, since the introduction of drug trafficking, illicit trade is having an increasingly detrimental effect on society and the community. The accumulation of wealth by young traffickers has created a cadre of newly wealthy, armed and influential groups of predominantly young men, who are operating outside of traditional societal structures. Each of the focus groups reflected on the way that the increase in *nouveaux riches* groups had changed the traditional balance of power at the community level, and the impact of this.

There has been a noted increase in banditry in those communities where control of illicit flows has not yet solidified: 'Competing faction leaders may quarrel with those groups/factions that have participated in successful trafficking operations. There have been instances of road banditry on the convoy route, the capture of the product, and its subsequent resale to the same trafficker/organiser.'[17] A number of participants in all three countries noted the militarisation of the youth: 'The young military are more brutal, sexist and aggressive. They don't know how to use their power and this power is serving organised crime. This is particularly dangerous because these are not "outsiders", but an important part of the population.'[18] A number of state officials interviewed suggested that the drug culture and usage also contributed to insurgency movements: the sentiment that 'rebels do not rebel when they are sober'[19] was expressed or implied a number of times. As the drug culture and usage is coupled with the widespread presence of small arms in the region, this contributes to the prevailing insecurity and violence, as well as to the growing propensity toward violent conflict in the region.

The armed young men engaged in trafficking publicise their success by buying valuable real estate, cars and other status symbols, which in turn become a tool for recruiting prospective members into organised crime, especially impressionable youths who are diverted from taking job opportunities in legitimate industries: 'Arab youths begin learning to drive at a very young age, and are known locally to have a particular talent for driving in the desert. They start as early as 10; are well practiced by 15, and by 18 are driving in the drug convoys for long distances. After being paid for the first couple of runs, they purchase their own cars – normally 4x4s – and then their futures are made.'[20] The Bissau focus group members described what they called the 'inversion of moral values', whereby 'students don't believe in school anymore, now they believe that to be an intellectual is a waste of time. Only through illegal schemes can one achieve success in Guinea-Bissau.'[21] This only exacerbates a well-established trend of illiteracy in these states. In Guinea-Bissau, 2, 3, years is the average length of schooling, and only 54,2 per cent of the adult population is literate.[22] The data is even more worrying in Mali and Niger, where the majority of adults (68,9 per cent and 71,3 per cent respectively) are illiterate.[23] As an NGO leader in Mali said: 'Why would I bother teaching my sons to read, if I can instead teach them to drive?'[24]

Apart from the practice of kidnapping for ransom, the general sense from the discussions was that there was no direct ideological link between trafficking, and terrorism and the insurgent conflicts in the region, sponsored by groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). One activity was conducted for profit, the other for political or ideological objectives. Nonetheless, most felt that funds from illicit activities did enrich insurgent, armed militia groups and those with a jihadist agenda. While a number of participants were quite firm that 'rebels do not traffic narcotics'[25], insurgents may take a percentage to guarantee the safe passage of goods (of any kind) through areas that they control. One of the key informants interviewed stated, 'Since 2005, AQIM has been taxing trafficking convoys.'[26] Another informant reported that from early as 1999, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (the precursor of AQIM) 'had begun making alliances with individuals from the north, especially through marriage, and they began taxing the drug trade or providing protection for the convoys as they passed through territory they controlled'.[27]

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The shifting power relations and breakdown of social norms triggered by the engagement of young men in the trafficking industry are, in turn, having an impact on gender relations and increasing the vulnerability of women and children. The Kidal focus group had a lengthy discussion on the growing practice of forced or swiftly arranged marriages to 'placate the desires of young Kel Tamasheq men who have access to large amounts of money'.[28] In turn, young men who do not have the required knowledge of trafficking routes to engage in the trade have difficulties marrying, as they cannot afford the increasingly inflated dowries required to find a bride. This phenomenon is creating schisms in society and promoting conflict. Furthermore, traffickers are fickle with their hastily bought brides. It was noted that the divorce rate was increasing, particularly if the young wives (sometimes as young as nine or ten) could not bear children in the first year of marriage.[29] In a community where virginity is highly prized, divorced women are then viewed as 'used goods who will find it increasingly difficult to remarry'.[30]

Participants in both Mali and Niger noted the increase in the number of brothels along the more established trafficking routes and in urban hubs to serve drivers and guides. One participant observed that the brothels were more often than not staffed by women from neighbouring countries; typically migrants without the means to continue their journey northwards.[31] Traditionally, in the region, prostitution is viewed as deviant behaviour and a serious social and religious ill,[32] and the increasing number of prostitutes is an indicator of the degree to which the cultural framework is changing. One of the key informants, an NGO worker in Guinea-Bissau, also told of the increasing number of cases of paedophilia and sexual abuse against children since 2008, when cocaine was introduced to the region.[33]

Finally, there was a general sense that drug consumption – of both cocaine and hashish – was on the rise in communities that were frequented by traffickers. A national health practitioner who was a member of the Kidal focus group reported that she had seen a huge increase in mental health problems due to drug use, with the cases equally divided between men and women.

Positioning for power

Focus group discussions noted that traditional sources of authority – clan leaders, imams, elders and others – were increasingly seeing their authority eroded by those with a perceived level of social capital and success from trafficking.[34] As *chacun veut être chef* ('everyone wants to be boss'), this has resulted in two distinct dynamics as the previous powerbrokers seek to re-establish their relevance and base of support.

The first has been an effort to reassert traditional values on the part of religious leaders. A prominent member of the *Haut Conseil Islamique* of Mali (the most important religious organisation in the country) noted in an interview that 'preachers have been sent to counsel with youth in order to teach correct Islamic principles.' He also noted that 'preachers are meant to admonish parents to be critical about where their children gain their income.'[35]

Almost all of the focus group discussions remarked on the growing conservatism in the previously moderate and liberal Islamic countries of West Africa and the Sahel. This appears to be a backlash to the growing criminality in society. Traditional leaders seek to counter the negative impact that the trafficking culture is having on society and their own loss of influence through a re-assertion of fundamentalist values. The proliferation of Koranic schools, Koranic preachers and veiled women was remarked upon in the Nigerien context, and the rapid foothold Islamic extremism gained in the north of Mali (which contributed to the collapse of the state in 2012) was preceded by a fundamentalism that had been spread by the teachings of fundamentalist preachers in the northern communities. The Bissau discussion group claimed that 'the Islamic Council held a public meeting to raise funds for the Mali terrorists'.[36]

A second result was the effort by some traditional leaders to position themselves as intermediaries between the traffickers and the state, to protect and facilitate the illicit trade: 'The traditional leaders see the effect of these youths on their communities and feel they must placate the [traffickers]. Traditional leaders are viewed as intermediaries, and have used this position to pay off state administrators for favours.'[37] In this way, the extraordinary purchasing power generated by trafficking feeds directly into the state: 'Military officers, members of the intelligence services, deputies, mayors, governors, anyone of influence will be approached. Bribes are not paid as a contract for a provided service. Most often they are paid as a gift, given with an understanding common to African people – that there is an obligation to return a favour at a later date, i.e. for a customs official to let a convoy go if they are found; for a military patrol to give an open passage for a convoy on a particular route; or even to temporarily remove competing trafficking networks from an area that will facilitate passage.'[38] Money made from trafficking also seeps into the political process more directly. The discussion groups described how 'wealthy Arabs who are assumed to be traffickers bankroll local candidates for mayoral positions, or seats in the National Assembly', or in fact run for election themselves.[39] In Mali, political parties regularly attempt to have journalists join their parties, or members of the media are bribed by state administrators to take the side of the state against its critics.[40]

In Guinea-Bissau, this process of intertwining state institutions and organised crime has been a top-down rather than a bottom-up process. Members of the Bissau focus group described the ways in which local governance was undermined by the central state: 'In the last elections, traditional representatives became politicians, then they received lots of money to support political parties.'[41] Similarly, 'the governors, directors and secretaries were all changed after the coup, and many are not even from the regions that they now represent'.[42] Members of the São Domingos focus group described cases 'where authorities had been corrupted to leave drug dealers out of jail or not to arrest them'. They also spoke of the tacit agreements made at state level between border authorities to provide visas and allow safe passage for traffickers on the Senegal/Guinea-Bissau border.

Corruption and the culture of impunity

As democratic governance has consolidated across the sub-region, the relationship between trafficking and governance has grown closer. Both bottom-up and top-down, corrupt practices have spread in scope and intensified in scale, as one participant phrased it: *Il suffit de fermer les yeux* ('you only have to close your eyes'.)[43] Throughout this steady evolution, the repeated failure to hold leaders to account for their association with criminal practices, and the failure of justice systems to punish those involved, have created a widespread culture of impunity. This was by far the most pervasive and potent impact of illicit trafficking that the focus group discussions described.

Across the sub-region, in all the countries of West Africa, corruption now extends to the highest levels of government, state and the private sector, and permeates down through all levels of state institutions and the societal fabric. The descriptions of citizens' experiences at community level paint a picture of exhaustive corruption that taints all aspects of their lives and their understanding of citizenship and statehood. 'Impunity is everywhere, because there is no state and no authority.'[44] Across the region, getting even the most basic of state services, such as an identification card, healthcare or judicial services, requires bribery or connections. Bribes, kickbacks and commissions from trafficking are commonly accepted as standard supplements to inadequate state salaries, and are not even viewed as misdeeds by government officials.

Identification card corruption in Mali[45]

All Malians are required to have a national ID card on their person (although, in practice, in rural areas this requirement is very relaxed). Since national ID cards are printed and supplied by Canadian firms (in order to ensure the inclusion of biometric info), the Malian state no longer pays for this service. The loss of a card can mean serious trouble for an individual who runs into the police or gendarmerie in a time of war. Malians without ID cards have to go to police stations to ask for new cards, but the police regularly inform them that there are none to be had, as the state is no longer purchasing the imported service. However, by drawing an officer aside, one can make a purchase from a stack of ID cards held by the police. Instead of paying 1 500 CFA francs ($3), the cards are sold for between 15 000 and 25 000 CFA francs ($30–$50).

Within the justice system, 'the members of the judiciary have interpreted their position not as being independent arbitrators of justice and the law, but as [having the right] to dole out justice as they see fit, without consequence'.[46] There is little to no access to modern constitutional justice systems outside of the capitals; consequently, at a local level, this creates systems that reinforce local dispute mechanisms, localised inter-group conflict and vigilante justice. 'People do justice with their own hands.'[47]

At the top of the pyramid, political leaders are viewed as elitist, corrupt and self-serving. In Guinea-Bissau, the

growing cycle of violence and instability that has followed the introduction of cocaine into the country is often attributed to the desire to control trafficking flows. In Mali, President Touré's laissez-faire, appeasement approach to the criminal economy in the north and its growing linkages to officials and economic operators in the south led to the slow failure of the state. In Niger, there is generally no sense that President Mahamadou Issoufou is engaged in trafficking in the way that political leaders are implicated in Guinea-Bissau, but the corrupting influence of illicit trafficking is still felt 'from the office of the President, all the way down.'[48]

> 'Why would you want to be close to a state that ignores your existence? The state is only the uniform and the rifle.'

It was repeatedly said that senior government officials considered themselves 'untouchable'. Those who profited from drug trafficking and other criminal trades were described as having a similar sense of invincibility by a number of participants: '[These people have] a sense that justice can't reach them, not because of the lack of technical skills of the judicial workers, but because of the block created by the defence and security forces, which many times stopped the judicial forces hitting those frontmen.'[49]

With the high-level complicity of government officials, any attempt to address illicit trafficking or smuggling on the ground appears hypocritical. For example, in an interview with an Arab leader in Gao, he clung to the position that there were no drug traffickers in Gao, a city commonly considered a major hub of illicit activity. When pressed to explain the notorious *Cocainebougou* (cocaine town) of Gao – a district of Gao with large villas, all constructed in the last five years, and commonly accepted to have been funded with the proceeds of narco-trafficking – he replied: 'Well, what about Bamako? We should be calling it *détournement-bougou* (corruption town),' and proceeded to describe how the state was the most potent example of criminality in the country.

Another lucrative – though this time licit – flow of resources into the region comes in the shape of foreign development assistance. In Guinea-Bissau, this is estimated to amount to about 80 per cent of the state budget,[50] and the other countries in the region are similarly dependent on foreign assistance. Focus group members described with emphatic frustration the ways in which the widespread corruption was affecting everything from infrastructure investments to development projects and the delivery of humanitarian assistance. For example, in Gao 'development projects do target Gao, but these projects are used as a means of wealth accumulation for those individual development project leaders – often these are not even people from Gao, but those with connected friends from the south'.[51] The Bissau focus group described cases of hospitals going without budgets because the funds 'stay in Bissau politicians' pockets.'[52]

Citizen disenfranchisement from the state

Every focus group discussion and interview emphasised the extent to which the state was considered absent from the lives of ordinary people across West Africa, and was becoming a concept that was meaningless at best, and pejorative at worst.

This is particularly prevalent and damaging in the case of the youth, who have known no other form of governance or had any other experience with the state apart from as a corrupt and self-serving entity. As a consequence, people do not view themselves as citizens of a country, but more as members of specific sub- or trans-national social entities (kin, tribe, ethnicity or village). It is these entities that provide the nexus of order, security and basic social services. A member of the Agadez focus group explained that 'the notion of the "state" makes no sense to most Nigeriens. Other identity and community affiliations are more important than ideas of Nigerien citizenship.'[53] Similarly, in Guinea-Bissau, a lack of homogeneity and unity, as well as a strong tribal structure, complicate the construction of the state, as some ethnic groups don't feel represented: 'There is no sense of common good, representativeness and citizen protection.'[54] One participant described how local chiefs would serve as intermediaries between their clan and the local governor, and 'that would be the visible extent of interaction with the state' for the average person.[55] People have confidence in their community and its leaders, but no trust in the government. Similarly, one participant in the Niger focus group explained, 'I feel like a stranger here. I don't know the state of Niger. If the Malian Islamists from MUJAO had come to Niger, I would have gladly picked up an AK-47 and supported them.'[56]

Ultimately, trafficking is serving to disenfranchise citizens from the state, or, as one participant phrased it: 'Why would you want to be close to a state that ignores your existence? The state is only the uniform and the rifle.'[57] With so little sense of loyalty to or engagement with the state, and seeing no positive results from statehood, criminality, corruption, theft and the diversion of state resources are a natural result. Within the framework of an absent and corrupt state, there is no sense that illicit

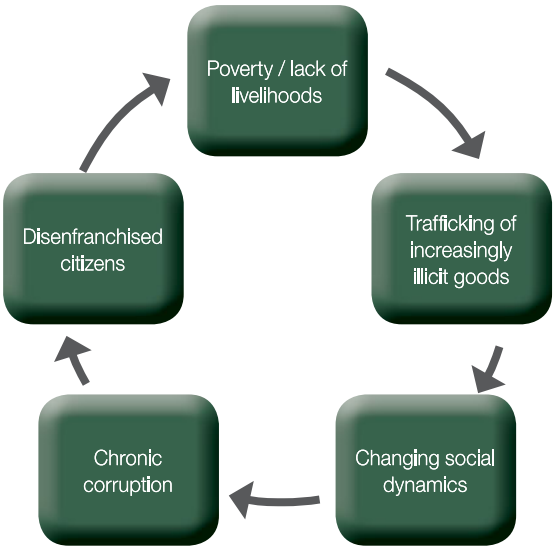
trafficking or smuggling should be perceived as criminal, or wrong, or even damaging in the context of broader political challenges and instability. To take the rather less elegant description of one Kidal focus group participant: 'Any activity of ours is equivalent to pissing in the ocean!'[58]

COMMUNITY-DERIVED RESPONSES

What the community discussion groups described is a self-reinforcing, vicious and negative cycle of poverty, crime, corruption and disenfranchisement – as illustrated in Figure 2. For the purposes of this report, the themes in the discussions and interviews have been grouped into a number of headings, whereas in fact they are very closely interwoven, and form a core negative cycle that has had a multitude of negative impacts on human and state security; triggering violence, conflict and the diversion of state resources away from development into widespread corruption.

Only very recently has the extent of the predation of the state by criminal networks been revealed, as highlighted by the collapse of the democratically elected government in Mali. Largely undetected – or at least unremarked upon – illicit trafficking and smuggling in their traditional forms corrupted and corroded local governance and security. Among others, the coup in Mali served to reveal the extent of popular discontent with the political class and the level to which it has been discredited, which surprised many members of the international community. The formal functioning of democratic institutions can cover up a regime's extreme fragility, and a failure to understand the way in which these dynamics engage at the local level will prevent the design of effective responses.

Figure 2 A negative cycle of citizen disenfranchisement and state erosion



One of the most important reasons for conducting detailed surveys of community perceptions is that the results can often challenge prevailing wisdom about how ordinary people view their day-to-day lives. The design of effective policy responses requires that these views be taken into account. While this study may have consulted with only a limited number of people, it has nevertheless offered new perspectives on the challenges of conflict, governance and state fragility across West Africa and the Sahel.

Until now, the threat posed by organised crime and the financing it provided to terrorist groups were predominantly perceived from the perspective of international stakeholders and their motivation to protect their own national security interests. For that reason, the problem of illicit trafficking and organised criminality was primarily viewed through a security lens: the need to invest in border control, law enforcement capacity, intelligence sharing and international cooperation. In contrast, the focus groups and key informant interviews have proposed a number of alternative priorities and entry points to turn back the negative cycle of crime, corruption and poor governance in a long-term and sustainable way.

The following recommendations for responses have been generated by the respondents themselves, reflecting concerns from the perspective of local communities.

Governance and state delivery of development

Despite the fact that many of the community-based focus groups and individual informant interviews expressed a sense of disenfranchisement, frustration and despair with the state, they ultimately wanted to see the state step up and play a positive role in their lives.

The participants in the Kidal focus group unanimously concluded, 'It is the responsibility of the Malian state to solve these problems.'[59] The Gao focus group wanted to see 'the country reformed so as to rekindle faith and confidence in the state as a whole'.[60] The Niamey group in Niger similarly concluded that 'if any initiative should go forward, it must be those that aim to reinforce the presence of the state in areas of the north that are vulnerable to trafficking.'[61] Even in Guinea-Bissau, where the government has been viewed as corrupt and self-serving since its inception, this has not deterred community members from desiring to see 'state presence in all of the country, including the south and the islands.'[62]

While a number of international actors may have recognised the need for reinforcing development and security interventions in the Sahel,[63] and international engagement in the region is at an all-time high following the collapse of Mali, the focus group discussions strongly indicate that international interventions have their limitations

and that they would rather see the delivery of assistance by the state. The Mali focus group participants described the longstanding courtship of President Touré by international donors, which served to reinforce the perception that Mali was not a sovereign state focused on the needs of its people. They characterised the prevalent discourse during President Touré's tenure as having been 'invaded by foreigners,' though as one participant dryly stated, 'Instead of an invasion, it was an invitation.'[64] President Touré ceded key sovereign responsibilities to international actors, including the right of passage and border control, and this reinforced the perception that the Malian state was weak and unable to deliver services unaided.

> **... the importance of the state being seen to lead development efforts and to project state institutions into those 'lawless corridors' where it had not previously been sincerely felt...**

To avoid having this perception perpetuated into the new administration or more widely reinforced across the region, international efforts to support the new government in Mali and its neighbours should reinforce the principles of national ownership and state delivery of services as far as possible. A clear lesson has been the need to project the state's influence beyond the capital and major cities. 'The state's presence ends in the urban centres and not even all of them, and the lack of control and influence facilitates the proliferation of organised crime.'[65] National participants emphasised the importance of the state being seen to lead development efforts and to project state institutions into those 'lawless corridors'[66] where it had not previously been sincerely felt, by creating visible impacts for both the disenfranchised segments of society and the population generally. One participant emphasised that visibility was key, since the majority of people were illiterate and did not have access to television. Tangible state efforts to provide water, for example, even on a small scale, would foster trust in the state and a greater willingness among northern populations to rely on the state instead of various non-state actors, legitimate or illegitimate.[67]

The development priorities highlighted by all participants was the need to provide alternative economic opportunities, which would reduce reliance on the illicit economy. Focus group participants recognised that it would be a challenge to find legitimate alternatives that could rival the incomes generated by trafficking: 'When [President Touré] visited the Kidal region to announce the *Programme spécial pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement du Nord Mali* (Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in North Mali, or the PSPSDN plan), he explained to a large audience of northern youths that the project would target the north's need for employment opportunities and training (as mechanics, masons, tailors, etc.). This speech was responded to with resounding vocal derision. The youths responded that these were not "jobs" and that they were happy with the jobs that they had had for the past seven to ten years: as guides and drivers for traffickers.'[68] Labour-intensive, short-term employment will not provide a sustainable alternative, but there is a need to create effective new economic sectors in each country and across the region, and to match skills to jobs. The burgeoning extractive industries sector in Niger was offered as a key example, under the proviso that employment opportunities within such sectors are offered to local populations.[69]

Security, community policing and access to justice

Because the community is keen to see the state play the lead role in responding to organised crime, a number of participants pointed to the need to strengthen the state's capacity to ensure security and justice. This manifested in two dimensions: building up civilian capacity for law enforcement at the community level, particularly in those communities along trafficking routes; and establishing the capacity to ensure swift punishment of convicted traffickers or corrupt officials. Importantly, while focus groups and informants spoke of the need to strengthen security capacity, the emphasis was rarely on technical skills but far more on integrity and the way in which security officials engaged with people.

In a discussion with a group of local mayors from across Mali, none of the regional mayors had police in their communes, apart from those close to Bamako.[70] Without a national police force, 'community members attempt to police themselves and to secure their property through local-level guarding arrangements.' Without civilian policing structures, the military is the only branch of the state associated with law and order, and in all three of the countries the military is known for its corruption, meddling in politics, and strong-arm tactics, often including human rights abuses. As one of the Malian focus groups emphasised, what they needed were 'capable and respectful armed forces that can be tasked with the surveillance of Malian borders.'[71] A few participants requested broad-scale security sector reform: 'The UN

[United Nations] must act against the military. Guineans are very tired!'[72] Others spoke of the need to increase significantly the number and capacity of both civilian and militarised police (gendarmes) forces, and to increase the number of border posts. However, if there are insufficient resources, political will and momentum to ensure this, other steps can be taken to enhance trust and integrity of security forces. Participants requested efforts to 'foster a culture of honesty and integrity … in the security services'[73] and to build local capacity for security. They also suggested increasing the rotation of security services that are active in communities vulnerable to illicit trafficking, as the bribes provided to security officials 'ensure that those already in place stay on in order to continue to profit from the trade.'[74]

Having an independent media and free civil society to investigate and report on violations of justice and human rights was seen as critical to creating a culture based on the rule of law

The need for strengthening the justice sector was seen as critical. Participants spoke of interventions at a range of levels, including strengthening the judiciary and protecting prosecutors and magistrates who are trying to halt trafficking: 'Lawsuits that involve militaries as alleged perpetrators [are lawsuits that] no judicial official has the courage to carry forward. It's not because of the lack of technical ability to do it, [but] because of the lack of magistrate's security.'[75] Similarly, they spoke of the need to find 'a way to encourage a witness to testify against an offender'[76] that would create a culture of reporting and accountability. Having an independent media and free civil society to investigate and report on violations of justice and human rights was seen as critical to creating a culture based on the rule of law. The civil society members interviewed in the course of the study emphasised the need to protect those who spoke out. Finally, participants in all three countries spoke of the need to increase access to justice, and expressed frustration at the inefficiency of the justice system.

Ending corruption and impunity

Perhaps the most urgent priority highlighted by national participants was the need to ensure a visible end to impunity for crime and trafficking, as this continued to disenfranchise citizens and make any attempts to address trafficking both ineffective and hypocritical. Furthermore, widespread corruption diverted development aid away from its intended objectives, thereby reducing or nullifying contributions.

Focus group participants in Agadez added that the political elite should not feel that they were beyond the reach of the law or be perceived as being 'untouchable.'[77] All of the community consultations emphasised that there had to be sufficient momentum to tackle the biggest fish in the pond, to drive down state-led corruption, and to prosecute the most senior officials in government where relevant: 'Americans must come here with an aircraft carrier and take the thousands of *Bubos* to the US.'[78] This did in fact occur in April 2013, when the former chief of the Guinea-Bissau navy, José Américo Bubo Na Tchuto, was arrested at sea by the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and charged with drug trafficking and the purchase of surface-to-air missiles and AK-47 assault rifles with grenade launchers for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). He had allegedly agreed to receive cocaine off the coast of Guinea-Bissau and store it prior to its onward shipment to the US and Europe. According to the DEA indictment, he negotiated for a portion of the cocaine to be used to pay off government officials, including the president, to provide for the drugs' safe passage through the country. A few days later, an indictment was issued for Antonio Indjai, the current chief of staff of Guinea Bissau's armed forces, on similar charges.[79] At the time of writing, he remained free and in his position.

However, as with the development, security and governance initiatives highlighted above, in which international action can be catalytic, the real onus on ending impunity lies at home, with domestic capacity built into the framework of the rule of law. While international interventions like the DEA sting can be effective at sending an unambiguous message, they also tend to highlight the inadequacies of the national justice system, as one participant emphasised: 'This kind of intervention will not change anything long term. For this to have a real impact in society, foreigners must work side by side with Guineans to create the understanding that these actions have disciplinary and criminal consequences.'[80]

In Niger, the Niamey focus group participants argued that when certain people enjoyed impunity from the law, instances of which were well reported in the Nigerien press, or when ordinary Nigeriens witnessed corrupt activities, they 'immediately questioned their own poverty and asked why it was necessary to follow the laws of the state when the law was not applied equally.'[81] If this attitude was to change, they concluded, 'the state must police

itself, and enforce strict penalties for breaking the public trust.'[82] The mayoral focus group in Mali proposed the development of a system of 'moral assessments for public servants,' which would consist of an arm of the government responsible for integrity, vetting individuals at the start of their public service and thereafter at regular intervals.[83]

Participants across all three countries were aware that building the capacity of state institutions to ensure integrity would take time – one suggested that it could require 'ten years of external escort [support] to government institutions'.[84] In this regard, the three countries differ significantly from each other regarding the degree of international intervention brought to bear by the UN in the country. The Guinea-Bissau focus groups expressed frustration with the UN Integrated Peace-Building Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS). They complained that 'the UNIOGBIS should leave their offices and better implement their budgets,'[85] and requested more tangible results from the mission, so that it would function with a mandate that was 'more operational and less political, as in other fragile states.'[86] Discussions and interviews in Niger, where international intervention is the lightest, were the most self-reliant, looking at strengthening state institutions and initiatives such as the High Authority against Corruption and Related Crimes (HALCIA), established by presidential decree. The Agadez focus group proposed that 'one tangible initiative would be to bulk up the capacity of the HALCIA, and to give them investigative teeth.'[87]

'[The] international community must establish dialogue mechanisms with the population and independent institutions.'

Interventions through non-state actors

The degree of mistrust that exists between citizens and the state means non-state actors are needed to build resilience among community groups, and to support efforts to increase transparency and accountability. As one member of the Bissau focus group said, 'the state cannot be a privileged interlocutor. It does not represent the people.'[88]

The role of different aspects of civil society – NGOs, community leaders and the media – was emphasised in relation to various proposed initiatives. In São Domingos, participants said that the 'state needs the help of civil society, religious leaders, local committees and the international community, because the government is not able to do it by itself.'[89] One participant from Guinea-Bissau invited the international community to facilitate a stronger partnership between NGOs and the government, and to 'exchange information, promote dialogue, coordinate their agendas and discuss Guinea-Bissau's needs, and not individual ones.'[90]

Another role for civil society is through civilian oversight. This was debated in the focus group in Gao, where one participant asked, 'Where is citizen control? Our citizens in Gao have no understanding or idea of this. They are not taught to check the management of their own development, and they assume that it is futile to do so since power means corruption.'[91]

According to international best practice, mechanisms that allow citizens to register a complaint about state institutions, particularly those that emphasise having an independent or confidential access point, have been proven to gain traction in communities where corruption was perceived as prevalent. Participants in Guinea-Bissau also asked for greater transparency and opportunities for engagement: '[The] international community must establish dialogue mechanisms with the population and independent institutions.' They also asked that more financial information be shared with relevant communities before activities were implemented in the field.[92] There are a number of means of achieving civilian oversight, from formal oversight bodies to independent complaints mechanisms, or reporting incidents via phone or in person. Given the variety of options, creative thinking and further discussions with individual communities on these issues may prove insightful.

One participant spoke of an initiative in the town of Ouelessebougou, in the south of Mali, which has been successful in lessening the degree of bribe paying and corruption. The mayor approached all the village chiefs and established a covenant whereby they pledged not to take funds from the state or local tax coffers. Instead, they and the individuals under their stewardship would pay taxes. Record-keeping rounds are conducted every three months to ensure the accuracy of tax returns and incoming revenues and to minimise claims of mismanagement and corruption. In one year, tax revenues were augmented significantly, which allowed infrastructure development and services to advance to the point that the town received national recognition.[93]

Examples such as this show the potential for disenfranchised communities to contribute positively to the state. This also emphasises that civil society and integrity are critical to ending the culture of impunity. As one participant put it, 'The only way to penetrate and dismantle these networks is to involve local populations in discrediting organised crime.'[94]

Sensitisation and civic education

In order to better engage local communities, a number of participants in all three countries emphasised the importance of initiatives to enhance civic education and sensitisation about the damaging role of illicit trafficking and organised crime.

The participants in the Agadez focus group insisted that citizens 'require lessons in civic responsibility if they are to feel connected to the state, and become willing to make changes to forms of current governance and corruption.'[95] One Guinea-Bissau participant said, 'The state and the community are responsible for fighting organised crime, but for that to happen, we first need to identify the gains that both the state and the community will make for fighting crime.'[96] Awareness-raising and sensitisation need to take a carrot and a stick approach. There are benefits to fighting crime, but also needed are 'awareness campaigns among civil society, politicians and the military to inculcate the notion that drug trafficking, corruption and money laundering are serious crimes and to engage in it is shameful.'[97] A number of participants focused on the need for 'serious studies and comparative measures'[98] that would show the real negative impact of drugs on society. In particular, they referred to drug abuse, the increase in mental health problems, the rise in paedophilia and child sex trafficking.

... for many of these communities, trafficking and migration are in fact the resilience strategies that have been employed in the face of weak governance, corruption, food insecurity and conflict

Where sources of influence and leverage lie will vary from community to community. Community radio and the media were repeatedly referenced as effective means to communicate with and influence communities across the region. The local media are important sources of community information – both positive and negative. Participants in the focus group from Gao in Mali said that 'the media generally lets the communities of the north know that there are traffickers among them.'[99] Similar sentiments were expressed in Niger, where it was felt that an effective and independent media could be used to hold corrupt officials and criminals to account. Public naming and shaming could reduce the likelihood of corrupt officials being re-elected, or being given other positions of responsibility in state administration. 'Only the media, in conjunction with traditional authorities, may have the required credibility to dissuade participants from involvement in illicit economic practices.'[100] Participants noted that radio was the most dominant form of media, given the high levels of illiteracy across the region and the fact that few people could afford a television set.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

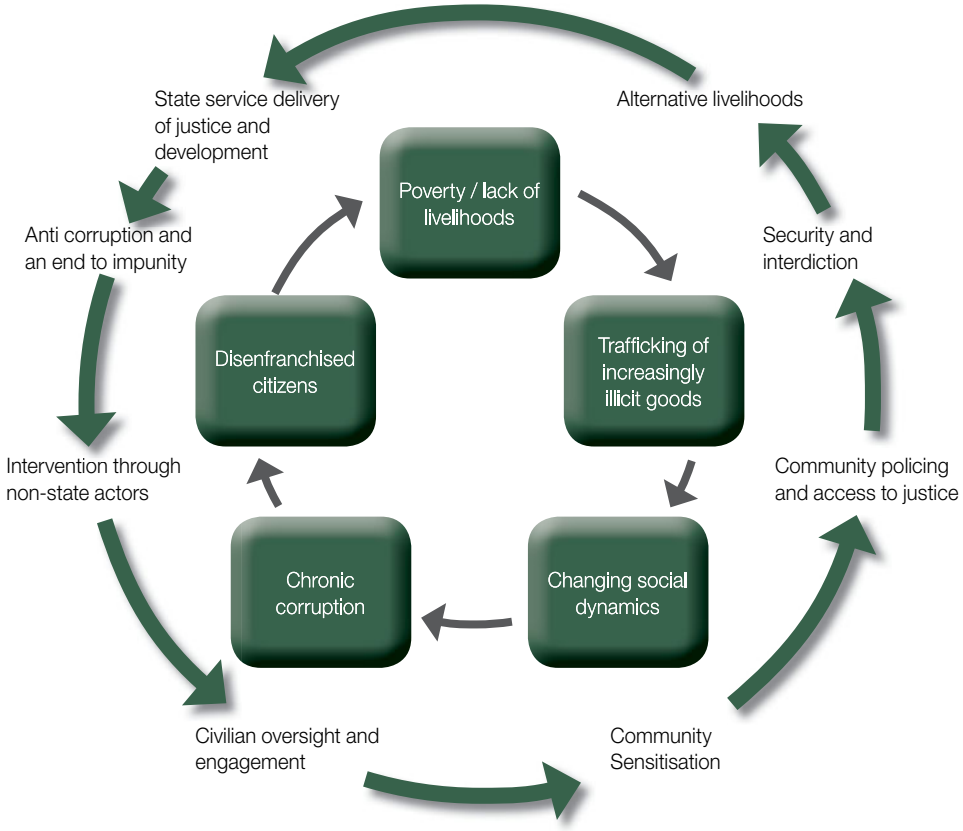
The original objective of this study was to assess community perceptions about illicit trafficking and organised crime, and to attempt to identify sources of community resilience. The main conclusion is that for many of these communities, trafficking and migration are in fact the resilience strategies that have been employed in the face of weak governance, corruption, food insecurity and conflict. The state is almost entirely absent from their lives, except in a punitive or negative capacity, and communities have low trust or confidence in state institutions.

At the same time, communities recognised the negative impact of their growing reliance on criminal economies, how it had changed community relations, and how this had increased the vulnerability of women and children. However, while the focus groups painted a picture of a negative cycle of citizen disenfranchisement, they also highlighted the desire of individuals to see their states strengthened, and provided entry points to turn around the negative cycle of bad governance, corruption, poverty and crime.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the need to develop integrated strategies that can address security, governance and development challenges as identified by ordinary citizens across a vast sub-region has created a series of goals and objectives that are far-reaching and complex. Building state institutions and the conditions for stable and productive societies is a long-term commitment, but the focus is too often concentrated only at the level of institution building, neglecting engagement with those citizens for whom the efforts of statehood and security are intended. Civic engagement must also come from the bottom up. While there is little doubt that the challenges of following this approach – or at least balancing the overall response to trafficking with greater levels of local-level engagement – are considerable, it seems clear from what ordinary people say that any attempt to solve the problem will be unsuccessful unless they are drawn in as allies and collaborators.

The consultations at the community level demonstrate that it is possible to change the paradigm for those disenfranchised communities who are engaged in and/or vulnerable to trafficking. Moreover, it shows that the

Figure 3 Building better governance and addressing the vicious cycle of criminality and citizen disenfranchisement



communities themselves can and will engage in fighting criminal activities if enabled to do so. This has a number of important implications for the ways in which the international community has to engage if it wishes to control these illicit flows. Strategies need to be relevant to the local context, because, as this study has shown, in many cases people rely on organised crime and its collateral industries for their livelihoods where few other alternatives exist. This gives both trafficking and traffickers a legitimacy in the eyes of the communities who depend on the trade, so efforts to explain this as criminal behaviour will need to be predicated on a clear understanding of the context at the local level.

Given the extent to which communities are both vested in, and reliant upon, trafficking and smuggling for their survival, credible, sustainable alternatives will have to be provided over the long term if the trend towards the criminalisation of the regional economy is to change. Providing high-intensity, short-term employment opportunities will not achieve this objective. Furthermore, both national and international interventions – whether in the domain of security, governance or development – need to be predicated on a proper criminal economy analysis, so that it is understood which vested interests, licit or illicit, stand to benefit.

This study emphasises the extent of citizens' disengagement and isolation from the state. However, as demonstrated by the West's surprise at the collapse of the state in Mali, the international community lacks the means to monitor and understand the degree of communities' enfranchisement in the state-building process. More broadly, and although this kind of work has seldom been done in the past in the development and governance sphere, ways need to be found to continuously monitor not only organised criminal activities, but also their impact on politics, the economy and communities. This calls for a more creative approach by external partners, as well as less reliance on engagement with state institutions alone and more with civil society groups and the media to produce and disseminate information on organised crime and trafficking and its impact on people's lives and livelihoods.

While integrated strategies are required, the provision of social goods must be with the intention of benefiting the people, and not with other motives, if the state is to be projected successfully into disenfranchised communities. It was noted, for example, that the PSPSDN plan in Mali offered job opportunities, but did not have options that were sufficiently compelling to offer a credible alternative to trafficking. It was also commonly recognised that the

PSPSDN plan was primarily a security strategy 'designed to position Mali a as key partner in the global war on terror'.[101] Development activities were used to camouflage security-related objectives, and the funding for the plan was predominantly aimed at security activities, rather than the limited development and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration activities. While it is clear that security and development are increasingly intertwined and mutually reinforcing in West Africa and the Sahel, interventions designed with the objective of enhancing regional security must also be credible development strategies if they are to be effective.

Ensuring the engagement, visibility and leadership of the state in these efforts is critical, as efforts that are driven and directed by international actors serve to disempower the state in the long term. Within a framework of decentralised democratic governance, empowering local authorities to create compacts with their populations – such as in Ouelessebougou in Mali – must counterbalance interventions at the level of central state institutions.

Another way to understand the concept of 'resilience' is to see it as creating self-reliance. The delivery of international assistance and the creation of a culture of aid dependency are at variance with a resilience framework. Efforts to promote state institutions and state service delivery are, in the short term, also likely to reduce community resilience until the state can fill the gap. The international community has a role to play in smoothing this transition, serving as an incubator for the promotion of state institutions during an interim period. However, the parameters of this transition need to be clear from the onset, capacity building of state institutions and national partners must be integrated into programme design, and other limits on the transfer of ownership should be firmly maintained.

Addressing high-level corruption and the culture of impunity is critical to ensuring a better response within the framework of regional rule of law and governance. The study has shown the role that illicit trafficking has played in fostering interdependence between democracy and crime. As yet, within the context of the current post-electoral period in Mali and preparations for the oft-postponed elections in Guinea-Bissau,[102] there is little evidence that the conjoined issues of organised crime, trafficking and corruption are as prominent as they should be. As the dialogues highlighted in this report have clearly shown, there is an undoubted link between building political commitment and showing that impunity will not last forever, so soliciting this commitment is important.

The results of the focus groups conducted in this study show that communities recognise the 'self-interest' of the international community's engagement, and as such neither entirely trust nor believe the motivations of international partners or their governments. Nevertheless, what is striking is how strongly citizens feel about the damage that is being done, and how well they understand what is occurring. These are sentiments that must be drawn upon in strengthening and shaping future responses.

NOTES

1 See, for example, the discussion in Joanne Csete and Constanza Sánchez, *Telling the story of drugs in West Africa: the newest front in a losing war?,* Global Drug Policy Observatory, Policy Brief 1, November 2013, http://tinyurl.com/naqnze2.

2 Interview in Bamako with a prominent leader and transport business owner.

3 UNODC, *Transnational organised crime in West Africa: a threat assessment,* Vienna, 2013, http://www.unodc.org/toc/en/reports/TOCTAWestAfrica.html.

4 Focus group discussion, Niamey, Niger.

5 UNDP Human Development Index 2013, https://data.undp.org/dataset/Table-1-Human-Development-Index-and-its-components/wxub-qc5k.

6 Focus group discussion, Gao, Mali.

7 Focus group discussion, Kidal, Mali.

8 Focus group discussion, Niamey, Niger.

9 Focus group discussion, Gao, Mali.

10 Niger, interview in Niamey with a former MNJ rebel and integrated customs official.

11 Mali, interview in Bamako with an Arab leader from Timbuktu.

12 Focus group discussion, Gao, Mali.

13 Focus group discussion, Agadez, Niger.

14 Mali, interview in Bamako with a former civil servant in the Touré regime.

15 Focus group discussion, São Domingos, Guinea-Bissau.

16 Focus group discussion, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau.

17 Mali, interview in Bamako with a Tuareg interpreter and professional guide.

18 Guinea Bissau, interview in Bissau with a project manager from a public sector, security-focused NGO.

19 Niger, interview in Niamey with a senior official from the *Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix* (HACP).

20 Mali, Interview in Bamako with a Tuareg interpreter and professional guide.

21 Focus group discussion, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau.

22 World Bank Data, Guinea-Bissau, http://data.worldbank.org/country/guinea-bissau.

23 World Bank Data, Niger, http://data.worldbank.org/country/niger; and World Bank Data, Mali, http://data.worldbank.org/country/mali.

24 Mali, interview in Bamako with an NGO women's leader.

25 Niger, interview in Niamey with former MNJ rebel and integrated customs official.

26 Mali, interview in Bamako with a journalist with the national press.

27 Mali, interview in Bamako with a former bureaucrat in the Touré government.

28 Focus group discussion, Kidal, Mali.

29 Niger, interview in Niamey with an international NGO worker.

30 Focus group discussion, Agadez, Niger.

31 Niger, Interview in Niamey with a senior official at an international organisation in the social sector.

32 Niger, interview in Niamey with a constitutional court judge.

33 Guinea Bissau, interview in Bissau with a national NGO leader.

34 Mali, Interview in Bamako with a senior member of the *Haut Conseil Islamique.*

35 Mali, interview in Bissau with a key religious leader.

36 Focus group discussion, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau.

37 Focus group discussion, Kidal, Mali.

38 Mali, interview in Bamako with a former bureaucrat in the Touré government.

39 Focus group discussion, Gao, Mali.

40 Mali, interview in Bamako with a journalist with the national press.

41 Focus group discussion, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau.

42 Focus group discussion, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau.

43 Niger, interview in Niamey with an advisor to the President.

44 Guinea-Bissau, interview in Bissau with a civil servant.

45 Mali, interview in Bamako with a professional accountant.

46 Mali, Interview in Bamako with a senior official of the *Haut Conseil Islamique.*

47 Guinea-Bissau, interview in Bissau with the president of a national NGO platform.

48 Niger, interview in Niamey with an Arab businessman and former cigarette trafficker.

49 Guinea-Bissau, interview in Bissau with a public prosecutor.

50 World Bank Data, Guinea-Bissau, http://data.worldbank.org/country/guinea-bissau.

51 Focus group discussion, Gao, Mali.

52 Focus group discussion, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau.

53 Focus group discussion, Agadez, Niger.

54 Guinea-Bissau, interview in Bissau with an international NGO implementing human rights projects.

55 Focus group discussion, Agadez, Niger.

56 Focus group discussion, Agadez, Niger.

57 Focus group discussion, Agadez, Niger.

58 In this he later explained that they considered their activities equivalent to stealing a pen from a multi-national corporation, easily replaced and of little significance.

59 Focus group discussion, Kidal, Mali.

60 Focus group discussion, Gao, Mali.

61 Focus group discussion, Niamey, Niger.

62 Focus group discussion, Bubabque, Guinea-Bissau.

63 See, for example, the EU Sahel Strategy, http://www.eeas.europa.eu/africa/docs/sahel_strategy_en.pdf.

64 Mali, interview in Bamako with a UN political affairs officer.

65 Guinea Bissau, interview in Bissau with a member of the national Youth Committee.

66 Focus group discussion, Niamey, Niger.

67 Niger, interview in Niamey with a member of the Niamey High Tribunal.

68 Mali, Interview in Bamako with a journalist from the state-owned newspaper.

69 Focus group discussion, Agadez, Niger.

70 Focus group discussions with thee locally elected mayors and three mayoral aids from across Mali.

71 Focus group discussion, Gao, Mali.

72 Focus group discussion, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau.

73 Niger, interview with a magistrate from Niamey's high tribunal.

74 Niger, interview in Niamey with a prominent journalist and a major newspaper.

75 Guinea Bissau, interview in Bissau with a public prosecutor.

76 Guinea Bissau, interview in Bissau with the president of a national NGO platform.

77 Focus group discussion, Agadez, Niger.

78 FDG discussion, São Domingos, Guinea-Bissau.

79 USA vs. Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto, Papis Djeme and Tchamy Yala, April 2013, http://tinyurl.com/qgk58g9 (accessed 11 November 2013).

80 Guinea Bissau, Interview in Bamako with a public prosecutor.

81 Focus group discussion, Niamey, Niger.

82 Focus group discussion, Niamey, Niger.

83 Focus group discussion in Bamako with mayors and mayoral aides from across Mali.

84 Guinea-Bissau, Interview in Bissau with a project manager working in a religious institution.

85 Focus group discussion, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau.

86 Focus group discussion, São Domingos, Guinea-Bissau.

87 Focus group discussion, Agadez, Niger.

88 Focus group discussion, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau.

89 Focus group discussion, São Domingos, Guinea-Bissau.

90 Guinea Bissau, interview in Bissau with an NGO coordinator.

91 Focus group discussion, Gao, Mali.

92 Focus group discussion, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau.

93 Mali, interview with a local mayor in the region south of Bamako.

94 Niger, interview with a national civil society leader, formerly an advisor to the President.

95 Focus group discussion, Agadez, Niger.

96 Guinea Bissau, interview in Bissau with a national civil servant.

97 Guinea Bissau, interview in Bissau with a former advisor to the Ministry of Justice.

98 Guinea Bissau, interview with a female project manager implementing health projects in the public sector.

99 Focus group discussion, Gao, Mali.

100 Mali, interview in Bissau with a national governance specialist, working as an advisor in an international embassy.

101 Mali, government official involved in development programmes for the north.

102 At the time of writing, the elections to replace the transitional government put in place after the April 2012 had just been postponed for the second time, from November 2013 to March 2014.

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

This study assesses community perceptions about illicit trafficking and organised crime in West Africa and the Sahel. Focus groups were conducted in Mali, Niger and Guinea-Bissau. For many of these communities, trafficking and migration are resilience strategies employed in the face of weak governance, corruption, food insecurity and conflict. Communities broadly did not recognise economically motivated trafficking to be criminal acts, although they acknowledged the negative impact of their growing reliance on criminal economies. The discussion groups portrayed a self-reinforcing cycle of poverty, crime and disenfranchisement. Regardless of their frustration with the state, participants highlighted a desire to see their states strengthened to play a positive role in their lives. The study offers new perspectives on the challenges of conflict, governance and state fragility across these regions, and a range of suggestions are proposed.

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