



Transatlantic drug trafficking – via Africa

by José Luengo-Cabrera and Anouk Moser

Over the last decade, West Africa has become an increasingly important gateway for the smuggling of Latin American illicit drugs (mainly cocaine) to the European consumer market. Spurred by growing transatlantic links between traffickers controlling opaque supply chains and operating in poorly governed spaces, the emergence of a narcotics trade network along the southern Atlantic ‘corridor’ remains a security hazard for the EU.

With growing European demand for high-value drugs, there is a risk that the activities of smugglers will intensify in West Africa, where law-enforcement is weak. This has significant implications for EU security policies, particularly as the transatlantic drug trade is an important source of revenue for organised crime syndicates and terrorist groups south of the Mediterranean. Although EU-led counter-narcotics programmes have taken root, they remain underfunded and limited to trans-regional interdiction operations. Without efforts tailored to dismantling localised smuggling networks, the political economy of the transatlantic drug trade will remain largely unscathed.

Partners in crime

With North American demand for cocaine falling, Latin American drug cartels have shifted their supply across the Atlantic, where European consumption has doubled since the late 1990s, reaching a total of 5.7 million users – according to 2015 estimates of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA).

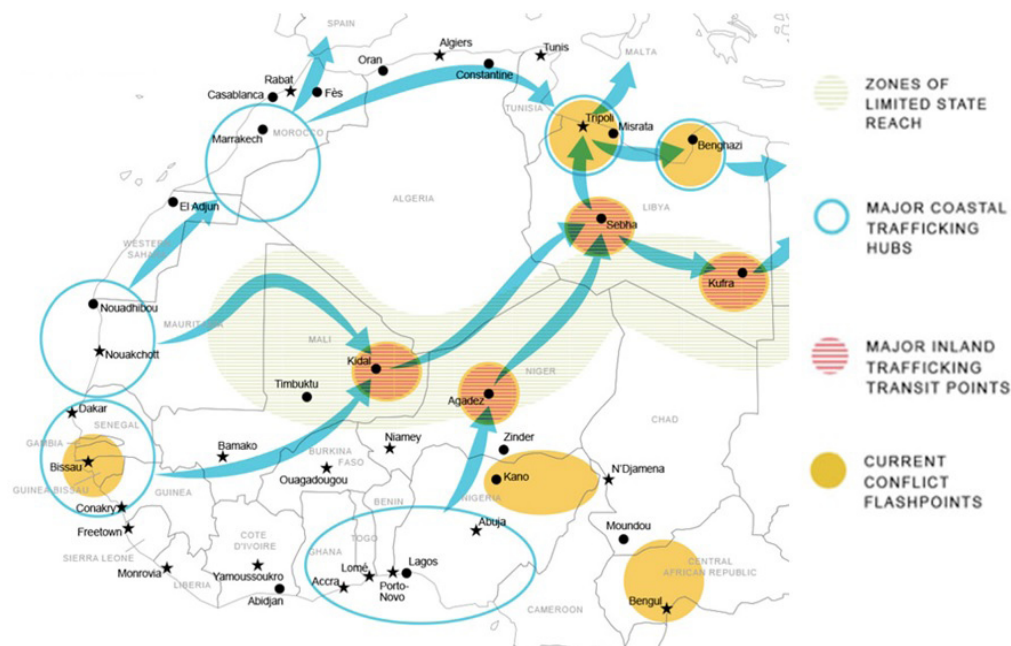
West Africa’s location has turned the region into a transit hub for cocaine originating from Andean countries. Lacking sufficient coastal monitoring capacities, ports on the Western Atlantic coast and Gulf of Guinea have become important transshipment platforms. This has been facilitated by the growing linkages between drug cartels in Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil with counterparts operating (mainly) in Guinea-Bissau, Ghana and Nigeria. Moreover, their collusion with corrupt state officials has allowed local political and military actors to generate large profits by acting as gatekeepers of the transatlantic drug trade.

The Columbian-led *Valencia-Arbelaez* cartel, for example, was found to have established ties with various West African drug lords, notably in the dubbed “narco-state” of Guinea-Bissau, where political complicity turned the country into a safe haven for transit operations.

From green leaf to white gold

As a high-value illicit commodity, cocaine sold in the European market yields high profit margins for traffickers. With an estimated tenfold mark-up over production costs, the selling price of cocaine in Europe (€52-70 per gram) evidences the lucrative opportunities offered to West African intermediaries. Criminal outfits operating in the Sahel’s ungoverned zones are unlikely to be intercepted, and smuggling contraband goods to European shores via Mali, Niger and Libya is made all the easier by the porosity of borders. Among the groups capitalising on the economic rents

West African coastal hubs and trans-Saharan smuggling routes



Source: Global Initiative against Transnational Crime (2015)

of the transatlantic cocaine trade are those present in northern Mali and southern Libya. Some of the rebel militia involved in the Malian peace process are suspected of engaging in smuggling activities, particularly in the Kidal region. Evidence also points to the involvement of groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in taxing drug convoys which pass through their territorial strongholds.

With the recent bolstering of multinational counterterrorism operations in the Sahel, however, the transport of Latin American cocaine through the region has become harder, thereby pushing the selling price upwards. At a time when the kidnapping of foreigners in the desert region has taken a nose-dive, the profits derived from engaging in cocaine smuggling are higher than those from trafficking Moroccan hashish or opiates coming from Asia.

Prioritising policy responses

As networks of illicit drugs smugglers become ever more intertwined, coordinating responses to tackle trafficking networks in West Africa stands out as a policy priority for the EU. Indeed, disrupting the transit routes in the region would force Latin American drug cartels to rely on costlier entry points to the European market, notably in the Balkans or the Black Sea area.

While the EU-funded Cocaine Route Programme (CRP) has adopted a triangular approach by relying on transatlantic cooperation to curtail drug flows, efforts have been largely limited to interdiction. With a budget thinly spread across 38 countries, CRP

operations have been focused on aerial (AIRCOP) and maritime (SEACOP) mechanisms of inflow prevention, as well as anti-money laundering and financial crimes initiatives – with mixed results, as trafficking groups constantly find new and innovative ways to evade authorities.

Meanwhile, facilitating information-sharing and co-operation between law-enforcement agencies and judicial authorities remains a tall order. The experience thus far in coordinating counter-narcotics operations with the West African Police Information System (WAPIS) and South American police community (AMERIPOL) has been hampered by deficiencies in institutional capacity.

Consequently, although the EU's CRP stands out as an innovative trilateral programme complementing the bilateral ones established with CELAC and ECOWAS, it could benefit from narrowing its scope and boosting available financial resources to address the more imminent security spillovers emanating from the illicit trafficking economy in West Africa and the wider Sahel. To dismantle smuggling networks in the immediate future, it might be cost-effective for the EU to channel more funds for programmes in Africa, perhaps by supporting the existing UN-led partnership with INTERPOL on the West African Coast Initiative (WACI) and its Transnational Crime Unit (TCU).

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