

A photograph of a woman sitting on a rock and a man with a bicycle in front of a brick wall with graffiti. The woman is on the left, wearing a dark top and light skirt. The man is on the right, wearing a dark t-shirt and red shorts, sitting on a green bicycle. The wall behind them is made of reddish-brown bricks and has graffiti including the name 'MILTON' and a large yellow '5'. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

Organised crime and conflict Implications for peacebuilding

May 2022

Organised crime and conflict

Implications for peacebuilding

May 2022

Acknowledgements

This paper was written by Louisa Waugh and Zahbia Yousuf for Saferworld. The authors are grateful to peer reviewers for generously giving their time and providing invaluable insights on drafts of the report: Andrei Gómez-Suárez, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre of Religion, Reconciliation and Peace, University of Winchester, co-founder and non-director of Rodeemos el Diálogo (Embrace Dialogue, ReD); Astrit Istrefi, Executive Director of the Balkan Forum; and Massaran Traore, Senior Project Coordinator at Alliance for Research and Integrated Development. They also thank Simon Mills, Victoria Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo, Alanna Inserra and Toral Pattni at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, for sharing their views at different stages of design and drafting, and colleagues at Saferworld for their support and inputs – Lucia Montanaro, Julia Poch Figueras and Lewis Brooks. A selection of comics have been reproduced with the kind permission of PositiveNegatives (www.positivenegatives.org/) and the Drugs & (dis)order Project, funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund (www.drugs-and-disorder.org/). Errors that remain, and views expressed, are solely the authors' own. The paper was copyedited for Saferworld by Rachel Campbell and Martha Crowley and designed by Jane Stevenson. Saferworld is grateful to the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office for its support for this research.



Disclaimer: The views in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the views of Saferworld or the UK Government.

© Saferworld, May 2022. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without full attribution. Saferworld welcomes and encourages the utilisation and dissemination of the material included in this publication.

Abbreviations

AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
AUC	United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia
Bacrim	<i>bandas criminales</i>
ELN	National Liberation Army (Colombia)
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

Cover photo: A woman selling cocaine next to the basketball court. The graffiti behind reads 'P15', the name of a local gang.

© Mads Nissen via Panos Pictures

Contents

1 Introduction	1
1.1 The crime-conflict nexus	2
1.2 Report outline	3
1.3 Contextual backgrounds	3
2 Crime, conflict and governance	7
2.1 Crime, conflict and corruption	8
2.2 Organised crime as statebuilding	8
2.3 Competition and cooperation between violent groups	10
3 Organised crime, conflict and communities	15
3.1 Recruitment	15
3.2 Resistance, co-option and cooperation	16
4 Interventions in response to violent criminal groups	21
4.1 Displacement rather than deterrence	22
4.2 Counter-productive impacts and unsustainability of top-down laws and policies	23
4.3 Measuring conflict sensitivity in countering organised crime	24
4.4 Pathways and pitfalls to resolving conflict and crime	26
5 Organised crime and conflict: implications for peacebuilding	29
5.1 Locally informed frameworks can harness political will and civilian oversight	30
5.2 Leaving conflict drivers unresolved provides opportunities for criminal cooperation	31
5.3 Conflict resolution strategies should better anticipate displacement of violence	31
5.4 Local accountability, livelihoods and equality should be prioritised for sustainable outcomes	32
5.5 Knowledge gaps	33



A customs building destroyed in fighting as Franco-Malian forces recaptured the city from occupying Islamist militants. The building was used by MUJAO (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa) as a base in the city.

© Sylvain Cherkaoui/Panos Pictures

1

Introduction

The threads between criminality and conflict are not new. Serious organised crime has been identified as an enabling factor in the outbreak of conflict as well as in lengthening its duration. Organised criminal groups have crept into conflict-affected regions, benefitting from contested, corrupt or absent governance, while criminality has been used by groups with political aims – from left-wing guerrillas to groups that espouse an Islamic ‘jihad’ – to finance their activities, while also altering the incentive structures available to combatants. Alongside globalisation and modern technologies, the end of Cold War superpower support for ‘proxy wars’ provided new opportunities for local conflict actors to connect with criminal networks and illicit markets. This facilitated access to supply chains that could fund and equip them, while also providing channels for state officials – military and political – to consolidate systems of ‘power crime’.¹

This nexus presents a number of challenges for peacebuilding as well as for existing responses to violent groups. The interweaving of criminal and political actions complicates analysis of conflict drivers and dynamics, and risks simplifying groups and their agendas as driven by profit and business interests. The blunt tools of law and order aimed at rupturing organised crime networks and counter-terrorism/insurgency to degrade armed groups can be channels for elite political and economic interests, or be counterproductive by intersecting to encourage cooperation, corruption and increased conflict. Importantly, community concerns and safety are often obscured in this analysis. Peace agreements and subsequent peacebuilding efforts are seen as important vehicles for tackling the causes of conflict and laying the foundations for sustainable peace, but are less frequently assessed in terms of how effective they are in addressing the complexity of the conflict-criminal nexus.

1.1 The crime-conflict nexus²

Research over the last decade has sought to better understand organised crime and violent conflict, and the groups involved. Particularly valuable in understanding the motives of particular groups and moving beyond artificial barriers is the emergence of literature conceptualising organised crime as a type of ‘strategy’ that is adopted by criminal organisations and warring parties (whether state- or non-state-based).³ Cockayne argues that armed groups will adapt either criminal or political strategies, with different factions within the same group at times pursuing distinct strategies.⁴ Williams and Felbab-Brown demonstrate how non-state violent actors (which include gangs and transnational organised criminal networks) employ a variety of strategies that combine different motives, methods and targets.⁵ Other studies have described how illicit activities can be segmented depending on a state’s particular socio-economic or geographic climate; for example, trading links to more profitable markets, transport hubs or telecommunications networks, and available and/or exploitable land for production. In particular, studies in borderlands have sought to show how historical marginalisation from the centre of the state has allowed both armed insurgents and criminal networks to flourish.⁶ In two contexts explored here, Mali and Colombia, the peripheries of the countries are particularly affected by conflict and organised crime.

Other studies have explored the conditions that promote violence and instability, looking at the breadth of criminal and political violence and activity, and going beyond a transactional relationship between conflict participants and criminal groups. Such studies conclude that the ‘nexus’ tends to solidify in contexts where viable economic alternatives to crime are weak or non-existent and where the state is dysfunctional or complicit.⁷ The suggestion is that weak institutions, combined with a range of political, security and economic vulnerabilities or pressures, create conditions for both violent conflict and crime to thrive and connect.⁸ These pressures include relative deprivation, urban decay and poor employment opportunities. Similarly, rather than assuming the failure of the state, there is increasing analysis of conflict and organised crime being prompted by deliberate actions taken by the state.⁹ Crime in particular can be understood as part of a criminal governance strategy that is associated with the

political, social and/or economic interests of state and non-state actors.¹⁰

Situating trends in national and transnational organised crime within conflict systems is therefore essential to ensure approaches and responses change and adapt over time. Serious organised crime covers a range of activities including human trafficking and migrant smuggling, drugs production and distribution, and weapons sales and transfers. Whereas specific domestic groups, for example the Italian Mafia, formerly specialised in specific practices and products, there has been an increase in poly-trafficking (which includes the multiplication of practices, alliances and products, as well as exchanges, for example of cocaine for diamonds, stolen cars for petrol, or arms exchanges for migration in Mauritania). Licit economies have also increasingly become targets of illicit trade, for example the smuggling of petrol, medicine, food, alcohol, cigarettes and various consumer goods across national borders, evading customs. Over the past 25 years, cigarette smuggling has become one of the most lucrative illicit businesses in the Balkans.

Understanding the intersections between criminality and armed conflict can help strengthen responses which address both. A few peacekeeping missions, for example the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), have tried to incorporate elements to tackle organised crime – with mixed results. The analytical tools and policy responses associated with treating armed groups as criminal or political actors can quickly become path-dependent. A conflict-based approach brings military, diplomatic and development resources into play; a crime-based approach leans towards policing and law enforcement-based responses.¹¹ Yet looking at the outcomes of two decades of the ‘war on terror’ and several more of the ‘war on drugs’, there are similarities in their shortcomings: over-reliance on armed enforcement which has escalated rather than reduced the threat and the levels of violence; the stigmatisation of communities, human rights abuses and further marginalisation; and a further breakdown in state–citizen relations, lack of accountability and fractured/corrupt politics.

Many studies point to organised crime as one of several elements representing the ‘dark side of globalisation’, whereby a pervasive consumer culture requires largely unfettered movement of goods and services.¹² While significant international effort has gone into combatting smuggling, the sheer volume of trade means that full control and monitoring of imports and exports is impossible without dramatically slowing down and restricting its speed, which would both disappoint consumer

expectations and hit corporate profits. Meanwhile, the demand for illegal drugs in Western countries creates the opportunity for profit. Although questions around demand, mainly in Europe and North America, go to the heart of the nexus, they receive the least attention in response discourse. Policy-level recognition of the failings of the war on drugs has started to emerge but is much less resourced. For example, the Organization of American States produced a high-level drug policy review that was extremely critical of the impact so far and urged greater emphasis on public health interventions in ‘demand’ countries.¹³

1.2 Report outline

This report seeks to better understand the peacebuilding implications where organised crime and conflict coexist, particularly in contexts where peace agreements have been concluded, focusing on violent groups in Colombia, Kosovo and Mali. These are contexts where there have been strong links between political and organised crime agendas – through armed participants, and state crime and capture; where some form of settlement has been pursued to resolve political contestations, including with and between violent armed groups; and where major international interventions, with very different aims, have been undertaken in response to illicit economies and/or armed groups. Our report focuses on the period after the conclusion of political arrangements to end conflict – Colombia’s Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2016; the 2015 Algiers Agreement in Mali; and Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008.

Our report looks at three key areas:

- how violent criminal groups influence governance and conflict dynamics
- the patterns of competition (and associated violence) and cooperation between different forms of violent criminal groups in specific contexts
- violent criminal groups’ relations with people in areas where they operate

As a peacebuilding organisation, Saferworld seeks to understand the underlying social and political contexts in which different violent groups may thrive, and to support approaches that address underlying drivers of conflict. Recognising the relatively few in-depth assessments of interventions on serious crime, our report attempts to understand some trends in responses to violent criminal groups.

It concludes by looking at the findings’ implications both for responses seeking to reduce violence and for broader peacebuilding approaches.

The report is based on a desk review of literature published in English. It recognises the intricacies and varied social, cultural, political, economic and gendered dynamics that make up the rich histories and complexities of the countries we have examined, and therefore also recognises the limitations of not conducting primary research. Instead of an in-depth case study analysis, our report pursues specific lines of enquiry based on the above research areas. There may be gaps, for example in the breadth of contextual analysis, or in relation to important topics such as the long-standing role of diaspora networks in relation to organised crime and trafficking in Kosovo and Mali. Also, while we recognise the global changes in production and transport that link the three contexts – for example, the last decade’s balance of power shift which saw West African criminal groups take over shipments previously controlled by Latin American networks – an in-depth analysis of these dynamics is not possible within the scope of the report.

While our report assumes the state’s role in organised crime, and the presence of corruption and elite capture, it also interrogates common assumptions about the ‘criminality’ of groups that may have different forms of social legitimacy. Despite the wealth of literature on gender and violence in conflict and ‘post-conflict’ settings, the gendered root causes of serious organised crime, links between it and gender-based violence, and women’s roles and participation in violent criminal and proscribed groups have not been sufficiently scrutinised. Our analysis draws on some of the available evidence but recognises there is a significant gap that needs further exploration.

1.3 Contextual backgrounds

1.3.1 Mali

The period following Mali’s independence from France in 1960 was characterised by a series of national leaders being deposed in military coups. With the exception of interim leaders, all but one Malian president left office ‘at the barrel of a gun’.¹⁴

The country has struggled to address weak and unaccountable governance, corruption at all levels, and to reconcile the conflicting government and state interests that have allowed criminality and criminal economies to become embedded, creating an ‘interweaving’ of licit and illicit networks and economies.¹⁵ In 2012, Mali’s fourth military coup opened the space for Tuareg separatist rebels and Islamist groups to take control of vast areas of the Malian Sahel and to occupy major cities including Timbuktu and Gao.¹⁶ A French-led military campaign pushed many Islamist armed groups back to the Algerian and Libyan borders; however, despite the Algiers Mali Peace Accord – which brokered a deal between the government and rebel groups in June 2015 – violent conflict swept across the country’s northern and central regions, once again catalysed by weak, corrupt governance and rising insecurity that facilitated arms and trafficking networks.¹⁷

The then President Amadou Toumani Touré, widely known as ATT, was reluctant to cooperate with Algeria and Mauritania against al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and against organised crime, in part due to Malian leadership interests and their complicity in drug trafficking and ransom negotiations with AQIM. But criminal groups also took advantage of the weakness of the government and the rule of law. Proscribed groups and organised crime networks have been able to develop their activities by exploiting the conducive conditions in Mali and the region, which include social atomisation; high levels of structural inequality and some of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world; deep-seated socio-economic grievances; and alienation from the northern regions by political elites/hostility towards the north. These groups have been able to cooperate in order to establish operational and logistical hubs and networks between them.¹⁸ In the last two decades, Mali’s incorporation into the global criminal economy has hinged on domestic conditions where ‘the state has not been able to impose the rule of law, contraband and other illegal activities have become socially legitimate, while many formal laws and rules have become de facto illegitimate’.¹⁹

1.3.2 Kosovo

Kosovo declared independence in 2008, 19 years after it was stripped of its autonomous status within Serbia by the then Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, who had pledged to defend the Serb minority in the majority Albanian Kosovo. The conflict that erupted between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbian security forces in March 1998 ended after eleven weeks of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air strikes on Yugoslav and Serbian security

forces and paramilitary groups. The war had a devastating effect, killing 13,500 people,²⁰ the vast majority Kosovar Albanian.²¹ An estimated 600,000 people were internally displaced,²² and at least 20,000 women were raped.²³ Kosovo was governed internationally from June 1999 with the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) still holding some executive powers after its declaration of independence in February 2008. The illegal economy became vital to the Kosovan Albanian population in the 1990s following Serbia’s revocation of the province’s autonomy in 1989. The KLA was largely financed by the Albanian diaspora including through narcotics trafficking (with Kosovo having become an important transit point for the drug trade), the profits of which were used to purchase arms. Organised crime did not dissipate after the war, with smuggling and trafficking (of both drugs and people) remaining widespread. There was also competition as parties that had fought in the conflict began competing for power against Kosovo’s first political party, the Democratic League of Kosovo. US and other international support to the KLA during the conflict had proved detrimental to non-violent resistance led by Ibrahim Rugova in the years prior to the conflict.²⁴ Political elites emerged from the remnants of the KLA, reflecting a tradition of inward-looking social capital rooted in family and clan loyalties and regional ties. Today it is estimated that illicit economies make up 30 per cent of the GDP of the Western Balkans. Tensions between the Kosovo Albanian majority (approximately 93 per cent of the population) and the Kosovo Serb community (disputed estimates range between 1.5 and 7 per cent)²⁵ remain unresolved – as do tensions between Kosovo and Serbia – risking further outbreaks of ethnic violence. Nevertheless, criminal networks have found opportunities to cooperate across ethnic divides.

1.3.3 Colombia

Drug trafficking and its co-evolution with the protracted internal conflict have shaped political, economic and social development in Colombia since the 1980s. Cartels expanded and organised into major criminal conglomerates focused on drug distribution, with later ‘federations’ specialising in certain links in the drug chain. From the mid-90s Colombia was the world’s main cocaine producer, opening the way for guerrilla groups – the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and to a lesser extent, the National Liberation Army (ELN) – to enter the drug economy, as well as the right-wing paramilitary United Self-Defense of Colombia (AUC). By the 2000s, the paramilitaries and guerrillas fully controlled coca leaf production and processing and were involved in trafficking.

Under the US-financed counter-narcotics programme 'Plan Colombia' from 2000 to 2015, the Colombian Government sought to eradicate coca cultivation as well as to degrade guerrilla groups. The funding and training of Colombian military and paramilitary forces as part of this strategy saw increased human rights abuses, escalations in violence and destruction of rural livelihood economies. Decline in political support resulted in the fracturing of the AUC and the emergence of a third generation of drug-trafficking organisations reformed from the paramilitaries – the Bacrim (*bandas criminales*), a highly networked system shifting to distribution.

In 2016, the Colombian Government signed a peace agreement with the FARC; a key section of the comprehensive agreement was dedicated to illicit crops (point 4). A public referendum failed to endorse the agreement, forcing the then President

Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC to renegotiate the agreement to avoid a full return to war. Colombia's Congress approved a new peace agreement in November and implementation started in earnest on 1 December 2016. Although overall security has improved, the state still lacks effective control in some peripheral areas, where guerrillas, paramilitaries and other criminal participants are still active and highly dependent on criminal economies. According to the Unit of Investigation of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (Colombian Transitional Justice Tribunal), 2021 saw the largest number of massacres (96) and forced displacement episodes (146) against communities since the peace agreement was signed. The ELN also continues to fight for control of the border with Venezuela while paramilitary groups continue to operate in Urabá and other regions of Colombia.

Notes

- De Boer J, Bosetti L (2015), 'The Crime-Conflict "Nexus": State of the Evidence', United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Occasional Paper 5, July.
- The report uses the Stabilisation Unit's definition of Serious and Organised Crime (SOC): Individuals planning, coordinating and committing serious offences, whether individually, in groups and/or as part of transnational networks. The main categories of serious offences covered by the term are: child sexual exploitation and abuse; illegal drugs; illegal firearms; fraud; money laundering and other economic crime; bribery and corruption; organised immigration crime; modern slavery and human trafficking; and cybercrime. See HM Government (2013), 'Serious and Organised Crime Strategy', October (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/248645/Serious_and_Organised_Crime_Strategy.pdf)
- De Boer J, Bosetti L (2015), 'The Crime-Conflict "Nexus": State of the Evidence', United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Occasional Paper 5, July; Shultze-Kraft M (2016), 'Organised crime, violence and development', Applied Knowledge Service, August (http://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Org_crime_violence_dev.pdf)
- Cockayne J (2013), 'Chasing shadows: Strategic responses to organised crime in conflict-affected situations', *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Journal* 158 (2).
- Williams P, Felbab-Brown V (2012), *Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Instability* (U.S Army War College Press).
- Plonski S, Yousuf Z (2018), 'Borderlands and peacebuilding. A view from the margins', *Accord Insight* 4, Conciliation Resources (<https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Accord-Insight-4-Borderlands-WEB.pdf>)
- Kleinfeld R (2018), *A Savage Order* (Vintage Books), p 43.
- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2015), 'Organized crime in conflict affected contexts: a challenge to address', 6 July (<https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/organized-crime-conflict-affected-contexts-challenge-address%C2%A0-1>)
- Stabilisation Unit (2019), 'Chapter 6: Addressing transnational threats in stabilisation contexts', in *The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners*, March (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/784015/Chapter_6_Addressing_transnational_threats_in_stabilisation_contexts.pdf)
- Arjona A (2016), *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* (Cambridge University Press); Idler A (2019), *Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia's War* (Oxford University Press).
- Banfield J (2014), 'Crime and Conflict: The new challenge for peacebuilding', International Alert, July (<https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CVI-Crime-Conflict-EN-2014.pdf>)
- Ibid.
- Esquenazi P, Simons P (2014), 'The OAS Drug Report: 16 Months of Debate and Consensus', Organization of American States (<https://www.oas.org/docs/publications/layoutpubgagdrogas-eng-29-9.pdf>)
- Tchioffo K (2020), 'Mali: 4 Out of 4 – Why Has Mali Had So Many Successful Coups?', *AllAfrica*, 27 August (<https://allafrica.com/stories/202008280004.html>)
- Gaye SB (2018), 'Connections between Jihadist groups and smuggling and illegal trafficking rings in the Sahel', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security Centre of Competence Sub-Saharan Africa (<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/14176.pdf>)
- Chauzal G, van Damme T (2015), 'The roots of Mali's conflict. Moving beyond the 2012 crisis', Clingendael, March (<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/roots-malis-conflict-moving-beyond-2012-crisis>)
- Waugh L, Farooghi M (2016), "'They treat us all like jihadis". Looking beyond violent extremism to building peace in Mali', International Alert, December (https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Mali_TheyTreatUsAllLikeJihadis_EN_2016.pdf)
- International Alert (2016), 'Organised Crime in Mali: Why it Matters for a Peaceful Transition from Conflict', Policy Brief, September (<https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Mali-Organised-Crime-EN-2016.pdf>)
- Briscoe I (2014), 'Crime after Jihad: armed groups, the state and illicit business in post-conflict Mali', Clingendael (https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Clingendael_Crime-after-Jihad.pdf)
- International Commission on Missing Persons (2017), 'Missing Persons from the Kosovo Conflict and its Aftermath: A Stocktaking' (<https://www.icmp.int/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Kosovo-stocktaking-ENG.pdf>)
- The Independent International Commission on Kosovo (2000), *The Kosovo Report* (Oxford University Press).
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2000), 'The Kosovo refugee crisis. An independent evaluation of UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response', Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, February (<https://www.unhcr.org/afr/3ba0bb4.pdf>)
- The Independent International Commission on Kosovo (2000), *The Kosovo Report* (Oxford University Press).
- Bonn International Center for Conversion (2001), 'Wag the Dog: The Mobilization and Demobilization of the Kosovo Liberation Army', Brief 20 (<https://www.bicc.de/publications/publicationpage/publication/wag-the-dog-the-mobilization-and-demobilization-of-the-kosovo-liberation-army-124/>)
- Minority Rights Group International, 'World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples: Serbs' (<https://minorityrights.org/minorities/serbs-3/>); *Balkan Insight* (2019), 'Kosovo's Demographic Destiny Looks Eerily Familiar', 7 November (<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/07/kosovos-demographic-destiny-looks-eerily-familiar/>)



People shout anti-government slogans during a protest in Pristina.
© Marko Djurica/Reuters

2

Crime, conflict and governance

There is a common assumption that organised crime *criminalises* the nature of politics in states by cementing structural weaknesses, and this is even more so in conflict contexts. At the same time, systemic corruption and illicit financial flows bleed resources that could otherwise be used to develop legitimate institutions that are necessary to avoid a relapse into violence.²⁷

In Mali, this ranges from influencing processes to determine appointments in the customs service, army and police, to the promotion of politicians and laundering criminal proceeds into legitimate businesses.²⁸ By buying the compliance of traditional leaders via threats and profit-sharing deals, traffickers have contributed to the penetration of corruption throughout Malian society.²⁹ In Colombia and Kosovo, organised crime groups wield more direct influence. Pristina, the political capital of Kosovo, is considered an active criminal environment – a number of senior government officials, including ministers, have been implicated in crimes including drug smuggling and charges of corruption.³⁰ In Colombia, regional mayors have repaid ‘favours’ by distributing posts from different levels of the public administration to various individuals in their informal networks of influence.³¹ The confluence of such criminal acts with political motives has given rise to what has become known as ‘parapolitics’, with suggestions that 35 per cent of Colombian Congress members were elected with the money of paramilitary groups and votes in the regions they controlled.^{32, 33}

However, the correlation between criminality and governance is not straightforward. In this section, we discuss how violent criminal groups position themselves in conflict systems and influence governance, and we look at the impact of patterns of cooperation and competition between groups.

“
The border between organised crime and the state is the least-guarded border in the Balkans.²⁶
”

2.1 Crime, conflict and corruption

“
Rather than the stereotype of wily criminal gangs opportunistically exploiting passive and fragile states to run their illegal trade, it is entrepreneurial political and business elites who often seek out opportunities for profit linked to transnational organised crime.

Rather than the stereotype of wily criminal gangs opportunistically exploiting passive and fragile states to run their illegal trade, it is entrepreneurial political and business elites who often seek out opportunities for profit linked to transnational organised crime.³⁴

In conflicted societies where the state is contested and mechanisms for accountability lacking, institutions and individuals will (a) find greater opportunities to benefit from criminal activities, and (b) develop cooperative relations with organised criminal groups to gain leverage in the conflict. As Kleinfeld argues, endemic violence emerges when states undertake a trio of steps. First, elites face competition and turn to private violent groups to maintain their political and economic control. Then politicians politicise, delegitimise and co-opt state security forces until they become inept and brutal. Finally, faced with a violent or absent state they cannot trust to protect them, marginalised citizens may become vigilantes, rebels and criminals or turn to militias for security, while the middle class hires private guards.³⁵

It is worth noting the possible gender implications of such criminal-political patronage. Both criminal networks and political institutions operate through patriarchal structures of access, networks and controlled violence, with men in positions of influence and enjoying decision-making powers. In many conflict-affected states, women are largely excluded from political participation, especially at local levels, with societal gender norms limiting the decision-making roles women play within households and in public spaces, and their control over economic resources. It is likely then that the deal-making, brokerage and collusion between men-dominated criminal networks, conflict agents and political institutions are likely to further block women from the possibilities of political participation and control over economic decision-making. In settings with high levels of political corruption, women are less likely to benefit from corruption pacts than men while also facing increased barriers to entering the political arena.³⁶ A number of studies show that men tend to see corruption in a more positive light than women, as providing the opportunity to supplement one's

income and to potentially become rich.³⁷ Ingrained power imbalances between men and women expose women to abuses of power and corruption, exacerbating existing gender inequalities. The lack of political and economic leverage, and lower levels of literacy and access to information on their entitlements, also render women less able to denounce corruption and openly demand accountability. For example, 74 per cent of African women and 54 per cent of Latin American women work in the informal sector and interact more frequently with public services like health or education institutions, which exposes them to higher risks of extortion by corrupt public officials who control such activities, while leaving them with fewer means to rebuff attempts to extort illicit payments from them.³⁸

Colombia's recent history warrants further exploration. Recent legal and parliamentary reforms that have sought to slice through corruption in the state's local, regional and national political institutions have coincided with the momentum brought by a decade of social movements, and a stalemate in the conflict with the FARC. The peace agreement had 130 gender stipulations that sought to increase women's participation. Although implementation of these stipulations is patchy,³⁹ women currently hold 21 per cent of Senate seats (including two senators from the FARC political party) and 18.7 per cent in the House of Representatives – compared with 13.4 per cent and 11.8 per cent respectively two decades ago.⁴⁰

2.2 Organised crime as statebuilding

The link between state officials and organised crime in conflict contexts goes beyond the co-option and corruption of state officials, agents of the law and politicians. An unintended consequence of the quest to 'stabilise' political settlements in conflict-affected contexts has seen statebuilding go hand-in-hand with – and even become reliant on – organised crime. Where, for example, large-scale security sector reform is not prioritised in the early stages of peace and statebuilding interventions, formal security institutions can replicate the operating modes of previous structures. In the former Yugoslav states, the very origin of the formal security sector is said to be criminal – arms smuggling, facilitated by the security services, officers and army units in the former republics, was regarded as a patriotic activity

bringing benefit to society during national independence wars.⁴¹ In Kosovo, the major criminal groups in Pristina include networks of veterans of the KLA and Kosovan diaspora.⁴² The transition to independence was seized by those who had resourced the conflict through illicit activities to dominate the privatisation process and establishment of institutions, including by taking on roles in political office.⁴³ The alignment of criminal and political interests around conflict narratives has embedded divisions within the statebuilding project. In northern Kosovo, well-established Serbian criminal networks hugely influence political parties, accessing funds provided by the Serbian government for Serbs in Kosovo, while leveraging wartime legacies of distrust for purposes of political propaganda.⁴⁴

The argument that violent criminal groups undermine governance also assumes that the state is already present, functioning and responsive to populations. In border areas of Mali and Colombia, state presence and formal economies have long been contested or absent, providing space for non-state actors to operate freely. Malian government efforts to counter the separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in the 2000s involved making deals with northern communities and rewarding their loyalty with access to criminal markets. Criminality became a tool not only to counter the threat to the state from the group but also to extend the hand of formal governance into areas beyond its reach.

However, the extended consequences of this, in fact, undermine governance and embolden the position of organised crime groups as well as individuals within them. In Mali, the elevation of criminals from outcasts to role models was a critical turning point that reshaped social hierarchies, with criminals elevated from outcasts to role models.⁴⁵ It had two countervailing impacts: it further weakened the central state through corruption – the presidency itself negotiated directly with cocaine traffickers for a ‘protection fee’ – while empowering groups on the periphery who taxed the illicit trade.⁴⁶ It also reinforced the status of the northern border as self-reliant and without state presence. Over time, northern border settlements adopted various forms of smuggling and trafficking, increasing their reliance on informal economies to sustain livelihoods.⁴⁷

Similarly, Colombian paramilitaries enabled the expansion of state power during the 1970s and 1980s, while autonomously mediating how that state power was experienced by local populations – this was especially shaped by paramilitary control over economic activity and enforcement of social order.⁴⁸ Having begun as proxies of the state and

business elites, paramilitaries used their increased capacity for violence to establish control over local markets and profits from the drugs trade, facilitating a shift from serving these elite interests to directly challenging their power and control.⁴⁹ For Colombia’s central elite and former President Alvaro Uribe in particular, the state-crime nexus became a liability in the early 2000s – internally challenging political power while attracting attention from the most important ally of the country’s traditional and commercial elites – the US – due to drug-trafficking activities against which the US had taken a hard public stance.⁵⁰

In other instances, organised crime groups such as the ELN in Arauca, the region bordering Venezuela, and the FARC in south-western Cauca have become direct competitors to the state as service providers, and hybrid governance actors in spaces marginalised by the state.^{51,52} Disrupting such governance models can be hugely destabilising in the absence of a comprehensive political and security engagement plan. Recent shifts in Colombia highlight the risks when the territorial control of the strongest group is put into question by another actor. The demobilisation of the FARC as part of the post-2016 Agreements has left swathes of territory open to exploitation by the Bacrim. The case of Arauca, in which more than 90 people have been killed since the beginning of 2022, highlights the complexity of overlapping interests and actors – local analysts argue that there are links between the Venezuelan Government and FARC dissidents, and between the Colombian Government and the ELN, and that both sides are fighting each other in a region with coca crops and drug-trafficking routes.⁵³

This raises questions about how responses to conflict that focus on technical institutional capacity building, without measures and monitoring of ‘good governance’ and security reforms that consider criminal dimensions, can entrench organised crime. For example, post-war Kosovo has been the subject of an unprecedented internationally led statebuilding project, hosting a series of international missions endowed with extensive powers and a massive flow of external experts, projects, assistance and funding. In 2009, the country received an influx of USD\$345 per capita in aid, compared to \$62 in Afghanistan and \$41 in Iraq.⁵⁴ International missions however made slow progress in delivering the goal of a multi-ethnic, functional and democratic state, as Kosovo rapidly became of key importance to regional illicit flows.⁵⁵ Kosovo consistently features among the highest-scoring criminal markets in Europe.⁵⁶

2.3 Competition and cooperation between violent groups

Literature suggests organised crime groups are invested in the conflict *status quo*, profiting from conflict-driven economies as well as patriarchal gender norms with regards to sexual exploitation. Competition and insecurity therefore provide opportunities to expand operations as well as evade law and order interventions. Violence can be a means to enter markets controlled by a competing group or of asserting control within and between organised crime groups, enforcing contracts, settling accounts or intimidating customers. However, criminality also requires predictability and protection for operations. It is argued then that violent criminal groups may shy away from overt violence as it attracts the attention of law enforcement and can interrupt established logistical channels, and they mainly work instead through corruption and intimidation.⁵⁷ This is despite the many hidden forms of violence experienced, for example by victims of trafficking.⁵⁸

In conflict-affected contexts, factors beyond securing access to markets will shape the violent means and methods of criminal groups including altering their capabilities and strategic environment.⁵⁹ Competition and cooperation can be largely opportunistic and unpredictable, especially where multiple groups with overlapping agendas are present. Groups that use criminality to finance political aims may conduct violent attacks against security forces and other strategic targets in pursuit of political aims, as well as indiscriminate violence against populations as part of ‘terror’ attacks; paramilitary groups such as the AUC in Colombia may exploit the impunity they are granted for counter-insurgency to engage in violent forms of criminality. Shifts in cooperation and competition are also linked to large-scale political and security upheaval that may disrupt settled trade routes and flows. The expansion and contraction of markets is a relatively reliable predictor of violent competition between groups. Unstable and highly fragmented markets (where roles are not clearly identified and lines of authority and hierarchy not clearly established) tend to be more prone to violence.⁶⁰ As discussed in section 3, security-focused interventions are largely destabilising for markets: border closures (Algeria–Mali, Venezuela–Colombia) have required adaptation in drugs and arms routes, and the emergence of new trafficking hotspots.⁶¹

2.3.1 Changes in the global organised crime environment

The shift from specialised production to the multiplication of practices in the last two decades has in turn shaped the incentives and opportunities for different groups to benefit from criminality, impacting relations between different groups. Colombia’s increasing strength in the drugs production phase led the FARC and the right-wing AUC and their respective armies to join the drugs economy, managing huge requisite labour forces, securing the expansion of plantations, and using violence to protect crops from competitors and the government eradication efforts.⁶² Specialisation in the production phase was an important source of war finance for both forces. Plan Colombia completely changed global dynamics by shifting power and distribution to Mexico and Honduras, with West African criminal groups controlling narcotics shipments instead of Latin American groups. Alongside this, the trend for transnational cooperation across multiple organised criminal groups operating not only in their own territory but with groups in neighbouring and other countries, which encourage coordination and greater forms of transnational profit-driven cooperation, is growing.^{63, 64}

2.3.2 Crime and conflict: shifting dynamics

The consequences of global trends are different across the three case studies. In Mali, the global financial leverage of organised crime has had a destabilising effect.⁶⁵ The enormous profits generated by the emergence of the Sahel as a strategic transit point for cocaine trafficking have, since the mid-2000s, attracted other groups’ involvement, generating a level of violence unparalleled in the sub-region. In Mali, the conflict in 2012 extended armed groups’ seizure of strategic territories and creation of protection rackets to secure narcotics flows.⁶⁶ This was compounded by the Malian state’s inability to bring the area under control. The easy availability of weapons circulating after the rebellions of the past two decades has exacerbated the militarisation of trafficking networks, whose rivalries fuel political and inter-communal tensions. Smuggling narcotics has become not only a means by which armed groups gain funds but a source of conflict in itself.⁶⁷

However, in Colombia and Kosovo, modes of cooperation have emerged that have overcome conflict divisions. In Kosovo, cooperation across political and ethnic divides between Serbs and Albanians has resulted in growing transnational

networks composed of multi-ethnic human ‘supply chains’. A 2019 report⁶⁸ suggests that the €750,000 weekly losses to Kosovo’s budget from smuggling are largely due to the movement of goods from the Serb-dominated north to further south where ethnic Albanians are in the majority.⁶⁹ This shows that, at least for smuggling networks, ethnicity and geographic and administrative boundaries are not an impediment to cooperation among criminals.⁷⁰ While this has been in contrast to continued state-level animosity between Serbia and Kosovo, and political divides within Kosovo itself, the parliament has more recently adopted the most advanced constitutional provisions in Europe for non-majority communities, including reserved parliamentary seats, government positions and the appointment of police station commanders. Currently an estimated 25 per cent of Kosovo’s 38 municipalities are run by Kosovo Serbs and other non-majority communities. A question for further research therefore is how changes have increased cooperation between northern and southern judicial structures and policing; and what the consequential impacts on cross-ethnic organised crime cooperation are.

In Colombia, enmities derived from ideological differences had previously seen limited cooperation between the FARC, ELN and AUC.⁷¹ However, as opposed to the centralised AUC, the Bacrim are networked, financially self-sufficient and autonomous, non-ideological smaller units. For example, the largest Bacrim today, the *Urabeños*, is a franchise with affiliated nodes around the country and abroad, dedicated to different tasks required in the drug trade.⁷² Today in Colombia, organised crime is all about cooperation – the Bacrim buy much of the coca base from FARC dissidents and ELN units, and are known to use the FARC along the border with Panama to move shipments into Central America.⁷³ Negotiation is preferred to violence, including because the Bacrim do not have the same military capacity as their paramilitary predecessors.⁷⁴ Perhaps the best example of this is the development of a criminal pact in Medellin between the *Urabeños* and the *Oficina de Envigado*, which dramatically reduced murders after its signing in July 2013.⁷⁵

The 2017 peace agreement and demobilisation of FARC units has shifted the strategic environment in which criminal activity takes place in Colombia, by decreasing the need for the FARC and ELN to cooperate over criminal activities in some areas, to ensure protection against paramilitaries and state forces, and with the highly ordered, hierarchal structure of the FARC replaced by smaller dissident groups.⁷⁶

2.3.3 Criminal, insurgent or ‘terrorist’?

The literature suggests that simple narratives have been sought to explain the relationship between ‘terrorism’ and criminal activities, while drawing conclusions about operational and organisational commonalities between groups within a single context.⁷⁷ International counter-narcotics methods in Mali have focused on the involvement of ‘terrorist’ and ‘extremist’ networks in drug-trafficking activities – the idea that ‘jihadists’ may be in control of the drug trade in Mali and the wider Sahel has certainly been the mobilising pretext for the counter-narcotics policy reform debates in Mali since the French and UN interventions in late 2012 and 2013. Yet the extent and exact nature of this involvement is open to dispute, and in some cases, attacks on markets attributed to ‘jihadist’ groups were actually carried out by bandits camouflaging their actions by copying the ‘terrorist’ *modus operandi*.⁷⁸

As seen with leftist groups in Colombia and Mali, ideological positions shape choices around whether and how to engage in criminality. In the early 2000s the involvement of al-Qaeda in the West Africa diamond trade saw a shift where actions considered ‘immoral’ gave way to pragmatism, as trade to benefit their cause. The pragmatic and adaptable position of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) on drugs has allowed it to thrive both as a drug-trafficking and as a ‘jihadist’ organisation.⁷⁹ While AQIM finances its activities predominantly through kidnappings but also through trafficking in illicit goods, especially cigarettes, there is no evidence connecting AQIM directly to cocaine trafficking, but it is likely that AQIM has imposed ‘taxes’ on trafficking operations in territories that it controls.⁸⁰

An overlooked area of analysis is how existing societal networks and norms, as well as group-specific ideological principles, could help ground discussions on violence reduction strategies. A number of analysts point to how violent criminal groups benefit from established bonds within tribes, ethnic groups and clans. Ties among members, who are often relatives or from the same tribe or ethnic group, are established so that the organisation should survive individual misfortune to continue operations and succeed.⁸¹ In the Balkans, groups are usually named after a particular place or family and comprised of members of extended families, and/or people from a particular community, while groups with links or operations abroad are often connected to the diaspora.⁸²

2.3.4 Gendered dimensions of cooperation and competition

Framing analysis around competition and cooperation can however obscure the roles women play within the structures of crime and conflict.

“
Women are hugely impacted by the fact that organisational decisions within violent criminal groups are largely taken by men.

Women are hugely impacted by the fact that organisational decisions within violent criminal groups are largely taken by men. Women are therefore often seen as a ‘resource’ for men to cooperate and/or compete over, for example, for the purposes of human trafficking. There are some suggestions that individually, women often ‘compete’ with other women or

”

cooperate with men and authorities to secure their freedom or better conditions for themselves, for example by taking on a recruitment role for other women or girls to be trafficked.⁸³ However, largely speaking, women and girls’ roles have not been fully understood beyond their status as ‘victims’ – in trafficking, as targets of physical and online violence, as well as domestic violence and intra-group violence – with increasing analysis on how this is influenced by aggressive masculinities, gender norms and lack of accountability.⁸⁴ More recent studies have expanded an understanding of women’s roles in violent groups, such as support roles including recruitment (for example, of other women), transport (for example, in trafficking), and sometimes logistics and financial support.⁸⁵

Notes

- 26 Ivan Krastev, Bulgarian social scientist, quoted in Judah T (2008), *Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press).
- 27 Uribe Burcher C (2014), ‘Organized crime, Colombia’s peace spoiler?’, *OpenDemocracy*, 27 August (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/organized-crime-colombias-peace-spoiler/>)
- 28 International Alert (2016), ‘Organised Crime in Mali: Why it Matters for a Peaceful Transition from Conflict’, Policy Brief, September (<https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Mali-Organised-Crime-EN-2016.pdf>)
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (2019), ‘Hotspots of Organized Crime in the Western Balkans. Local vulnerabilities in a regional context’, May (<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Hotspots-Report-English-13Jun1110-Web.pdf>); U.S. Department of the Treasury (2021), ‘Treasury Targets Corruption Networks Linked to Transnational Organized Crime’, 8 December (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0519>)
- 31 Uribe Burcher C (2014), ‘Organized crime, Colombia’s peace spoiler?’, *OpenDemocracy*, 27 August (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/organized-crime-colombias-peace-spoiler/>)
- 32 See López Hernández C et al (2010), *Y refundaron la patria... De cómo mafiosos y políticos reconfiguraron el Estado colombiano* (Coporación Nuevo Arcoiris).
- 33 De Boer J, Garzón Vergara JC, Bosetti L (2017), ‘Criminal Agendas and Peace Negotiations: The Case of Colombia’, United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, April.
- 34 International Alert (2016), ‘Organised Crime in Mali: Why it Matters for a Peaceful Transition from Conflict’, Policy Brief, September (<https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Mali-Organised-Crime-EN-2016.pdf>)
- 35 Kleinfeld R (2018), *A Savage Order* (Vintage Books), pp 59–60.
- 36 McDonald E, Jenkins M, Fitzgerald J (2021), ‘Defying exclusion. Stories and insights on the links between discrimination and corruption’, Transparency International and Equal Rights Trust, July (<https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2021-Defying-exclusion-Report-v2-EN.pdf>). A comparative study of 18 European countries, for instance, found that where corruption is high, the number of elected women is relatively low. See Sundström A, Wängnerud L (2015), ‘Corruption as an obstacle to women’s political representation: Evidence from local councils in 18 European countries’, *Party Politics* 22 (3).
- 37 Transparency International (2016), ‘Gender and Corruption. Topic Guide’, March, p 7 (https://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Topic_guide_gender_corruption_Final_2016.pdf)
- 38 Boehm F, Sierra E (2015), ‘The gendered impact of corruption’, U4 Brief (<https://www.cmi.no/publications/5848-the-gendered-impact-of-corruption>)
- 39 Peace Accords Matrix, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies (2021), ‘Five Years of Peace Agreement Implementation in Colombia: Achievements, Challenges, and Opportunities to Increase Implementation Levels’, December (<https://curate.nd.edu/show/oc483j36025>); and on gender see Peace Accords Matrix, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies (2019), ‘Gender Equality for Sustainable Peace. Second Report on the Monitoring of the Gender Perspective in the Implementation of the Colombian Peace Accord’ (<https://peaceaccords.nd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/012820-GENDER-REPORT-DIGITAL.pdf>)
- 40 Current representation of women in the lower house of Colombia’s parliament is lower than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of just over 30 per cent. See OECD (2020), ‘Figure 2.1. Gender equality in parliament, 2012, 2015 and 2019’, in *Gender Equality in Colombia: Access to Justice and Politics at the Local Level* (July). At the subnational level, 12.2 per cent of mayors and 17.9 per cent of municipal councillors are women; and at the departmental level, women comprise 15.6 per cent of governors and 17 per cent of departmental deputies. This low representation persists despite incentives for support of women candidates under the electoral reform law of 2011. See OECD (2020), ‘Women’s political participation in Colombia’, in *Gender Equality in Colombia: Access to Justice and Politics at the Local Level* (July).
- 41 Center for the Study of Democracy (2004), ‘Partners in Crime: The Risks of Symbiosis Between the Security Sector and Organized Crime in Southeast Europe’.
- 42 Bonn International Center for Conversion (2001), ‘Wag the Dog: The Mobilization and Demobilization of the Kosovo Liberation Army’, Brief 20 (<https://www.bicc.de/publications/publicationpage/publication/wag-the-dog-the-mobilization-and-demobilization-of-the-kosovo-liberation-army-124/>)
- 43 Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (2017), ‘Crooked Kaleidoscope. Organized Crime in the Balkans’, June (https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/OC_balkans.pdf)
- 44 Saferworld interview with Balkans expert, January 2020.
- 45 Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (2017), ‘Crooked Kaleidoscope. Organized Crime in the Balkans’, June (https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/OC_balkans.pdf)
- 46 Tinti P (2014), ‘Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future’, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, January (<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Illicit-Trafficking-and-Instability-in-Mali-Past-present-and-future.pdf>); Reitano T, Shaw M (2015), ‘Fixing a Fractured State: Breaking the Cycles of Crime, Corruption, and Conflict in Mali and the Sahel’, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.
- 47 Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (2018), ‘Responding to the Human Trafficking–Migrant Smuggling Nexus’, Policy Note, July (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Reitano-McCormack-Trafficking-Smuggling-Nexus-in-Libya-July-2018.pdf>)
- 48 Gutiérrez Sanin F, Baron M (2005), ‘Re-Stating the State: Paramilitary Territorial Control and Political Order in Colombia (1978–2004)’, Crisis States Programme, September.
- 49 Rivera M, Duncan G (2018), ‘Colombian Paramilitaries: From Death Squads to State Competitors’, *The Global South* 12 (2), pp 109–130.
- 50 Stone H (2016), ‘Organized crime and elites in Colombia: an InSightCrime report’, *OpenDemocracy*, 18 August (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/organized-crime-and-elites-in-colombia-insightcrime-report/>)
- 51 García Pinzón V, Mantilla J (2020), ‘Contested borders: organized crime, governance, and bordering practices in Colombia-Venezuela borderlands’, *Trends in Organized Crime* 24.
- 52 Gutiérrez JA (2021), ‘“Whatever we have, we owe it to coca”. Insights on armed conflict and the coca economy from Argelia, Colombia’, *International Journal of Drug Policy* 89.

- 53 Saferworld interview with Colombian civil society activist, February 2022; International Crisis Group (2015), 'Venezuela's Dangers Spill across the Colombian Border', 2 September (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/venezuela-s-dangers-spill-across-colombian-border>)
- 54 OECD (2014), 'Illicit Financial Flows from Developing Countries: Measuring OECD Responses' (https://www.oecd.org/corruption/Illicit_Financial_Flows_from_Developing_Countries.pdf)
- 55 Elbasani A (2018), 'State-building or state-capture? Institutional exports, local reception and hybridity of reforms in post-war Kosovo', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 18 (2) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14683857.2018.1475901>)
- 56 Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 'The Global Organized Crime Index 2021' (<https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/ocindex-2021/>)
- 57 Williams P (2009), 'Illicit markets, weak states and violence: Iraq and Mexico', *Crime, Law and Social Change* 52 (3), pp 323–36.
- 58 Cockayne J (2013), 'Chasing shadows: Strategic responses to organised crime in conflict-affected situations', *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Journal* 158 (2), pp 10–24.
- 59 Banfield J (2014), 'Crime and Conflict: The new challenge for peacebuilding', *International Alert*, July (<https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CVI-Crime-Conflict-EN-2014.pdf>)
- 60 De Boer J, Bosetti L (2015), 'The Crime-Conflict "Nexus": State of the Evidence', United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Occasional Paper 5, July.
- 61 See also Goïta M (2011), 'West Africa's Growing Terrorist Threat: Confronting AQIM's Sahelian Strategy', *Africa Security Brief* 11, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February.
- 62 International Crisis Group (2021), 'Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia', Report No. 87, 26 February.
- 63 UNODC in the Balkans suggests there are three main types of organised crime groups: small ad hoc groups without an established structure, medium-size groups with a hierarchical structure, and large groups resembling the structure of a network. See UNODC (2020), 'Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans', UNODC Research.
- 64 It may be important to assess assumed significance of global transnational flows for domestic revenues. For the Sahel, transnational links are crucial, although while non-state actors in West Africa have been playing a solely logistical role for years, providing a corridor from Latin America to Europe, in the last decade local drug production has appeared in the Sahel. See Natale F (2020), 'Organised Crime in the Sahel, an inextricable puzzle?', *Security Distillery*, 24 July (<https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/organised-crime-in-the-sahel-an-inextricable-puzzle>). While the traditional traffic of amphetamines and heroin was amplified by the addition of Colombian-Balkan channels following the end of the war in Kosovo, in contemporary Kosovo these traditional organised crime activities are not necessarily the predominant sources of revenue: it has become particularly important to track money laundering, petrol, litigations concerning socially owned enterprises, property issues, the creation of clan-based fiefdoms controlling public revenue, and the challenges of corruption and accountability. Montanaro-Jankowski L (2005), 'Good cops, bad mobs? EU policies to fight trans-national organised crime in the Western Balkans', European Policy Centre, 10 October, p 27.
- 65 De Boer J, Bosetti L (2015), 'The Crime-Conflict "Nexus": State of the Evidence', United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Occasional Paper 5, July.
- 66 Tinti P (2022), 'Whose crime is it anyway? Organized crime and international stabilization efforts in Mali', Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Whose-crime-is-it-anyway-web.pdf>)
- 67 International Crisis Group (2018), 'Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali', 13 December (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotraffic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-dumali>)
- 68 Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (2019), 'Hotspots of Organized Crime in the Western Balkans. Local vulnerabilities in a regional context', May (<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Hotspots-Report-English-13Jun1110-Web.pdf>)
- 69 Jeremic I (2021), 'An Unexpected Cooperation: Albanians and Serbs' "Affairs" in Kosovo', Italian Institute for International Political Studies, October (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/unexpected-cooperation-albanians-and-serbs-affairs-kosovo-31747>)
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Arjona A (2016), *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* (Cambridge University Press).
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 McDermott J (2013), 'Medellin Truce Inches Groups Closer to Criminal Hegemony', *InSight Crime*, 4 October (<https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mafia-truce-brokered-in-medellin/>)
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Southwick N (2013), 'Medellin Homicide Rate Tumbles After Mafia Pact', *InSight Crime*, 13 November (<https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/medellin-homicide-rate-down-60-from-2012/>)
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Lacher W (2012), 'Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September.
- 78 EU Institute for Security Studies (2014), 'Re-mapping the Sahel: transnational security challenges and international responses', June (https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Report_19_Sahel.pdf)
- 79 Lindell MT, Mattsson K (2014), 'Transnational Threats to Peace and Security in the Sahel. Consequences in Mali', FOI, June.
- 80 Ibid.
- 81 Ibid.
- 82 Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (2019), 'Hotspots of Organized Crime in the Western Balkans. Local vulnerabilities in a regional context', May (<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Hotspots-Report-English-13Jun1110-Web.pdf>)
- 83 Voronova S, Radjenovic A (2016), 'The gender dimension of human trafficking', European Parliamentary Research Service, February ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/577950/EPRS_BRI\(2016\)577950_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2016/577950/EPRS_BRI(2016)577950_EN.pdf))
- 84 Violence Against Women and Girls Helpdesk (2020), 'Serious and organised crime and violence against women & girls', Report 319, July (<https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/2076/soc-and-vawg-factsheet.pdf>)
- 85 Ibid.



A Colombian anti-drug policeman looks through binoculars at a poppy plantation during an anti-drug crop eradication programme in the former rebel enclave of El Silencio near to San Vicente del Caguan in Caqueta province, 3 March 2002.

© Stringer/Reuters

3

Organised crime, conflict and communities

The literature reviewed illuminated two aspects relating to the relationship between violent criminal groups and communities: recruitment pathways, and patterns of resistance and cooperation, including how these relationships present differently for women and men and young people, including in terms of co-option, gendered social status and cultural norms.

3.1 Recruitment

Motivations for individuals to join violent armed groups have been well researched and documented. While discussions related to organised crime focus primarily on high social and political exclusion, massive unemployment and limited economic opportunities,⁸⁶ analysts exploring conflict environments also look at the role of ideology, political motivations and non-economic values such as community protection and familial ties. The extent to which individuals ‘choose’ between groups that engage in solely criminal activities and those with political motivations is to be further explored. It is important to consider how pathways in are linked to pathways out. For example, currently, criminal groups lure FARC members into their fold by offering double the stipend they would receive through disarmament and demobilisation.⁸⁷ To date, while 70 per cent of FARC combatants have been demobilised, 71.3 per cent of ex-FARC combatants are not linked to a productive project disbursed by the national government. Security guarantees for ex-combatants have also been low – since the process began in 2020, 250 ex-combatants have been killed, an alarming figure which emphasises their vulnerability and lack of protection.⁸⁸



'Jessica: coca, estigmatización, violencia y desarrollo en Colombia'
Drugs & (dis)order.

© PositiveNegatives

Explorations of the 'relationship between religious-based violent extremism and ethnically-driven political extremism in Kosovo'⁸⁹ argue that entrenched ethnic animosities have become a stomping ground for organised crime and extreme ideologies that seek to portray a territorial dispute as a clash between Christianity and Islam, drawing deeply on present geopolitical divisions and the increasing religious rhetoric to explain ideological and ethnic differences.⁹⁰ Albanian and Serb community representatives blamed 'weak state institutions and governance for hyperbolisation of the threat posed by violent extremism' as well as 'the lack of [citizens'] trust in state institutions'.⁹¹

A gender analysis of pathways into and out of violent organised crime groups is crucial. While pressures come from gender expectations on young men, and frustrations among those with limited livelihood options, the narrative often centres on young men 'getting hooked on the money, adrenaline and sometimes drugs',⁹² as well as an assumed propensity for violence, particularly within and in response to a hyper-masculinised setting.⁹³ Increasing research on women's pathways into and out of violent criminal groups – often as objects of criminal activities, including human trafficking, drugs transportation and sex work⁹⁴ – suggests women's recruitment happens through their relationships with men, either as objects of human trafficking being 'promoted' to support roles in the criminal network, or by being introduced to

organised criminal groups through family ties and intimate partners,⁹⁵ reinforcing their subordinate roles.⁹⁶

It is worth highlighting, however, that the bulk of research into motives focuses on poor and disadvantaged groups, in particular young men in both the global north and south, who may play a vital role in the retail of drugs, collecting debts or acting as enforcers, but who rarely move up the ranks and who may know little about those who are pulling the strings above them.⁹⁷ There is less scrutiny on the motivations of criminal bosses active at the apex of transnational criminal networks, or the state authorities determined to exploit the state for their own personal and group enrichment over public service, nor of women joining at different ranks within proscribed and organised crime groups.⁹⁸

3.2 Resistance, co-option and cooperation

Disaggregating the types of risks communities face in crime-conflict environments provides a clearer understanding of how violence is used and operates,

and insights into governance gaps and peacebuilding opportunities. For example, the priorities of Mali-based organised criminal groups are to ensure secure transit routes stay free from regulation, and secure other income. Relations with communities have been transactional, exploitative and extractive, directly affecting community safety and security. Communities bore the brunt of the rise in the kidnapping-for-ransom industry in the 2000s across the Sahel, used by smuggling networks as well as 'jihadi' groups. With the significant decrease in the presence of foreigners in the Sahel after the 2012 rebellion, the kidnap-for-ransom industry remained a significant source of revenue for some groups – shifting to the kidnapping of locals.^{99, 100} In comparison, Colombia's rural areas have been the locus for both the transit and production of coca. Violent criminal groups dictate to farmers what they can and cannot grow on their lands, but also govern over territories and the communities that live there to protect their produce. A number of trends emerge, which are outlined in the following sub-sections.

3.2.1 The criminalisation of communities

At any one time, communities in conflict environments may face multiple threats and security risks. In Kosovo, long-standing tensions between Serbia and Kosovo are never more than an 'incident away' from escalating.¹⁰¹ In northern Mali, organised crime sits alongside long-standing, multilayered intercommunal violence, which over time has developed a distinctly criminal element with bandits and small-scale armed groups exploiting the context to monetise the violence, the presence and actions of 'jihadist' groups, and the successive waves of Tuareg liberation movements and heavy state responses to them.

On the other hand, illicit economic activities that outsiders perceive as 'criminal conduct' have been a resilience strategy for communities and enjoy some form of social legitimacy, particularly given conflict-ravaged formal economies.¹⁰² In many peripheral regions, cross-border informal commerce is hardly new and has long been a vital part of local economies, with historic transit points.¹⁰³ In some border areas in Mali, 'trafficking is not seen as a significant security risk by the population', not even the trafficking of drugs or weapons (in a 2014 poll of 530 people, less than two per cent of respondents considered it among the top ten problems).¹⁰⁴ In Mali the border trade has been the main strategy of communities for dealing with extreme poverty:¹⁰⁵ 'In northern Mali for instance, the social status of high-level traffickers has risen, as their business provides a major source of economic opportunities for a

heavily unemployed and impoverished population.'¹⁰⁶

Activists, researchers and drug crop cultivators in Colombia themselves have tirelessly argued that small farmers participate in illegal narcotics markets because there are no viable alternative livelihoods, and that state policies fail to reflect this.¹⁰⁷ Either directly or indirectly, communities have been targets of government policies including criminalisation, crop destruction, counter-insurgency and other security operations. Colombia's US-backed war on drugs and its combination of counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency offensives classed whole communities as the insurgents' puppets or accomplices,¹⁰⁸ effectively criminalising already marginalised *campesinas/os*.¹⁰⁹ As well as fumigation and eradication, communities faced recurrent stop-and-search measures, arbitrary seizures of possessions, other intimidation tactics, unlawful detentions, false incriminations, indiscriminate bombardments and gunfire, torture, gender-based violence and extrajudicial killings.¹¹⁰ This 'deepened blockages of representation, that were already dramatic' due to the state's 'anti-peasant bias'.¹¹¹ As a result, illegal crop cultivation has become socially acceptable in places like lower Putumayo, and law enforcement, which is generally perceived as a public good, has actually generated antipathy towards the state, especially but not only because it interferes with people's subsistence.¹¹²

*"The government says we are all ELN," said 26-year-old Pipe, as he planted coca seedlings at his family's small farm in Puerto Lajas. "They say we are narcos, that we are guerrillas. None of that is true. We have had to learn to survive with the guerrillas because there is no other option ... If we want to survive, we plant coca."*¹¹³

3.2.2 Partial, fractured or 'shadow' local governance

Under the shadow of criminality and conflict, communities have been forced to live with unpredictable and fractured governance whereby existing formal and informal institutions are manipulated for criminal or political interest, or replaced by other systems. In response to the 2006 Tuareg rebellion, the Mali government deliberately exploited increasing rivalries among different networks over smuggling by playing leaders from certain communities against others and relying on select tribes to keep the north under control.¹¹⁴ The result has been an increase in disputes among communities with conflicts degenerating into protracted feuds as criminal groups increasingly fall back on their communities for support.¹¹⁵ The FARC and ELN have substituted for local authorities,

setting rules while providing public goods and services, such as security and justice,¹¹⁶ levying taxes, and regulating trade and human mobility.¹¹⁷ This is not without risk – women and girls are especially vulnerable during the brief but frequent interactions with buyers. Female growers report cases of sexual violence and the danger that young girls could be seized from their homes. After the coca is paid for, some male farmers spend their earnings on alcohol, and women say rates of domestic violence rise as a result. In the words of one resident: “Coca ruptures social bonds. It makes some rich, the men drink the money, they fight with one another. It ruins the family. You go to meetings in these areas and you see that most of those who want out of coca are women.”¹¹⁸

Annette Idler analyses the implications of different types of arrangements and authority put in place by armed groups in Colombia for community security. From short-term to long-term arrangements, she looks at the relative likelihood that women will experience physical violence, and the types of social services provided to them. For example, parallel justice systems are seen by some as more efficient, where decision and punishment are more immediate, whereas the state justice system requires a longer process or is flawed in other ways, such as corruption.

Colombia’s experience since the peace agreement was signed signals the challenges of reclaiming or reforming governance in criminalised/conflicted regions. While the ‘order’ that the FARC had instituted was dismantled, there was nothing to replace it, allowing other armed actors to establish a foothold. At the same time, the FARC became another party in the political arena. Lacking the teeth to make things happen at a local level its former social base’s interests quickly eroded, together with its commitment to illicit crops’ substitution.¹¹⁹ As already noted, peace economies have not necessarily been fairer than war economies. In the former, transnational companies seem to benefit while *campesinas/os* see little benefit, whereas in war economies, the economic dividends for communities can be higher. This is particularly so, as historically livelihoods have been completely isolated from formal legal and economic systems.

3.2.3 Reclaiming security

The possibilities for communities to influence or shape their relations with violent armed actors is limited. This is exacerbated by the fact that they are rarely the target of non-security interventions that would allow them to break out of violent cycles or challenge their position strategically.

Less than one per cent of the more than 100,000 civil society organisations registered in the Western Balkans deal directly with organised crime or corruption.¹²⁰ Many of them face similar challenges, including pressure from governments, difficulties in raising funds to sustain their activities and concerns about security. Indeed, the space for civil society appears to be shrinking in the region.¹²¹ In Mali, the continued breakdown of governance and the widespread perception that criminal activities and corruption have degraded Malian state structures in the last two decades have led to sporadic backlashes by communities against individuals associated with organised crime groups. In 2013, a crowd of angry youth in Gao reportedly nearly lynched two people suspected to be traffickers and accused of involvement in the drug trade alongside ‘jihadi’ groups.¹²² Yet it is unclear whether these community frustrations have been recognised by local elites, and whether civil society organisations have been able to leverage this frustration to further their aims.

Advancements in the Colombian peace process again provide some useful lessons: the peace agreement empowered communities, providing forums for *campesinas/os*, as well as indigenous and Afro-Colombian men and women to provide their perspectives.¹²³ There are several initiatives underway to break the link between communities and organised crime, including the creation of a national body – the Coordinator of Cultivators of Coca, Poppy and Marijuana – which seeks ‘to effectively transform the coca economy into a viable, sustainable and legal economy’.¹²⁴ Alongside *campesinas/os* involved in illicit crop production, they have lobbied hard for implementation of the National Programme for the Substitution of Illicit Crops, designed to manage economic transitions away from coca and other illegal crops. Over 98 per cent of farmers initially approached to join the programme agreed to voluntarily remove their coca plantations and replace them with licit crops that provide legal livelihoods. However, the political interests of the administration of current President Iván Duque have seen a return to the focus on eradication rather than alternative rural economy development, arguing that it is necessary to bring about peace, security and stability. In some cases, state security forces have contributed to the stigmatisation of civil society, strengthening the link between criminal groups and communities.¹²⁵

Notes

- 86 The World Bank (2011), 'World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development' (https://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01306/web/pdf/wdr2011_full_text.pdf)
- 87 De Boer J, Garzón Vergara JC, Bosetti L (2017), 'Criminal Agendas and Peace Negotiations: The Case of Colombia', United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, April.
- 88 *OpenDemocracy* (2021), 'Four years later, Colombia's Peace Agreement advances at a snail's pace', 6 January (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/colombia-peace-agreement-advances-snail-pace/>)
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 *The Economist* (2017), 'The chaotic western Balkans take a sudden turn for the better', 19 May (<https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/05/19/the-chaotic-western-balkans-take-a-sudden-turn-for-the-better>)
- 91 Jakupi R, Kraja G (2018), 'Accounting for the Difference: Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism in Kosovo', Berghof Foundation and Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), Country Case Study 3.
- 92 Haziri F (2017), 'Fighting Organised Crime in Kosovo', 24 February (https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-09/pC_V7N3_en_Haziri.pdf)
- 93 Schultze-Kraft M (2016), 'Organised crime, violence and development: Topic guide', GSDRC, University of Birmingham, August (http://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Org_crime_violence_dev.pdf)
- 94 Natale F (2020), 'Organised Crime in the Sahel, an inextricable puzzle?', Security Distillery, 24 July (<https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/organised-crime-in-the-sahel-an-inextricable-puzzle>)
- 95 Fraser E, Ahlenback V, Clugston N (2019), 'Linkages between Gender, VAWG and SOC in Western Balkans', VAWG Helpdesk Research Report No. 263, 21 October (<https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1852/vawg-helpdesk-report-263-w-balkans-gender-vawg-and-soc-web.pdf>)
- 96 Colombian Organized Crime Observatory (2020), 'Women and Organized Crime in Latin America: Beyond Victims or Victimized?', 13 April.
- 97 Banfield J (2014), 'Crime and Conflict: The new challenge for peacebuilding', International Alert, July (<https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CVI-Crime-Conflict-EN-2014.pdf>); Haziri F (2017), 'Fighting Organised Crime in Kosovo', 24 February (https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-09/pC_V7N3_en_Haziri.pdf)
- 98 Banfield J (2014), 'Crime and Conflict: The new challenge for peacebuilding', International Alert, July.
- 99 Tinti P (2014), 'Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future', Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, January (<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Illicit-Trafficking-and-Instability-in-Mali-Past-present-and-future.pdf>)
- 100 *France 24* (2021), 'Six Western hostages now held in Africa's troubled Sahel region', 5 May (<https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210505-six-western-hostages-now-held-in-africa-s-troubled-sahel-region>)
- 101 Marshall T (2019), *Shadowplay: Behind the Lines & Under Fire: The Inside Story of Europe's Last War* (Elliott & Thompson).
- 102 Wilton Park (2011), 'Global conflict – future trends and challenges: towards 2030', conference report (<https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/wp1073-report.pdf>)
- 103 Lebovich A (2013), 'Mali's Bad Trip. Field notes from the West African drug trade', *Foreign Policy*, 15 March (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/15/malis-bad-trip/>)
- 104 International Alert (2016), 'Organised Crime in Mali: Why it Matters for a Peaceful Transition from Conflict', Policy Brief, September (<https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Mali-Organised-Crime-EN-2016.pdf>)
- 105 Ibid.
- 106 Tinti P (2014), 'Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present and Future', Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, January (<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Illicit-Trafficking-and-Instability-in-Mali-Past-present-and-future.pdf>)
- 107 Ramírez Tobón W (1996), '¿Un campesinado ilícito?', *Análisis Político* 29, pp 54–62 (<https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/anpol/article/view/74971>), cited in Acero C, Thomson F (2021), "'Everything peasants do is illegal": Colombian coca growers' everyday experiences of law enforcement and its impacts on state legitimacy', *Third World Quarterly*.
- 108 Ibid.
- 109 Ibid.
- 110 Acero C, Thomson F (2021), "'Everything peasants do is illegal": Colombian coca growers' everyday experiences of law enforcement and its impacts on state legitimacy', *Third World Quarterly*.
- 111 Gutiérrez-Sanín F (2015), 'Organization and Governance: The Evolution of Urban Militias in Medellín, Colombia', in A Arjona, N Kasfir, Z Mampilly (eds.), *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp 246–264.
- 112 Acero C, Thomson F (2021), "'Everything peasants do is illegal": Colombian coca growers' everyday experiences of law enforcement and its impacts on state legitimacy', *Third World Quarterly*.
- 113 Collins J (2021), 'Five years on, Colombia's coca regions remain at war and distrust is growing', *The New Humanitarian*, 31 August (<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/8/31/colombias-coca-regions-remain-at-war-and-distrust-is-growing#:~:text=Five%20years%20on%2C%20Colombia's%20coca,&text=Beyond%20the%20abang%2Dbang%3A%20Reporting,the%20front%20lines%20of%20peace.>)
- 114 Lacher W (2012), 'Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September.
- 115 International Crisis Group (2018), 'Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali', 13 December (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotraffic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali>)
- 116 García Pinzón V, Mantilla J (2020), 'Contested borders: organized crime, governance, and bordering practices in Colombia-Venezuela borderlands', *Trends in Organized Crime* 24.
- 117 Idler A (2012), 'Arrangements of Convenience in Colombia's Borderlands: An Invisible Threat to Citizen Security?', *St Antony's International Review* 7 (2).
- 118 International Crisis Group (2021), 'Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia', Report No. 87, 26 February.
- 119 Gutiérrez JA (2021), "'Whatever we have, we owe it to coca". Insights on armed conflict and the coca economy from Argelia, Colombia', *International Journal of Drug Policy* 89.
- 120 Bami X (2021), 'Western Balkan Civil Society Avoiding Fight Against Corruption, Crime: Report', *Balkan Insight*, 15 March (<https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/15/western-balkan-civil-society-avoiding-fight-against-corruption-crime-report/>)
- 121 Ibid.
- 122 Lebovich A (2013), 'Mali's Bad Trip. Field notes from the West African drug trade', *Foreign Policy*, 15 March (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/15/malis-bad-trip/>)
- 123 Herbolzheimer K (2016), 'Innovations in the Colombian peace process', Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, June.
- 124 Ballesteros J (2021), 'An uneasy peace for Colombia's coca farmers', *New Internationalist*, 13 October (<https://newint.org/features/2021/10/13/uneasy-peace-colombia-coca-farmers>)
- 125 Machuca D (2021), 'Pathways to opposing centralised and exclusionary drugs policy in Colombia', *Drugs & (dis)order*, 26 May (<https://drugs-and-disorder.org/2021/05/26/pathways-to-opposing-centralised-and-exclusionary-drugs-policy-in-colombia/>)



The flags of Kosovo, Albania and the US wave in the air in the streets of Pristina, Kosovo, during Kosovo independence day, 17 February 2010.

© Jerome Cid/Alamy

4

Interventions in response to violent criminal groups

In our 2014 joint report with the Small Arms Survey,¹²⁶ *Identifying approaches and measuring impacts of programmes focused on Transnational Organised Crime*, six common types of intervention were identified:

- Deterrence, which consists primarily of law enforcement initiatives, and is primarily targeted at actors operating within the inner circles.
- Those that seek to sever the links between politics, the state and crime and are primarily targeted at facilitation networks that support transnational organised crime.
- Cultural change interventions which seek primarily to undermine support networks, but are also relevant for social, political and economic vulnerabilities.
- Mitigation interventions which may seek to reduce the harm to individual communities and state systems by seeking to contain or cap criminal activity.¹²⁷
- Interventions guided by economic transformation, focused on social, political and economic vulnerabilities.
- Global regulation interventions which seek to put in place mechanisms that address the global political and economic system that facilitates transnational organised crime.

In conflict or insecure contexts, where different armed actors and drivers of violence intersect, interventions in response to criminality are more often focused on deterrence. Law enforcement often exists alongside military/security operations that may or may not be directed at organised crime, with more attention paid, where necessary, to severing the link between politics, the state and crime, undermining support networks and harm reduction strategies. As Montanaro points out, ‘international actors and donors [in Kosovo] have focused predominantly on security, ignoring the role that equitable economic development can play towards peace. In 2000, Kosovo had one of the highest concentrations of security personnel in the world: one police officer or soldier for every 40 people’.¹²⁸ International actors also need to look at the way they themselves interact with the criminal economy.

In this section, we examine the types of interventions that have been applied, both by national states and by international actors, focusing on how effective these have been, and also applying a gender lens to analyse how gender responsive they have been. Recognising that responses to conflict actors and to organised crime are normally distinct, the analysis looks at how responses to organised crime impact on conflict, and vice versa.

“

International actors and donors [in Kosovo] have focused predominantly on security, ignoring the role that equitable economic development can play towards peace.

”

We looked at four dimensions from the literature:

- responses to organised crime displacing rather than deterring violence
- counterproductive impacts and unsustainability of top-down laws and policies
- levels of conflict sensitivity in countering organised crime
- possible pathways to resolving conflict and crime

4.1 Displacement rather than deterrence

In ‘following the money’, criminal organisations and networks are hugely adaptable, perhaps more so than groups driven solely by political agendas, whose broader strategic objectives and ideological profiles need to be mindful of any social constituencies, and for whom safety concerns influence their locations, their actions and their hierarchal structure. Networked criminal groups are able to weather the changes brought by interventions, and other political, economic and social variables. For example, Venezuela’s closure of the Colombian border in 2019 had a marginal impact on deterring irregular immigration and criminal activities, instead creating a window of opportunity for criminals to diversify their illegal profits, extend their control over human mobility and set new mechanisms through which state officials engage in collusion arrangements with organised crime groups, creating a border control paradox.¹²⁹

Most commentators agree that deterrence-driven initiatives have resulted in the displacement of transnational organised crime-related violence to weaker and more fragile contexts while doing little to actually reduce demand: the so-called ‘balloon effect’.¹³⁰ For example, crop eradication efforts in one place, or a crackdown on trafficking routes, simply displace production and transport, often to areas that lack the capacity to prevent or manage the impacts. This pattern has been clearly illustrated in the displacement of drug-trafficking routes through Mexico and West Africa, following crackdowns on transshipment routes through the Caribbean for drugs travelling from South America to Europe and the US in the 1990s. It can also be seen in the emergence of new human trafficking and migration routes from Africa into Europe.¹³¹

Many other authors have written about how Plan Colombia facilitated the growth of Colombian paramilitarism since its inception in 2000, as the close links between paramilitary groups and the army ensured steady access to the money and weapons provided by the US government as part of the aid programme.¹³² While the FARC moved towards the negotiating table (and had a political route available to them), the Bacrim emerged out of the ashes of the AUC in a completely different form, better adapted to global and domestic changes.

The city of Medellin’s recent history has been held up as an exemplary model, where levels of violence significantly dropped from 381 to 20 murders per 100,000 people between 1991 and 2015.¹³³ The election of an independent mayor, Sergio Fajardo, in 2003 was seen as a turning point. He dedicated his mayoral term to “repaying the historic social debt” to the poorest parts of the city. Subsequent policies focused on new public spaces, schools, parks and public libraries, and support to local businesses, as well as architecture that tied the poor hillside slums to the rest of the city. The partnership he developed with existing social movements and civic actors was seen as crucial to the process. However, it is important to note that the 2015 murder levels were still relatively high in comparison with the country and region as a whole, and some would argue that paramilitarism was not dismantled, but simply ‘re-engineered’, with more targeted violence and threats against human rights defenders and civil society.¹³⁴

Identifying incentives for state officials – politicians, judges, police – to sever links to organised crime is crucial and an area which this review was unable to investigate given its limitations in scope. Analysts point to how regulations in Colombia have become more sophisticated, with punishment for involvement in organised crime focused on individual politicians, as well as responsibility being placed on political parties who risk losing their parliamentary seats, under the ‘empty chair’ law. Parties have also made efforts to clean up their ranks, by discussing inter-party agreements during elections to ban criminals and prevent candidates shopping around from party to party looking for endorsements.¹³⁵ Such examples require further investigation – particularly in Colombia where some of these trends may have reversed in the post-peace agreement phase.

4.2 Counter-productive impacts and unsustainability of top-down laws and policies

Conflict-affected states also tend to be overly centralised, with policies to address criminality and insecurity that are developed in capitals implemented in areas that are contested and where the state is absent or predatory. Analysts note that the Colombian political system has been democratic and competitive throughout the war on drugs period (although corrupted at various levels), but decision-making on anti-drug policy was not.¹³⁶ In Mali, an incomplete legal framework on organised crime has created an easy link between organised crime and terrorism. This has led to the construction of the notion of ‘narco-terrorism’, shifting available resources to the fight against ‘terrorism’, attracting more national and international attention.¹³⁷

Such centralised policies are further victim to the corrupting links between criminality and the state – allowing for the creation of ‘exceptional’ legal regimes, ranging from proscription and extrajudicial killings to extended periods of detention without trial,¹³⁸ or widespread immunity for group leaders. In Kosovo, while prosecutions of organised criminal groups have risen, the numbers of convictions are decreasing. Prosecutions and convictions focus on lower ranks among criminal organisations, with group leaders more often enjoying impunity.¹³⁹

The challenge is often not about the lack of the ‘right’ legislation. The introduction of peace agreements or new political settlements brings with them new legislation and policies: laws to assess how property is acquired and how vetting processes in the justice system are being drafted in Kosovo;¹⁴⁰ in Mali, there are legal reforms alongside international interventions to strengthen counter-narcotics capacities and assistance for prosecution efforts; and a wealth of legislation and policies accompanying the peace agreement in Colombia focus on agrarian reform, political amnesties for criminal behaviours, demobilisation and reintegration.¹⁴¹ However, implementation is often slow, especially where political interests align with criminal interests. In addition, weak governance (including or especially in the legal and judicial systems), the financial and political clout of

organised crime groups, and the security forces’ lack of equipment, training and accountability for abuses are among the main factors contributing to slow implementation.¹⁴² Political changes such as changes in government can reverse support for commitments as seen with Duque in Colombia, and in Mali.¹⁴³ Three areas to consider strengthening this are:

i. Recognising the centrality of the judicial route to achieve changes in policy. In Colombia, decisions both to decriminalise consumption and to suspend aerial spraying have been taken by judges (at different levels) who have considered that certain aspects of anti-drug policies violate the fundamental rights of marginalised populations (indigenous people, for example).¹⁴⁴

ii. Legal instruments are crucial for civil society and citizen-led movements to use as ‘hooks’ for advocacy and to make demands of state authorities. Over time, commitments incorporated into legal documents and instruments become too engrained in political and public discourse to be reversed. These can be reinforced through discourse, civic education and support for civil society agendas. For example, while ethnic divisions remain rife, Kosovo’s constitution provides for a broad degree of self-rule to ethnic minorities, which, after many years, has formed the basis for more demonstrative representation in state institutions.¹⁴⁵

iii. Oversight and creation of public policy processes deemed ‘emergency’ or ‘extra-legal’ should be maintained by other state agencies (control bodies, for example), local authorities and citizens. While legislation can provide the basis for change, the military and executive branch often enjoy greater powers to dictate policy, excluding local authorities and citizens from the decision-making process. Insofar as counter-narcotics policy was linked almost from the outset to the fight against the insurgency, the state largely delegated power to define the former to the army and police.¹⁴⁶ In Kosovo, there has been massive financial and technical investment in the legal framework and capacity building. Civil society activists indicate that this has overwhelmingly relied on external expertise with limited input from national experts. The emphasis on EU integration processes to align Kosovo’s legal frameworks with EU standards has resulted in, for example, ‘hundreds of laws being passed in a single year’. Twenty years after the war, public perceptions of justice are ‘quite low’, particularly regarding the lack of proper mechanisms to recruit and monitor the work of judges and prosecutors.¹⁴⁷



4.3

Measuring conflict sensitivity in countering organised crime

Siloed interventions to address criminality or conflict can have unintended consequences for each other. Increasing border surveillance (often through securitisation) in response to analysis showing that weak border management facilitates illicit trade has proven harmful in Mali, where trade is the main economic opportunity and food security source. Non-sensitive border control or state-led security measures could potentially lead to conflict with

central authorities, who already lack legitimacy in areas of limited state reach, but also within and between communities competing for access to resources.¹⁴⁸

Plan Colombia, which combined counter-narcotics, counter-insurgency and ‘civil/military governance’, included operations aimed at winning hearts and minds, such as soldiers helping people register for ID cards and healthcare.¹⁴⁹ However, civilian accounts of militarisation emphasise fumigation and eradication; experiences of recurrent stop-and-search; arbitrary seizure of possessions; and the invasion of civilian space, including soldiers setting up camp on their farms or interrupting community meetings and intimidating participants. A regional leader summarised: “if a police or military officer arrives, a *campesino/a* feels apprehension, fear, because he doesn’t know if he’s going to kill him, if he’s going to take him to jail, or who knows what he might do ... there’s no trust in the armed forces”.¹⁵⁰



Aerial fumigation of coca and poppy plantations by anti-narcotics forces.
© JB Russell via Panos Pictures

As the International Crisis Group points out, eradication and supply-side reduction too easily alienate or criminalise populations, rather than seeking to bring them back into the fold of lawful activity and state protection.¹⁵¹ There is increasing evidence, including from Afghanistan and Myanmar, that the approach is ineffective and largely counterproductive¹⁵² – in Colombia 80 per cent of farmers go on to replant.¹⁵³ Stamping out illicit trade linked to armed violence can be a blunt instrument which devastates community livelihood opportunities and leads to deeper cycles of fragility, feeding into anti-state narratives, while providing incentives for people to turn to militias as a means of protecting their livelihoods.¹⁵⁴

Interventions can also be easily ‘politicised’ where there are societal divides and deep polarisations. In Kosovo, interventions are still seen along ethnic lines. For example, a police anti-smuggling/corruption arrest operation in 28 locations in different municipalities was perceived in northern

Kosovo as anti-Serbian, and fomented tensions internally and with Serbia.¹⁵⁵

Increased state or law enforcement measures, therefore, come with numerous risks in conflict settings, and efforts to offset destructive military operations with ‘hearts and minds’ components are rarely effective. Policies aimed at reducing violence should centre on recasting the relationship between the state and those communities affected by security operations. In Colombia, analysts have argued that security operations which pay far greater heed to the need to protect civilians and invigorate rural reforms would be more effective in weakening the illicit economy and the groups that feed off it.¹⁵⁶ Commentators also point to the missed opportunity to replace cooperation between organised crime groups of different ethnicities – for example, in Kosovo – with efforts to support business activities that build longer-lasting and wider societal connections and contribute to reconciliation between communities.¹⁵⁷

Interventions also have mixed results when it comes to supporting gender equality. The rhetoric employed by advocates of intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1995), and more recently in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), demonstrates the increasing incorporation of women's rights as a justification for military intervention. However, these interventions themselves are dominated by patriarchal militarised narratives and have fuelled abuses of women and the commodification of their bodies.¹⁵⁸ As noted, 'since the deployment of allied NATO forces, Kosovo has become a major destination country for the trafficking of women and girls into the sex industry'.¹⁵⁹ A surge in internal and regional trafficking of local women and girls, facilitated by porous borders and weak visa regimes, has been a result of (a) the sudden presence of military personnel which created an immediate increase in demand for sexual services in a region with previously negligible demands; (b) the post-intervention militarisation of Kosovo sustained this demand and fostered an environment where organised criminal networks could reap substantial profits; (c) the disruption of society and the economy resulted in increased numbers of at-risk women and girls in need of remuneration, thereby creating the supply for a burgeoning sex industry.¹⁶⁰

4.4 Pathways and pitfalls to resolving conflict and crime

International priorities to respond to conflict can inadvertently provide openings for organised crime to embolden and consolidate networks. By focusing on certain aspects of a context's socio-economic and political conditions – ethnic polarisation, securing of elite bargains, proscribed armed groups – the state can become fragile in other ways, enabling organised criminal groups to flourish. In Kosovo, the need to avoid exacerbating ethnic polarisation and a repetition of what happened in Srebrenica, and to avoid the risk of instability spilling over into EU territories, led to the belief that independence was the only solution and that a state needed to be secured.¹⁶¹ This embedded corruption into the system, as individuals and sources of illicit economies were transposed into the formal political and financial spheres, something which Kosovo is now struggling to undo.¹⁶²

MINUSMA provides one of the few examples of a stabilisation operation concurrently seeking to address organised crime – and it has had limited results. The mandate of MINUSMA – deployed in July 2013 and currently with around 15,000 personnel – makes direct references to limiting organised crime (about half of UN peacekeeping missions mention organised crime as a threat to various extents). There is, however, little clarity on how to implement that aspect of the mandate, and two objectives trump engaging organised crime: the need for self-protection of MINUSMA, the deadliest ongoing UN peacekeeping mission; and combatting 'violent extremist groups'.

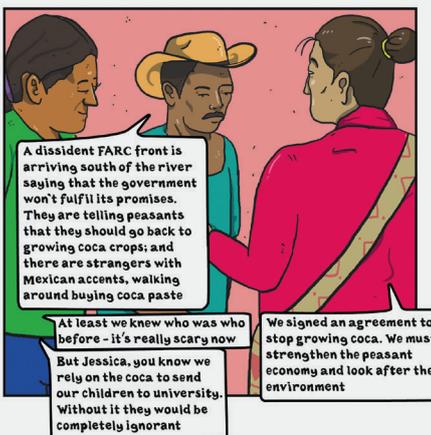
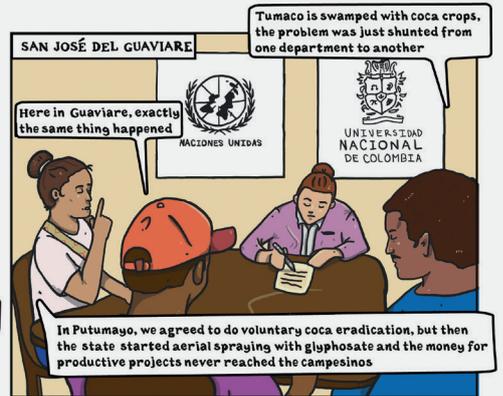
Colombia's peace agreement also provides some evidence for pathways and pitfalls involved in exploring political, dialogue-based approaches to organised crime. As well as a paradigm shift away from a militarised war on drugs to a public health-based approach, negotiations involved the FARC agreeing to leverage its criminal insight to combat illicit economies, and the government agreeing to create viable alternatives to illicit economies for FARC members and local communities. The process found practical ways to distinguish between politically motivated crimes and crimes driven by profit, helping persuade the FARC to open up about its hidden criminal agendas.¹⁶³

Several challenges have emerged: coca cultivation has increased and, while there are several theories to explain the dramatic rise (such as the halting of aerial fumigation), a plausible explanation is that the peace accord created perverse incentives for people in the regions most affected by the FARC to cultivate coca.¹⁶⁴ The accord envisioned significant benefits for individuals and families that were willing to engage in coca substitution programmes, thereby favouring farmers who cultivated coca.¹⁶⁵ This raises questions about the necessary safeguards required in peace implementation to mitigate against such unintended consequences, rather than shying away from the inclusion of such provisions. The alternative – a continuation of securitised approaches – has already been proven ineffective, in particular for outcomes around accountable and responsive governance, poverty reduction and human security.

Another area of interest from Colombia is the development of and efforts to coordinate between specialised judicial units within the Prosecutor's Office to dismantle criminal groups, and a national commission on security guarantees for ex-combatants. So far, the unit has produced poor results largely because the Duque administration has not convened it in recent years.¹⁶⁶ But its development and mandate are useful references for policy actors.

Notes

- 126 Midgley T, Briscoe I, Nowak M, Bertoli D (2014), 'Identifying approaches and measuring impacts of programmes focused on Transnational Organised Crime', Saferworld Working Paper, May.
- 127 Ibid. Generally, this policy of containment is aimed at the 'business' circle (which may be tolerated as a result), at communities (through a non-repressive, health-focused approach to drug use), or through changing the global dynamic of illicit business (notably through drug decriminalisation).
- 128 Montanaro L (2009), 'The Kosovo Statebuilding Conundrum: Addressing Fragility in a Contested State', International Alert and FRIDE, Working Paper 91.
- 129 García Pinzón V, Mantilla J (2020), 'Contested borders: organized crime, governance, and bordering practices in Colombia-Venezuela borderlands', *Trends in Organized Crime* 24, pp 265–281.
- 130 Midgley T, Briscoe I, Nowak M, Bertoli D (2014), 'Identifying approaches and measuring impacts of programmes focused on Transnational Organised Crime', Saferworld Working Paper, May.
- 131 UNODC (2011), 'The Transatlantic Cocaine Market. Research Paper', April (https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Transatlantic_cocaine_market.pdf)
- 132 See García Pinzón V, Mantilla J (2020), 'Contested borders: organized crime, governance, and bordering practices in Colombia-Venezuela borderlands', *Trends in Organized Crime* 24, pp 265–281.
- 133 Rapid Transition Alliance (2018), 'The Medellín miracle', 19 December (<https://www.rapidtransition.org/stories/the-medellin-miracle/>)
- 134 Saferworld interview with Colombian analyst, February 2022; García Pinzón V, Mantilla J (2020), 'Contested borders: organized crime, governance, and bordering practices in Colombia-Venezuela borderlands', *Trends in Organized Crime* 24, pp 265–281.
- 135 Uribe Burcher C (2014), 'Organized crime, Colombia's peace spoiler?', *OpenDemocracy*, 27 August (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/organized-crime-colombias-peace-spoiler/>)
- 136 Machuca D, Acero C, Triana B, Gutiérrez F, Dávila C (2021), 'An analysis of Colombia's drug policy and actors', Working Paper, May.
- 137 International Alert (2016), 'Organised Crime in Mali: Why it Matters for a Peaceful Transition from Conflict', Policy Brief, September (<https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Mali-Organised-Crime-EN-2016.pdf>)
- 138 Madrazo Lajous A (2014), 'The Constitutional Costs of the War on Drugs', in LSE, *Ending the Drug Wars: Report of the LSE Expert Group on the Economics of Drug Policy*, May (<https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-Ending-the-Drug-Wars.pdf>)
- 139 UNODC (2020), 'Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans', UNODC Research (<https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/OC/Measuring-OC-in-WB.pdf>)
- 140 See for example: Office of the Prime Minister (2021), '52nd Meeting of the Government', 29 December (<https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/en/52nd-meeting-of-the-government/>) and Ministry of Justice (2021), 'Concept paper on the issue of unjustifiably acquired assets', April (<https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Concept-Paper-on-the-Issue-of-Unjustifiably-Acquired-Assets-converted.pdf>)
- 141 De Boer J, Bosetti L (2015), 'The Crime-Conflict "Nexus": State of the Evidence', United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Occasional Paper 5, July.
- 142 Ibid.
- 143 Gberie L (2016), 'Crime, Violence, and Politics: Drug Trafficking and Counternarcotics Policies in Mali and Guinea', Brookings (<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/gberie-mali-and-guinea-final.pdf>)
- 144 Machuca D, Acero C, Triana B, Gutiérrez F, Dávila C (2021), 'An analysis of Colombia's drug policy and actors', Working Paper, May.
- 145 Doli D, Korenica F (2013), 'The Consociational System of Democracy in Kosovo: Questioning Ethnic Minorities' Special Status in Kosovo's Constitutional Regime', *International Journal of Public Administration* 36 (9) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/loc/1pad20/36/9>)
- 146 Machuca D, Acero C, Triana B, Gutiérrez F, Dávila C (2021), 'An analysis of Colombia's drug policy and actors', Working Paper, May.
- 147 Saferworld interview with Kosovan expert, 2022.
- 148 Faroghi M (2014), 'Sustainable approaches to organised crime in Mali and the Sahel', International Alert, November (https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Mali_SustainableApproachesOrganisedCrime_EN_2014.pdf)
- 149 Acero C, Thomson F (2021), "'Everything peasants do is illegal": Colombian coca growers' everyday experiences of law enforcement and its impacts on state legitimacy', *Third World Quarterly*.
- 150 Ibid.
- 151 International Crisis Group (2021), 'Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia', Report No. 87, 26 February.
- 152 See Felbab-Brown V (2016), 'No Easy Exit: Drugs and Counternarcotics Policies in Afghanistan', Brookings Institution; Felbab-Brown V (2013), 'Counterinsurgency, Counternarcotics, and Illicit Economies in Afghanistan: Lessons for State-Building', in J Brewer, M Miklaucic (eds.), *Convergence: Illicit Networks and National Security in the Age of Globalization* (Washington DC: NDU Press), pp 189–212. On Myanmar see Stepanova E (2009), 'Addressing Drugs and Conflicts in Myanmar: Who Will Support Alternative Development?', SIPRI Policy Brief, June.
- 153 Ballesteros J (2021), 'An uneasy peace for Colombia's coca farmers', *New Internationalist*, 13 October (<https://newint.org/features/2021/10/13/uneasy-peace-colombia-coca-farmers>)
- 154 Midgley T, Briscoe I, Nowak M, Bertoli D (2014), 'Identifying approaches and measuring impacts of programmes focused on Transnational Organised Crime', Saferworld Working Paper, May.
- 155 UN Security Council (2019), 'Situation in Kosovo Fragile after Police Raid on Organized Crime Leads to Arrest, Injury of Peacekeeping Personnel, Top Political Official Tells Security Council', 8541st Meeting, SC/13833, 10 June (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13833.doc.htm>)
- 156 International Crisis Group (2021), 'Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia', Report No. 87, 26 February.
- 157 Montanaro L (2009), 'The Kosovo Statebuilding Conundrum: Addressing Fragility in a Contested State', International Alert and FRIDE, Working Paper 91.
- 158 Godec S (2010), 'Between rhetoric and reality: exploring the impact of military humanitarian intervention upon sexual violence – post-conflict sex trafficking in Kosovo', *International Review of the Red Cross* 92 (877), March.
- 159 United States Department of State (2015), '2015 Trafficking in Persons Report – Kosovo', 27 July (<https://www.refworld.org/docid/55b73bd72d.html>)
- 160 *Gazeta Express* (2022), 'German Ambassador welcomes Kosovo's progress in TI's Corruption Perception Index', 25 January (<https://www.gazetaexpress.com/german-ambassador-welcomes-kosovos-progress-in-tis-corruption-perception-index/>)
- 161 Montanaro L (2009), 'The Kosovo Statebuilding Conundrum: Addressing Fragility in a Contested State', International Alert and FRIDE, Working Paper 91.
- 162 Ibid.
- 163 De Boer J, Garzón Vergara JC, Bosetti L (2017), 'Criminal Agendas and Peace Negotiations: The Case of Colombia', United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, April.
- 164 De Boer J, Bosetti L (2015), 'The Crime-Conflict "Nexus": State of the Evidence', United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Occasional Paper 5, July.
- 165 Cockayne J (2013), 'Chasing shadows: Strategic responses to organised crime in conflict-affected situations', *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Journal* 158 (2), pp 10–24.
- 166 Gómez-Suárez A (2022), 'Colombia's Peace at Risk', 5 February (<https://uk.rodeemoseldialogo.org/2022/02/colombias-peace-at-risk/>)



'Jessica: coca, estigmatización, violencia y desarrollo en Colombia' Drugs & (dis)order

Created by: Inty Grillos, Colombia

Illustrated by: Jhonatan Acosta

Design by: Sebastian Narvaez

Written by: Dr Andrei Gomez-Suarez and PositiveNegatives

Produced by: PositiveNegatives

Funded by: UKRI - GCRF

© PositiveNegatives

5

Organised crime and conflict: implications for peacebuilding

The previous chapters have explored how criminal groups are connected to governance and conflict dynamics in fragile contexts, as well as exploring patterns of competition, cooperation, and associated violence between criminal groups themselves and between criminal groups and communities and governments. We have also looked at interventions by state and international actors. The tools used to interrupt and reduce organised crime in conflict environments continue to be separated, designed and carried out by distinct agencies and based on isolated analyses. Law enforcement-based interventions can fall short in conflict settings, where the state does not have a monopoly of violence, and where its security, justice and political sectors are often intertwined with criminal agendas, networks and actions.

These siloed interventions frequently make little sense for local communities, or for public officials attempting to grapple with the daily challenges of violence, illicit economies and chronic poverty.¹⁶⁷ A good starting point, therefore, is to make efforts to address the disconnects in individual agencies pursuing drug policy goals, poverty alleviation and attempts to reduce levels of large-scale armed violence. This includes agencies developing shared analysis that better understands criminality and economic agendas as part of conflict systems, not just as anomalies or as ‘conflict drivers’. A more holistic joined-up approach is likely to be more effective in tackling demands, and to allow for more coherent approaches to interrupting national, regional and global supply lines. As the UN Office on Drugs and Crime has acknowledged, ‘multi-stakeholder partnerships are vital for holistic approaches to counter organised crime’.¹⁶⁸

The scope of the report is limited because it is desk-based as opposed to being based on comprehensive primary and secondary research, and was compiled with limited time and resources. While being wary of drawing detailed conclusions from the patterns and trends pulled from the surveyed literature, we have identified some implications for responses seeking to reduce violence and promote broader peacebuilding approaches.

- Locally informed frameworks can harness political will and civilian oversight.
- Leaving conflict drivers unresolved provides opportunities for criminal cooperation.
- Conflict resolution strategies need to anticipate and mitigate the displacement of violence, while emerging practices to address criminality alongside conflict should be better analysed.
- Local accountability, livelihoods and equality should be prioritised for sustainable outcomes.

5.1 Locally informed frameworks can harness political will and civilian oversight

As Balkan criminologist Bojan Dobovsek has observed, ‘[l]egislation as a starting point and key element reducing organised crime needs to be anticipatory rather than re-active’.¹⁶⁹ Responses to

transnational threats continue to be frequently value-driven, with built-in assumptions of how law and order are constituted and received in any environment, and how populations will respond to them. What we know from conflict analysis is that everything is contested – legitimacy, accountability, government, state security, and licit and illicit economies. Yet, formal legal frameworks and standards are often a cut and paste job using external technical expertise to develop legal reforms, institutions and ‘capacity’. For example, in Kosovo the overwhelming focus has been towards EU integration.

However, there are often parallel judicial systems – of both customary and formal legal frameworks – that exist *in situ*. National expertise, including on judicial systems, is often not sufficiently taken up.

Concentrating on capacity building of the judicial and security sectors is an effective approach in the long term only if governments stand behind efforts to combat criminal networks.¹⁷⁰ Otherwise, criminal groups and networks are more easily able to infiltrate the judicial system while maintaining the veil of legal process. Programmes need to be responsive to context, and harness national expertise in order to understand the incentives that

make formal legal and economic opportunities attractive, viable and ultimately valued by crime-affected communities.¹⁷¹ Donors therefore need to focus more on political engagement, encouraging agencies to develop strategies that make the political accommodation of influential players contingent upon their disengagement from the illicit economy. This entails grappling with challenges such as replacing the financial, social and political rewards that corruption and organised crime offer, addressing relatively low conviction rates especially regarding transnational networks,¹⁷² as well as the risks of legal reforms simply displacing organised crime and/or criminal networks, as opposed to undermining or interrupting them.

Likewise, engagements with civil society activists need to be consistent and inclusive in order for implementing parties to understand how legal frameworks fit within existing societal norms, politics and conflict dynamics. There are clearly roles for civil society in these approaches and responses. As noted earlier, civil society space in the Western Balkans is generally shrinking: investing in the capacity of civil society organisations, academia and investigative reporting should be prioritised. At the same time, it is important to underline that it is not civil society’s sole responsibility to combat organised crime and corruption but it is fundamental to create room for civil society to maintain a monitoring role over state institutions.¹⁷³

The importance of labels and definitions applied by the state is also often overlooked – discourse around criminality and ‘terrorism’ are often used to delegitimise groups but can be counter-productive and restrictive to the consideration of more constructive and effective options. Since 1994, Colombia’s Constitutional Court has defined drug traffickers as those seeking profit from the industry; small-hold farmers and day labourers do not meet this definition. According to one former grower, cultivators earn relatively little and “know about coca only to the point of sale – nothing about cocaine”.¹⁷⁴ Rather than seeking to antagonise and criminalise farmers, the goal should be to ensure they are no longer vulnerable to violence and can shift to other productive activities.¹⁷⁵ Labels also have material effect: the labelling of the FARC as a narco-terrorist organisation until November 2021 excluded it from reconciliation programmes.

“
It is important to underline that it is not civil society’s sole responsibility to combat organised crime and corruption but it is fundamental to create room for civil society to maintain a monitoring role over state institutions.”

”

5.2 Leaving conflict drivers unresolved provides opportunities for criminal cooperation

In Mali and Kosovo, ethnic tensions have long exacerbated violence and conflict between communities, while at the same time, criminal networks have overcome these divides through strong economic incentives. Legal and/or military interventions, however, that seek to suppress symptoms of ‘criminal-terrorist’ groups – for example, in the Sahel – do not take ethnic tensions, nor patterns of competition and cooperation, into account.¹⁷⁶ We have seen that where patterns of cooperation between armed groups and between the state and armed groups, or relative stability in criminal activity, are interrupted, this can lead to increased violence and insecurity for communities, in particular for women and other marginalised groups.

The need to work on unresolved conflict drivers is urgent, as inter- and intra- ethnic conflicts and divisions fuel mistrust within and across communities and between them and state actors. At the same time, they present lucrative opportunities for criminal networks who have no vested interest in ethnic tensions that hinder economic cooperation, simply to make profits. These divisions are also leveraged by political elites to consolidate their positions, and to deflect attention from corruption and nepotism.

For example, in Mali, efforts to degrade AQIM would involve the government having to strike deals with local forces, including temporary alliances with at least some of the north’s criminal networks, to gain back control of the territory. The challenge is to ensure that a settlement of the conflict there does not consolidate the power of criminal networks and expand their ability to operate. Efforts to weaken networks should therefore be approached incrementally, for example, initially targeting localised sources of funding, alongside clear poverty reduction strategies (in line with section 5.4).

5.3 Conflict resolution strategies should better anticipate displacement of violence

The analysis has highlighted the severe limitations of militarised responses that often merely suppress, or displace, symptoms, as opposed to addressing causes and drivers of conflict that create opportunities for organised crime to flourish. Ceasefire deals and the implementation of peace agreements in Mali and Colombia have also provided new spaces for organised criminal groups to exploit, bringing with them new forms of violence and exploitation.

This highlights the clear need for ‘multi-pronged approaches’ that take into account legal frameworks, conflict dynamics, national civil society expertise, as well as the impacts of militarised responses. Externally imposed legal reforms often take a long time to be instituted and practicable, while criminal groups and networks are highly adaptable and flexible, moving into new geographic and commercial areas as required. Such transitions often result in initial forms of competition and violence as groups vie for control of these new sectors and of populations.

Integrating conflict and gender sensitivity into organised crime responses is also crucial to mitigate the risks of programmes that displace organised crime from one location to another, or the risks of exacerbating existing tensions between ethnic groups and/or networks. Equally, it can mitigate gender backlashes which can reinforce gender-based violence and abuses. The UK Government’s own *Western Balkans Serious and Organised Crime Annual Summary (2019–2020)* recommends that ‘a gender and conflict analysis should be completed for the programme and to underwrite all project consideration and approval’ in order to strengthen the programme’s overall effectiveness.¹⁷⁷ This is crucial because framing analysis around trade-offs, attempting to identify easy wins and consequent prioritisation are more likely to be harmful for women and girls, gender equality, and long-term peace and security.

Suggested approaches might include transitional justice processes that shed light on conflict and organised crime-related human rights abuses, as

well as exposing some of the networks behind the illegal businesses to delegitimise criminal interests. Developments in the innovative mechanisms set up in Colombia as part of the peace process are worth keeping an eye on for international policymakers. This includes the Colombian Truth Commission and the Investigation and Accusation Unit of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace.¹⁷⁸ The end of the conflict could open the doors for a security sector reform process to continue addressing corruption in these institutions. Security sector reform would also shift security policies away from counter-insurgency military tactics that may currently undermine human rights, and towards countering crime.¹⁷⁹

More effort is needed to study and evaluate which interventions work most effectively in dealing with criminal groups and networks in conflict-affected environments, developing a richer evidence base in order to better inform strategy, and programme design and development. Over the last two decades there have been numerous examples of governments engaging criminal groups, both directly and through intermediaries, in efforts to reduce violence. In the 1980s the Burmese government, for example, negotiated with drug-trafficking secessionists, thereby reducing violence, but arguably criminalising governance. More recently, the Nigerian government has had mixed success in dealing with oil-bunkering militants in the Niger Delta. The Colombian government's amnesty and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes are another useful reference case – both for the innovations in mechanisms developed and the challenges they have encountered.

5.4 Local accountability, livelihoods and equality should be prioritised for sustainable outcomes

Interventions that aim to disrupt criminal networks, and to degrade proscribed groups, need to address human security or they risk leaving communities at greater risk from hybrid conflictual threats. Military operations/security regulations also risk asphyxiating local economies. Substantial gaps in understanding the inter-generational value of illicit economies remain, as do the patterns of violence

associated with them. These include exploitative labour practices and less visible or 'hidden' violence, particularly in conflict contexts and especially gendered violence. Recent analysis argues for looking at illicit economies as a long-term, complex development issue, rather than at simplistic narratives of 'good' or 'bad'. In addition, it is essential to understand the distributional impacts of drug economies in different places and times, interrogating who 'benefits' and who 'loses' when they are interrupted.¹⁸⁰

Prioritising local accountability means making clear distinctions between communities who are involved in illegal activities, such as in Colombia, Mali and Kosovo, as one of the few viable livelihood options available to them. It involves supporting communities to challenge social and gender norms that create coercive pressures on them to accept, or to be co-opted by, criminal networks, including fear of social exclusion: this approach includes addressing the loss of vital economic opportunities attached to direct or indirect involvement in organised crime. In particular, the ways in which illicit economies in conflict settings provide women and young men with ways out of poverty, while also exposing them to various forms of exploitation, require examination.

For many people in conflict-affected environments, legal institutions and reform processes are not part of their everyday lives. Therefore, communities aligned with organised crime may not share the same concerns about legality. Criminality can be highly structured and is often decentralised across networks at national and local levels. It may be possible to incorporate decentralised legal reforms, shifting where resources are allocated, to incentivise people to move beyond criminality and to create more localised forms of accountability. This might involve exploring ways for smaller illicit activities to be absorbed into larger licit economies at local levels, and working with community-based associations that represent marginal groups engaged in these illicit economies. This approach could help both counter the stigmatisation of communities, as well as strengthen their abilities to resist coercion by organised criminal groups. Examples from Colombia where corruption was disincentivised within national political parties, partly through their being denied representation at sub-national levels of government, are useful, as are lessons from Medellín where the new political leadership explicitly championed socio-economic inclusion through licit local economies.

These approaches involve grappling with the ways in which both conflict and organised crime mirror patriarchal social structures and exacerbate gender inequality, as well as gender-based violence,

including domestic violence and violence against sexual minorities (such as LGBTQI people) as well as indigenous women, men and children. Given evidence of the high numbers of women in informal economies, assessments need to overcome the gender bias that leads to underestimating the presence of women in organised crime, as well as simplifying their roles and the impacts on women and girls from diverse backgrounds.¹⁸¹ More decisive strategies can then be designed to support women's pathways out of insecure livelihoods, alongside broader national-level interventions to meaningfully incorporate women into political processes and decision-making positions and mechanisms. Women's rights organisations, women activists and feminist groups need to be central to the design and implementation of policies and programming seeking to respond to organised crime.

5.5 Knowledge gaps

As a time- and resource- bound exercise, our report offers an initial exploration of a complex but important topic. A number of additional areas emerged which raise further political dilemmas in the design of interventions:

- How can peacebuilding approaches influence organised crime and the digital space? For example, criminal groups using cryptocurrencies and social networks to create digital ecosystems that create webs of influence from local to global levels.
- How can we best apply rigorous analysis and risk assessments to wider geo-political dimensions of serious organised crime? For example, predicting and/or situating the changes in and impacts of US policy in Colombia from the Central Intelligence Agency's indirect sponsoring of arms to cartels and paramilitaries as allies required to fight the FARC, to its increased aversion to the actions of paramilitaries; and the impact of former US President Donald Trump's approach which worked against the peace agreement in Colombia, in direct contradiction of his predecessor, Barack Obama.
- Is it desirable to incorporate actions against organised crime into the mandates of peacekeeping missions? If this, for example, could include political-level work as well as law enforcement frameworks, under what circumstances and with what mandate(s) would this be appropriate and most effective?
- What are potential violence mitigation and community security approaches and steps that could offset the inherent risks of peace agreements which fail to address criminal activities?
- What lessons for stability can be measured, if any, from the collaboration achieved by organised crime networks? What can we learn from how they work together and cooperate across ethnic divides, and how can these lessons best be applied?
- What are the security and social conditions under which communities end up reluctantly relying on organised criminals for order and livelihoods?
- What would 'decoupling the actor from the act' mean in relation to (a) communities engaging in illicit activity and (b) organised crime leaders?
- How can external actors better navigate contexts that involve interacting with partners who may be either conflict or criminal actors, or both?

“ Given evidence of the high numbers of women in informal economies, assessments need to overcome the gender bias that leads to underestimating the presence of women in organised crime. ”

Notes

- 167 Drugs & (dis)order (2020), 'Drugs, development and violence in war-to-peace transitions: Voices from the borderlands', Policy Brief (https://drugs-and-disorder.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Voices-from-the-borderlands-2020_Policy-brief.pdf)
- 168 UNODC (2021), 'Multi-stakeholder partnerships are vital for holistic approaches to counter organized crime', 24 May (<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/ngos/multi-stakeholder-partnerships-are-vital-for-holistic-approaches-to-counter-organized-crime.html>)
- 169 See 'Western Balkans CSSF Serious and Organised Crime Annual Review summary 2019 to 2020' (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1003286/Western_Balkans_Serious_and_Organised_Crime_annual_review_summary_2019_to_2020.odt)
- 170 Midgley T, Briscoe I, Nowak M, Bertoli D (2014), 'Identifying approaches and measuring impacts of programmes focused on Transnational Organised Crime', Saferworld Working Paper, May.
- 171 Ibid.
- 172 Price M, Derks M (2010), 'The EU and Rule of Law Reform in Kosovo', Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael, November.
- 173 Amerhauser K (2019), 'How can civil society counter organized crime in the Western Balkans? Insights and recommendations from roundtable engagements with civil society actors across the region', Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, October (<https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/GI-Balkans.Final-web.pdf>)
- 174 International Crisis Group (2021), 'Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia', Report No. 87, 26 February.
- 175 Ibid.
- 176 Kfir I (2018), 'Organized Criminal-Terrorist Groups in the Sahel: How Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Approaches Ignore the Roots of the Problem', *International Studies Perspectives* 19 (4), November, pp 344–359.
- 177 See 'Western Balkans CSSF Serious and Organised Crime Annual Review summary 2019 to 2020' (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1003286/Western_Balkans_Serious_and_Organised_Crime_annual_review_summary_2019_to_2020.odt)
- 178 Burnyeat G, Engstrom P, Gómez Suárez A, Pearce J (2020), 'Justice after war: innovations and challenges of Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace', LSE Blog, 3 April (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2020/04/03/justice-after-war-innovations-and-challenges-of-colombias-special-jurisdiction-for-peace/>)
- 179 Uribe Burcher C (2014), 'Organized crime, Colombia's peace spoiler?', *OpenDemocracy*, 27 August (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/organized-crime-colombias-peace-spoiler/>)
- 180 Drugs & (dis)order (2020), 'Drugs, development and violence in war-to-peace transitions: Voices from the borderlands', Policy Brief (https://drugs-and-disorder.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Voices-from-the-borderlands-2020_Policy-brief.pdf)
- 181 Institute for Security Studies, INTERPOL, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (2021), 'Women as actors of transnational organized crime in Africa: Analytical Report', November (<https://www.interpol.int/ar/content/download/17072/file/Project%20ENACT%20Strategic%20Assessment%20Women.pdf>)

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

SAFERWORLD

UK OFFICE

Brick Yard, 28 Charles Square
London N1 6HT, UK

Phone: +44 (0) 20 7324 4646

Email: general@saferworld.org.uk

Web: www.saferworld.org.uk

 www.facebook.com/Saferworld

 [@Saferworld](https://twitter.com/Saferworld)

 [Saferworld](https://www.linkedin.com/company/saferworld)

 www.instagram.com/saferworld_org

Registered charity no. 1043843

A company limited by guarantee no. 3015948

ISBN 978-1-912901-31-9

