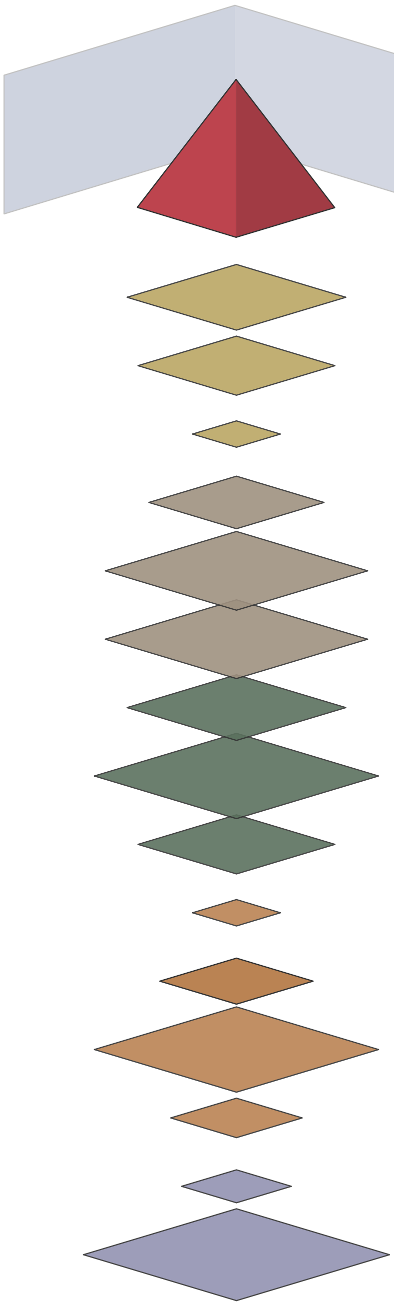
Africa ORGANISED CRIME INDEX 2025

enact — Enhancing Africa's response to transnational organised crime

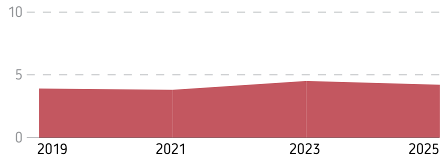
This project is funded by the European Union

MALAWI



4.17 ↘0.32
CRIMINALITY SCORE

47th of 54 African countries ↘7
10th of 13 Southern African countries ↘4



CRIMINAL MARKETS	**4.53**	↘0.23
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	**5.00**	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	**4.50**	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	**2.00**	0.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	**4.00**	↘0.50
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	**6.00**	↘1.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	**6.00**	0.00
FLORA CRIMES	**5.00**	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	**6.50**	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	**4.50**	0.00
HEROIN TRADE	**2.00**	↘2.00
COCAINE TRADE	**3.50**	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	**6.50**	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	**3.00**	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	**2.50**	0.00
FINANCIAL CRIMES	**7.00**	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS	**3.80**	↘0.40
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	**1.00**	↘1.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	**4.50**	0.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	**4.00**	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	**5.50**	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	**4.00**	↘1.00

ISS INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

INTERPOL

GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

enact
Enhancing Africa's response to transnational organised crime

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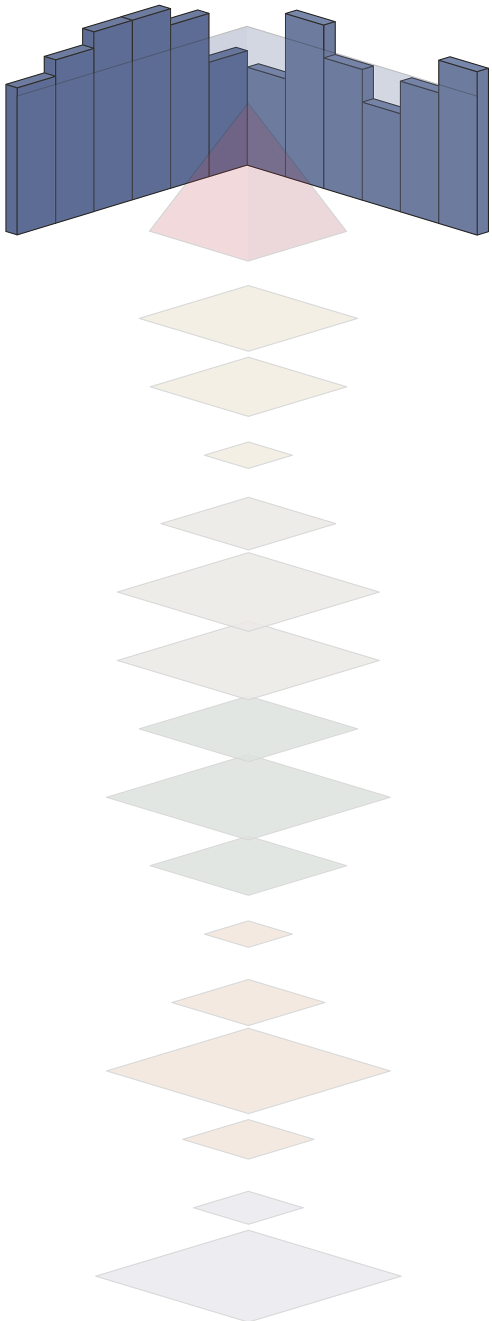
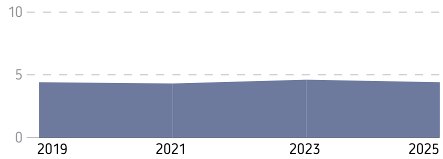


4.42 ↘0.17
RESILIENCE SCORE

18th of 54 African countries ↘2
7th of 13 Southern African countries ↘2



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	4.50	↘1.00
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	5.00	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	5.50	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	5.50	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	5.00	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	3.50	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	3.00	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	5.00	↘1.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	4.00	0.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	3.00	↗0.50
PREVENTION	4.00	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	5.00	↘0.50

CRIMINALITY

Criminal markets

PEOPLE

Malawi is a significant hub for human trafficking. It is a source, a transit point and, to a lesser extent, a destination country along the southern migration route. Dzaleka refugee camp has been identified as a key location where trafficking networks operate, exploiting vulnerabilities among displaced populations. Victims are frequently trafficked across borders under the guise of employment, particularly to destinations such as Oman. Domestic demand for trafficked persons is low but child labour persists in sectors such as the tobacco industry. State-embedded actors, including government officials, have been implicated in forced labour schemes, complicating efforts to combat trafficking.

Human smuggling in Malawi is an independent illicit market primarily driven by financial incentives. Migrants often seek opportunities in the region, especially in South Africa. Smuggling networks involve a mix of state-embedded actors, private sector entities, foreign actors and local criminal groups. Malawi is a key transit hub for individuals seeking passage to South Africa, particularly Ethiopian migrants. Smuggling operations are facilitated by corrupt immigration officers, and high-profile cases have revealed the involvement of influential figures.

Extortion and protection racketeering are not widespread in Malawi, though isolated cases have been documented. Reports indicate that gangs have engaged in localized protection racketeering schemes, targeting teachers in rural schools and demanding money or valuables under the threat of violence.

TRADE

Arms trafficking in Malawi has declined due to a reduced supply and an amnesty programme encouraging the surrender of illegal firearms. However, sporadic gun-related crimes continue and law enforcement operations have led to the confiscation and destruction of illicit weapons. Criminal networks and foreign actors are involved in the trade and firearms are often linked to organized theft and poaching. Local demand for firearms appears to be decreasing but Malawi remains a potential transit point for trafficking operations, particularly along routes connecting neighbouring countries.

The counterfeit goods market is notable and structured networks facilitate the trade. Common items include imitation clothing, fake alcoholic beverages and substandard or falsified medicines. A recent example is the surge in counterfeit fertilizers, exacerbated by global shortages and the failure of state-run agricultural programmes. Private sector actors play a crucial role in this market, and counterfeits extend beyond fertilizers to medicines and vehicle parts. These goods are primarily imported from Tanzania, China and India and distributed through local markets. Other everyday counterfeit products are also available, often brought in by the same smuggling networks importing goods from Tanzania and China.

The country has seen a rise in the smuggling of excisable goods, particularly tobacco and alcohol, driven by high taxes and weak enforcement capacity. Cross-border smuggling, particularly along routes connecting Mozambique and Zambia, has expanded, affecting local industries and reducing government tax revenues. The illicit market is well established and private and foreign actors are involved. Economic hardships and limited job opportunities drive local demand for smuggled goods, entrenching the trade. Malawi has been identified as a key country in the illicit cigarette trade, functioning as an origin, transit and destination point. The market is facilitated by permeable borders and unregulated channels.

ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes in Malawi are common, particularly in relation to illegal charcoal production and timber trafficking. Organized groups, including private sector actors, facilitate the trade, taking advantage of weak regulatory enforcement. Illegal logging from protected areas, such as Dzalanyama Forest Reserve, supplies urban markets, where demand for charcoal is high due to energy shortages.

Fauna crimes are also a notable issue, and Malawi is a hub for wildlife trafficking. Recently convicted fauna crimes networks exemplify the organized and entrepreneurial nature of this market. Criminal groups exploit weak border controls to smuggle rhino horns, elephant ivory and pangolin scales to Asian markets. Poaching is prevalent in national parks, particularly in border regions, where authorities struggle to assert jurisdiction. The illegal fishing industry in Lake Malawi is another concern, and authorities frequently confiscate banned fishing gear.

Non-renewable resource crimes are relatively unstructured but are emerging in locations such as the Nathenje River and Namizimu Forest Reserve. Gemstones are the primary mineral commodity but most mining occurs informally, creating opportunities for smuggling networks. Illegal sand mining has become increasingly prevalent, particularly in rural areas where regulatory oversight is minimal. Despite concerns over environmental degradation and economic losses, government enforcement efforts are limited, allowing illicit mining to persist largely unchecked.

DRUGS

There is limited evidence of a heroin trade in Malawi and only occasional reports of seizures. The country is considered a potential transit route from east Africa to the rest of the southern region, where demand for the substance is reportedly increasing. However, no significant domestic consumption or established distribution networks have been identified.

The cocaine market is relatively small but the country is a transit route for shipments moving from Mozambique to Zambia and South Africa. There are indications that Malawi plays a role in the broader trafficking networks connecting east Africa to southern Africa. Trafficking operations primarily involve Nigerian nationals and organized criminal groups that transport cocaine through international airports. There are signs of cocaine being present but available research does not confirm significant local consumption.

Cannabis cultivation is embedded and the country produces internationally recognized strains such as Malawi Gold. The recreational cannabis trade remains illegal despite recent legalization of industrial hemp. The illicit market is well-structured and production is concentrated in remote areas such as the Likwawa hills. Organized groups oversee distribution and Malawi's cannabis reaches regional and international markets. The government prioritizes industrialization but it has not effectively curbed illegal cultivation and exports.

The synthetic drug trade is limited, largely due to low domestic demand. Emerging reports suggest an increase in synthetic drug use but evidence is scarce. However, the country plays a key role in regional drug trafficking, particularly as a transit point for Afghan methamphetamine moving from Mozambique through Malawi towards Zimbabwe and South Africa. The penetration of meth into Malawi's illicit commodity chain and local distribution networks appears to be recent and so far limited to small communities of people who use drugs acting as early adopters. The meth supply seems to be geographically restricted and difficult to access consistently.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crimes in Malawi are limited, largely due to low internet penetration. Only a quarter of the population has internet access and digital literacy is low. This may account for the low prevalence of cyber-dependent crimes, but the potential for future expansion is a concern.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes in Malawi are widespread, involving state-embedded actors, private sector entities and foreign networks. Corrupt practices, particularly procurement fraud, are pervasive and recent high-profile cases implicated political figures. Despite efforts to strengthen financial oversight, weak enforcement and systemic corruption facilitate financial crimes at several levels of governance and business operations, leading to the existence of a consolidated criminal market where tax evasion is rife.

Criminal actors

Malawi does not exhibit any presence of mafia-style groups. No evidence suggests the existence of hierarchical organized criminal organizations with the capacity to exert control over territories or markets through systematic violence or corruption. The country has loosely structured criminal networks that engage in various illicit activities, primarily human trafficking, human smuggling and wildlife crimes. These networks thrive due to Malawi's strategic location as a transit route for illicit trade, making it a key conduit for regional criminal operations. Human smuggling networks, for instance, facilitate the movement of migrants – mainly from Ethiopia – through Malawi towards South Africa. The level of violence in these networks is relatively low and there is no evidence to suggest they interfere with democratic processes or governance structures. While there are no confirmed cases of state-embedded actors directly engaging in transnational criminal activities, weak financial oversight and corruption create opportunities for organized crime networks to exploit. Reports indicate that state-embedded actors have been involved in financial misconduct, including the misappropriation and mismanagement of public funds at local government levels. Foreign criminal actors play a role in Malawi's illicit economy, particularly in wildlife crimes, drug trafficking and mineral smuggling. The Chinese diaspora has been notably involved in organized wildlife trafficking networks, and recently convicted networks are prominent examples of foreign-led wildlife crimes. Chinese actors operate in urban centres such as Lilongwe and rural areas, leveraging local knowledge to facilitate poaching and the illegal trade of protected species. These groups exploit weak enforcement mechanisms and porous borders, allowing illegal wildlife products such as rhino horns and pangolin scales to reach international markets. Nigerian nationals are active in drug trafficking, particularly in smuggling cocaine, while Malawians of Indian origin are primarily linked to procurement fraud and financial crimes. These foreign actors often collaborate with corrupt local officials and law enforcement personnel, enabling them to operate with relative impunity.

The private sector in Malawi is not a major vehicle for criminal activities. However, the trade in counterfeit goods and financial crimes have reportedly become areas in which private sector actors could potentially benefit. Recent reports indicate that private actors have invested heavily in the supply and distribution of counterfeit fertilizers, taking advantage of high demand for agricultural inputs. Private sector entities have been implicated in financial crimes, such as embezzlement of funds.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Malawi's political leadership and governance have seen mixed developments. Political stability and democratic accountability have shown slight improvements in recent years, and there have been incremental efforts to strengthen governance structures and electoral processes. The government has taken steps to combat organized crime through legislative reforms and stricter enforcement mechanisms. For instance, stringent penalties – including lengthy prison sentences and asset confiscations – have been implemented to deter criminal activities. High-profile cases underscore the government's commitment to tackling organized crime. Opposition parties have also contributed to these efforts, particularly through parliamentary scrutiny of illegal mining. However, public perceptions of government effectiveness are low, and corruption and financial mismanagement are major concerns. In terms of transparency and accountability, Malawi struggles with systemic corruption. The Anti-Corruption Bureau has faced political interference, undermining its ability to function effectively. High-profile corruption cases, including some implicating senior political figures, have resulted in inconsistent legal outcomes, some cases being dismissed due to alleged lack of evidence. The departure of a key anti-corruption official who had played a major role in high-profile arrests has raised concerns about political pressure on anti-corruption institutions. While Malawi has enacted access-to-information laws, gaps remain in their implementation. The lack of independent oversight bodies outside government control also weakens transparency efforts.

On the international front, Malawi participates in global and regional initiatives against transnational organized crime. The country has been a signatory to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime since 2005 and has signed cross-border extradition agreements, such as the Rwanda-Malawi treaty. It has also ratified international frameworks, including the UN Convention against Corruption and the Arms Trade Treaty. Despite these commitments, enforcement challenges persist and international assessments highlight gaps in the implementation of trafficking and anti-corruption laws. Nonetheless, the presence of an INTERPOL unit in Malawi reflects ongoing cooperation with global law enforcement bodies. In late 2024, Malawi was invited to accede to the Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention), signalling an interest in international cooperation to combat cybercrime, though it has not yet formally joined. Malawi has strong national policies and legal frameworks to combat organized crime, particularly in areas such as wildlife protection and trafficking in persons. The National Parks and Wildlife Act, for example, has yielded a high conviction rate for offences related to protected species, demonstrating its effectiveness. Human trafficking laws are less effective due to porous borders and weak enforcement capacity. Similarly, while Malawi has introduced cybersecurity legislation to address emerging digital threats, its implementation is underdeveloped due to limited technological infrastructure and expertise.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The judicial system has made notable progress in addressing organized crime-related threats. For instance, a specialized financial crimes division has been established in the judiciary and has played a crucial role in handling cases involving high-ranking officials, demonstrating the judiciary's commitment to combating corruption. However, the prison system suffers from severe overcrowding, poor sanitation and inadequate facilities. Reports indicate that substandard conditions pose significant health risks, and incarcerated individuals are vulnerable to mistreatment due to resource constraints and weak oversight mechanisms. Law enforcement efforts against organized crime are supported by specialized units in the Malawi Police Service. The criminal investigation department plays a key role in investigating transnational crimes, including human trafficking and wildlife smuggling. The establishment of an anti-poaching unit has led to successful wildlife crime interventions with assistance from international conservation organizations. However, public confidence in law enforcement is low due to concerns over corruption. Community-led initiatives, such as neighbourhood watches, have emerged as alternative security solutions in response to these challenges. Malawi's territorial integrity is compromised due to permeable borders and limited border enforcement capacity. Corrupt immigration officials have facilitated human smuggling, allowing foreign nationals to enter and transit the country undetected. Reports indicate that some border officials have been directly implicated in smuggling networks, complicating efforts to combat cross-border crimes. Malawi has increased collaboration with regional bodies to address these vulnerabilities but enforcement measures are inconsistent.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Anti-money laundering efforts have been bolstered by the establishment of the Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA), which is responsible for investigating financial crimes. Malawi is not listed on any international watch lists, suggesting that its resilience to money laundering is assessed as adequate. However, the FIA lacks prosecutorial authority, limiting its ability to independently pursue legal action against offenders. Additionally, concerns over political interference in its operations have raised questions about its effectiveness. Reports suggest that government influence over funding and appointments has compromised the agency's autonomy, reducing its ability to combat illicit financial flows effectively. Malawi's economic regulatory environment faces challenges from widespread corruption and weak enforcement of business regulations. The Ministry of Trade and Industry has attempted to support small and medium-sized enterprises but the illicit trade in counterfeit goods and second-hand clothing is prevalent due to high demand for low-cost products. The country has struggled to regulate illicit fertilizer markets and fraudulent schemes have exploited weaknesses in procurement processes. The absence of stringent sectoral regulations has enabled organized criminal actors to operate in key industries with relative impunity. Under its 2024–25 budget policy, the government has announced plans to implement a mandatory VAT e-invoicing system aimed at combating VAT fraud and evasion. The new system aims to replace electronic fiscal devices with a centralized government invoice-reporting portal, modernizing the procedure while easing financial burdens on smaller businesses.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Victim and witness support services are primarily managed by the Malawi Police Service victim support unit, which operates in many police stations nationwide and assists victims of gender-based violence, child abuse and human trafficking. However, resource constraints have severely limited its capacity and a shortage of safe housing facilities has contributed to victim retraumatization. The lack of specialized courts exacerbates challenges in providing adequate support for trafficking victims and witnesses. Civil society organizations have stepped in to fill these gaps, offering financial aid and advocacy programmes, but their reach is limited. Prevention efforts against organized crime have been strengthened through public awareness campaigns and legislative initiatives. The national strategy for countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism and the national plan of action against trafficking in persons underscore Malawi's commitment to crime prevention. However, key challenges persist, including inconsistent enforcement and lack of government funding for community outreach programmes. The absence of formal whistle-blower protection mechanisms also undermines efforts to encourage public participation in crime prevention. Malawi has an active civil society focused on combating organized crimes such as child labour, human trafficking, smuggling, and wildlife crimes. These groups engage in awareness campaigns and civic education programmes to inform communities about the risks and effects of organized crime. Media outlets, particularly community radio stations, play an essential role in disseminating information, especially in remote areas where access to mainstream news is limited. The state generally maintains a cooperative relationship with civil society and non-government organizations but political tensions occasionally arise, leading to instances of intimidation, forced closures and arrests, particularly when these organizations criticize government policies. Although the organizations have faced challenges such as allegations of financial mismanagement and occasional legal disputes, they typically operate without direct interference from criminal actors. However, recent developments suggest increasing restrictions on media freedom, and journalists and activists critical of the government have reportedly faced censorship and intimidation.