

Africa Organised Crime Index **2025**

The past, present and
future of organised crime

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ENACT is implemented by

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SECTION 1

Introduction



1

Introduction

Understanding how criminal markets have developed, and how they interact with broader dynamics within and across countries, is essential for crafting effective responses. Research provides the evidence base for targeted policies and equips national and regional actors with the tools to dismantle entrenched criminal systems and tackle emerging threats.

For years, research on organised crime in Africa was conducted in silos, focused on key hotspots or specific criminal activities. To address this, since 2017, the ENACT project¹ has been working to enhance Africa's capacity to counter and respond to organised crime, through analysis, engagement, technical assistance, training and convening of stakeholders. A flagship product of the ENACT project is the ENACT Africa Organised Crime Index (henceforth the 'Africa Index'), which explores criminality and resilience dynamics on the continent, highlighting where illicit activities are the most pervasive and where country responses are the weakest or most compromised.

IS THERE ORGANISED CRIME IN AFRICA?

There has been a long-standing debate about whether organised crime can truly be said to exist in Africa. The enduring nature of this debate underscores the need for greater conceptual clarity on this matter, as it has significant implications for empirical research and effective policy responses.

The debate centres on the contention that 'organised crime' is Western-centric and is inappropriately imposed on African contexts, sometimes to serve international donor and development agendas.² Critics argue that the concept fails to adequately capture the relationship between states, licit businesses and criminal actors in Africa,³ and that it mischaracterises the continent's extensive informal economies as organised crime. This scepticism partly stems from the idea that organised crime – understood as coordinated, mafia-like formations modelled on the Sicilian mafia and its patronage networks – does not exist in Africa.⁴ The lack of a universal definition compounds the problem. The most commonly referenced framework, the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), defines organised criminal groups but not organised crime itself.

However, our analysis of empirical evidence clearly shows that the different illicit activities observed today – including how they have developed and how they connect to global trends – constitute organised criminal activity, sometimes operating transnationally. For the purposes of the Index, organised crime encompasses illegal activities conducted by groups or networks acting in concert through violence, corruption or related means to obtain, directly or indirectly, financial or material benefit, whether domestically or across borders.

Examples abound: Al-Shabaab's taxation regime in Somalia, entrenched gangs in South Africa, and rampant fraud, embezzlement and corruption across the continent show how criminal actors manipulate systems of governance and use violence and corruption to their benefit. Human trafficking and smuggling economies in North Africa demonstrate cross-border coordination for profit, while West Africa's cocaine trade reveals how corruption helps integrate the continent into global trafficking routes. These are not merely instances of informal activity, these are large-scale illicit enterprises characterised by violence, corruption, sophisticated coordination, hierarchical structures and transnational reach – all hallmarks of organised crime.

African states and regional bodies themselves recognise this threat through their legal frameworks. South Africa, for example, has enacted a Prevention of Organised Crime Act, the African Union (AU) and regional conventions reference the fight against organised crime, and virtually all African states have ratified the UNTOC. This widespread recognition by policymakers confirms that organised crime is not only present in Africa but poses systematic challenges requiring urgent attention.

1.1 The ENACT Africa Organised Crime Index

In 2019, the inaugural Africa Index assessed 10 criminal market types, four criminal actor typologies and 12 resilience indicators for all 54 countries in Africa. The selection of the criminality indicators considered the diversity of illicit economies and those that engage in them, as well as methodological factors such as replicability. The 12 resilience indicators selected covered a holistic response to organised crime that includes law enforcement responses, political integrity and governance, economic measures, and civil society and community-based efforts. Over 120 thematic, country and international experts participated in

the multi-iterative stages of scoring, verifying and consolidating each country indicator.

In 2021, the second Africa Index was published alongside the first Global Organized Crime Index, a tool that assesses criminality and resilience in the 193 United Nations (UN) member states. This allowed criminality and resilience in Africa to be compared to global trends in transnational organised crime and to position Africa within the global illicit economy. Published during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 Index also gave insights into how organised crime adapts to global emergencies.

In 2023, the Africa Index and the Global Index were expanded in response to evolving trends in organised crime across the world with the addition of five new criminal markets (cyber-dependent crimes, financial crimes, the trade in counterfeit goods, extortion and protection racketeering, and the illicit trade in excisable goods) and one new criminal actor type (private sector actors, to capture the involvement of those operating in the grey space between licit and illicit economies).

The 2025 Index shows patterns in organised crime in Africa using four sets of data that cover more than seven years of criminality and resilience dynamics. This longitudinal dataset highlights the growth and

consolidation in some criminal markets, ebbs and flows in criminal actor dynamics and an inertia in resilience, which has consistently had a lower score than criminality.

In 2025, the ENACT project comes to an end after nearly a decade of producing knowledge on organised crime in Africa and building capacity to respond to organised crime threats. Therefore, this is the last Africa Index to be produced as a standalone report. Going forward, Africa data will continue to be incorporated into the Global Index, and Africa analysed in terms of its role in the global illicit economy, providing a more comprehensive picture of criminality and resilience.

1.2 High-level findings (2019–2025)

- Organised crime in Africa is diverse in terms of illicit markets and criminal actors.** In 2025, criminal markets averaged 5.11 (out of 10, with 10 indicating the highest level of criminality), reflecting the widespread presence of 15 criminal markets, while criminal actors averaged 5.58, capturing the influence of an array of criminal actors active in Africa. Both indicators have recorded steady increases since the 2019 Index.
- State-embedded actors drive criminality in Africa.** Criminality is primarily driven by the power and adaptability of criminal actors operating on the continent, where criminal actors consistently score higher than the pervasiveness of criminal markets. Since 2019, the most prevalent criminal actors have been state-embedded actors who enable criminal markets, undermine governance structures and weaken state capacity to respond to organised crime.
- Although subject to nuance, the governance structure of a state influences the scope and scale of criminal markets.** While different governance structures have their own challenges with organised crime, democratic states have consistently been found to be better equipped to respond to organised crime while authoritarian states have been found to embrace organised crime when they are not violently suppressing it.
- Geopolitical dynamics and organised crime are mutually reinforcing.** State-driven objectives relating to regional security, economic strategies and foreign policies, among others, often converge with illicit economic activity and shape international relations. For instance, the withdrawal (and sometimes expulsion) of traditional foreign allies, such as France and other Western actors, from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, has created a security and geopolitical vacuum, which has been filled by alternative allies capitalising on the instability in these states.
- Criminality thrives in volatile and unstable environments.** States and regions where conflicts and fragmented insurgencies continue unabated experience heightened levels of criminality. Where organised crime and conflict intersect, economic, social, historical and political motives often drive engagement. Lasting solutions must confront these underlying drivers by addressing community needs, creating alternative livelihoods and offering conflict actors pathways out of illicit economies.
- The internet is reshaping Africa's criminal landscape.** The internet provides economic opportunities for criminal groups, both to expand and diversify traditional markets, and to grow new criminal markets, such as online financial fraud and ransomware.

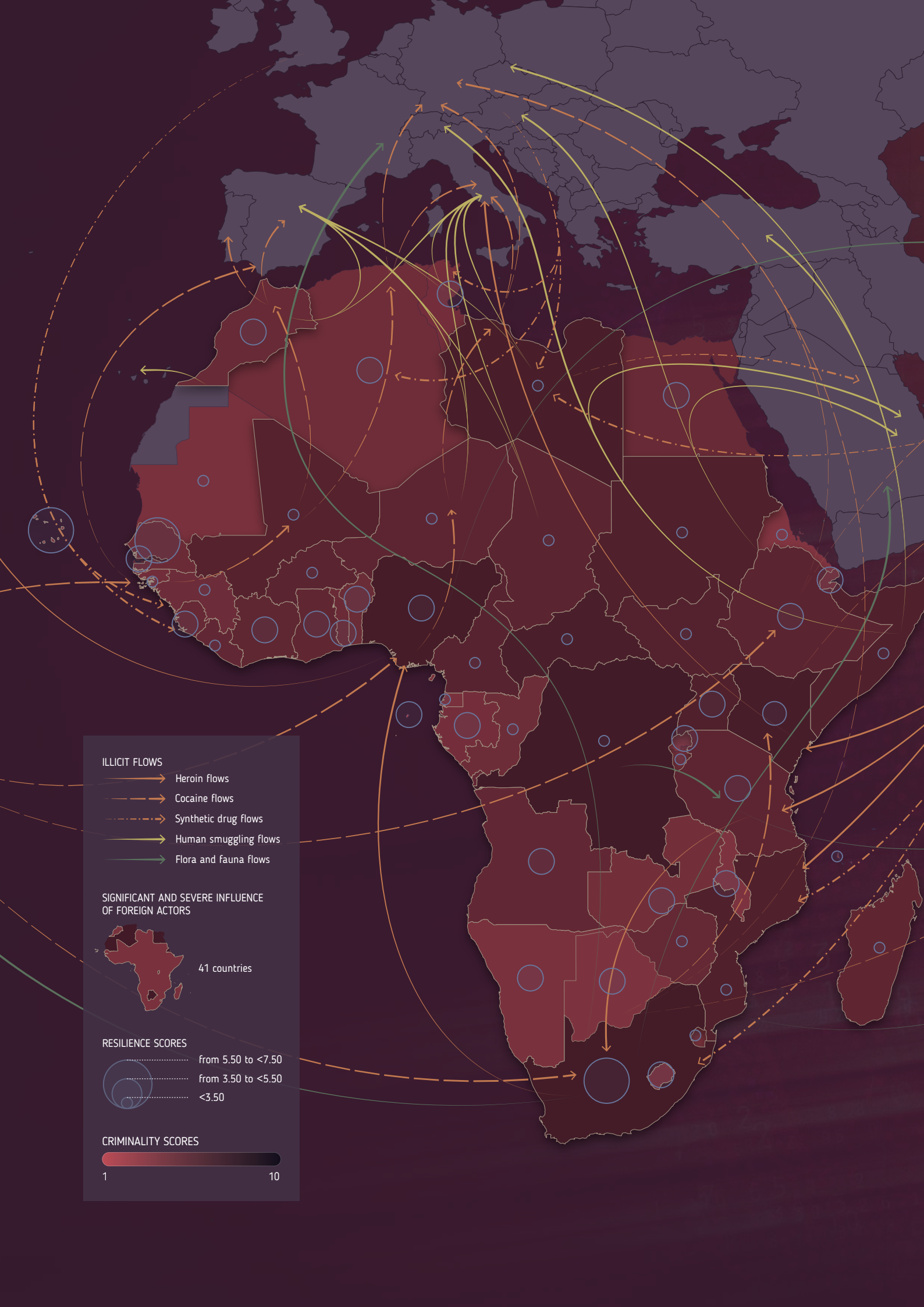
- **Africa's resilience mechanisms are insufficient.**

Apart from a slight increase to pre-pandemic levels between 2021 and 2023, the general trend of declining resilience on the continent has continued, alongside an increase in criminality. Moreover, African countries tend to favour institutional responses over softer approaches, such as using non-state actors, when it comes to building resilience. Non-state actors play a vital role in growing resilience by supporting vulnerable communities and holding authorities to account. They are often at the forefront of leading social protection efforts. However, since the 2021 Index, the 'non-state actors' resilience indicator has declined the most.

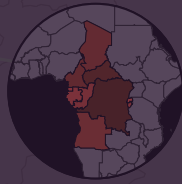
- **Effectively absorbing population growth is essential to reducing organised crime.** As populations continue to grow, countries in Africa must find ways to absorb the growing workforce and strengthen the existing economic environment by regulating informal sectors, providing economic safety nets and protecting sectors vulnerable to criminal capture, such as artisanal gold mining.

Using a combination of qualitative analysis and data from four iterations of the Africa Index, this report looks at how organised crime has developed in Africa, how criminality and resilience interact with global issues of our time and what may be in store for the continent in the future. After providing an overview of organised crime in Africa, the report examines the evolution of organised crime, the role of Africa in transnational organised crime and the influence of geopolitics on organised crime in Africa. This is followed by an interrogation of the reinforcing cycle of conflict, violence and criminal economies, and the links between governance, corruption and organised crime. The report then explores cybercrimes and threats related to Africa's digital boom, concluding with some key action points for the continent.





HIGHEST-SCORING CRIMINAL MARKETS



Central Africa



Non-renewable resource crimes — 6.27



Human trafficking — 6.23



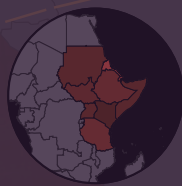
Arms trafficking — 6.05



Financial crimes — 5.95



Flora crimes — 5.86



East Africa



Human trafficking — 7.94



Arms trafficking — 7.89



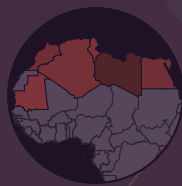
Human smuggling — 7.67



Financial crimes — 6.78



Non-renewable resource crimes — 6.28



North Africa



Financial crimes — 7.83



Human smuggling — 7.75



Cannabis trade — 7.42



Synthetic drug trade — 6.75



Trade in counterfeit goods — 6.25



Southern Africa



Financial crimes — 6.0



Fauna crimes — 5.77



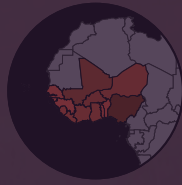
Non-renewable resource crimes — 5.31



Heroin trade — 5.15



Cannabis trade — 4.96



West Africa



Cocaine trade — 6.67



Human trafficking — 6.33



Trade in counterfeit goods — 6.20



Non-renewable resource crimes — 6.0



Financial crimes — 6.0

SECTION 2

About the Index



2

About the Index

The Africa Index is recognised as a source of evidence-based research and is widely used by policymakers and criminal justice practitioners. It is an influential resource for shaping and strengthening strategies and plans to combat transnational organised crime, and has been endorsed by state institutions, such as the National Prosecuting Authority of South Africa, and multiple states and regional bodies, including the Eastern Africa Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization.⁵ The Africa Index has also been used in the development of other tools, including the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, and in civil society and academic engagements across the continent.

THE INDEX'S DEFINITION OF 'ORGANISED CRIME'

Illegal activities conducted by groups or networks acting in concert by engaging in violence, corruption or related activities in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or material benefit. Such activities may be carried out both within a country and transnationally.

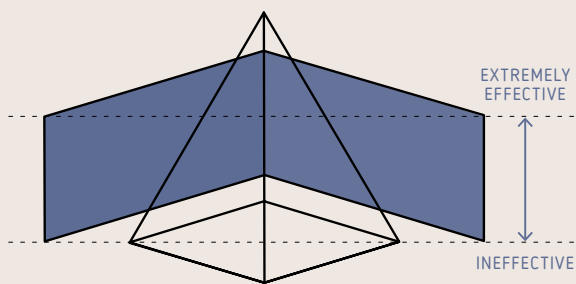
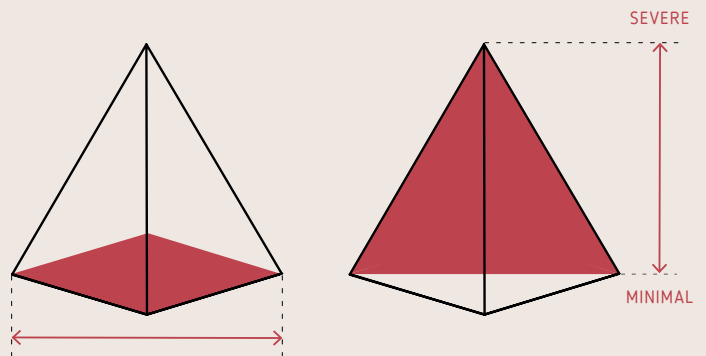
2.1 Components of the Index

The Africa Index is based on the following components:

- The scope, scale and impact of 15 criminal markets (the base of the criminality pyramid – the wider the pyramid, the higher the criminal market score).
- The structure and influence of five criminal actor types (the height of the pyramid – the higher the pyramid, the higher the criminal actor score).
- The existence and effectiveness of 12 resilience 'building blocks' that are designed to counter organised crime (the wall behind the pyramid – the higher the wall, the higher the resilience score).

Pyramid width and height

The **criminal markets** score is represented by the pyramid base size and the **criminal actors** score is represented by the pyramid height on a scale ranging from 1 to 10.



Panel height

The **resilience score** is represented by the panel height, which can be identified by the side of the panel.

Africa average score

The pyramid shape represents the criminality score, the average between criminal actors and criminal markets.

The overall **criminality** score for Africa is 5.34. This score is composed by a 5.11 score for **criminal markets**, and 5.58 for **criminal actors**. The **resilience** score is 3.79.

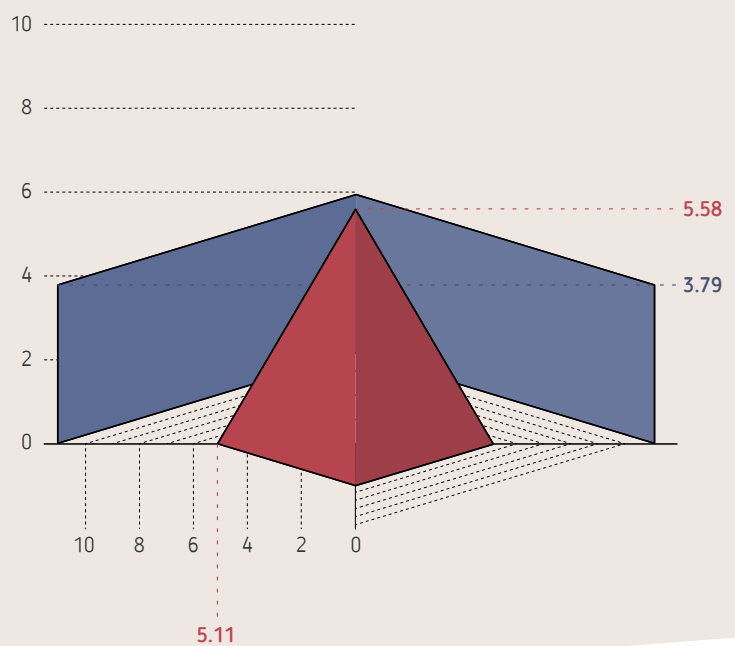
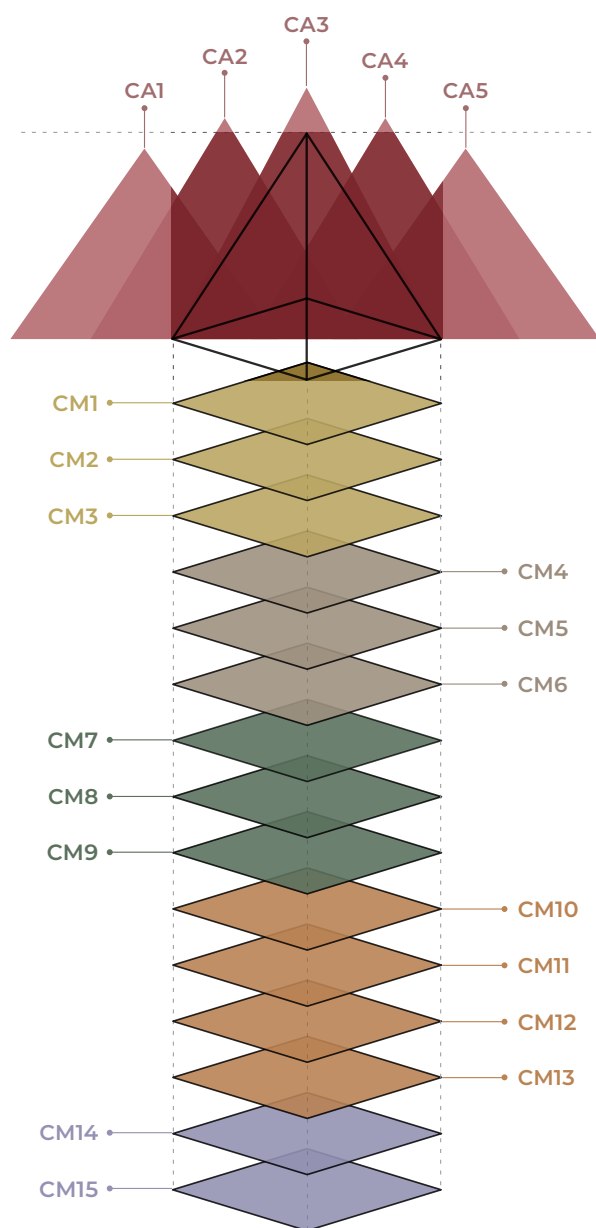


FIGURE 2.1

Criminality indicators



Criminal actors

- ▲ CA1. Mafia-style groups
- ▲ CA2. Criminal networks
- ▲ CA3. State-embedded actors
- ▲ CA4. Foreign actors
- ▲ CA5. Private sector actors

Criminal markets

- ◆ CM1. Human trafficking
- ◆ CM2. Human smuggling
- ◆ CM3. Extortion and protection racketeering
- ◆ CM4. Arms trafficking
- ◆ CM5. Trade in counterfeit goods
- ◆ CM6. Illicit trade in excisable goods
- ◆ CM7. Flora crimes
- ◆ CM8. Fauna crimes
- ◆ CM9. Non-renewable resource crimes
- ◆ CM10. Heroin trade
- ◆ CM11. Cocaine trade
- ◆ CM12. Cannabis trade
- ◆ CM13. Synthetic drug trade
- ◆ CM14. Cyber-dependent crimes
- ◆ CM15. Financial crimes

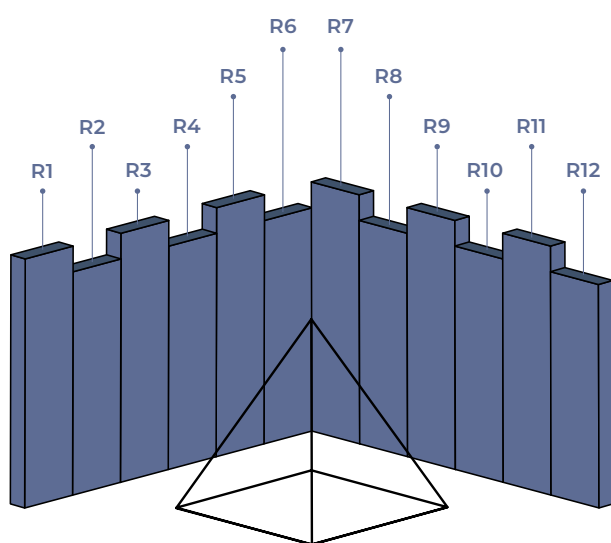
2.2 Scoring of the indicators

The criminality and resilience components are scored anonymously and independently by a broad range of country and thematic experts, informed by preliminary data collected by the Index research teams and the experts' own knowledge and experience. All elements within each component and sub-component are standalone and equally weighted, but they can also be grouped into broader categories that reflect their commonalities.

Each indicator is assigned scores on a scale ranging from 1 to 10, but the scoring thresholds are inverted for resilience and criminality (Figure 2.3). A score of 1.0 means the absence of a criminal market or criminal actor (which is desirable), but low resilience (which is least desirable).

FIGURE 2.2

Resilience indicators



- **R1.** Political leadership and governance
- **R2.** Government transparency and accountability
- **R3.** International cooperation
- **R4.** National policies and laws
- **R5.** Judicial system and detention
- **R6.** Law enforcement
- **R7.** Territorial integrity
- **R8.** Anti-money laundering
- **R9.** Economic regulatory capacity
- **R10.** Victim and witness support
- **R11.** Prevention
- **R12.** Non-state actors

FIGURE 2.3

Scoring thresholds for criminality and resilience indicators

CRIMINALITY

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
NON-EXISTENT TO LITTLE INFLUENCE			MODERATE INFLUENCE		SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE		SEVERE INFLUENCE		

RESILIENCE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
NON-EXISTENT OR EXTREMELY INEFFECTIVE			MODERATELY EFFECTIVE		SUFFICIENTLY EFFECTIVE		HIGHLY EFFECTIVE		

The scores for all indicators are then averaged to produce a national score for criminality and a national score for resilience. This means that countries with several moderately pervasive criminal markets will often score higher on criminality than those with only one or two extremely pervasive markets.

SECTION 3

Overview of organised crime in Africa in 2025



3

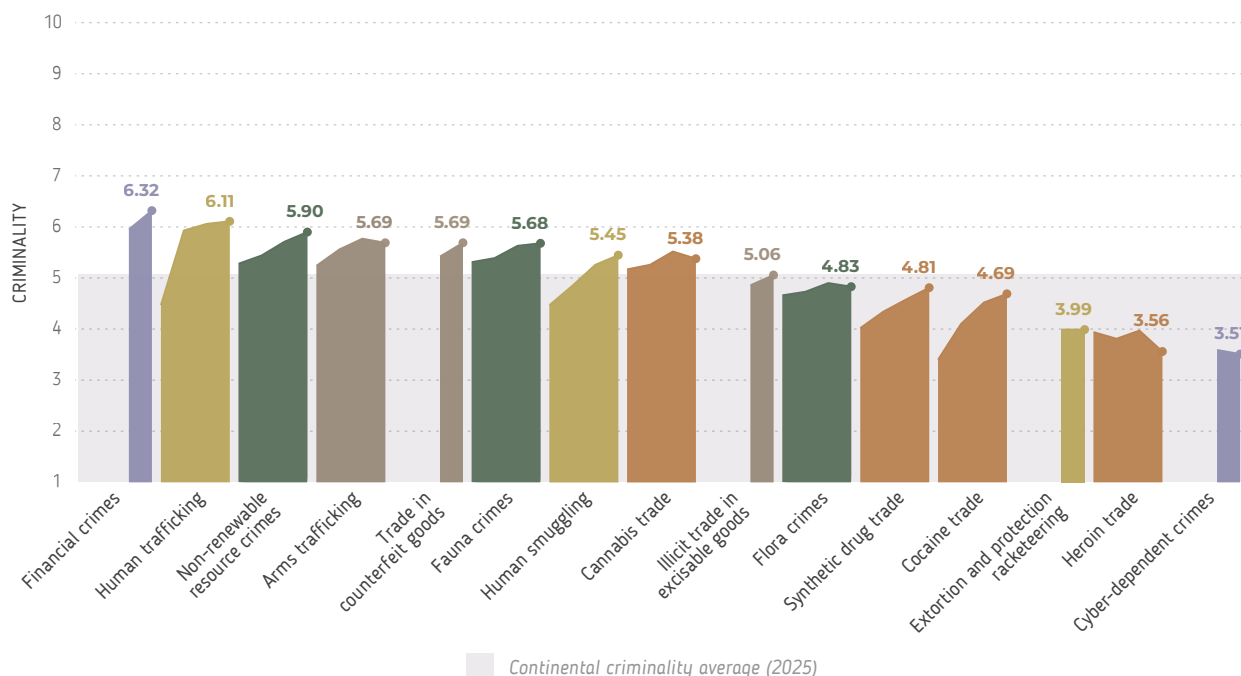
Overview of organised crime in Africa in 2025

3.1 Criminal markets

Criminal markets in Africa are marked by their considerable diversity – from commodity-based markets and the exploitation of people and natural resources, to cyber-dependent and financial crimes. By monitoring the trajectory of criminal markets over seven years, the Index brings to light several trends that capture the state of criminal economies and illicit commodities in Africa today.

FIGURE 3.1

Criminal market trends (2019–2025)



In the 2025 edition, the most pervasive criminal markets were financial crimes, human trafficking, non-renewable resource crimes, the trade in counterfeit goods and arms trafficking (Figure 3.1). Since 2023, the two fastest-growing markets have been financial crimes and the trade in counterfeit goods, reflecting global

patterns. Although human smuggling has grown more slowly since 2023, over the six years between the 2019 and 2025 Indexes it was the second fastest-growing criminal market (the first being cocaine), which is indicative of instability and conflicts driving the movement of people. The high score for non-

renewable resource crimes reflects the continent's abundant resources and biodiversity that are in high demand globally. Other criminal markets recorded marginal decreases between 2023 and 2025. These include arms trafficking, flora crimes and cyber-dependent crimes.

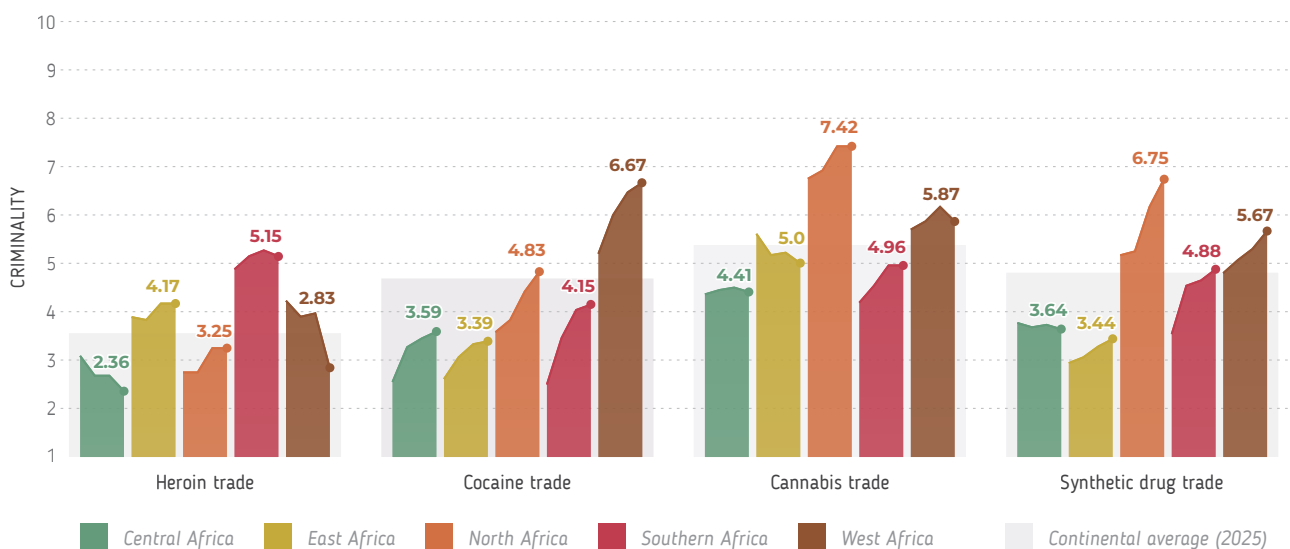


In 2025, the cannabis trade was recorded as the most entrenched drug market in Africa, while the heroin trade was the least entrenched. The regions with the highest scores for drug markets were North Africa for the cannabis and synthetic drug trades,

Southern Africa for the heroin trade and West Africa for the cocaine trade (Figure 3.2). Between 2019 and 2025, the cocaine trade was the fastest-growing criminal market overall, but the synthetic drug trade has grown faster since 2023.

FIGURE 3.2

Regional drug scores (2019–2025)



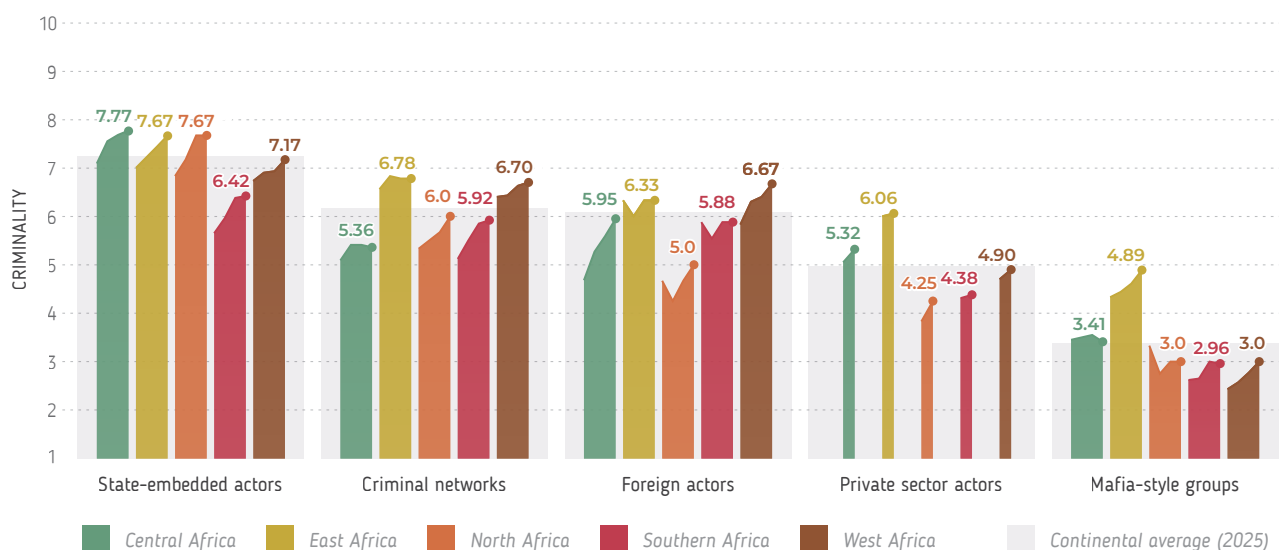
3.2 Criminal actors

Criminal actors involved in these criminal markets include state-embedded actors, criminal networks, mafia-style groups, foreign actors and private sector actors, and are all influential in driving up the criminality average. State-embedded actors,

in particular, remain the most dominant drivers of criminality since the first assessment in 2019, leveraging official authority to enable and sustain illicit economies.

FIGURE 3.3

Criminal actors, regional trends (2019–2025)



As Figure 3.3 shows, state-embedded actors continued to be the most prevalent criminal actor category, increasing their influence by 0.65 points since 2019, reflecting a global trend that shows this criminal actor type to dominate the criminal landscape. These actors are at the forefront of driving criminality in Africa, especially in Central Africa, East Africa and North Africa. Since 2023, the influence of foreign actors and private sector actors increased

the most. West Africa had the highest regional score (6.67) for foreign actors in Africa and in the world, reflecting their entrenched hold in the cocaine trade and other criminal markets, and the complex dynamics between geopolitics and organised crime, while private sector actors were most prominent in East Africa. Mafia-style groups and criminal networks only marginally increased their influence on the continent between 2019 and 2025.

3.3 Resilience

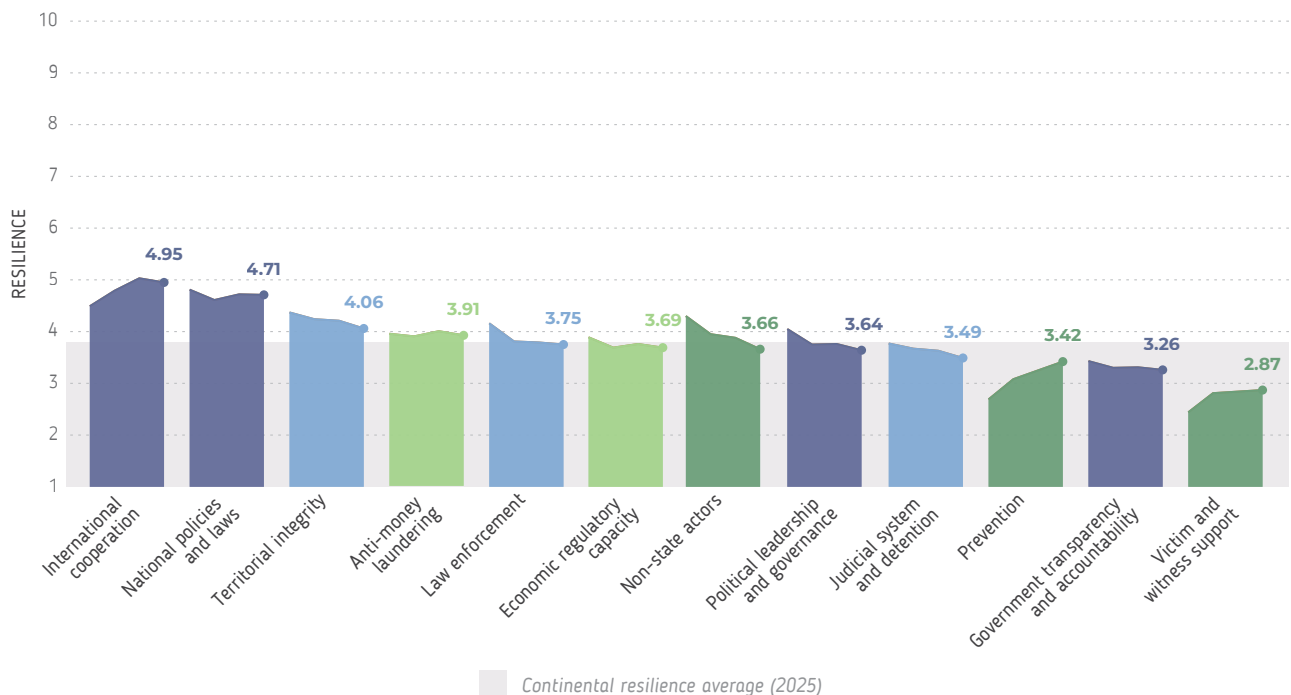
After a slight increase between 2021 and 2023, overall resilience declined between 2023 and 2025, from 3.85 to 3.79. The resilience indicators that contributed to this decline were 'anti-money laundering', 'economic regulatory capacity', 'political leadership and governance', 'judicial system and detention', 'territorial integrity', 'law enforcement' and, notably, 'non-state actors'. Only two regions (Southern Africa and West Africa) had higher than average resilience scores.

'Non-state actors' is the indicator that has declined the most since 2019, from 4.30 to 3.66 in 2025.

'Non-state actors', which include the media and civil society, continue to face difficult operating environments across the continent, especially in North Africa, which had the lowest score (2.75) for this indicator in the world.

FIGURE 3.4

Resilience trends (2019–2025)



Between 2023 and 2025, 'territorial integrity' was among the resilience indicators that decreased the most, second to 'non-state actors'. Since 2019, Central Africa and East Africa – both conflict-afflicted regions – have recorded declines in this indicator.

Since 2021, 'international cooperation' has been the strongest indicator, followed by 'national policies and laws' (which ranked the highest in 2019), reflecting robust legal frameworks across the continent. In 2025, Southern Africa was the highest-scoring region

for 'international cooperation' (5.54) and 'national policies and laws' (5.12).

Despite being among the lowest-scoring resilience indicators in 2025, 'victim and witness support' and 'prevention' have both improved since 2019, reflecting the implementation of measures to support victims and witnesses of organised crime. However, their low scores suggest that countries may not yet view them as priority interventions.

SECTION 4

The development of organised crime in Africa

A photograph of several assault rifles and handguns lying on a grassy field. The weapons are arranged in a row, with some pointing towards the left and others towards the right. A person's leg and boot are visible on the right side of the frame. The image is overlaid with a dark red semi-transparent rectangle on the left side, which contains the text 'The development of organised crime in Africa'.



4

The development of organised crime in Africa

Organised crime has expanded rapidly in Africa's post-colonial states, in response to weak governance and socio-economic inequalities, and fuelled by abundant natural resources and rich biodiversity, as well as porous borders, political instability, persevering conflicts, fragility and systemic corruption. These conditions have attracted foreign criminal actors and enabled the rise of domestic networks.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE STATE ON ORGANISED CRIME

Three countries offer interesting insights into how organised crime developed and how the state's role has influenced the nature of organised crime.

South Africa. Rapid industrial development and urbanisation after the Second World War created an environment in which urban criminality began to increase in South African cities, particularly Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban.⁶ As criminality grew, loosely structured street gangs proliferated. These street gangs were the forerunners of the more defined organised criminal groups that are present today, and succeeded the renegades and opportunistic criminals from around the world drawn by the gold rush in 1885.⁷ These gangs were involved in armed robbery, protection rackets, hijackings, and the smuggling of cannabis and other contraband. By the 1980s, more hardened, organised criminal gangs had formed, spurred on by social, economic and political dynamics within South Africa and the wider region. Migrants established connections between gangs in South Africa and criminal groups in neighbouring countries. The apartheid government also allowed gangs to go unchecked in order to stave off liberation movements. They used gangs to infiltrate and inform on mandrax and car smuggling syndicates, which were said to fund some liberation movements.⁸ Organised criminal gangs, which the Index categorises as mafia-style groups, wield severe influence in South Africa's organised crime landscape today and have a negative impact on social and state structures.



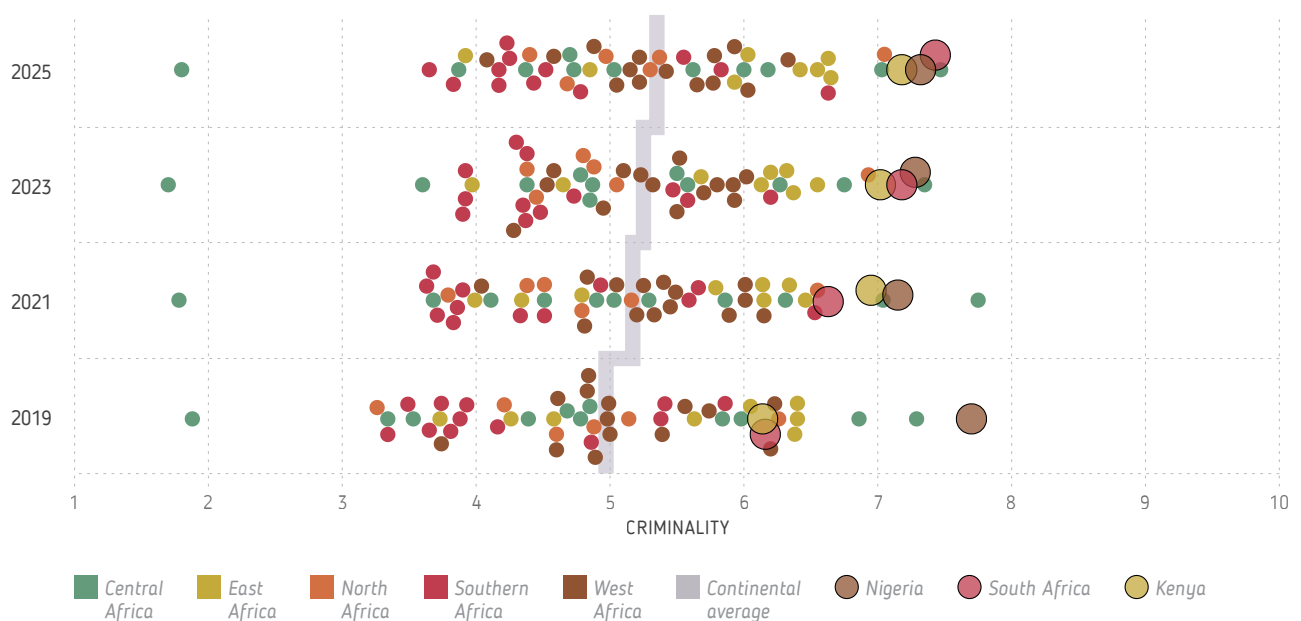
Nigeria. Following independence in 1960, criminality evolved around the country's oil sector, enabled by corrupt state officials whose complicity in illicit activities set the groundwork for organised crime to spread to other commodities and created a vacuum for criminal groups to proliferate. This is reflected in Nigeria's high scores for non-renewable resource crimes, state-embedded actors and criminal networks, which all scored 8.0 in 2025. Over time, corruption encouraged a disregard for the law and facilitated other types of illicit markets, including piracy, armed robbery, burglary and drug trafficking.⁹

Kenya. Resistance to colonial rule inadvertently laid the foundation for the proliferation of gangs, which would be weaponised after independence by politicians. During the late 1950s, guerillas of the Mau Mau movement fought against the British colonial establishment,¹⁰ culminating in the country's independence from colonial rule in 1963. Militias and gangs such as the Mungiki, one of Kenya's largest gangs with a membership estimated at over 100 000 people, are believed to have descended from the Mau Mau movement.¹¹ These gangs are not only involved in criminality, including cattle rustling and extortion, but have also gained political influence by collaborating with state-embedded actors during election periods.¹² State-embedded actors, mafia-style groups and criminal networks continue to exert significant influence in the country.

Since 2019, South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya have had the highest criminality scores in their regions and ranked in the top 10 in Africa. Today, democratic elections in Kenya and Nigeria are marred by voter intimidation and violence from criminal gangs, while local municipal elections in South Africa are undermined by assassinations of politicians, highlighting the links between the state, criminal actors and organised crime.

FIGURE 4.1

Criminality scores for South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria (2019–2025)



4.1 Organised crime grows (1970s and 1980s)

The 1970s saw an increase in the smuggling of commodities readily available on the continent. These included illicit diamonds out of Sierra Leone and excisable goods, such as cocoa from Ghana into Côte d'Ivoire and Togo, and from Nigeria into modern day Benin (then Dahomey) and groundnuts from Nigeria to Niger.¹³ Tribes in northern Cameroon also smuggled cattle into neighbouring Nigeria.¹⁴

Around the same time, organised crime grew as a result of the rise in oil prices, 'the delinking of the dollar from gold, high inflation, and the rapid spread of debt in the developing world'.¹⁵ In Nigeria, organised crime groups began small-scale trafficking of illicit drugs, from South Asia to the United States (US);¹⁶ while in Uganda, an illicit trade in excisable goods began with around 20% of Arabica coffee officially exported and the rest smuggled into neighbouring countries.¹⁷ State-embedded actors implicated in this trade played a pivotal role in driving criminality in Uganda.¹⁸

The 1980s were characterised by a rise in conflict, the expansion of existing markets and the entry of new, foreign actors into the continent's illicit markets. Arms trafficking increased, with reports of firearms being exported to Côte d'Ivoire by armed groups involved in wars in Liberia and Sierra

Leone.¹⁹ Similarly, in Senegal, the armed conflict in the Casamance region contributed to increased cannabis trade and arms trafficking.²⁰

New markets emerged that solidified existing criminal markets, which had been growing since the 1960s. For example, financial crimes in Nigeria expanded when international advance-fee fraud became widespread during the 1980s, adding to currency fraud that had been ongoing since the 1960s.²¹

During this time, 'fortune hunters' from France, Portugal, Britain, Greece, Lebanon, India, Israel and some Central European states arrived in African countries such as Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, then Zaire), Zambia and Zimbabwe.²² Many of them set up small import/export businesses, as a cover for the illegal business opportunities that they were seeking to establish.²³ Sourcing from local criminal actors, they illegally exported goods including cobalt and other precious metals, diamonds and ivory.²⁴ During the 1980s, Israeli nationals were involved in arms trafficking and drug smuggling in South Africa,²⁵ which continues to be a destination for foreign actors seeking to engage in organised crime.

4.2 Organised crime solidifies (1990s)

With the end of the Cold War, the world was changing, as authoritarian states transitioned to democracies (South Africa), and others gained their sovereignty (Namibia, Eritrea). Civil wars and conflict were fomenting across the continent, in West Africa, the Horn of Africa and Central Africa, while borders and societies were opening up. These critical shifts not only allowed for the free movement of people and legitimate goods, but also the trafficking of illicit goods.

The transition from one political system to another also led to the weakening of state structures in some countries.²⁶ For example, tourists and

businesspeople arrived in droves in post-apartheid South Africa, after sanctions were lifted and border policies relaxed.²⁷ These visitors included foreign criminal actors, from countries such as Nigeria, Morocco, Russia and Italy, who built links to local criminal networks and expanded operations, which led to organised crime becoming more consolidated.²⁸ In particular, Russians became involved in extortion and protection racketeering, the drug trade, money laundering and human trafficking in the Western Cape and across the region.²⁹ This resulted in Russia and South Africa signing (in the late 1990s) a joint agreement to tackle transnational organised crime.³⁰

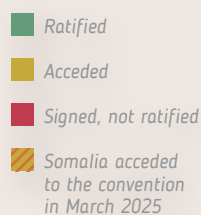
In West and Central Africa, armed groups, which had formed in response to the civil wars and conflict, sought alliances with foreign criminal networks to access arms and funding.³¹ During the 1990s, the cannabis trade was also in full swing across the entire continent. Moroccan hashish began flowing southward along Saharan routes through the Sahara–Sahel region. From North Africa, cannabis resin destined for markets in Europe and Western Asia was transported through Mali, southern Algeria, Niger, Chad, Libya, Egypt and Sudan.³² This market continued to flourish, with North Africa (and specifically Morocco) being the highest-scoring region in Africa for the cannabis trade in all four editions of the Index.

At the same time that organised crime was growing in Africa, the international community was beginning to prioritise tackling it.³³ These efforts culminated with the adoption of the UNTOC in 2000.³⁴ The Organisation of African Unity (OAU),

which later became the AU, had already recognised the need to address the threat of organised crime in Africa. In the early 1990s, the OAU began discussions about strengthening cooperation and coordination among African states to address crime, terrorism and extremism. These discussions were driven by the rising spectre of transnational organised crime, which was undermining state sovereignty in Africa. In 1992, the OAU adopted the Resolution on the Strengthening of Cooperation and Coordination among African States in Dakar,³⁵ following sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council on Libya for failing to cooperate with investigations into the Pan Am Flight 103 and the UTA Flight 772 terrorist attacks,³⁶ and escalating violence that culminated in the assassination of Algerian President Mohamed Boudiaf.³⁷ However, these early continental efforts did not translate into individual state responses, leaving national legal frameworks decades behind the entrenched criminal networks and policymakers perpetually playing catch-up.

FIGURE 4.2

Ratification of the UNTOC by African states



4.3 Criminal markets mature and globalise (2000s and 2010s)

By 2000, Africa's homegrown criminal markets had matured, while connections between local criminal networks, mafia-style groups and foreign criminal actors were solidifying transnational and intracontinental criminality. In the early 2000s, globalisation and Africa's economic growth brought the continent deeper into the global economy, with illicit markets growing alongside licit markets.³⁸ Despite being present for discussions and the finalisation of the UNTOC, African countries did not rank organised crime as a national priority, although a considerable portion of African countries signed the UNTOC as soon as it came into force. By then, however, organised crime had already gained significant momentum on the continent.

A crackdown by European law enforcement agencies on established cocaine trafficking routes from South America prompted traffickers to pivot towards West Africa, establishing a South American–West Africa–Europe route.³⁹ By the mid-2000s, South American cocaine was being imported into coastal West Africa (mostly Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Senegal, Cabo Verde and Gambia) before being trafficked through the Sahel to Europe, which represented 26% of world consumption at the time.⁴⁰ In 2016, an estimated 20 tonnes of cocaine (with a wholesale value of US\$1 billion) transited through West Africa en route to Europe,⁴¹ cementing the region's role as a critical transit point that persists today.

Between 2005 and 2015, organised crime became further entrenched across Africa. Entire states in West Africa had effectively been captured by foreign criminal networks involved in the cocaine trade; the East African coast was serving as a major transit route for Afghan heroin; synthetic drugs were now being manufactured in laboratories in Nigeria and South Africa; and Morocco had consolidated its position as a leading global cannabis producer.

Human trafficking was also ubiquitous, with large numbers of people trafficked for forced labour, slavery, sexual exploitation and forced recruitment in conflict zones. The closely related human smuggling

business flourished alongside it, with smugglers facilitating movement from conflict zones and enabling economic migration to Europe and beyond. In 2016, this market was conservatively estimated to be worth around US\$15 million annually.⁴²

Conflicts in Mali, the DRC, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Libya and elsewhere fuelled a thriving arms trafficking trade. Fauna crimes – including illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing – also became firmly established on the continent during this decade, followed closely by crimes involving flora and non-renewable resources. This type of crime has only become more prevalent in subsequent iterations of the Africa Index, with the Central African Republic (CAR) reaching the maximum score of 10 by 2023 (a score confirmed in the 2025 edition).

State-embedded actors frequently facilitated these illicit markets, either through active participation in criminality or by accepting bribes to ignore it. Foreign criminal groups established operations throughout the continent: the Brazilian *Primeiro Comando da Capital* and Italy's *'Ndrangheta* in West Africa, Bulgarian groups in South Africa, and Italian criminal actors in Kenya. These groups set up shop in major, well-connected cities such as Lagos, Cape Town and Nairobi, where they collaborated with loose criminal networks and mafia-style actors, supplying a range of illicit products from drugs to weapons.

In the face of flourishing and diverse criminal economies, a notable concern was the continent's capacity to respond. One of the seminal findings of the first Africa Index in 2019 was that African countries had very low levels of resilience to the threat of organised crime. The continent was assessed to have a resilience average of 3.86 out of 10, while the criminality average was 4.97 out of 10. This finding confirmed that the scourge of criminality had outpaced the continent's resilience to it – a finding that has remained consistent across all four editions of the Africa Index.

FIGURE 4.3

Criminal market and actor scores (2019)

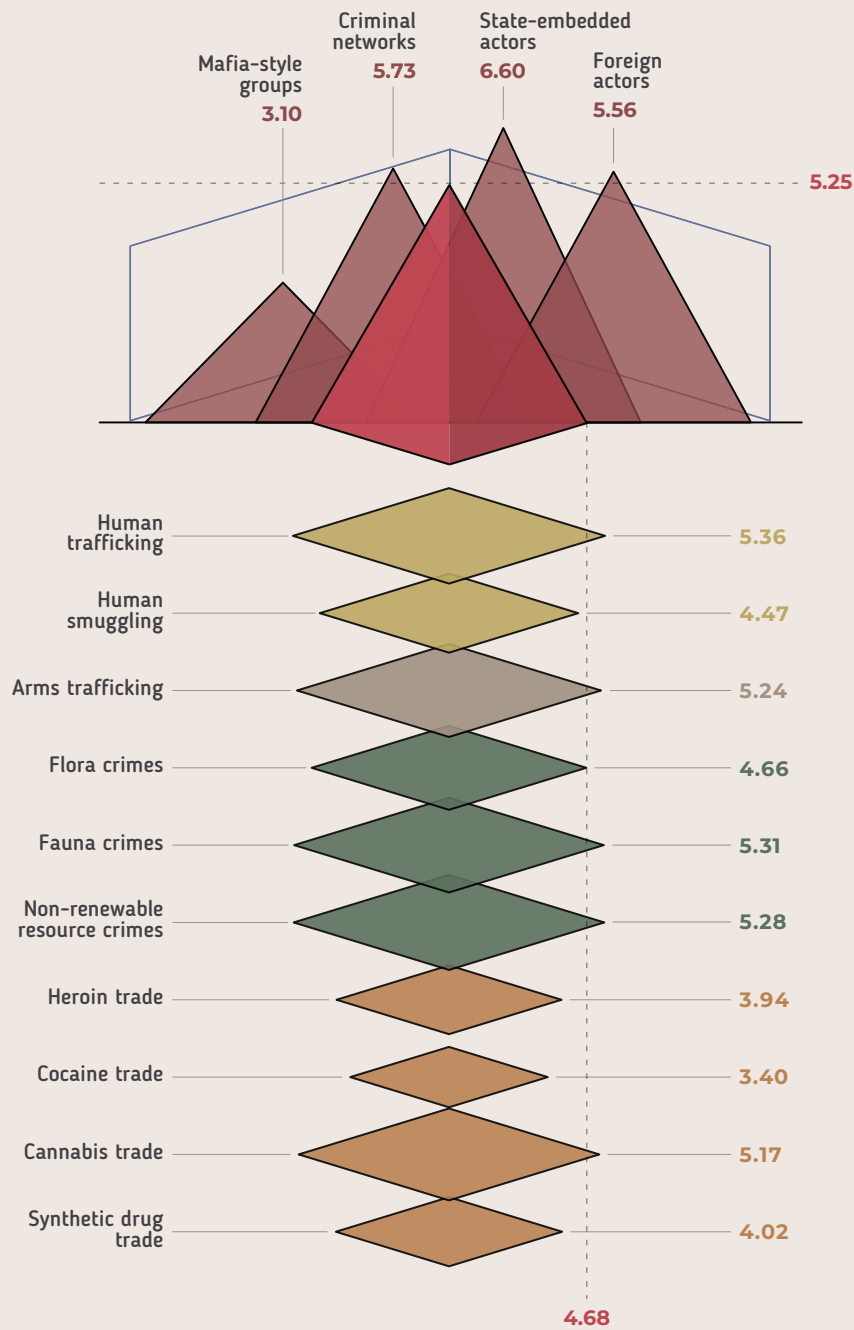
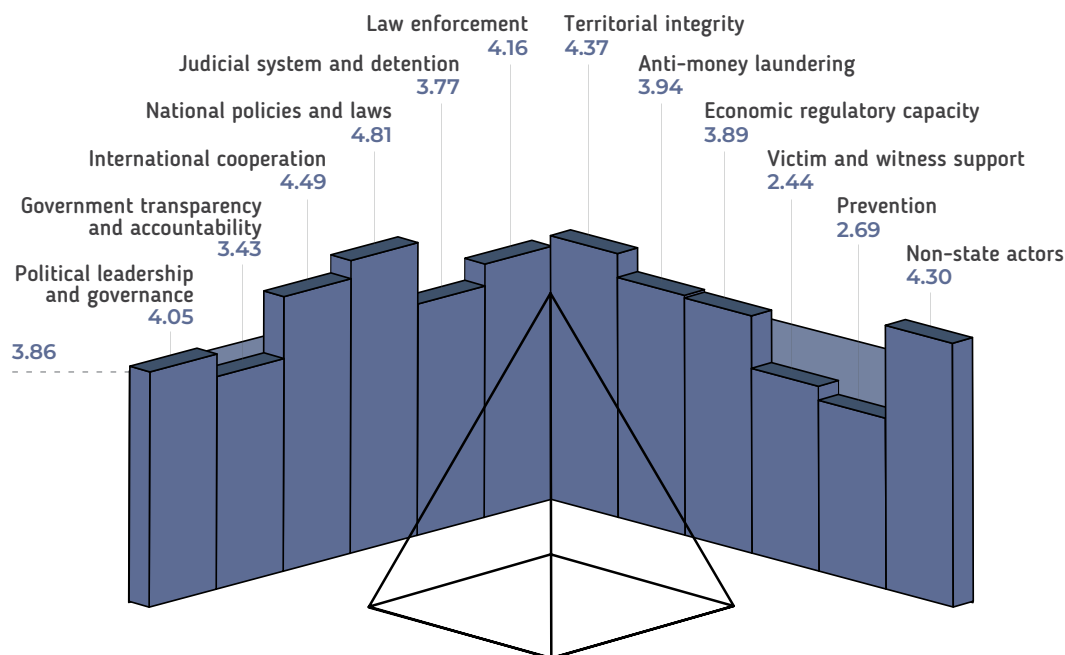


FIGURE 4.4

Resilience scores (2019)

4.4 The COVID-19 pandemic: Criminality outpaces resilience

Africa's resilience deficit would be highlighted during one of the most consequential global stressors of our time: the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic's effects on the continent may have been less severe than in other parts of the world, organised crime's response to lockdown measures – including border closures and heightened security – revealed its sophistication and entrenchment in Africa. Between 2019 and 2021, criminality increased marginally on the continent, largely undeterred by measures implemented in response to the pandemic. Criminal actors adapted through innovation, with illicit activities increasingly migrating online.⁴³ At the same time, restrictions on movement and gatherings combined with a lack of financial support for disenfranchised and at-risk people pushed many to look to the informal or illicit economy to secure their livelihoods. During this period, the gap between criminality and resilience continued to widen, as authorities shifted their focus to the health emergency.

A modest increase in resilience levels occurred between 2021 and 2023, driven by greater international cooperation on the continent to counter expanding illicit markets. However, the effectiveness of these responses varied across regions. The continent has generally prioritised institutional responses to combating organised crime – such as political leadership, international cooperation, and the development of national policies and laws – often at the expense of more socially oriented, community-based initiatives, such as prevention efforts or support for victims and witnesses. This tendency, already evident in the first iteration of the Index, has persisted across all subsequent editions, despite modest progress in select areas.

This trend suggests that adopting new legislation or advancing political rhetoric around the fight against organised crime frequently takes precedence over addressing the root causes of criminality and ensuring protection for victims. This persistent

imbalance points to the need for a fundamental rethinking of the continent's approach to combating organised crime, particularly as this edition of the Africa Index reveals a general decline in performance

across almost all resilience indicators. Throughout the decades, the continent's resilience has remained insufficient to disrupt the ever-changing organised crime landscape.



SECTION 5

The role of Africa in transnational organised crime



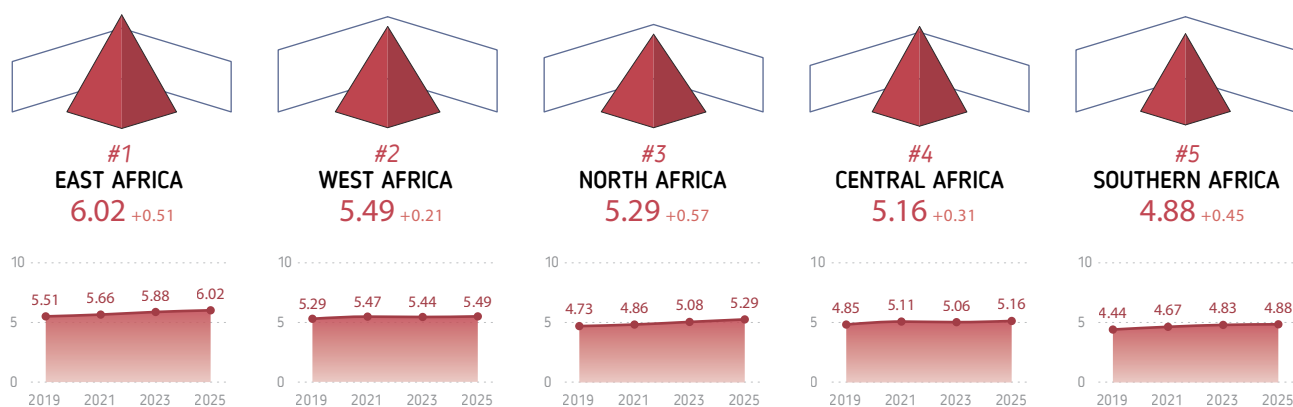
5

The role of Africa in transnational organised crime

Between the first Index and this latest edition, criminality across Africa has grown steadily (Figure 5.1). Africa has become deeply embedded in the global criminal economy, serving as a source, transit hub and destination for various criminal markets – often in overlapping roles. Africa's position within the global criminal economy has been shaped by infrastructure, ports, transport networks, social and political systems, financial networks and limited law enforcement capacity. At the same time, measures aimed at driving economic development and increasing trade between Africa and the rest of the world (expansion of containerisation, advancements in transport infrastructure and free trade agreements) have provided opportunities for criminal organisations.

FIGURE 5.1

Regional average changes in criminality (2019–2025)



5.1 Africa as a point of origin

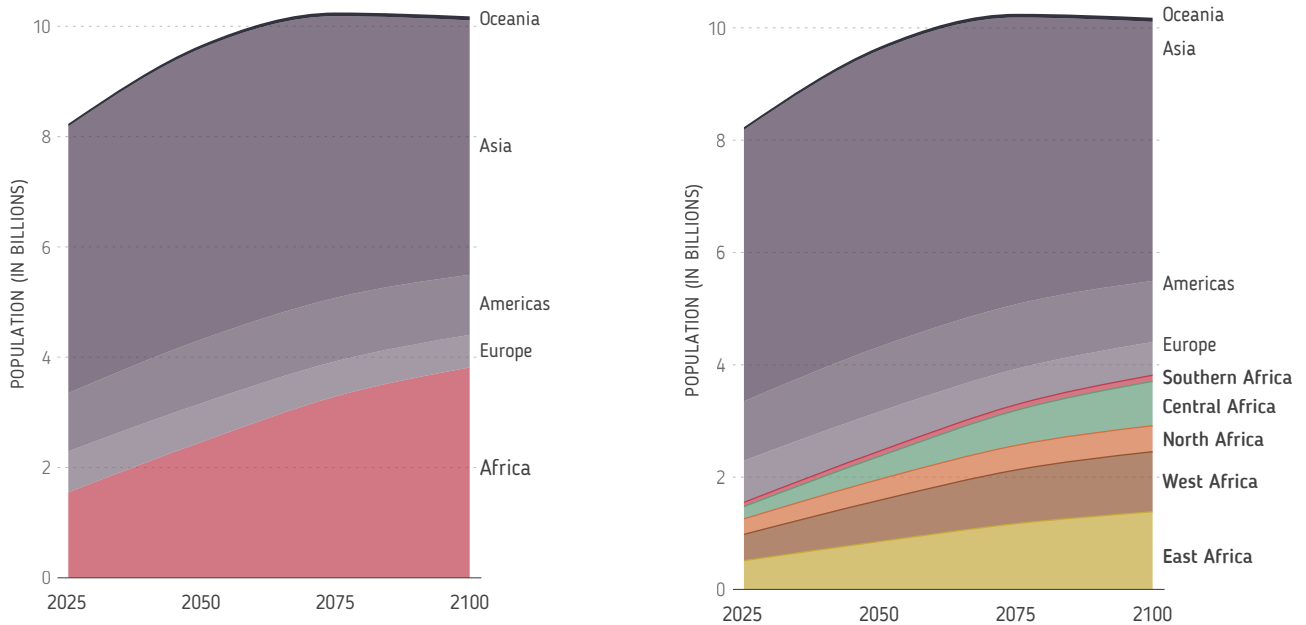
5.1.1 Human exploitation and unauthorised movement

Africa's young and rapidly growing population is outpacing the continent's economic growth, making migration, particularly from rural to urban areas, a common trend.⁴⁴ The continent's urban population, currently estimated at around 700 million, is projected to double to 1.4 billion by 2050.⁴⁵ Without effective urban planning and strategies to manage this growth, African cities will struggle to absorb the

influx of people and sustain the rapidly expanding workforce. These demographic pressures are compounded by environmental degradation, resource depletion and the mounting impacts of climate change, including droughts and flooding, which put further strain on urban infrastructure and exacerbate socio-economic vulnerabilities. In many regions, inadequate planning, weak governance and limited infrastructure perpetuate overcrowding and food insecurity, compelling people to seek opportunities elsewhere.⁴⁶

FIGURE 5.2

Africa's population and projected population, 2025–2100.



Growing instability, marked by heightened armed conflict and *coups d'état*, amplifies existing pressures, driving migration under increasingly precarious conditions. Conflict and irregular migration are deeply intertwined: state collapse, erosion of the rule of law, social fragmentation, economic stress and displacement all heighten vulnerability and fuel internal and cross-border human smuggling, creating an environment

conducive to organised crime. In 2024, an estimated 40 million Africans were forcibly displaced.⁴⁷ Of these 40 million, almost 80% were internally displaced within their own countries, and 96% of those who had left their countries stayed in Africa.⁴⁸ Over the past year, 64% of forcibly displaced Africans came from five countries: Sudan, Somalia, the DRC, Nigeria and Burkina Faso, all of which are experiencing conflict and have high levels of criminality (Figure 5.3).⁴⁹

Over the past year, more than 3 million Africans have been displaced due to conflict, a 13% increase since 2011.⁵⁰ Since 2019, human smuggling activity has increased every year (Figure 5.4) but slowed down in 2025 compared to previous years due to the substantial drop in irregular migrants travelling beyond the continent. Between 2023 and 2024, the number of irregular African migrants intercepted en route to Europe and the Gulf almost halved,

from 282 000 to 146 000. This reduction is largely attributed to intensified European Union (EU)-funded operations in North and West Africa, amplified coastguard patrols in East Africa and the ongoing conflicts at certain transit points, particularly in Yemen.⁵¹ Despite these developments, smuggling persists, continuing to grow in complexity and deepening its social impacts across the continent.

FIGURE 5.3

Countries experiencing conflict and their human smuggling scores

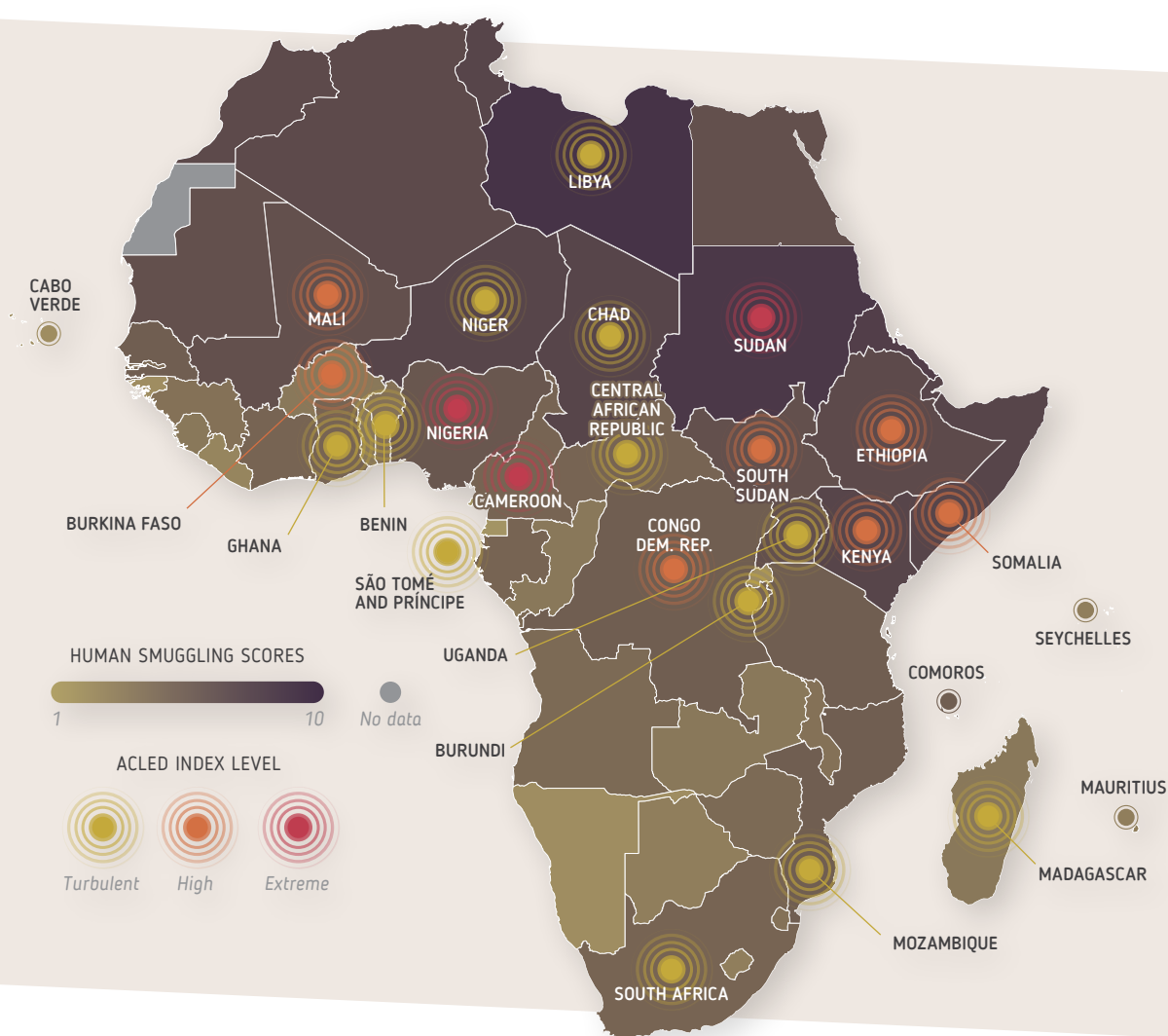
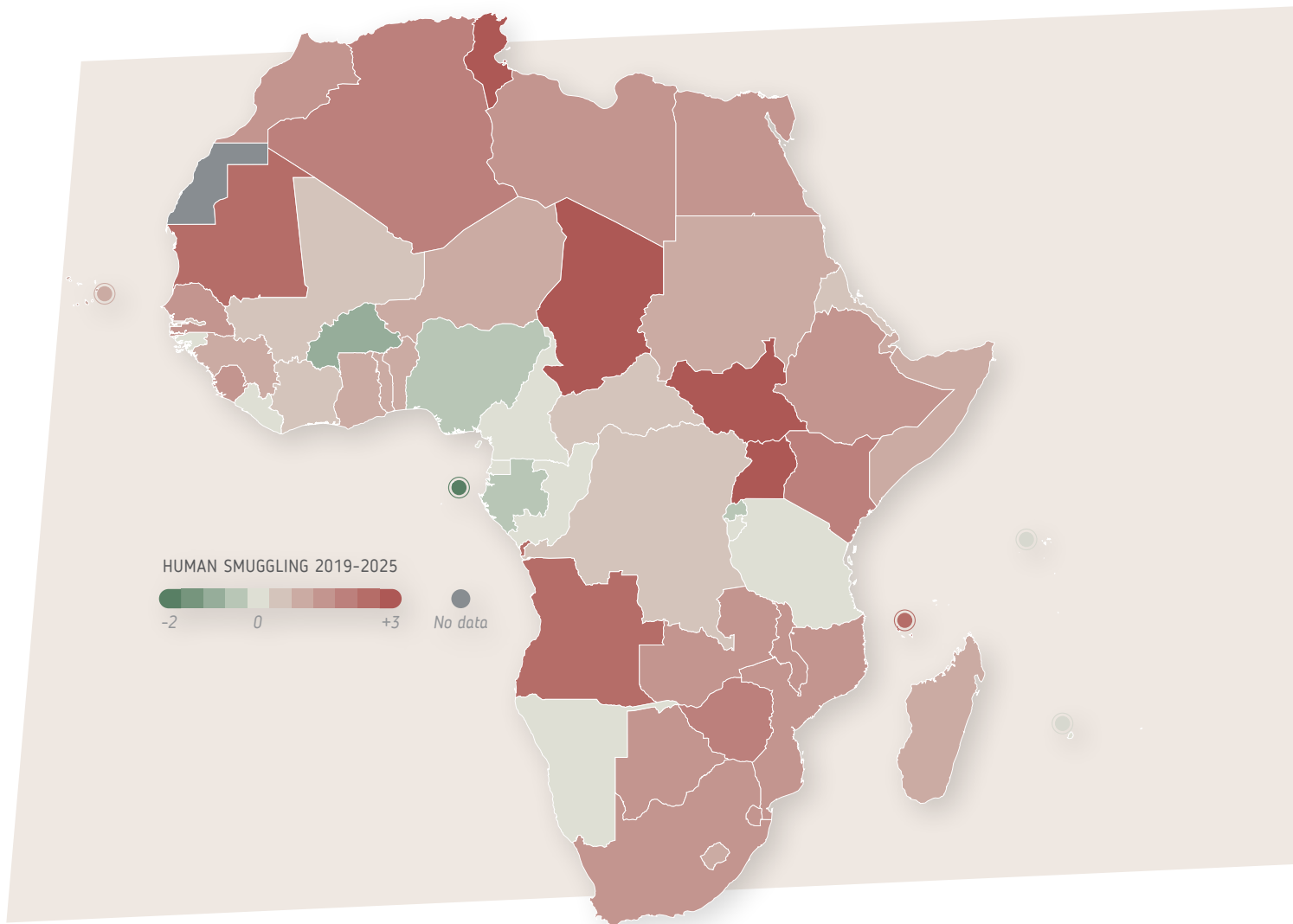


FIGURE 5.4

Trajectory of human smuggling since 2019



HUMAN SMUGGLING AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Poverty and social inequality push people to accept high-risk opportunities in pursuit of economic survival, while weak institutional responses leave them more vulnerable to exploitation. In the 2025 Index, the correlation between human smuggling and human trafficking was 0.68, reflecting the crossover between the two distinct criminal markets, as human smuggling may lead to human trafficking.

In some cases, people believe that they are engaging the services of a smuggler, only to end up in the hands of traffickers. Others may arrange to repay smugglers through labour but find themselves trapped in open-ended debt bondage. Sometimes, migrants are seized mid-route by criminal groups. In 2025, human trafficking was the second most widespread criminal market in Africa and has shown consistent growth since 2019. Libya is a notorious hotspot for such

abuses and scored 8.50 for human trafficking, one of the highest scores in Africa.⁵² Human trafficking takes many forms, from forced labour in agriculture and artisanal mining, to the conscription of child soldiers in conflict zones. Most human trafficking occurs within the continent, largely at sub-regional and national levels, and has profound and damaging impacts on societies and governance.

Of all the indicators in the Index, human trafficking is the primary impediment to human development,⁵³ with a correlation of -0.58. Refugee routes often overlap with existing smuggling and trafficking corridors, facilitating the expansion of transnational organised crime. Criminal groups operate in and around refugee camps and along migration pathways, subjecting displaced individuals to forced labour, sexual violence, human trafficking and, in some cases, recruitment into armed groups.

Although Africa is often seen as a point of origin for human smuggling to other regions of the world, extensive smuggling networks also operate within the continent, underscoring its dual global and regional role. A network of smuggling routes connect African regions with each other and provide pathways for onward travel to Europe and Western Asia. These routes are underpinned by well-established smuggling networks that have developed over years.

Reflecting its prominent role within smuggling routes, North Africa (7.75) was the highest scoring region for human smuggling in 2025, overtaking East Africa (7.67), which had scored highest for this criminal market in the past three editions of the Index. The northern or central Mediterranean corridor (Figure 5.5), one of most notorious and deadly smuggling routes, takes migrants from across the continent through Libya and (to a lesser extent) Tunisia towards Europe (typically Italy). Unsurprisingly, Libya had the highest score (9.50) for human smuggling. Migrants are frequently subjected to severe exploitation, including forced labour and torture, at the hands of entrenched smuggling networks.⁵⁴

The western Mediterranean route is largely used by migrants from Central and West Africa and comprises several sub-routes linking other northern African countries, in particular Morocco and Algeria, to Spain.⁵⁵

The West African Atlantic route is closely connected to migration flows through Central and West Africa, with irregular migrants often originating from coastal states such as Gambia and Senegal and then directed to Spain's Canary Islands. Journeys range from under 100 kilometres to more than 1 600 kilometres across open sea, making this route one of the most dangerous migration passages, with a high risk of fatalities.⁵⁶

The East African route runs through the Horn of Africa into Yemen and onwards to the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia. Although regular labour migration from East Africa to the Gulf remains substantial, irregular flows have expanded sharply in recent years, making this one of the busiest migration routes to the Gulf.⁵⁷ Despite significant dangers from conflict, insecurity and hazardous sea conditions, human smuggling has risen steadily, especially from Ethiopia (7.50), Djibouti (8.0) and Somalia (8.0).⁵⁸ Most of the thousands who travel this route are without legal documentation and rely heavily on smugglers. The route from Ethiopia passes through Djibouti or coastal departure points in Somalia where they are joined by Somali migrants also using smugglers to reach Yemen.⁵⁹ Upon arrival, smugglers facilitate passage to Saudi Arabia by linking migrants with new sets of smugglers in Yemen.⁶⁰

FIGURE 5.5

The central Mediterranean corridor

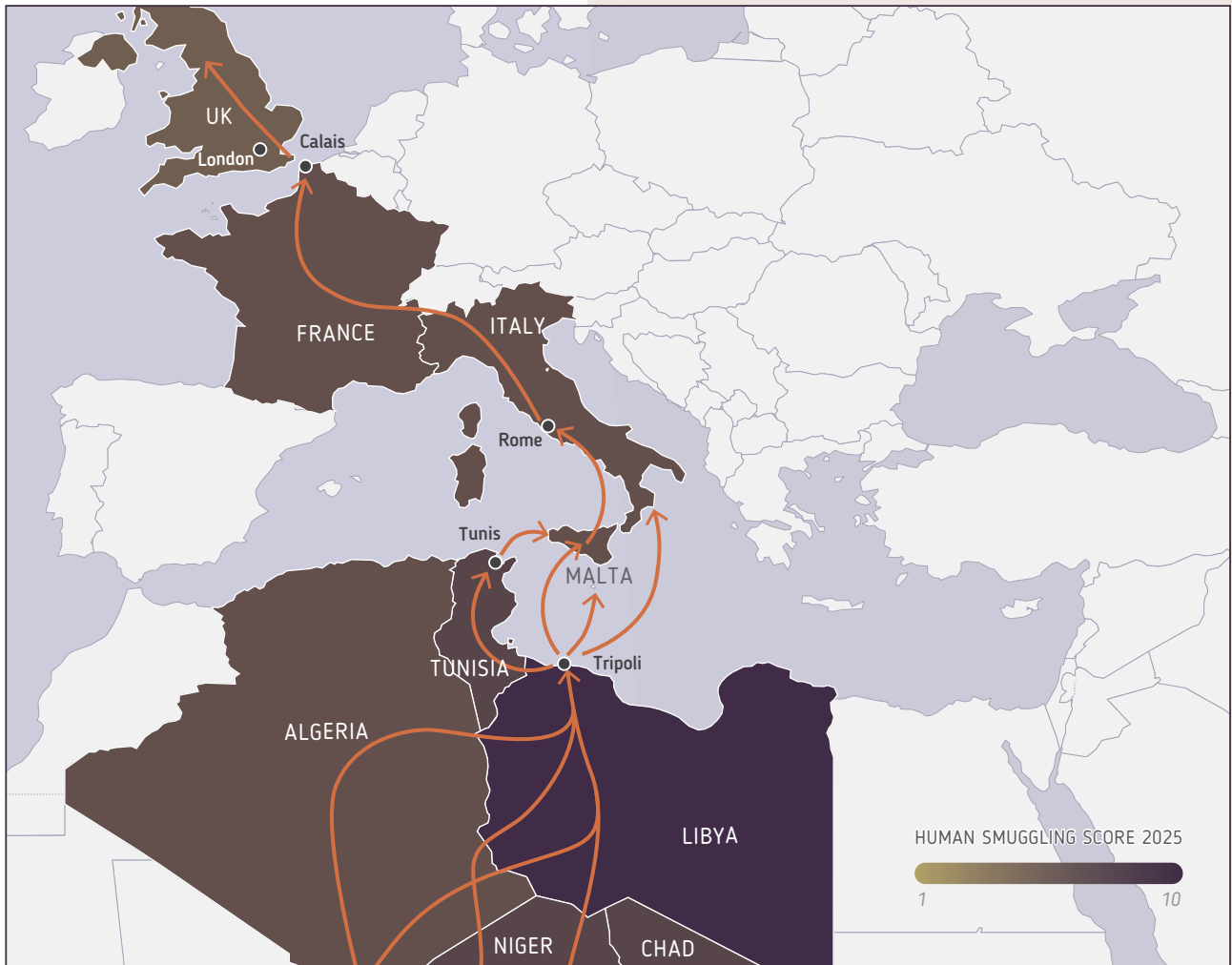
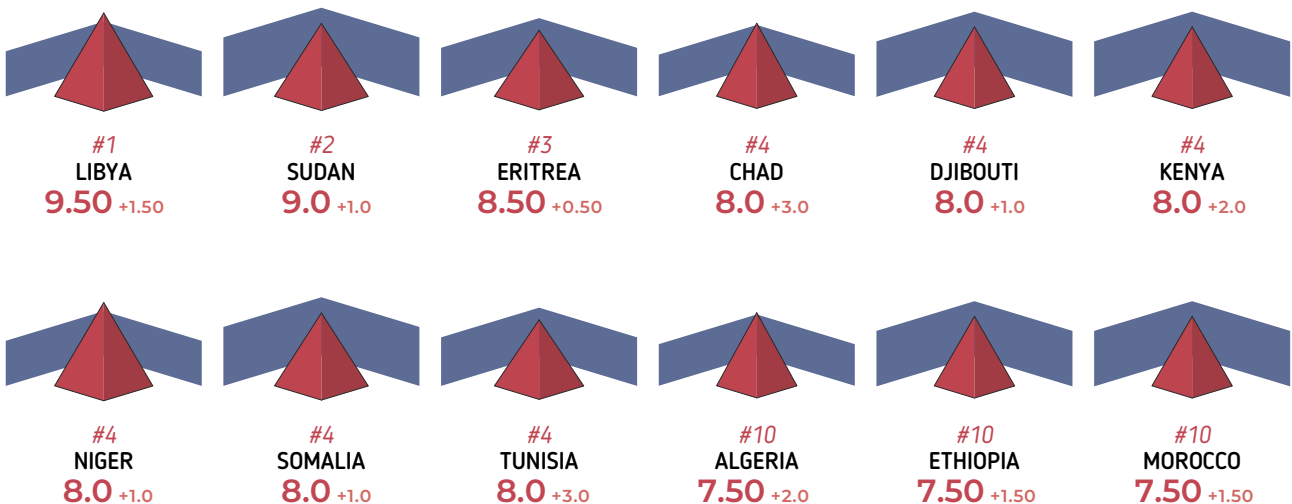


FIGURE 5.6

Countries with the highest human smuggling scores (2025)



THE IMPACT OF THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN SUDAN ON MIGRATION ROUTES

In Sudan, the civil war between rival predatory groups seeking to control the formal and illicit economies (in particular the country's mineral and financial resources), as well as exploit state institutions for personal gain,⁶¹ has triggered a massive humanitarian crisis. Between the start of the war in April 2023 and November 2024, more than 28 700 reported fatalities were reported, including 7 500 civilians killed in direct attacks, and economic hubs (such as Khartoum) have been ravaged.⁶² The conflict shows no signs of abating, with most people subject to sexual violence, homes looted, and health facilities, economic markets and other infrastructure destroyed.⁶³ Almost half of Sudan's population requires humanitarian aid and over 30% have been displaced, creating the conditions for human trafficking and smuggling networks to proliferate.

The civil war is also reshaping regional smuggling and migration routes. In 2025, Egypt's visa restrictions on Sudanese refugees pushed many to rely on smuggling networks, particularly through the contested Halayeb Triangle. The increase in arrivals at the Libyan border reflected shifting migration patterns. Meanwhile, in western Sudan, territorial control exercised by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and associated violence against the civilian population, resulted in large-scale displacement into Chad. Refugees often travel autonomously, but smuggling networks along the Chad–Sudan border are increasingly crucial, either to facilitate safe passage through RSF territory or as part of longer routes to northern Niger and southern Libya. There has also been a limited resurgence of migrant and refugee flows from Ethiopia and Eritrea into Sudan's south-east. If sustained, these movements may further entrench smuggling corridors from eastern Sudan to Egypt, exacerbating the already precarious security situation in the region.⁶⁴

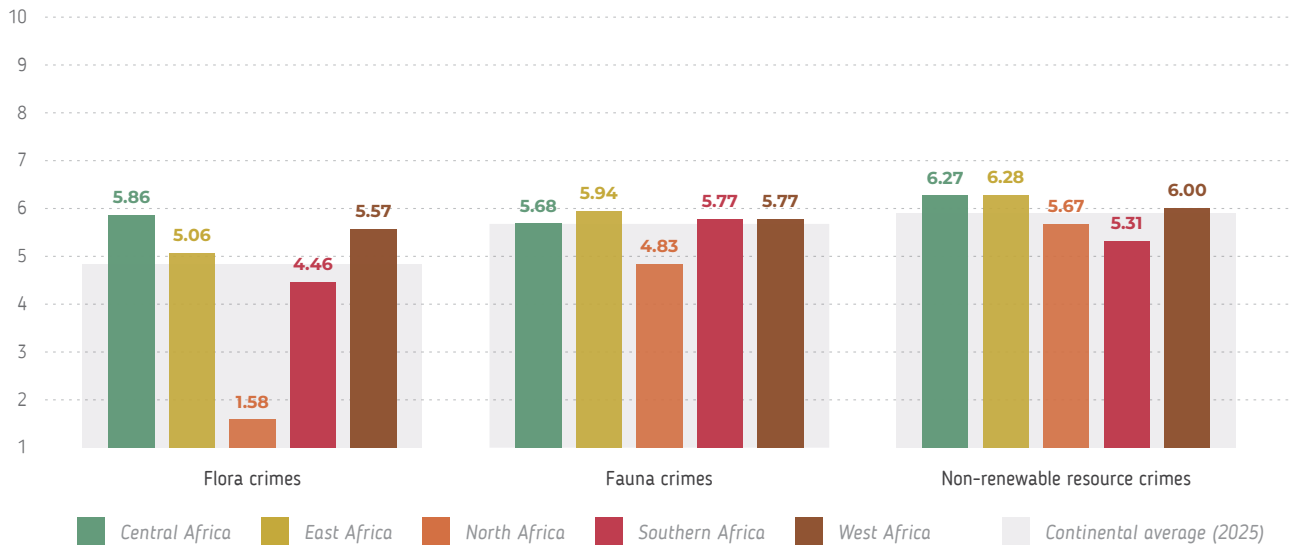
5.1.2 Resource exploitation

Africa's extensive biodiversity and abundant resources make the continent a major origin point for crimes involving extractive commodities and wildlife that feed high-value illicit markets worldwide.

In 2025, non-renewable resource crimes were the third most pervasive criminal market on the continent, after financial crimes and human trafficking. Africa is a major source of non-renewable resources for the global illicit economy, as it contains vast reserves of gold, diamonds and platinum.

It is estimated that gold worth tens of billions of dollars is smuggled out of Africa every year.⁶⁵ This trade depletes reserves, deprives national economies of vital revenue, results in human exploitation in mining sites, and causes severe environmental harm through destructive extraction methods. A network of transit hubs sustain the illicit gold flows and are located in areas that have weak regulatory oversight, are close to production areas or have strong logistical links. These include Mali and Ghana in West Africa, Libya in North Africa, the DRC in Central Africa, Kenya in East Africa and Zimbabwe in Southern Africa.⁶⁶

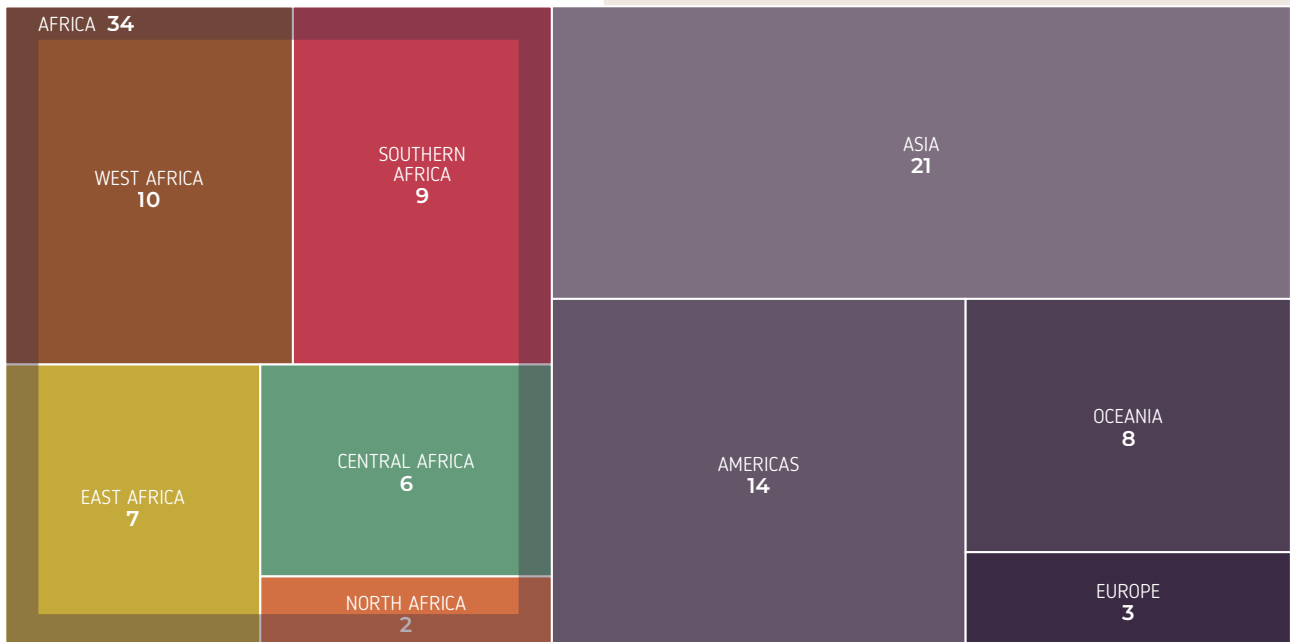
FIGURE 5.7

Fauna, flora and non-renewable resource crimes per African region (2025)

Between 2015 and 2021, about one-fifth (19%) of reported global wildlife seizures were in Africa, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa. The top five species groups seized included elephants, pangolins,

rhinoceroses, crocodiles and parrots, underscoring Africa's central role in high-impact fauna markets, especially those supplying demand in Asia.⁶⁷

FIGURE 5.8

Fauna crimes by region globally

NOTE: Numbers reflect the countries per region that registered a score of 5.50 or more for fauna crimes in 2025.

Much like human smuggling, wildlife trafficking in Africa follows well-established patterns tailored to specific species and routes between source and destination markets. The illicit fauna market is found in all regions in Africa, with East Africa having the highest regional score (5.94) in 2025.

- West Africa and Central Africa are the main source and transit hubs for forest elephant ivory and pangolin scales, with Nigeria serving as the exit point for these commodities bound for Asian markets.⁶⁸
- East Africa (in particular Tanzania and Kenya) is a source of illicit ivory that is shipped from Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Maputo and Nampula in Mozambique to Asian markets, including Vietnam, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Malaysia.⁶⁹ Trafficking of cheetahs from East Africa is also rampant – every year, it is estimated that 300 cheetah cubs are smuggled through Somalia to private exotic animal collectors in Gulf countries.⁷⁰
- Southern Africa's most prominent fauna crime is rhino horn trafficking, especially from South Africa and Namibia, although the number of rhinos killed in South Africa decreased from 499 in 2023 to 420 in 2024.⁷¹ Another prominent issue in South Africa is the illegal harvesting of abalone (*Haliotis midae*), which is exported to Asian markets. This trade is sustained by well-organised networks, despite long-standing countermeasures.⁷²

In 2025, the correlation between fauna and flora crimes was 0.69, reflecting the fact that these crime markets often converge, as similar criminal networks are involved in both.⁷³

Driven by global demand for hardwood, illegal logging is estimated to cost Africa around

US\$17 billion annually and causes lasting, often irreversible damage to its ecosystems.⁷⁴ Central Africa is the region most affected by illegal logging, particularly the Congo Basin, due to conflict economies and weak concession governance. The DRC contains roughly 60% of the Congo Basin and is home to the world's second-largest tropical forest, which explains its top score (of 9.0) for flora crimes in Africa. Forests are being destroyed as a result of protracted conflict, which has pushed illegal logging and charcoal production to unprecedented levels,⁷⁵ and the activities of industrial logging companies, which routinely break forestry laws, ignore harvesting quotas, rename tree species in export documentation and bribe officials.⁷⁶

West Africa is a primary source of illicit rosewood (*Pterocarpus erinaceus*) destined for China. Senegal's Casamance region, just south of Gambia, serves as a long-standing supply hub, from where timber is routinely smuggled across the border into Gambia and re-exported to Asian markets in defiance of formal restrictions. Separatist groups operating in Casamance are also reported to have tapped into the profits from this trade to help fund their insurgency.⁷⁷

Southern Africa, particularly South Africa and Namibia, is a major region of origin for rare succulents and cycads destined for markets in Europe, the US and Asia. The Karoo Biome, a global biodiversity hotspot, has been hit especially hard by the illegal trade, with centuries-old desert plants uprooted to supply lucrative horticultural markets.⁷⁸ Other sought-after flora from the region include rosewood from Madagascar and medicinal plants such as bark from the African cherry (*Prunus africana*) and the hoodia cactus (traditionally used by San communities but now heavily overharvested to meet growing international demand).⁷⁹

ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

The climate crisis is reshaping Africa's economy, environment and society, as well as amplifying and feeding into organised crime. Resource shortages as a result of climate change create fertile ground for the expansion of shadow economies and organised crime. Criminal actors exploit the continent's rich natural resources and biodiversity for profit, contributing to environmental degradation, accelerating climate change and threatening the security and economic prospects of Africa's citizens.

- Boko Haram's presence around Lake Chad has hampered regional cooperation on saving the shrinking lake, while militants in the Sahel have deliberately sabotaged water infrastructure to weaken their rivals. As conflicts persist, conservation areas go unprotected and forests become havens for fighters or smugglers, resulting in the breakdown of sustainable resource management practices.
- Corruption and extortion have undermined some of the climate adaptation funds and natural resource access. Officials or armed groups have reportedly demanded large payments from local organisations or communities in exchange for project approvals or resource rights.

Measures to combat these challenges should focus on shielding climate adaptation funds and resource rights from corruption through transparency, audits and community oversight; protecting ecosystems in conflict zones through local conservation initiatives and rapid patrols; enhancing cross-border enforcement through joint operations, intelligence sharing and specialised units to combat environmental crime; and strengthening community resilience in climate-stressed areas by promoting legal, sustainable livelihoods and providing psychological support to victims of climate-related conflict.

5.1.3 Cannabis trade

Cannabis is the only drug market for which Africa is a global source. A substantial share of the cannabis trafficked worldwide, particularly into Europe, is cultivated in Africa – in 2023, Africa accounted for 44% of all cannabis herb and resin seized globally, surpassing the Americas, Asia and Europe.⁸⁰ Since 2019, the cannabis trade has been the most pervasive drug market on the continent, with North Africa having the highest regional score both within Africa and globally. Morocco (9.0) dominates cannabis production regionally and globally, while Tunisia (7.0) and Libya (7.0) cultivate cannabis largely for the domestic markets.⁸¹



In 2021, Morocco passed Law 13-21, which legalised the production of cannabis for medical, pharmaceutical and industrial purposes (but not for recreational use). The following year, the country established the National Agency for the Regulation of Activities relating to Cannabis (ANRAC) to implement the law and manage licences. By the end of 2024, ANRAC had issued over 3 300 permits related to cultivating and processing the drug; cannabis was being legally cultivated on 2 700 hectares, producing more than 4 000 tonnes for approved purposes; and King Mohammed VI had granted royal pardons to more than 4 800 people who had been convicted or charged in cannabis-related cases.⁸² Despite these reforms, the regulated sector remains modest compared to the entrenched

illicit market. According to Morocco's interior ministry, between 2023 and 2024/25, licensed cultivation grew from under 300 hectares to about 5 800 hectares, which is a fraction of the estimated 27 100 hectares of cannabis grown nationwide. These reforms have also not yet translated into a decrease in Morocco's cannabis trade score in the Index.

Cannabis is trafficked along five primary routes: from Morocco across the Strait of Gibraltar and the Alboran Sea to Spain; across the central Sahara into Libya; eastward through Algeria, Tunisia and Libya; by sea from Morocco to Libya and the eastern Mediterranean; and from Libya east to Egypt and the Levant, and north to the Balkans and elsewhere in Europe.⁸³

CANNABIS LEGALISATION IN AFRICA

For centuries, cannabis has held important medicinal and cultural value in African societies.⁸⁴ Under colonialism, the cannabis market was driven underground and then criminalised during the 20th century, as it was swept up in the blanket enforcement-led approaches to drug markets across the world.⁸⁵ At the time, the rationale was that restricting drug production and intercepting trafficking routes would stop the supply getting to market and would create friction in drug supply chains, thereby driving up prices and reducing overall demand.⁸⁶ In reality, these approaches led to increased organised crime, militarisation of the drug war, human rights abuses, and criminalisation and marginalisation of drug users.

Over the past decade, inspired by booming global markets and driven by recognition of the plant's economic potential, many countries have moved towards decriminalising or legalising cannabis. African countries that have adopted laws allowing industrial or medical use of cannabis and hemp cultivation or its export include Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Ghana, Morocco, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda.⁸⁷ South Africa has also decriminalised the possession of cannabis for personal use.⁸⁸

Ongoing research and advocacy work by regional bodies argues that regulating the cannabis market would help prevent criminal proceeds from filtering into legal markets, disrupt the black market, reduce drug-related violence, lessen the burden on the criminal justice system, and create new economic opportunities.⁸⁹ However, they emphasise the importance of clear and context-specific legislation to unlock these benefits and disrupt illicit trade. This is particularly evident in the case of South Africa, where the 2024 Cannabis for Private Purposes Act does not make provision for a legal supply mechanism, meaning that cannabis used recreationally must either be grown by the user or purchased on the illicit market. This has led to the continuation of the illicit trade despite cannabis use being decriminalised.⁹⁰

5.2 Africa as a transit point

Once peripheral to the global drug economy, Africa has become a pivotal trans-shipment hub due to its position between drug production regions and consumer markets in Europe and Asia. Cocaine from Latin America and heroin and synthetic drugs from South-West Asia now move in significant and increasing volumes through African ports, airports and overland corridors.⁹¹ Furthermore, Africa's porous borders, under-resourced enforcement agencies, entrenched corruption and political

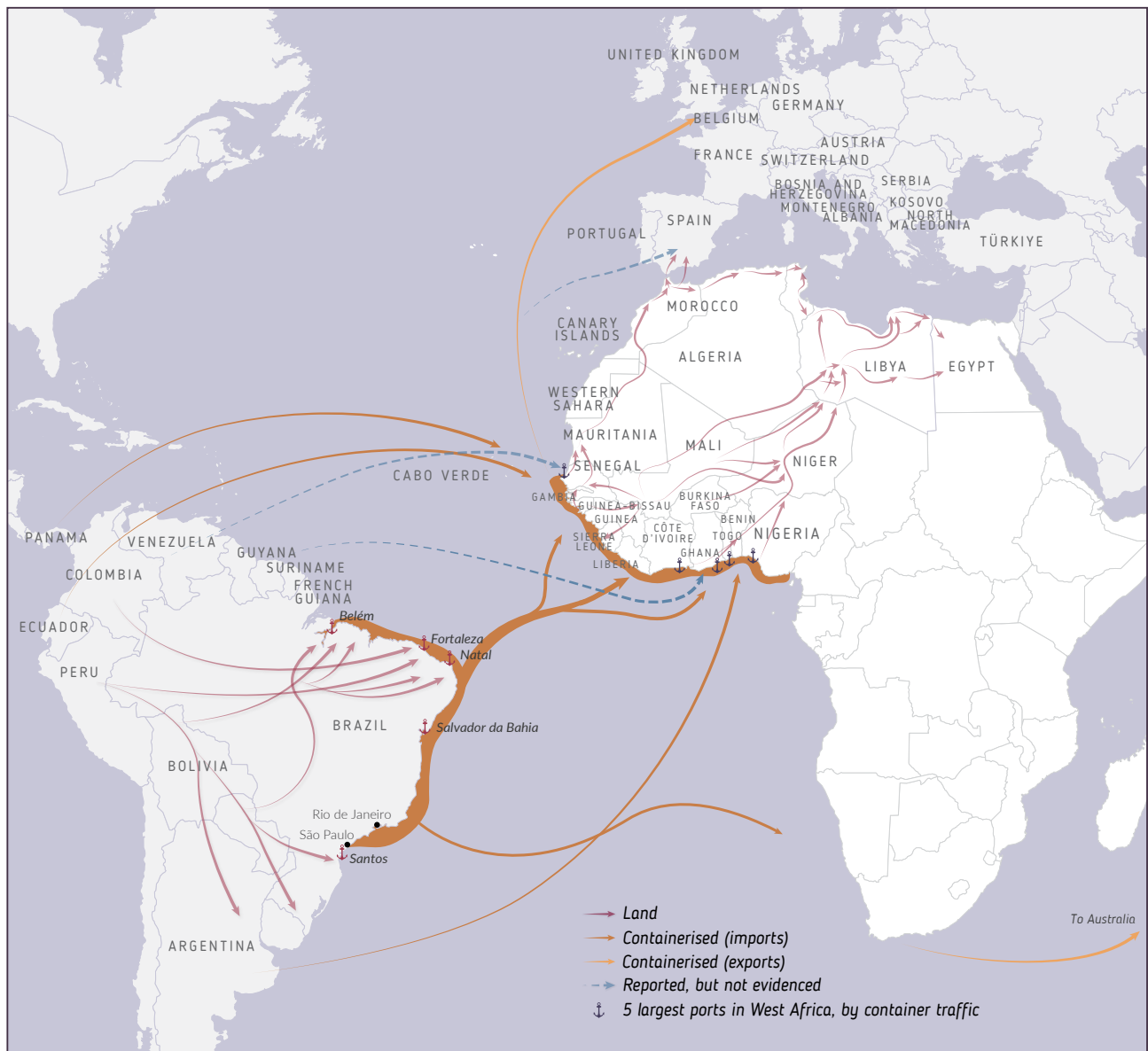
instability have allowed trafficking networks to embed themselves within legitimate trade and logistics systems.

5.2.1 Cocaine trade

As global production and consumption have increased, the cocaine trade has surged in Africa, especially in West Africa (6.67) and North Africa (4.83),⁹² which had the highest regional scores for this market in 2025. These two regions serve as

FIGURE 5.9

Cocaine trafficking routes through West Africa

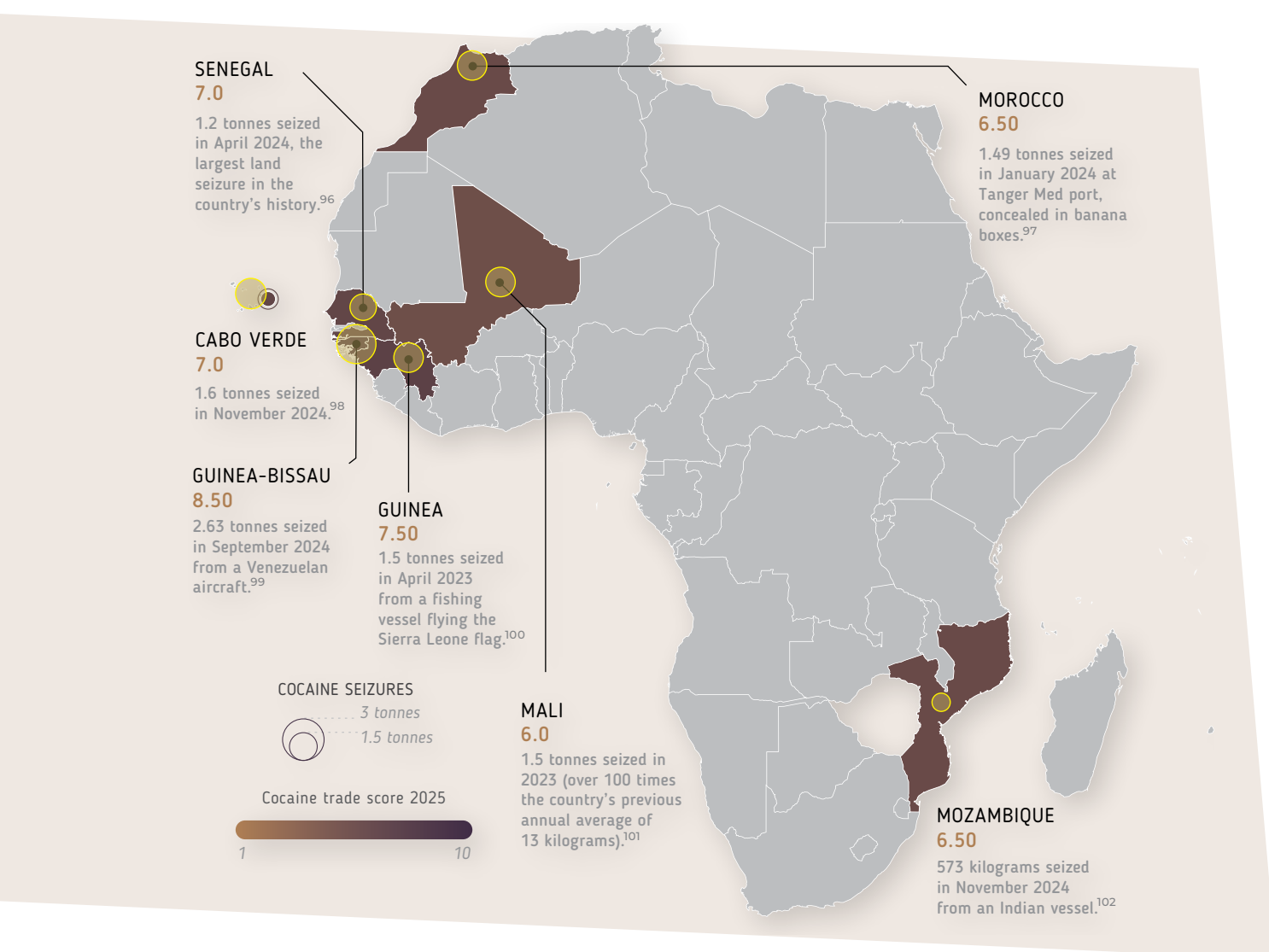


major transit points for Europe-bound shipments transported predominantly on bulk carriers, fishing vessels and (increasingly) yachts. From coastal states, cocaine is re-exported hidden in legitimate cargo or moved overland through the Sahel to North African ports.⁹³ Although West Africa and North Africa continue to dominate this market, East Africa and Southern Africa are gaining prominence due to under-monitored ports, weak maritime enforcement, permissive political environments, and established shipping and air links to the EU.⁹⁴

Law enforcement only intercepts a fraction of trafficked drugs, and so these seizures may not reflect actual trade volumes, but instead indicate improved law enforcement and international cooperation.⁹⁵ However, the seizures do provide a picture of the different countries in Africa through which drugs are transiting, which may be a sign of traffickers adapting in response to pressure from enforcement agencies (Figure 5.10).

FIGURE 5.10

Sample of cocaine seizures (2024 and 2025)



These seizures point to the diversification of transit countries across the continent, a sign of the adaptive strategies employed by traffickers in response to enforcement pressure. This geographic spread, coupled with increasing spillover into domestic markets, has made the cocaine trade the fastest-growing criminal market in Africa since the Index

began measuring the trade. This sharp shift since 2019 is due not only to Africa's increasing role in the transnational cocaine trade, but also to rising domestic drug use, mounting public health impacts and the expansion of interconnected criminal economies spanning multiple regions.

FIGURE 5.11

The southern heroin route



5.2.2 Heroin trade

While cocaine has recently become more prominent in Africa’s illicit drug landscape, heroin – particularly of Afghan origin – has long been trafficked across the continent. In 2025, Southern Africa (5.15) and East Africa (4.17) had the highest regional scores for the heroin trade in Africa. Heroin destined for markets in Asia, Africa, Europe and (to a more limited degree) North America is shipped mainly from Afghanistan through a network of interconnected maritime and overland routes.¹⁰³

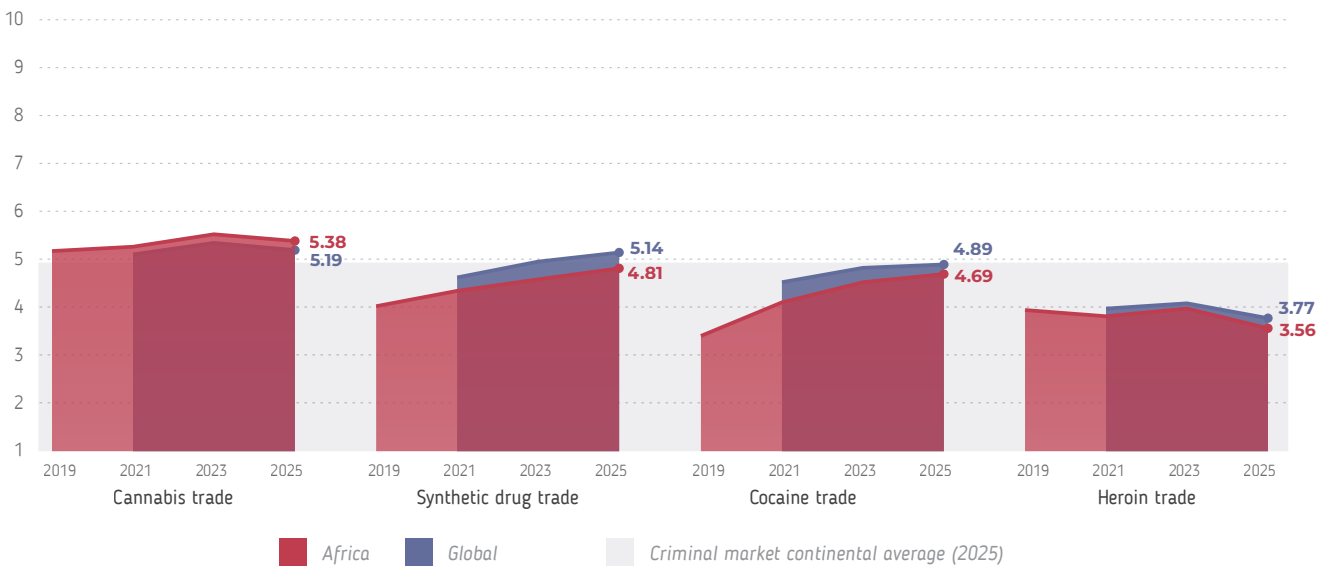
- Via Pakistan and Iran, across the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean to northern Mozambique and Tanzania, which had the highest scores (8.0) in Africa for the heroin trade.
- From South-West Asia to Kenya (8.0), particularly in or near Mombasa – multiple seizures of hundreds of kilograms on vessels in the Indian Ocean highlight Mombasa’s strategic importance in the heroin trade.

- Through South Africa, where northern KwaZulu-Natal’s proximity to Mozambique facilitates cross-border smuggling of heroin, and the Gauteng region (which includes Johannesburg, Pretoria and surrounding towns) serves as a central distribution hub.

This southern route through Africa has become an alternative to the land-based Balkan route to Western Europe, which has become more difficult for traffickers to use.¹⁰⁴

Since 2021, the heroin trade has been the least pervasive drug market in Africa and had the steepest decline of all 15 criminal markets from 2023. This decline mirrors a broader global trend rather than a uniquely African development, as in the wake of Afghanistan’s opium cultivation ban global heroin seizures fell and heroin prices increased, suggesting supply constraints in the international heroin market.¹⁰⁵

FIGURE 5.12
Drug markets in Africa (2019–2025)



5.3 Africa as a destination

The global expansion of containerisation, advancements in transport infrastructure and free trade agreements – all measures designed to drive economic development – have encouraged trade

between Africa and the rest of the world. However, these measures have also created opportunities for criminal organisations to bring illicit goods into Africa, particularly through ports already struggling

with inspection capacity.¹⁰⁶ Africa's growing integration into legal global trade has therefore been accompanied by an increase in new vulnerabilities, including the emergence of domestic consumption markets for various illicit drugs.

5.3.1 A growing drug consumption market

The increase in the volume of drugs transiting through Africa has had spillover effects domestically, with countries also becoming destination markets. For instance, the city of Agadez in Niger, which is on the South America–West Africa–Europe cocaine route, has seen a rise in cocaine consumption, driven by smaller-scale traffickers who are often paid in

kind (i.e. in cocaine) and funnel excess supply into local markets if they lack connections to more lucrative destinations.¹⁰⁷ Exacerbating the problem is that Agadez is also a transit hub for migrants trying to reach Europe. The vulnerabilities of migrant populations, particularly women trapped in sex work to repay smuggling debts, have secured a steady demand for the drug.¹⁰⁸

Since 2019, the synthetic drug trade in Africa has grown from 4.02 to 4.81. In North Africa, West Africa and Central Africa, the non-medical use of tramadol has long been problematic and has become a major health concern.¹⁰⁹ Between 2015 and 2023, almost 90% of global tramadol seizures occurred in West



Africa and Central Africa. Tramadol is increasingly being used by young people and manual labourers, such as miners and drivers, and as a component of low-cost (and readily available) drug mixtures – such as ‘kush’ – carrying serious health and social harms.¹¹⁰

East Africa and Southern Africa have become important destinations for Afghan synthetic drugs, specifically methamphetamine. Afghan methamphetamine emerged suddenly in 2019 and soon became integrated into global drug

supply chains.¹¹¹ Despite the Taliban banning drug production and sales in 2022, methamphetamine production has continued, enabled by the fact that these laboratories are harder to detect than heroin-related sites. South Asian criminal networks, which were already moving heroin into Southern Africa, adapted by including methamphetamine in response to the strong local demand for illicit drugs.¹¹²

5.3.2 Trade in counterfeit goods

In 2025, the trade in counterfeit goods was the fourth highest overall criminal market and recorded the second largest year-to-year increase – 36 of Africa's 54 countries had scores above 5.50 (indicating 'significant influence'), with several scoring higher than 7.50 ('severe influence').¹¹³ Africa was found to have the second-largest counterfeit goods market in the world overall.

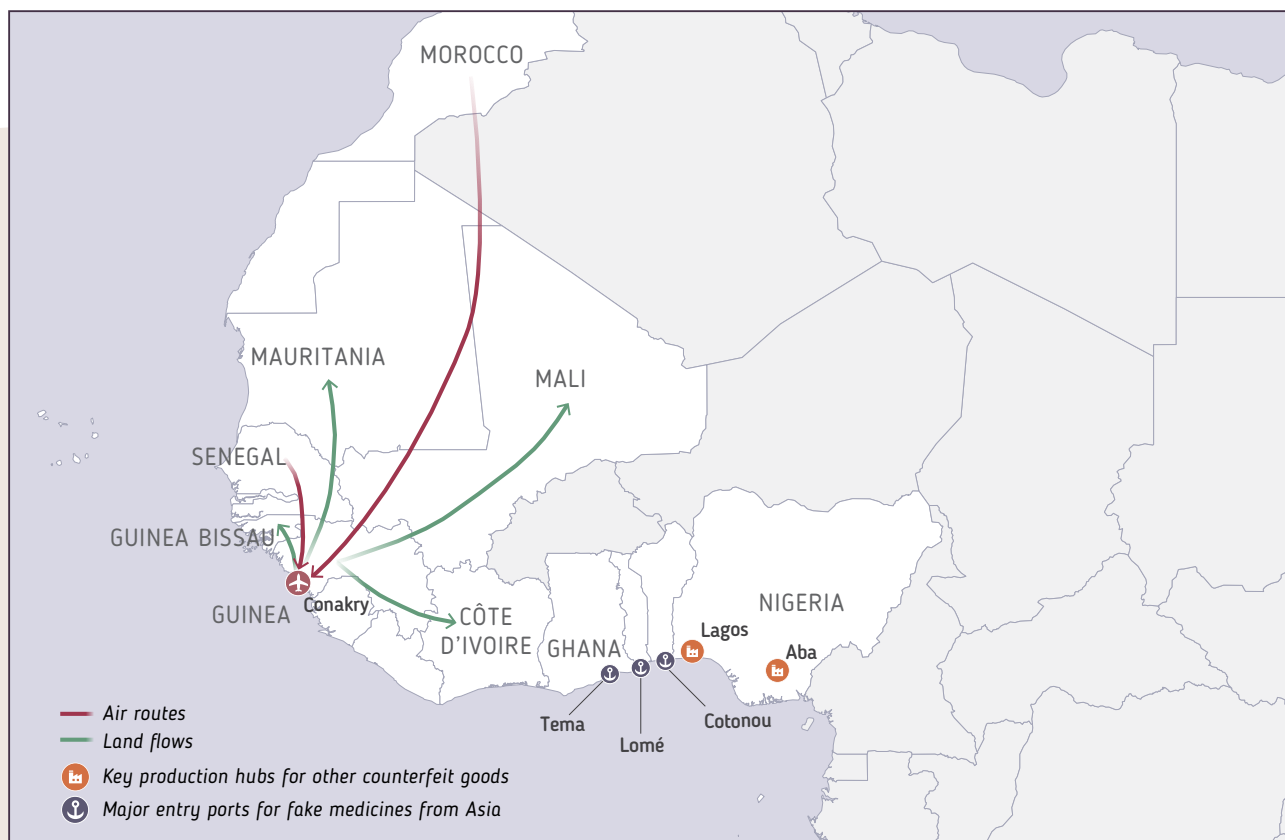
Nigeria is Africa's largest consumer market for counterfeit goods, with a population of over

230 million people, high poverty rates and low-income levels all driving demand. The country is a hub for counterfeit goods, with large volumes of imports from Asia (particularly China) arriving at the Apapa Port Complex in Lagos, one of Africa's largest and busiest ports. Corruption within customs, law enforcement and political structures enables traffickers to bypass inspections. The counterfeit goods being trafficked include medicines, mainly from China and India, as well as other pharmaceutical products, which pose a serious and immediate threat to public health.

In addition, counterfeit consumer goods and medical products are produced locally and often smuggled throughout the region. Within West Africa, Nigeria and Ghana are the main producers of pharmaceuticals – of the 172 manufacturing facilities for medical products located in countries belonging to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), 120 are in Nigeria and 37 in Ghana.¹¹⁴ Alongside legal factories, smaller facilities feed the market with fake medicines. Other goods that are

FIGURE 5.13

Trafficking flows of counterfeit goods and fake medicines



frequently counterfeited in Nigeria and smuggled across the region include alcoholic beverages, soft drinks and cosmetics. In 2024 and 2025, Nigeria's National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control conducted frequent raids and dismantled illicit factories and workshops in Aba and Lagos that were producing counterfeit goods.¹¹⁵

Outside of Nigeria, medical products are smuggled using sea routes through other major ports in West Africa, including Lomé (Togo), Cotonou (Benin), Tema (Ghana) and Conakry (Guinea).¹¹⁶ Guinea has been identified as another major node for counterfeit trafficking. While the port of Conakry is the main entry point for counterfeit pharmaceuticals originating in Asia, Ahmed Sékou Touré International Airport in the capital city has also seen flows of fake medical products from within the region, particularly from Senegal and Morocco. Once in Conakry, these counterfeit goods are illegally transported into other West African countries, including Mali, Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau.¹¹⁷

5.3.3 Arms trafficking

The UN has estimated that over 40 million illicit small arms and light weapons are currently circulating in Africa, with most having originated from outside the continent.¹¹⁸ Years of armed conflict and political instability have led to the widespread proliferation and misuse of illicit weapons, especially in East Africa (7.89), which was the highest scoring region for arms trafficking in Africa and the world in 2025.

In 2025, Sudan's score of 9.50 for arms trafficking was driven by the resurgence of intense and violent internal conflict since April 2023. Estimates of the number of weapons in Sudan vary from 5 million civilian-held weapons by the end of 2022 to over 3 million weapons as of May 2023.¹¹⁹ Arms flow into Sudan from multiple illicit sources, including international and regional dealers, as well as through legal channels. The involvement of foreign powers pursuing strategic and resource-driven interests complicates the conflict in Sudan. Some of the weapons and ammunition, which had been imported legally from countries such as China, Russia, Serbia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen, were found to be diverted into Darfur, an area still subject to an arms embargo, thereby further fuelling instability in the region.¹²⁰

Somalia (9.0) was the other hotspot in East Africa for illicit arms, which are trafficked from Yemen, across the Gulf of Aden. These arms are used in violent attacks and other criminal activities by armed clan militias, transnational criminal networks and militant groups linked to al-Shabaab and the Somali faction of the Islamic State.¹²¹ In 2023, after more than 30 years, the UN Security Council fully lifted its arms embargo on Somalia, as the prevailing international consensus was that Somali security forces should assume full responsibility for national defence, including through importing military equipment. Despite concerns that removing restrictions could trigger an arms race among non-state actors, given the state's limited control over its territory, Somalia's arms trafficking score remained stable between 2023 and 2025, suggesting that the lifting of the embargo has not had an adverse impact.

SECTION 6

Geopolitics and organised crime



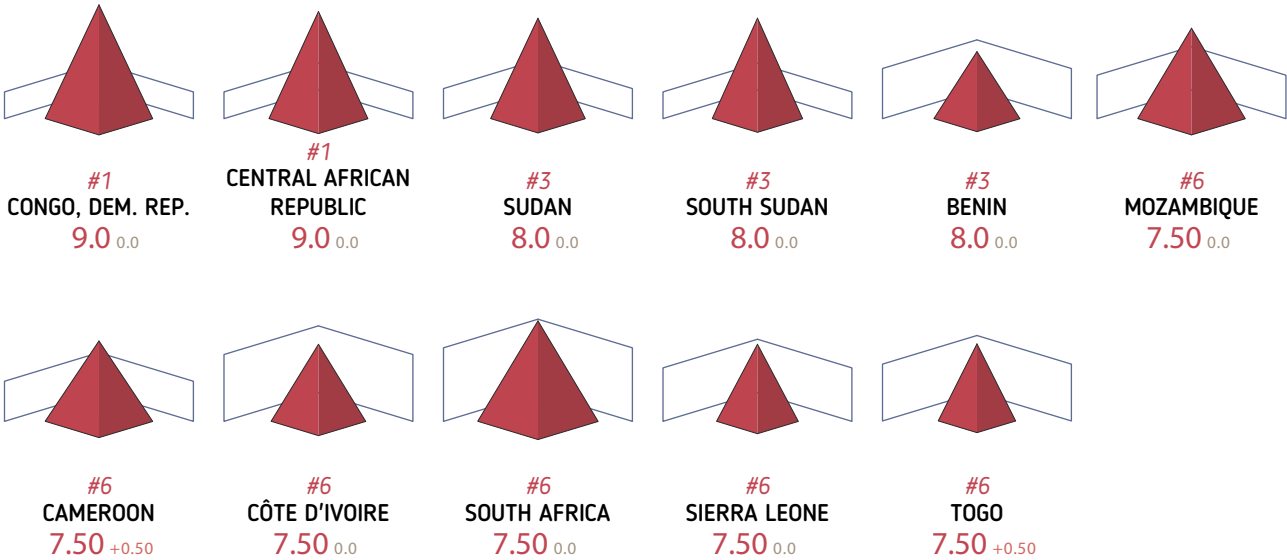
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6 Geopolitics and organised crime

Africa’s position in the global illicit economy is inherently tied to its role in broader geopolitical dynamics, and the intersection between geopolitics and organised crime increasingly defines contemporary international relations. The Russia–Ukraine war has reignited East–West fault lines and led the US, EU, Russia and Ukraine to seek diplomatic partnerships and political support from African states in international forums such as the UN.¹²² As East–West rivalries deepen, African countries have built tactical alliances with external actors from different global blocs or spheres of influence. These alliances have often centred on mutually beneficial arrangements, where, in exchange for Africa’s resources and political support to advance geopolitical interests, external actors offer foreign investment and military and security partnerships aimed at countering insurgencies. In some cases, foreign powers benefit from lucrative illicit markets such as illegal gold mining and extraction of other non-renewable resources.

Much of Africa has become a proxy ground for East–West competition, which has exacerbated organised crime, with non-renewable resource crimes and arms trafficking in particular proliferating in direct response to conflicts. In West Africa and the Sahel, military cooperation engagements have resulted in human rights atrocities, the violation of international arms embargoes and corruption. These dynamics are reflected in the increased influence of foreign actors on the continent, from 5.56 in 2019 to 6.09 in 2025, the largest year-on-year increase of any of the criminal actors. Since 2019, the CAR has consistently ranked the highest on the continent for non-renewable resource crimes (scoring the maximum of 10 in 2025) and for foreign actors (scoring 9.0 since 2021).

FIGURE 6.1
Top countries for foreign actors (2025)



6.1 A divided world order

Conflict, trade wars and diplomatic tensions have tested geopolitical alliances and underscored increasing divisions in the world order. Amid this multipolarity and shifting dynamics, countries vie for alliances and resources, often facilitating criminal activities to strengthen their political, military and economic objectives.

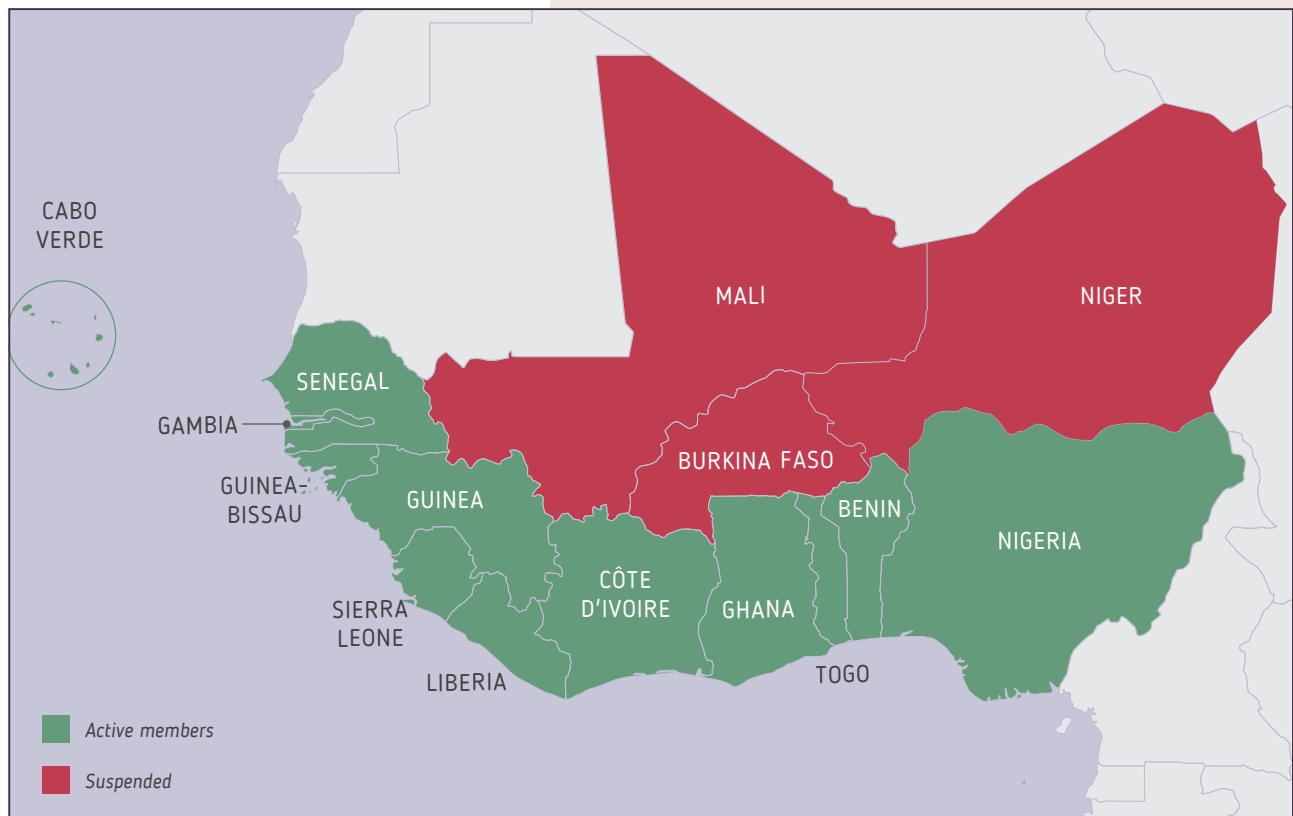
The framework for international relations was established before many African countries gained independence, and so Africa historically depended on former colonial powers for assistance and development. During the Cold War, African countries tended to maintain a position of 'non-alignment',¹²³ and yet European influence remained deeply embedded. The EU is Africa's largest trading partner and investor (in 2023, trade between the two regions reached €467.2 billion) and a leading source of development aid, security cooperation and governance support.¹²⁴

Europe's engagement has shifted from a development ethos rooted in democracy, human rights and aid provision, towards a 'recalibrated realism' that blends commitments with pragmatic, interest-driven strategies in response to pressures over irregular migration, resource security and competition with China and Russia.¹²⁵ However, European aid and trade arrangements have long been criticised for perpetuating structural inequalities. Development assistance fosters elite capture, reinforces class hierarchies, breeds dependency and serves geopolitical ends (instead of creating genuine self-sufficiency),¹²⁶ while trading relationships often mirror postcolonial extractive models, with African economies oriented toward resource exports while remaining dependent on European markets and financing.¹²⁷

In response, a growing number of African countries have pushed back against Western influence.

FIGURE 6.2

ECOWAS membership (2025)



The CAR, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have all broken away from traditional Western ties. By 2024, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso had expelled French and US forces, withdrawn from ECOWAS and formed the Alliance of Sahel States.¹²⁸ They had also welcomed military aid, training and resource-linked partnerships from Russia, signalling a weakening of Western influence and the emergence of a new multipolar dynamic in the region that has implications for security, resource access and global alignments.

6.1.1 Shifting sands

The US has been a major external actor in Africa since the decolonisation period, with its strategies, policies and interventions shaping geopolitical dynamics across the continent. However, Africa has rarely been of central foreign policy importance for the US. Instead, US actions on the continent have historically been influenced by geopolitical considerations, such as countering communism or the activities of violent extremist organisations, stabilisation and democracy promotion goals, or economic interests, notably around natural resource extraction.

There has repeatedly been friction between different US interests on the continent. In its effort to counter communism, for example, the US supported Mobutu Sese Seko's rise to autocratic power in Zaire (now the DRC). His rule in turn normalised grand corruption and locked the country into the cycle of instability, conflict and fragility that continues today.

A similar tension is apparent in US efforts to counter transnational organised crime on the continent.

Supporting African states in countering organised crime has been a component of US assistance programmes in Africa for several decades, and has led to the provision of equipment and training. Notably, the continent hosts two US-funded regional International Law Enforcement Academies, which provide specialised training to law enforcement officers. Linked to this, the US has focused on cultivating operational engagement with African partners on investigations, an approach that African law enforcement personnel have flagged as important in the local fight against transnational organised crime.

However, the US focus in engaging with African states to counter crime has occasionally been impeded by broader geopolitical or domestic interests. It has reportedly led to restraint, for example, in efforts to address sanctions circumvention by US allies or their clients in some circumstances. In other instances, the US has inadvertently fuelled criminal markets through its support for regime change, such as in Libya in 2011. The current domestic drive in the US to limit foreign aid has led to widespread disruption of assistance programmes in Africa, particularly those related to combating corruption and upholding rule of law.

The Trump administration's policy plans for Africa remain unclear. However, there are signs that official engagement on the continent may be deprioritised further. This could undermine US–Africa cooperation in tackling organised crime and more broadly weakening the country's influence on the continent. This, in turn, could create a security and geopolitical void that multiple countries with competing interests are likely to try to fill.

6.2 State-backed private military companies

These dynamics are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Russia's growing involvement on the continent. In Africa, the Russia–Ukraine war has not only disrupted supply chains and increased food insecurity but also exposed diplomatic divisions and stoked the growing disenchantment of many countries towards Western powers and international institutions. The departure of European and US

military partners created a vacuum of influence in Africa. Consequently, over the past few years, Russia has increased economic and military support to many African nations, particularly those experiencing conflict. This has included the deployment of state-funded private military companies, most notably the Wagner Group, which is classified as a 'terrorist organisation' by the EU and the United Kingdom



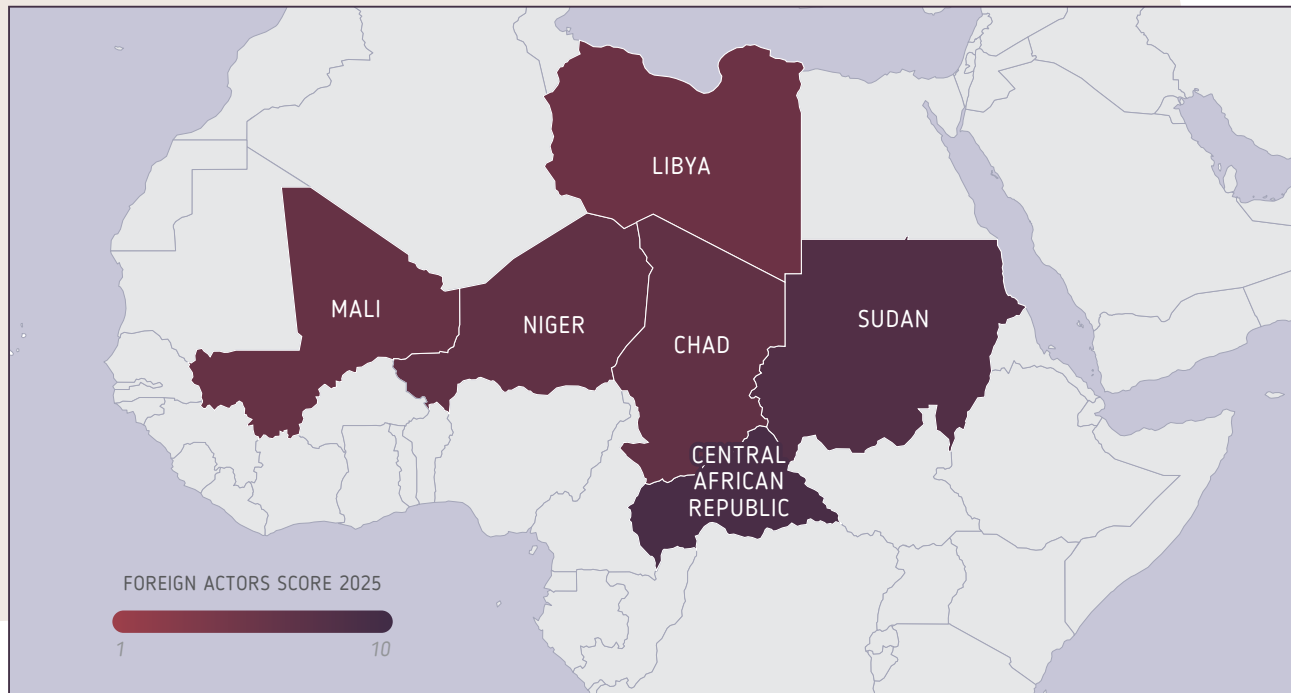
(UK), and as a ‘transnational criminal organisation’ by the US and Ukraine.¹²⁹

The Wagner Group’s presence in Africa has been portrayed as an instrument of foreign policy to help boost Russia’s global standing against the West and to assist states with counter-insurgency. However, its activities have involved human rights abuses and atrocities, political interference and the plunder of natural resources. For example, in the CAR, Wagner has been accused of involvement in large-scale smuggling (particularly of gold and diamonds), political interference in elections and atrocities against civilians.¹³⁰ In Sudan, Russia initially positioned itself on both sides of the country’s conflict, partnering with the RSF through Wagner, while maintaining formal ties with the government and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). In this way, Russia was able to strengthen its geopolitical position and facilitate smuggling activities. The

alignment with the Sudanese government and the SAF was driven by Russia’s long-term goal of acquiring a naval base on the Red Sea.¹³¹ At the same time, Wagner’s alliance with the RSF enabled large-scale smuggling of gold and accumulation of non-dollar reserves, helping Russia circumvent sanctions imposed after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.¹³² In 2025, Sudan ranked second on the continent for foreign actors, highlighting how the presence of the Wagner Group has been influential in the country’s criminal landscape while also promoting Russian geopolitical interests.¹³³

Following the dismantling of the Wagner Group in 2023, Russia has pursued its geopolitical interests in Africa through the Africa Corps, which continued many of Wagner’s operations and strategies and expanded into other countries.¹³⁴ These countries include Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, all of which saw an increase in the influence of foreign actors

FIGURE 6.3

Foreign actor influence where the Wagner Group is present (2025)

between 2023 and 2025. In late 2023, Africa Corps troops were deployed to Burkina Faso, to assist the military junta, while in early 2024, Russian military equipment and personnel arrived in the Nigerien capital of Niamey and are rumoured to have arrived in Chad.¹³⁵ There is as yet no conclusive evidence that the Africa Corps is exploiting illicit economies

in these countries,¹³⁶ but Russia has established the African Initiative project in Burkina Faso to 'project Russian-friendly narratives in the region'.¹³⁷ The Wagner Group's brand lives on in Mali, where the group is engaged in looting and cattle rustling with the consent of political and military elites, and in the CAR.¹³⁸

6.3 Strategic investments

Alongside Russia, a number of external actors have increased their influence in Africa to further geopolitical aims, feeding illicit activity and aggravating instability in the process. While Russia has exploited geopolitical rivalries and domestic divisions to increase its footprint in Africa, the UAE has primarily advanced its influence in Africa through commerce and investment. Its investments have been in strategic assets, such as ports, airports and transport corridors, and large-scale ventures in agriculture, renewable energy, mining and telecommunications. Over the past decade, the Gulf state has invested nearly US\$60 billion in Africa, making it the fourth-largest foreign investor after

China, the EU and the US,¹³⁹ and increased bilateral trade with sub-Saharan Africa by more than 30%, with a growing number of Emirati firms embedding themselves in critical economic sectors.¹⁴⁰

Over time, the UAE has gradually expanded beyond economic opportunism to include security partnerships, using military assistance and, in some cases, non-state actors, to bolster allied governments and secure long-term access to valuable resources.¹⁴¹ In Ethiopia, this dual approach was on full display during the Tigray War, when the UAE's supply of high-grade military equipment and elite force training was swiftly followed by a raft of agreements across energy, logistics and

agriculture.¹⁴² A similar model emerged in the DRC, where Emirati firms have provided military support and invested in infrastructure, with the goal of accessing gold, cobalt, copper and diamond reserves.¹⁴³

Perhaps the clearest example of the UAE's willingness to mix geo-economic interests with political manoeuvring is found in Sudan, where the UAE sided with the RSF over the SAF with the aim of securing gold supplies, agricultural land and port access. UN investigators deemed credible claims that a large-scale airlift from the UAE to neighbouring Chad allegedly served as a supply route for the RSF, although the UAE asserts that the flights were purely humanitarian.¹⁴⁴

In many conflict zones, especially in Ethiopia and Sudan, Emirati involvement has been associated with civilian casualties and breaches of international law, as well as deepening hostilities and escalating displacements, compounding instability in already fragile contexts.¹⁴⁵ Such conditions not only fuel humanitarian emergencies but also created fertile ground for the proliferation of organised crime, as reflected in increased criminality scores for Ethiopia (+1.46) (since 2020 when the Tigray conflict began) and Sudan (+0.26).

The UAE is believed to play an important role in the illicit gold trade.¹⁴⁶ In 2022, it was estimated that the UAE imported more than 435 tonnes (or 66.5%) of African gold.¹⁴⁷ Both the RSF and the SAF smuggle substantial volumes of gold to the UAE, while the US Treasury has estimated that over 90% of the DRC's gold is trafficked to neighbouring states for refining before being exported, predominantly to the UAE.¹⁴⁸

The UAE has also been identified – alongside the US, the UK, Switzerland, Seychelles, Panama, Hong Kong, France, Cyprus and the British Virgin Islands – as a transit and destination jurisdiction for African illicit financial flows (IFFs),¹⁴⁹ and as a tax haven, a destination for illicit cash and a hub for money laundering, often through real estate.¹⁵⁰

Like the UAE, China's focus in Africa has been on securing natural resources and expanding overseas markets, to sustain the country's long-term economic growth. For many African states, China is viewed as a compelling alternative to traditional Western partners, offering flexible financing

arrangements, competitive industrial goods and large-scale infrastructure projects, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative and the establishment of special economic zones, providing a pathway to economic expansion and greater integration into the global economy.¹⁵¹

Africa occupies a pivotal position in China's strategy to diversify supply chains and secure a steady flow of critical commodities. Major exports to China include crude petroleum from Angola and South Sudan, zinc and copper from Eritrea, cobalt from the DRC, and iron and titanium from Sierra Leone.¹⁵² However, China's presence in Africa has been linked to allegations of illicit and exploitative practices. A stark example is the DRC, where almost two decades ago, Chinese state companies struck the 'Sicomines' minerals-for-infrastructure deal, pledging development in exchange for vast mineral rights. Instead, a shell company funnelled tens of millions of dollars to benefit the former ruling elite and associates, diverting wealth from public benefit, undermining transparency, entrenching kleptocracy and delaying the DRC's economic recovery.¹⁵³ Exploitation by foreign actors continues to this day (for instance, Chinese operators involved in the illicit extraction of gold¹⁵⁴) and is reflected in the country's high scores in 2025 for non-renewable resource crimes (9.50) and the influence of foreign actors (9.0).

Even within legal operations, Chinese companies have been accused of exploitative labour practices, environmental degradation and human rights violations in Zimbabwe, where the Chinese are reported to control a significant portion of the extractive industry.¹⁵⁵

Unlike many other foreign powers in Africa, China had historically adhered to a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of its partner states. However, it has progressively moved towards a more flexible and case-by-case approach to peace and security engagement at bilateral, regional and international levels. This has allowed Beijing to reinterpret its foreign policy principles, particularly non-interference, in ways that protect its economic and strategic interests while deepening its influence across Africa.¹⁵⁶ For example, China's involvement in South Sudan's conflict was driven by the need to safeguard its substantial oil investments, but it

has been accused by international counterparts of prolonging the devastating war and providing military equipment that has been used in human rights violations. In addition to South Sudan, Chinese-supplied military equipment has surfaced in the hands of non-state armed groups in Mali and the DRC, underscoring how Beijing's involvement has, at times, contributed to ongoing instability and armed violence.¹⁵⁷

China has also increased support to law enforcement forces across the continent, including through providing equipment and training.¹⁵⁸ However,

reports indicate that some countries (such as Uganda) have used Chinese weapons and surveillance technologies to intimidate, monitor and suppress political opposition and dissent, raising concerns about governance and human rights.¹⁵⁹ This trend is particularly troubling given that the 'non-state actors' indicator has declined by 0.64 since 2019, the steepest decline of any resilience indicator. The score of 3.66 in the 2025 Index reflects an increasingly precarious environment for civil society organisations, journalists, and activists who challenge or hold governments to account across the continent.



6.4 After soft power

A number of other countries have also expanded their role in Africa, boosting their geopolitical positions while simultaneously shaping how illicit activities on the continent unfold. Among these is Türkiye, whose involvement in Africa began as a soft-power initiative rooted in humanitarian aid, education, cultural exchange and religious diplomacy, but has since evolved to span trade,

infrastructure and security.¹⁶⁰ The expansion into the security domain was driven in part by Türkiye's booming defence industry, whose exports surged from US\$2.3 billion in 2020 to over US\$7.1 billion in 2024 with defence companies such as Baykar, Aselsan, Tusas and Nurol Holding recording increasing demand for their products in Africa.¹⁶¹ Türkiye initially supplied military equipment,

weapons, ammunition and training to North Africa (and was found to be in violation of the UN arms embargo on Libya¹⁶²) but has expanded into sub-Saharan Africa, becoming the region's fourth-largest arms supplier.¹⁶³

Turkish defence equipment is in high demand due to its cost-effectiveness. Drone technology (most notably the TB2 Bayraktar and Akinci) has emerged as a flagship of Türkiye's defence exports, finding particular favour among military regimes in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali.¹⁶⁴ After severing ties with former colonial power France, these countries view Turkish drones as a tactical asset and a geopolitical alternative. In addition to drones, Türkiye's exports to Africa include small arms, trainer aircraft, helicopters and armoured vehicles, signalling the country's increasingly entrenched role in Africa's security landscape.¹⁶⁵

While these arms deals have been commercially and strategically beneficial for both Türkiye and its African partners, they have also drawn criticism, especially where weapons have been supplied to states engaged in active conflicts or implicated in human rights abuses, such as Ethiopia, Sudan and Burkina Faso.¹⁶⁶ The growing presence of Turkish-made weaponry in conflict zones also carries the significant risk of arms being diverted illicitly to non-state armed actors and criminal networks. The chance of such diversions is greater in environments where armed conflict is sustained, oversight is weak, stockpile controls are inadequate and law enforcement capacity is limited. The consequence could be to intensify entrenched arms-trafficking markets in countries such as Sudan,¹⁶⁷ Ethiopia and Burkina Faso, all of which have increased their arms trafficking scores since 2019, and to fuel broader instability, making conflict resolution more elusive.

6.5 Intra-Africa geopolitics

Notwithstanding external actors, the intersection of state power, geopolitics and organised crime can also be found domestically on the continent. A notable example is Central Africa, where conflict has long been fuelled by various criminal activities, including human trafficking, arms trafficking and non-renewable resource crimes.

The conflict between the DRC and Rwanda, which is deeply historical and ethnically driven, has evolved into geopolitical contestation centred on non-state armed groups and highly sought-after natural resources that include tin, gold and tantalum, which is extracted from coltan and is in high demand for use in smartphones.

The DRC has accused Rwanda of using the Congolese M23 rebel group as a proxy to destabilise the country.¹⁶⁸ In response, Rwanda has justified

its presence in Eastern Congo as part of its security operation to prevent the resurgence of the Forces démocratiques de la libération du Rwanda (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda), a group formed by Hutu militias who fled Rwanda after the genocide. However, the illicit mining of minerals, such as gold and coltan, in areas under the control of the M23 and subsequent shipment across the border to Rwanda has led to accusations that the security argument is being used to mask criminal activity and mineral exploitation by the Rwandan government.¹⁶⁹ This illustrates how geopolitical rivalry and organised crime mutually reinforce each other when state-driven goals, such as the consolidation of regional security and influence, coincide with illicit economic activity.

SECTION 7

Conflict and humanitarian crises

The background image is a composite. The top half shows a blue and white ship, likely a humanitarian aid vessel, with the text 'RESCUE SMH' and 'EBXC (MO9248851)' visible. The bottom half features a red and black plaid pattern, possibly a blanket or clothing, and a red banner with white text that is partially obscured and difficult to read.

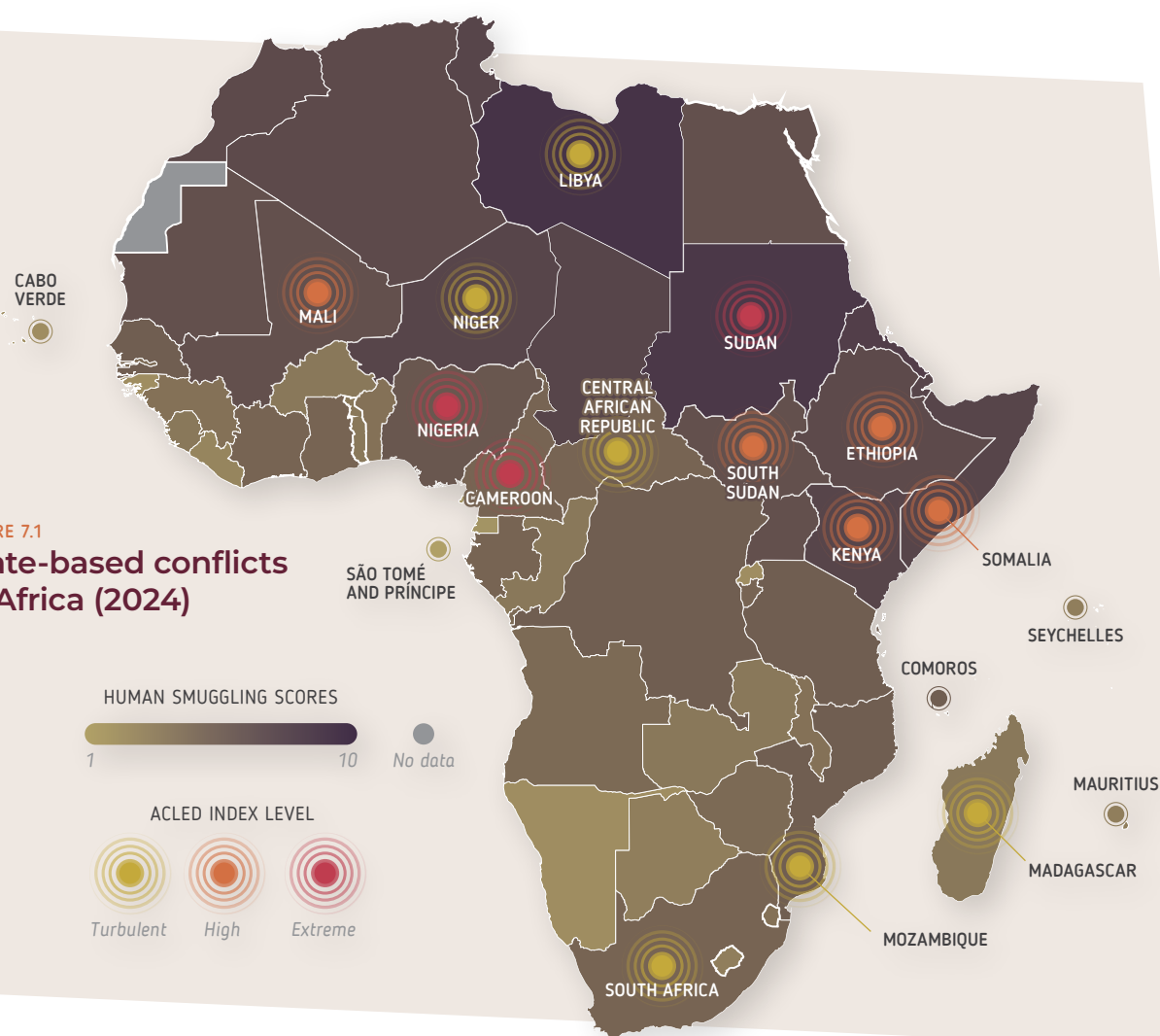


7

Conflict and humanitarian crises

As illicit economies expand across Africa and organised crime becomes more entrenched, the continent continues to grapple with persistent and emerging conflicts, underscoring the risk of enduring fragility. In 2024, Africa was home to 28 of the 61 active state-based conflicts recorded worldwide (the highest since the Second World War), making it the continent most affected by conflict.¹⁷⁰ Conflicts ranged from civil wars and territorial disputes (in Sudan and Ethiopia) to non-state armed violence and military coups (in Sahelian countries).

FIGURE 7.1
State-based conflicts
in Africa (2024)



The nature of conflicts in Africa has changed, from large-scale proxy wars to more decentralised and fragmented insurgencies. In many countries, governments may be in power but are not in control due to a 'chessboard of control and competition' with jihadists, foreign mercenaries and local rebel groups.¹⁷¹ This has resulted in a more complex conflict landscape, especially in the Sahel region, Sudan, the DRC, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia and Mozambique.

- In the Sahelian countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) exploit political instability to launch deadly attacks, increasingly against civilians. They are also pushing further south, threatening the security of coastal West African states.¹⁷²
- In Sudan, one of the most volatile conflict zones on the continent, the civil war between the SAF and the RSF continues unabated, marked by widespread civilian atrocities and ethnically targeted massacres.¹⁷³
- In the DRC, the conflict continues to intensify,

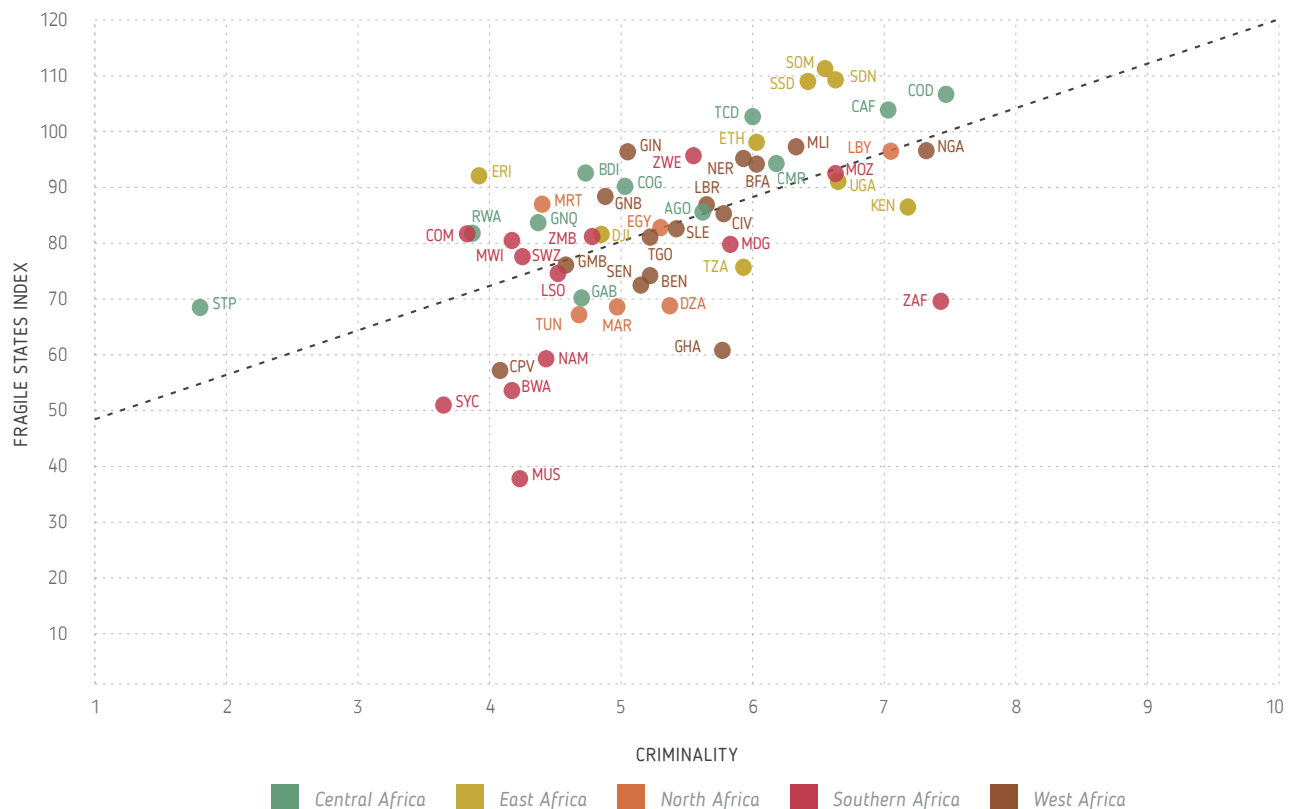
as armed groups (particularly the M23) resist government forces and peacekeepers, amid worsening humanitarian conditions.¹⁷⁴

- In Ethiopia's Tigray region, tensions persist despite the peace agreement that ended the civil war in 2022.¹⁷⁵
- The north-west region of Nigeria has become an epicentre of violence, with armed bandits continuing to fuel instability.¹⁷⁶
- In Somalia and Mozambique, entrenched insurgent groups remain a serious threat to peace and security.¹⁷⁷

Since 2019, the Index has highlighted the convergence between criminality and conflict, or the crime–conflict nexus. Criminality contributes to (and in many cases causes) state fragility, which weakens a country's resilience, or its ability to respond to organised crime. Higher levels of criminality tend to occur in more fragile and conflict-affected states (Figure 7.2), which is confirmed by the correlation of +0.59 between criminality (2025 Index) and state fragility (2024 Fragile States Index).

FIGURE 7.2

Relationship between state fragility and criminality



The 2025 Index found that countries grappling with fragility and conflict also had the highest criminality scores – the DRC (7.47), Nigeria (7.32) and Libya (7.05).

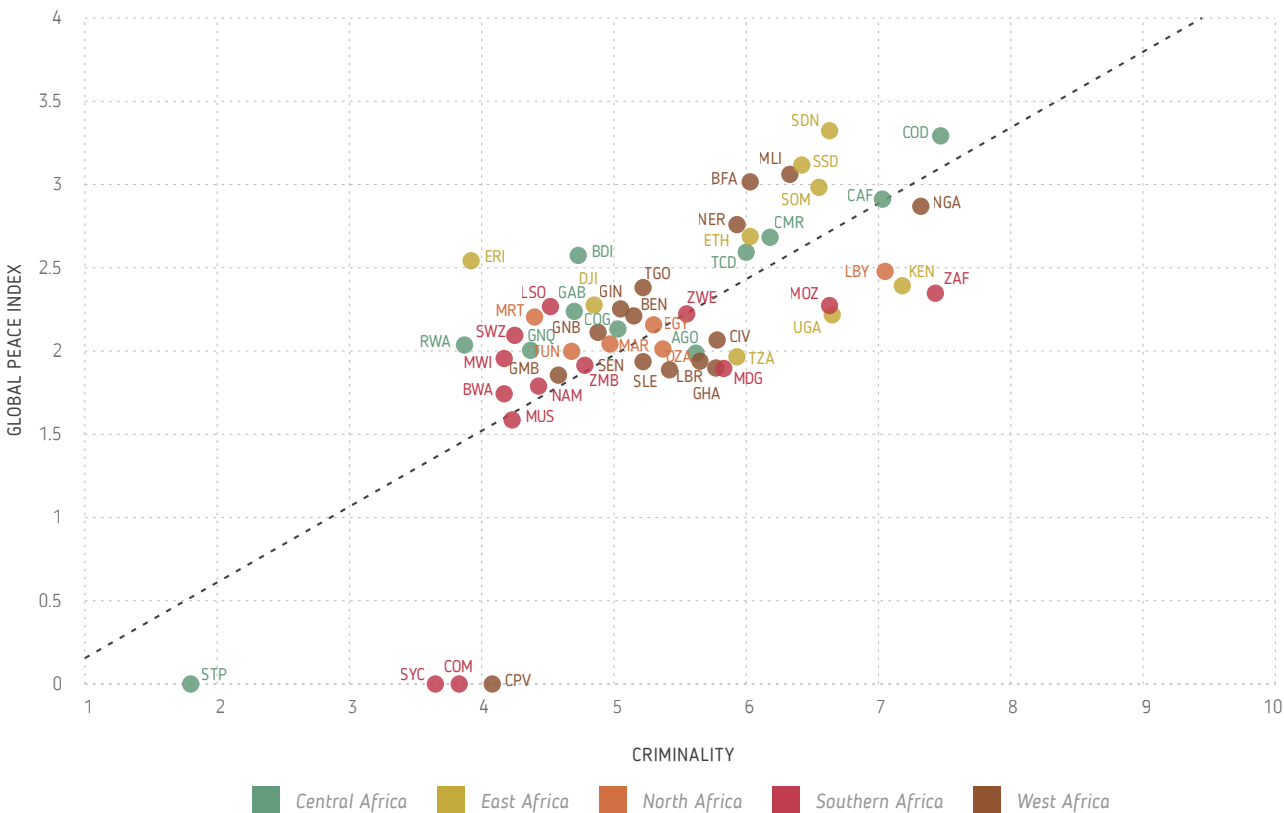
Similarly, countries that had experienced years of protracted conflict had very low levels of resilience – the DRC (2.21) and Libya (1.88).

7.1 Organised crime fuels conflict

Organised crime thrives during conflicts, which create opportunities for illicit activities. In turn, profits derived from these criminal enterprises are often used to fuel further violence and disorder. The trafficking of drugs, arms, people and natural resources provides revenue streams that insurgents, militias and terrorist organisations can use to finance operations and gain legitimacy and support.

Two criminal markets that appear to thrive in situations of instability are non-renewable resource crimes and extortion and protection racketeering, both of which are positively correlated with fragility and peacefulness. A comparison of the 2025 Index with the 2024 Fragile States Index and the 2025 Global Peace Index revealed moderate correlations between fragile states and extortion (+0.58) and non-renewable resource crimes (+0.51), and a strong correlation between peace and extortion (+0.71).

FIGURE 7.3
Relationship between peace and criminality



Both militia groups and more structured groups (such as Boko Haram) use various criminal activities to finance their insurgencies.

- In the Great Lakes area in eastern DRC, militia groups smuggle gold, diamonds and wildlife products through other East African countries.¹⁷⁸
- In several West African countries, armed non-state actors, including violent extremist groups, separatists and mercenaries, increasingly finance their operations through cattle rustling, artisanal gold mining, kidnapping and trafficking motorbikes.¹⁷⁹
- In Nigeria, Boko Haram carries out kidnappings for extortion purposes, while armed bandits in the north-west have transitioned from cattle rustling to more profitable crimes, such as kidnapping, gold mining and forced labour. In 2023 and 2025, Nigeria had the highest score (8.0) in West Africa for extortion and protection racketeering. The expansion of these actors and their growing influence over specific illicit economies is reflected in the 2025 score for mafia-style groups, which has increased by a full point since 2023.
- As JNIM and IS Sahel have expanded their operations across national borders in the Sahel, the international community has largely focused on violent extremism as the biggest threat,

rather than the illicit economies that fuel and sustain these groups.¹⁸⁰

Criminal groups also use their illicit activities to gain local legitimacy and expand the territory under their control, blurring the line between ideological and profit-driven motives.

In the Sahel, groups involved in livestock trafficking and illicit extraction and smuggling of gold have infiltrated supply chains that are essential to the livelihoods of local communities. These illicit markets are becoming more transnational, with criminal groups replicating crime–conflict patterns from the Central Sahel in neighbouring countries. For instance, cattle stolen in Mali and Burkina Faso are sold in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, gold mined in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana is sold in Mali and Burkina Faso,¹⁸¹ and mercury and cyanide are trafficked mainly from Burkina Faso for use in artisanal gold mines. Northern coastal areas also serve as main smuggling corridors for fuel and motorbikes, which are vital to armed groups.¹⁸²

JNIM has strengthened its regional presence by leveraging local grievances to gain legitimacy.¹⁸³ Its strategy is to maintain centralised control while deploying experienced commanders from Mali to other West African states where they run local cells that have some autonomy.

7.2 Conflict enables criminal economies

Conflicts erode state control and create fertile ground for criminal activities, which in turn weaken governance, distort legitimate market systems and undermine respect for the rule of law. In the absence of strong and effective governance, criminal actors exploit ungoverned spaces to pursue their economic ambitions and operate with minimal resistance. Instability and violence also drive up the demand for illicit goods (such as weapons, drugs and commodities) and incentivise the diversion of legal goods into black markets that support non-state armed groups.¹⁸⁴

A notable case of criminal economies enabled by conflict is Libya. Since the 2011 uprising and the collapse of the central authority in Libya, years of

instability and civil war have turned Libya into a hub for organised crime with little capacity to resist illicit activities. Criminal markets that have thrived include human smuggling, non-renewable resource crimes and arms trafficking.

Although Libya had long been an important node in trans-Saharan smuggling networks, after 2011, it became the main corridor for irregular migrants between Africa and Europe.¹⁸⁵ In 2025, Libya had the highest score for human smuggling (9.50, compared to 8.0 in 2019). The country's well-established human smuggling ecosystem involves various criminal actors, including corrupt government officials who facilitate the movement of migrants. The consequences for migrants can be severe, as

many undertake life-threatening journeys and suffer exploitation through extortion, forced labour and other abuses.¹⁸⁶

In 2025, Libya also had one of the highest scores in Africa for non-renewable resource crimes (9.50). After 2011, subsidised fuel intended for domestic consumption began to be smuggled out of the country, where it was sold on the black market, and today oil and gas are at the centre of Libya's smuggling industry.

Since 2011, weapons from Libya have been moved southwards to neighbouring countries and beyond.¹⁸⁷ Small arms, anti-aircraft weapons, heavy machine guns, artillery shells and explosives from stockpiles once held by the Libyan government have fallen into the hands of various criminal actors in Central and West Africa. Trafficking networks moved arms across porous borders into Niger, Chad, Mali, Sudan, Algeria and further afield. Since 2019, Libya's score for arms trafficking has remained consistently high (from 8.50 in 2019 to 9.50 in 2025). The widespread availability of arms has not only intensified violence but also transformed the scale and ambition of armed groups across the region.¹⁸⁸

Similarly, since 2017, the Cabo Delgado conflict in northern Mozambique, which is driven by a non-state armed group now known as Islamic State

Mozambique, has enabled illicit markets, including the drug trade, to thrive. Active conflict may have subsided, but the situation remains unstable, with 2024 marked by renewed attacks and deeper integration of criminal economies into regional governance and local livelihoods.

The actors behind the conflict profited in particular from the heroin trade, which was the most prominent drug market in Mozambique in 2025. Heroin is trafficked from Afghanistan via Pakistan and Iran, transported by dhow across the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean and enters northern Mozambique (and Tanzania), from where it continues to Europe and Australia, or is adulterated and consumed across East and Southern Africa.¹⁸⁹

Islamic State-aligned insurgents and supporters have also been implicated in gold smuggling, timber trade and extortion schemes.¹⁹⁰

- Gold and gemstones mined illicitly in the Niassa Special Reserve, near the border with Tanzania, are smuggled through Pemba and Nampula airports.
- Rubies and graphite are extracted in Cabo Delgado, allegedly by groups operating outside legal frameworks.
- Illegal logging, particularly of rosewood from northern Mozambique, is also a persistent threat.



It is unclear to what extent these illicit economies finance the ongoing insurgency, but the rebels in Cabo Delgado are known to be involved in facilitating or directly engaging in criminal activity within the territories under their control.¹⁹¹

Somalia is another country that is mired in chronic conflict, resulting in it becoming a haven for criminal activity. The insurgency led by al-Shabaab has created a power vacuum in areas that were once under direct state control and enabled the group to profit from illicit markets. In 2025, Somalia (with Libya) had the lowest resilience score (1.88) and the highest score for extortion and protection racketeering (9.50) in Africa. Al-Shabaab extorts

fees at road checkpoints and imposes taxes on businesses even in areas beyond its immediate control, including the capital Mogadishu.¹⁹²

Al-Shabaab's control of extensive territory combined with the Somali government's inability to counter the group's activities is reflected in the country's score of 1.50 for both the 'political leadership and governance' and 'territorial integrity' resilience indicators. The instability in Somalia has also exacerbated arms trafficking across the Horn of Africa, as weapons leak from conflict zones into the hands of regional criminal networks and extremist groups. For instance, arms trafficked from Somalia often end up in Kenya, where they are used by cattle-raiding militias and criminal gangs.¹⁹³

7.3 Arms trafficking heightens violence

Violence lies at the heart of many complex crises across Africa, where criminal markets and conflict dynamics are closely intertwined. Illicit arms flows have entrenched instability throughout the continent, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle in which armed conflicts sustain the demand for illicit arms (from both state and non-state actors) while the easy availability of weapons sustains conflict. The result is the undermining of peace efforts, systematic abuses of human rights, deepened communal rifts, intensified gender-based violence and the displacement of millions of people.¹⁹⁴ Compounding the situation are weak regulatory frameworks and limited law enforcement capacity.

An analysis of the 2025 Africa Index together with the Fragile States Index and the Global Peace Index found a notable strong correlation between arms trafficking and fragility (+0.72) and arms trafficking and insecurity (+0.79).

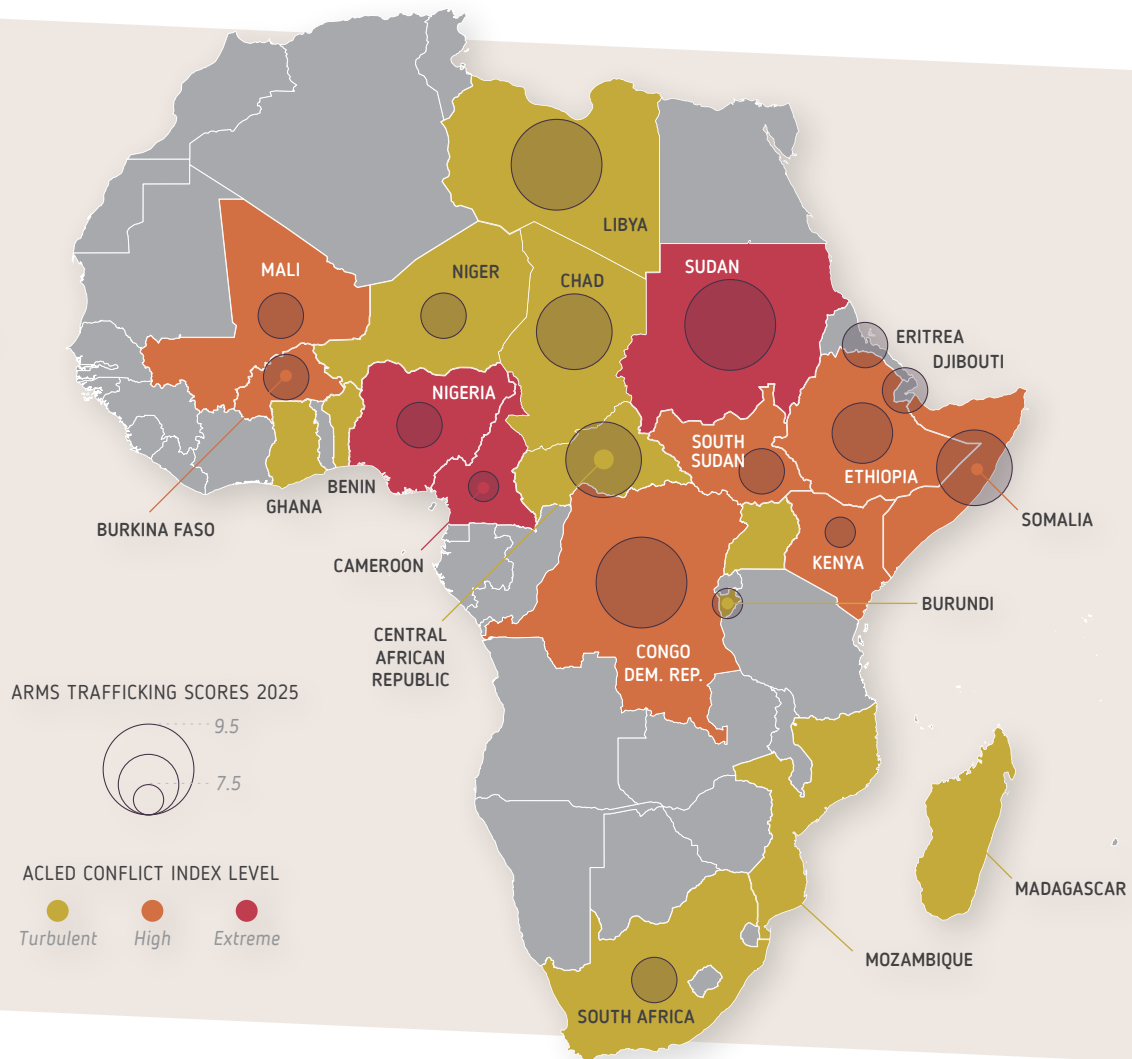
The unchecked proliferation of small arms and light weapons across borders enables crime and violence and blurs the lines between criminality and conflict.¹⁹⁵ In fragile states and conflict-prone regions, the presence of weapons often exacerbates underlying social, political and ethnic tensions.

For example, in Nigeria, rising insecurity has led to growing demand for illicit arms not only from violent extremists and separatist groups but also from ordinary communities seeking protection. Stepping into the security vacuum, armed vigilante groups initially formed as a grass-roots response to insecurity, but some have instead perpetuated cycles of retaliation and abuse.¹⁹⁶ In Nigeria's north-west, the proliferation of illegal arms has weaponised existing tensions, resulting in deadly confrontations between communities and farmers and herders.¹⁹⁷

Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the state-sponsored *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* (Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland), established to counter violent extremist groups, have been implicated in abuses and intercommunal violence. This highlights how, without robust oversight and accountability, efforts to enhance community protection may instead deepen insecurity.¹⁹⁸

Arms trafficking also fuels violence in urban spaces where state governance is weak or contested. In cities across Africa, organised crime groups (especially youth gangs) use violence to control territory, enforce extortion rackets and dominate illicit markets, such as drug trafficking.

FIGURE 7.4

Conflicts and arms trafficking hotspots in Africa (2025)

- In Cape Town, South Africa, heavily armed criminal groups involved in drugs and extortion wield considerable influence over neighbourhoods. Their turf wars have resulted in chronic levels of bloodshed, resembling low-intensity armed conflict.¹⁹⁹
- In Nairobi, Kenya, youth gangs operating in informal settlements within governance grey zones employ various forms of aggression, offer protection services and serve (at times) as enforcers for political actors or local elites. This contributes to a cycle of violence that is often tolerated, if not tacitly supported, by elements within formal power structures.²⁰⁰

Violence in Africa is not merely a symptom or an aggravating factor of conflict and crime. It is a central mechanism for contesting power, extracting resources and perpetuating insecurity. South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Mali and the CAR consistently report among the highest rates of violent deaths on the continent,²⁰¹ driven by the convergence of criminal violence, gang warfare, political instability and unaddressed communal and intergroup grievances. In such ecosystems, violence becomes both a tool and a consequence of the hybrid criminal-political order. The illicit arms trade plays a pivotal role in this ecosystem, empowering non-state actors while eroding formal governance.

7.4 Conflict reduces resilience and increases fragility

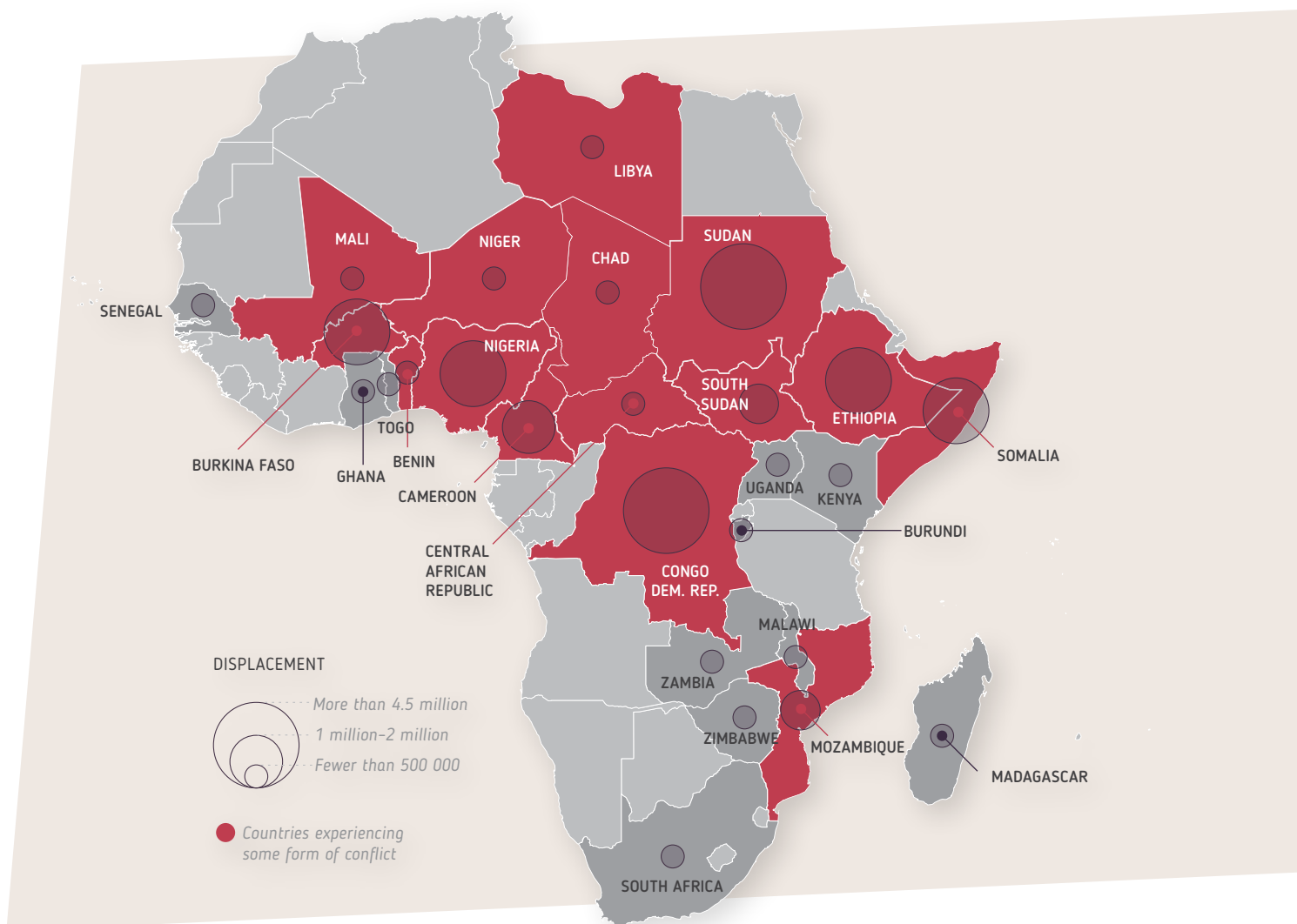
Armed conflicts can devastate public infrastructure, disrupt governance, cripple formal economies and displace large numbers of people, further fuelling cycles of criminality and fragmentation.²⁰² In regions such as the Horn of Africa, conflicts also magnify the impact of other stressors, including water scarcity, ethnic tensions and limited economic opportunities. The resulting widespread poverty and unemployment push people into informal and illicit markets (such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling or illegal mining), where they are exploited by

criminal networks. Criminal economies become deeply entrenched, as they offer sources of income and protection.

Displaced people are especially vulnerable to exploitation. At the end of 2024, more than one in 67 people in the world (or 123.2 million people) had been forced to flee their homes due to conflict, violence or persecution. Of these people, 42.7 million were refugees and 73.5 million were internally displaced (i.e. within the borders of their country).²⁰³ Africa is disproportionately affected (Figure 7.5).

FIGURE 7.5

Displacement and conflict in Africa (2024)



Conflicts also create environments in which criminal groups are able to operate freely because state institutions either lack the capacity to respond effectively or are complicit in illicit activities. The undermining of legislative and law enforcement capacities and the collapse of the criminal justice system erode accountability and prevent criminal actors from being punished, enabling them to operate without repercussions.²⁰⁴

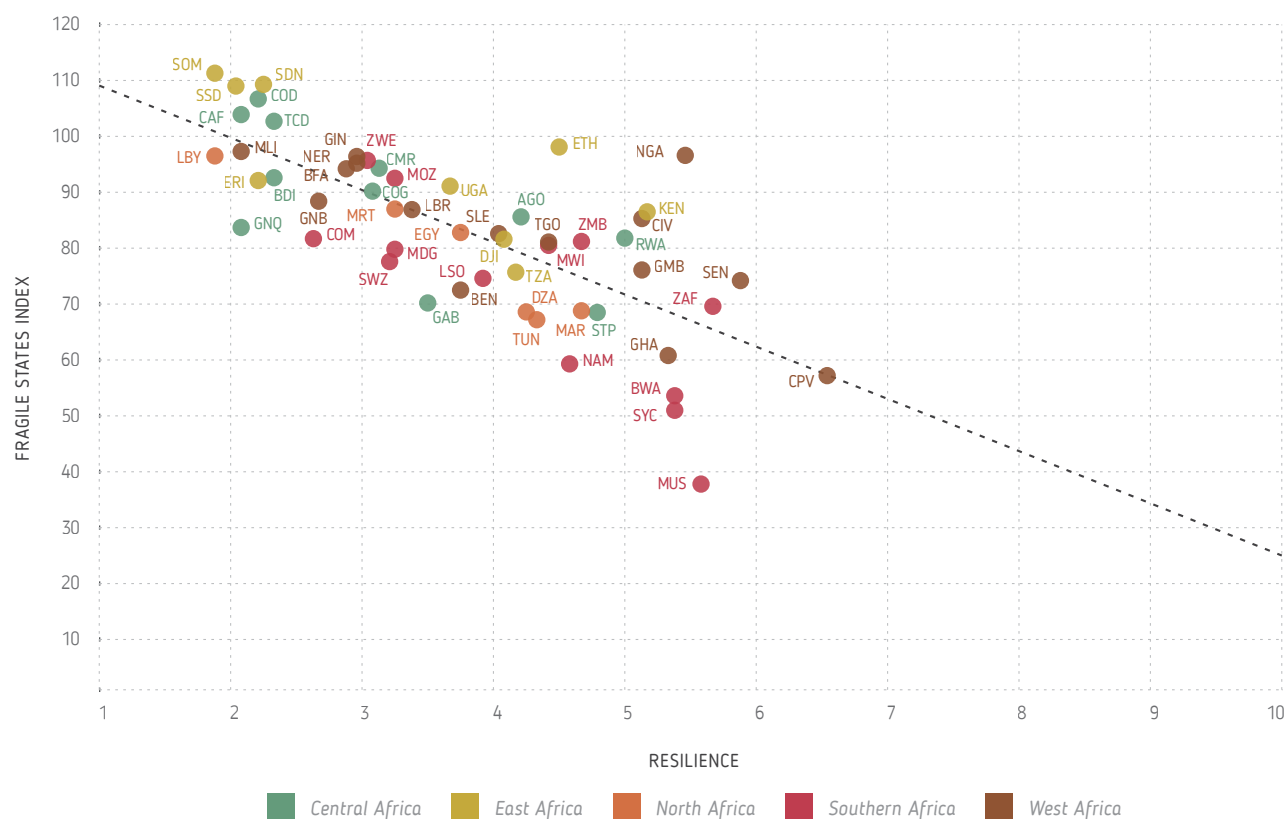
In conflict areas, critical infrastructure ceases to function, leaving civilians without access to justice, healthcare, education or even basic security. The breakdown of basic services further weakens state structures and strains peacebuilding efforts.²⁰⁵ With communities facing limited or non-existent access to healthcare, education or livelihood opportunities, criminal groups frequently act as parallel providers

of services, substituting for the state in ways that further weaken formal institutions. In some areas, criminal and armed groups seize authority over regions previously governed by the state, often replacing official structures with violent or exploitative alternatives.

The convergence of eroded state capacity, institutional weakness and humanitarian emergencies creates conditions where organised crime can operate with impunity and resilience mechanisms remain inactive. It becomes a cycle where weakened resilience to organised crime results in a fragile state, which is in turn less able to address organised crime. This is reflected in the strong negative correlation of -0.74 between fragile states and resilience indicators in Africa (Figure 7.6).

FIGURE 7.6

Relationship between resilience and state fragility



Since 2019, the resilience indicator that has decreased the most is 'non-state actors', which also had a moderate negative correlation of -0.54 to fragility. In insecure environments, the work of civil society organisations dedicated to preventing organised crime and supporting its victims becomes constrained. Many are compelled to redirect their efforts towards immediate humanitarian needs, such as distributing food, water and emergency medical care, at the expense of long-term development or anti-crime initiatives. The risks to their personnel and limited resources further weaken their effectiveness and reach.²⁰⁶

Conflict erodes the foundational elements of effective resilience to organised crime. It disables institutional responses, fractures community structures and provides openings for criminal actors to entrench their power.²⁰⁷ To break this perpetual loop of violence, displacement and criminal exploitation, holistic and coordinated responses are required, in which addressing humanitarian needs, rebuilding state institutions and disrupting criminal organisations must go hand-in-hand.²⁰⁸



SECTION 8

Governance, corruption and organised crime



8

Governance, corruption and organised crime

A feature of criminality in Africa is the involvement of institutional actors in organised crime, either through corruption or by actively directing and facilitating criminality.²⁰⁹ In the Index, the 'state-embedded actors' indicator refers to criminal actors operating from within the state – from individual law enforcement officers to the highest echelons of government. This indicator has a strong negative correlation to overall resilience (-0.68), which is to be expected, given the complex web of criminality that blurs the lines between the legitimate and illegitimate when state-embedded actors are pervasive.

The politicisation of organised crime is not unique to Africa. The relationship between the state and organised crime is as old as the notion of the nation-state itself.²¹⁰ Like elsewhere in the world, adversarial and mutually beneficial economic, political and social conditions in Africa have resulted in a complex relationship between the state and organised crime.

8.1 From governance to criminal governance

Governance refers to 'the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised', including respect for the rules and institutions that govern economic and social interactions.²¹¹ Governance is not synonymous with government and so, in theory, it can extend to non-state actors, such as civil society organisations, private corporations and even illicit groups that participate in decision-making or service provision.²¹² In some cases, these non-state actors may provide order, services, security and economic opportunities in conjunction or in competition with the state.

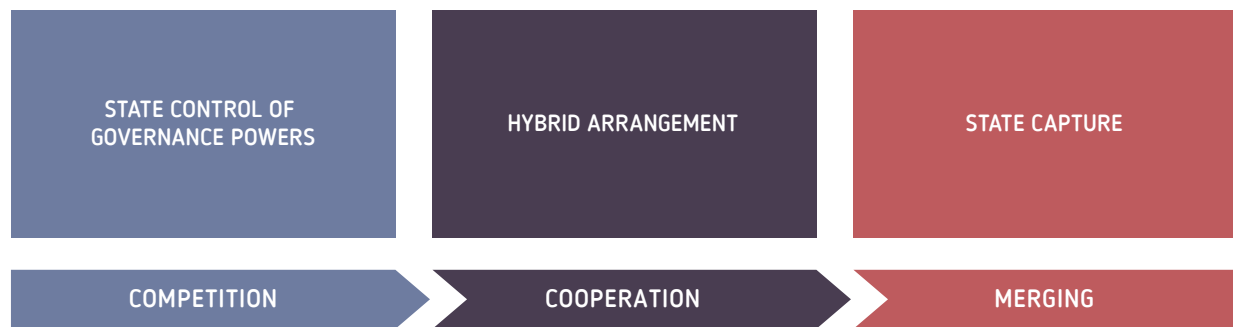
When criminal or extremist groups are involved in providing services and ensuring order and security in competition with a weakened state, criminal governance ensues – in such cases, organised crime can transform from being a challenge to governance to becoming an integral, albeit illegitimate, part of governance.²¹³

The nature of the state–criminal relationship is influenced by various factors, including state strategies (whether the state challenges or partners with criminal groups) and the type of criminal group (whether it uses violence or relies on non-coercive methods).²¹⁴ It can be viewed as a continuum,

from competition to the merging of the state and criminal groups (Figure 8.1). At each stage of the state–criminal relationship, corruption (the use of public office for private gain) is present because corruption is an individual-level phenomenon.²¹⁵

FIGURE 8.1

Continuum of state–criminal relationships



8.1.1 Competition

In this relationship, the state and criminal groups compete for control, but organised crime has limited influence and the state is well-equipped to respond to threats. For the state, organised crime is a threat that must be policed, prosecuted and dismantled. In response, criminal groups may violently clash with the state or operate covertly as the ‘underworld’ and run clandestine black markets. The state effectively governs and criminalises underworld markets, shaping the legal and regulatory environment to control and suppress illicit activities. Cabo Verde provides a useful illustration of this dynamic.

In 2025, Cabo Verde had one of the lowest overall scores for criminality (4.08) and the highest resilience score in Africa (6.54). Most criminal markets scored lower than the regional averages, including human smuggling (2.50), arms trafficking (3.0), environmental crimes and cyber-dependent crimes (3.50). The exception is drug markets, including the cocaine trade (7.0), which scored higher due to the country’s strategic geographic location. Cabo Verde has robust economic, political and social institutions, including a demonstrable political commitment to combating crime, an independent judiciary and low levels of corruption, as reflected in the moderate influence of state-embedded actors (4.0).

8.1.2 Cooperation

In this relationship, the state co-opts criminal groups that may be non-violent or violent to form hybrid arrangements in which criminal and state-embedded actors actively collude. The state may incorporate non-violent criminal groups for economic development,²¹⁶ allow criminal groups to use violence to conduct their business or enforce the law selectively in return for services from the criminal groups.²¹⁷ State-embedded actors facilitate criminality in multiple ways, from turning a blind eye – for instance, by allowing undocumented migrants to pass unchecked at border crossings – to actively directing criminality. For example, members of the executive in Equatorial Guinea have been accused of embezzlement and extortion using shell companies.²¹⁸

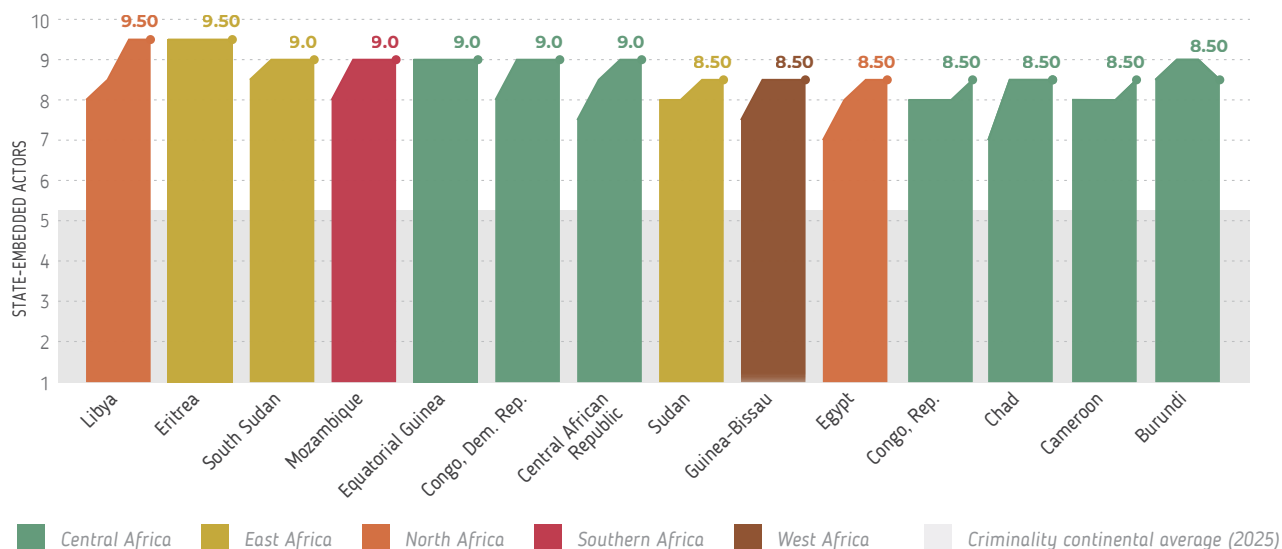
Under hybrid arrangements, the state or state-embedded actors forego their duty in governance for financial, economic or political benefit. According to the 2025 Index, one of the strongest negative correlations (–0.73) was found in the relationship between state-embedded actors and the ‘political leadership and governance’ resilience indicator. The very high scores for state-embedded actors in Nigeria and Kenya (both 8.0) highlight their influence in driving criminality in these countries, especially

during elections, when state-embedded actors collaborate with criminal organisations to intimidate opponents or finance campaigns. In Nigeria, criminal groups have used violence to coerce and intimidate

voters,²¹⁹ while in Kenya, gangs and armed militias have been deployed to instigate violence aimed at influencing election outcomes or to suppress protestors.²²⁰

FIGURE 8.2

State-embedded actors and criminality (2019–2025)



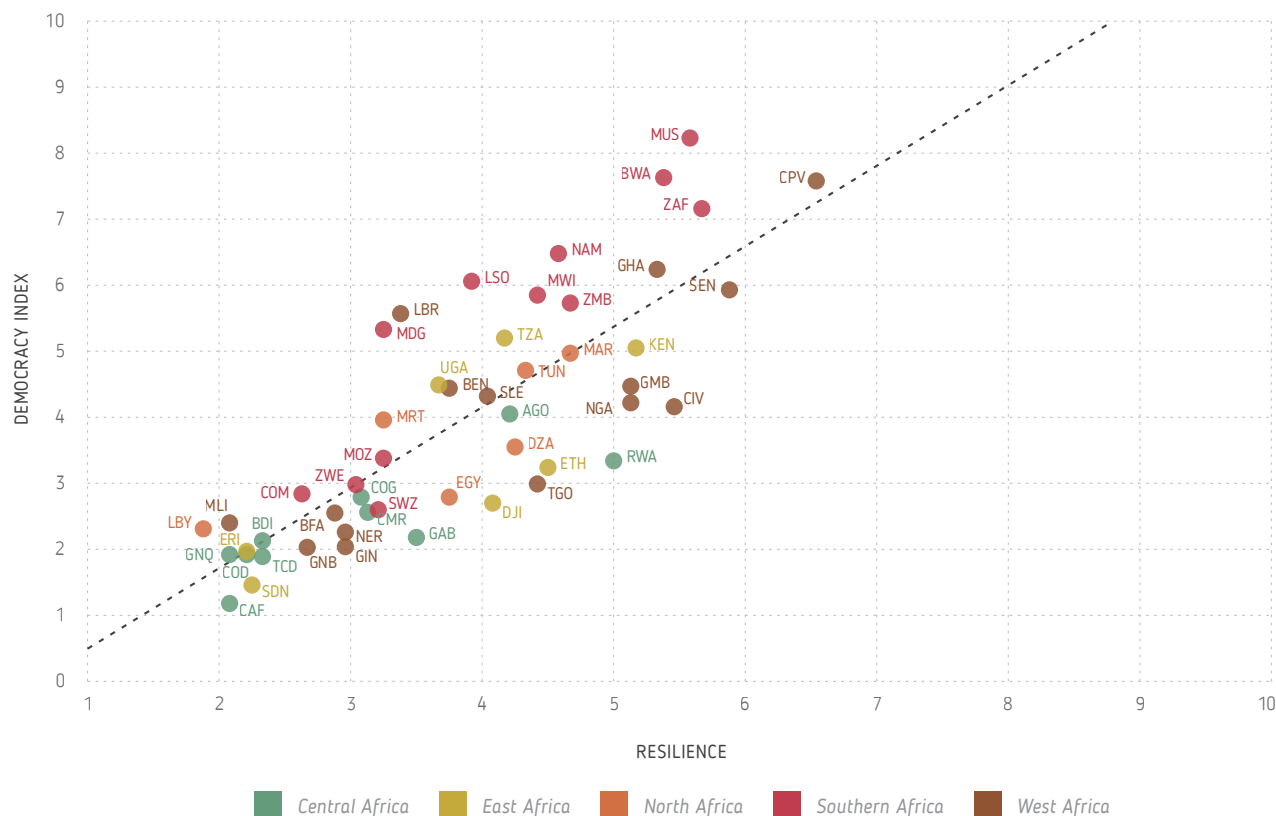
8.1.3 Merging

In this relationship, criminal groups shape state laws and policies, and control public institutions to serve their own interests. Criminal groups can also co-opt the state, particularly when they gain influence over state institutions or officials through corruption, threats or intimidation, and exploit state weaknesses. For example, in Zambia's mining industry, criminal actors in the Copperbelt region collaborate with government and law enforcement officials in the illicit extraction of and trade in copper,²²¹ while in the CAR, foreign criminal actors and state-embedded actors wield substantial influence and direct the trafficking of natural resources, drugs and weapons.²²²

The extreme version of merging is state capture, which is when criminal groups exert significant influence or control over state institutions and redirect public power to advance private interests.²²³ Examples include Guinea-Bissau and Somalia, which had among the lowest 'political leadership and governance' scores on the continent. In Guinea-Bissau, criminal actors have co-opted members of the armed forces and high-ranking politicians to facilitate the cocaine trade,²²⁴ resulting in politicians shifting from competing for legitimate control of the country to fighting for control over illicit markets.²²⁵ State capture may also lead to criminal organisations exercising quasi-state functions, such as in Somalia, where al-Shabaab's taxation system is separate from the government tax system.²²⁶

FIGURE 8.4

Relationship between democracy and resilience



Well-functioning democracies have been found to be more resilient to the threat and impact of organised crime.²²⁸ Democratic institutions, including the judiciary and oversight bodies, and a free and active civil society and media, are important for holding governments accountable and reporting on corruption.²²⁹ However, democracies are also vulnerable to infiltration by organised crime due to the cost of elections and lack of campaign funding from state funds. Openings for organised crime include funding expensive election campaigns, patronage networks (gifts of airtime, clothing or food packages) and high filing and advertising fees. Political elites may co-opt organised crime groups to finance their election campaigns in exchange for political and financial kickbacks once elected. Some armed groups gain political influence in order to protect and expand their economic rackets, while other criminal organisations penetrate formal political structures directly, blurring the lines between crime and governance.²³⁰

Young democracies are most vulnerable to the infiltration of organised crime because their institutions are typically not strong enough to withstand the pressure – building resilience takes time. More mature democracies may be more resilient to organised crime but may still experience high levels of criminality. The Democracy Index classifies the following African countries as full or flawed democracies: Botswana, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa (Figure 8.5). Yet both Ghana and South Africa have documented instances of organised crime infiltrating elections. In Ghana, proceeds from illegal artisanal gold mining have funded election campaigns over the years,²³¹ while in South Africa, municipal elections are marred by assassinations of electoral candidates.²³² However, the reason for organised crime infiltration being well documented may be because democracies have more public coverage and stronger civic participation.

FIGURE 8.5

Relationship between democracy and criminality



In contrast, authoritarian regimes tend to actively co-opt or violently suppress organised crime. Organised crime is co-opted for various objectives, including revenue generation, consolidation of power and control, and as proxies for illicit activities. Examples include Rwanda's relationship with M23 and the involvement of political elites in non-renewable resource crimes in Zimbabwe – the 2024 Democracy Index classifies both countries as authoritarian regimes.



SECTION 9

Emerging threats of Africa's digital boom



TRANSNET

National Ports
Authority House

9

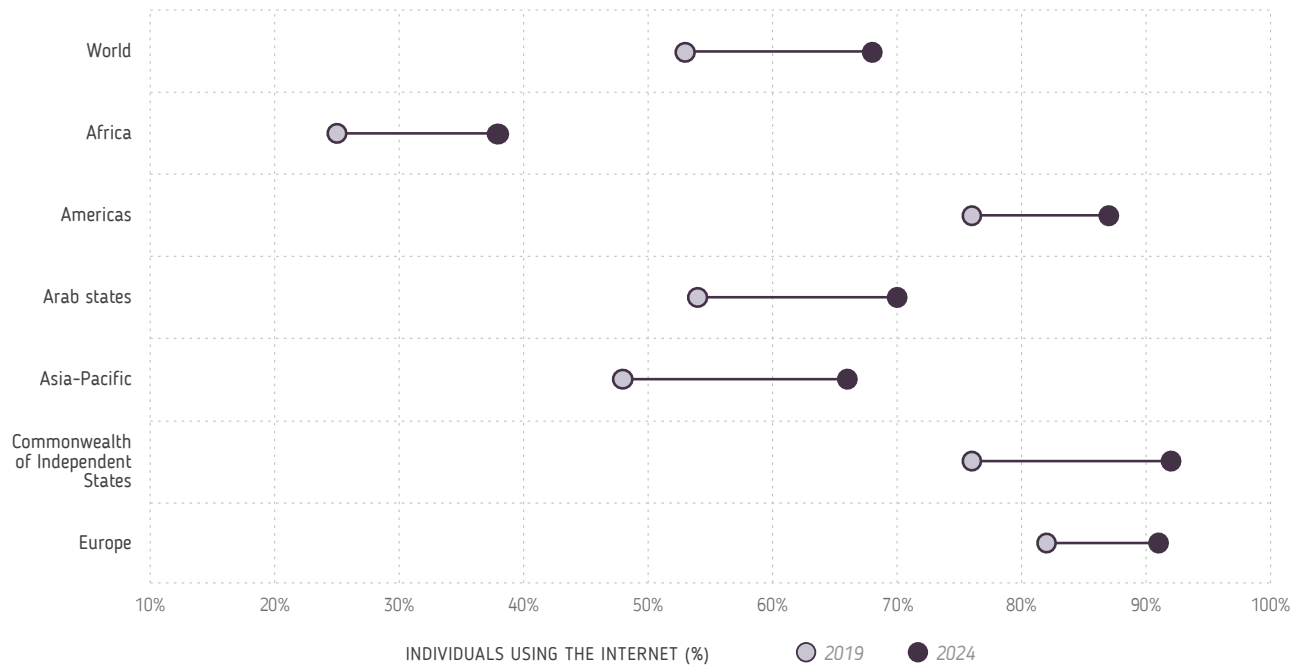
Emerging threats of Africa's digital boom

Digitalisation is a strategic imperative that is reshaping economies, organisations and societies worldwide. Recognising this, the AU launched the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030), aiming to harness digital technologies and innovation to advance Agenda 2063 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.²³³ Africa has also partnered with international actors in related initiatives, such as the World Bank's Digital Economy for Africa Initiative, the EU-Africa Global Gateway and the AU–EU Digital for Development Hub.²³⁴ However, the continent continues to lag behind global benchmarks due to structural barriers, including unreliable electricity supply, high data costs, limited rural connectivity and low levels of digital literacy.²³⁵ In 2024, for example, only 38% of Africans were using the internet, compared to a global average of 68% (Figure 9.1).²³⁶ Nevertheless, Africa has one of the fastest-growing internet penetration rates in the world – since 2005, internet access has grown on average by almost 17% per year, compared to a global average of 8%. However, this growth has slowed over the past decade, reaching 10.7% per year compared to a global average of 6.1%.²³⁷

The increase in internet access has fuelled the continent's digital economy and contributed to economic growth. Between 2012 and 2020, the digital economy's contribution to GDP increased from 1% to 4.5% and is projected to reach 5.2% by the end of 2025 and 8.5% by 2050.²³⁸ A study of 40 sub-Saharan countries found that a 10% increase in mobile penetration was linked to a 1.2% rise in GDP per capita,²³⁹ while another study revealed that increasing investment by 0.4% in information and communications technology (ICT) corresponded to a 0.7% improvement in inclusive growth.²⁴⁰

The internet gives individuals, communities and economies access to information, markets, services and opportunities; facilitates trade and innovation; and connects African societies to the global digital economy.²⁴¹ Yet, at the same time, criminal actors have been quick to exploit the gaps created by weak infrastructure, fragmented regulations, insufficient policy coordination and underdeveloped cybersecurity. The 2025 Index found a correlation of +0.56 between criminal markets and cyber-dependent crimes, indicating that countries with higher levels of cyber-dependent crime also have more diverse and entrenched criminal markets.

FIGURE 9.1

Internet use in Africa and globally (2019–2024)

Cyber-dependent crimes include ransomware, banking trojans, online scams, phishing, business email compromise, malware-as-a-service and identity theft.²⁴² The Index measures cyber-dependent crimes separately from cyber-enabled crimes. For example, cyber-enabled financial crimes are considered as financial crimes, while crimes solely depending on the use of ICT infrastructures

(such as the spread of malware or ransomware) are assessed as cyber-dependent crimes. In 2025, cyber-dependent crimes and cyber-enabled crimes accounted for over 30% of reported crimes in West and East Africa.²⁴³ The direct financial cost of these crimes is estimated at over US\$3 billion annually, which excludes the cost of missed business opportunities and reputational damage.²⁴⁴

ENABLING OTHER CRIMES THROUGH CYBERSPACE

In addition to cyber-dependent crimes, criminal groups use the internet to support other criminal activities, exploiting online anonymity, coded language and disposable tools to operate without leaving a trace. Some more traditional criminal markets are now cyber-enabled, including drug sales, human trafficking and wildlife trafficking.²⁴⁵

Human trafficking and human smuggling are routinely facilitated through social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps. In West Africa, organised criminal groups that are active both locally and in Europe use Facebook and WhatsApp, among other platforms, to advertise services, lure victims and even promote 'travel packages', which include forged documents, transport arrangements and accommodation along the route.²⁴⁶

Trafficking of wildlife, arms and narcotics takes place through digital platforms, with African organised crime groups often working in cooperation with transnational networks. South Africa is a major hub for digital advertisements offering wildlife products (both live animals and processed animal parts), particularly those linked to traditional medicine markets, for sale locally and internationally. Sellers frequently evade detection by using coded language and emojis in their listings, making enforcement even more challenging.²⁴⁷

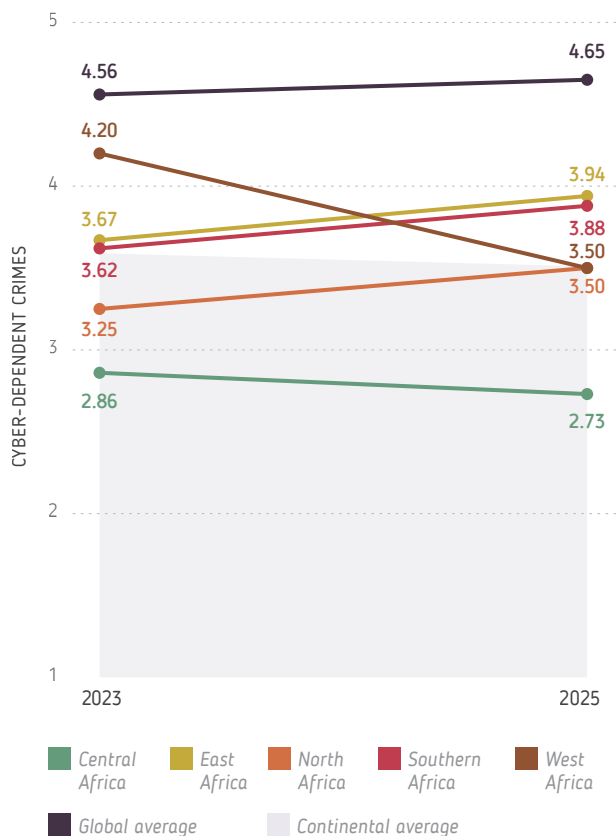
The trade in drugs and associated commodities is increasingly shaped by Africa's rapid digitalisation. Digital tools are playing a central role in Africa's expansion as a key global transit hub for cocaine from South America, heroin from Asia and domestically cultivated cannabis.²⁴⁸ Mobile money platforms, such as M-Pesa in East Africa, have made it easier for traffickers to move and conceal profits from sales of drugs and other illicit products.²⁴⁹ In West Africa, mobile money platforms have been linked to the surge in illicit sales of prescription drugs, particularly tramadol, in Benin, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria.²⁵⁰

9.1 Cyber-dependent crimes

Introduced in the 2023 Index, cyber-dependent crimes continue to be the least pervasive of the criminal markets measured, declining slightly overall in 2025 (from 3.59 to 3.51), as shown in Figure 9.2.

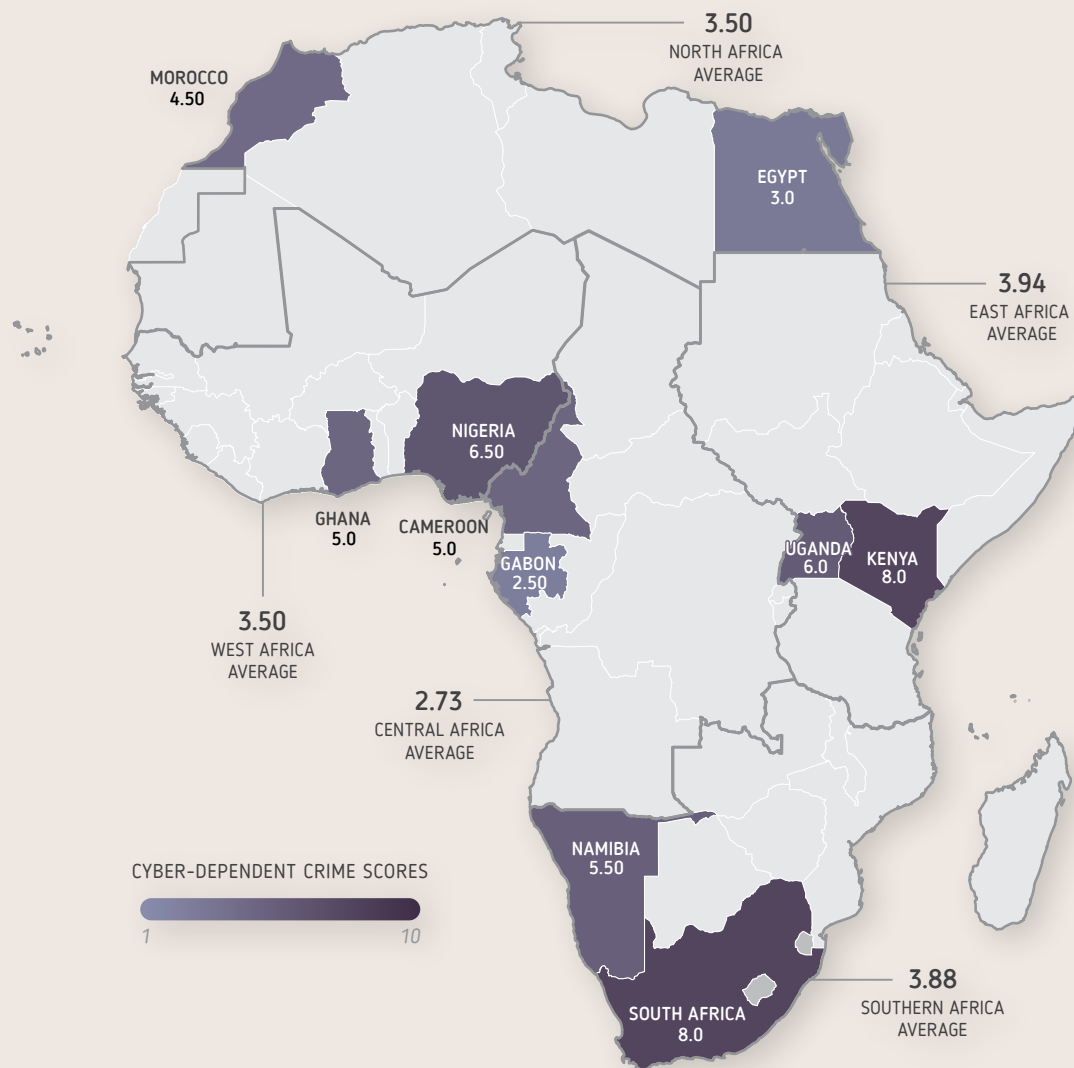
Globally, Africa has consistently ranked second to last for this criminal market (just ahead of Oceania), due to its low internet penetration rate, high internet costs and underdeveloped technological infrastructure.

FIGURE 9.2
Cyber-dependent crimes in Africa



Despite the overall decline, the picture is different for countries where internet access is high and expanding, including Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa. Cyber-dependent crimes in these countries have remained high in the 2025 Index, with South Africa recording a full point increase in this criminal market since 2023. During this period, many African countries were hit by major cyberattacks that affected infrastructure and services across various sectors, including banking, energy and government. Figure 9.3 provides a small sample of the millions of attacks registered across the continent, which highlight the risks for different sectors and data security.

FIGURE 9.3

Examples of major cyber-dependent crimes (2023–2025)**CENTRAL AFRICA****CAMEROON (2024)**

In January 2024, a cyberattack on Eneo, Cameroon's national energy provider, disrupted several applications. The company confirmed the breach but did not disclose further details.²⁵¹

GABON (2023)

In June 2023, the ransomware group Bianlian targeted the BGFIBank Group in Gabon, stealing sensitive commercial data and disrupting banking services.²⁵²

EAST AFRICA**KENYA (2024)**

A hacking attack on Kenya's Micro and Small Enterprises Authority exposed sensitive data on the dark web. The leaked data, which reportedly included employee records, government correspondence, financial statements and business registration details, was allegedly offered for sale to the highest bidder.²⁵³

SUDAN (2024)

In early March 2024, the 'hactivist' group Anonymous Sudan launched a series of DDoS attacks on two of Egypt's largest mobile operators that caused service outages for hours.²⁵⁴

UGANDA (2024)

Offshore hackers identifying themselves as 'Waste' targeted the Bank of Uganda, infiltrating its IT systems and illegally transferring approximately US\$16.8 million.²⁵⁵

NORTH AFRICA

EGYPT (2024)

The group FunkSec breached Egyptair's digital infrastructure, gaining access to administrative portals and webmail systems. Although no ransom was publicly demanded, access to Egyptair's systems was listed for sale on a dark web platform.²⁵⁶

MOROCCO (2025)

An unprecedented cyberattack on Morocco's social security services resulted in the leakage of large volumes of sensitive data concerning millions of citizens and thousands of companies.²⁵⁷

SOUTHERN AFRICA

NAMIBIA (2024)

In December 2024, a ransomware attack on state-owned Telecom Namibia leaked almost half a million pieces of customer data, including personal and financial details of ministries, senior officials and other clients. As the company refused to meet their demands, the hackers (Hunters International) started

releasing the stolen data to the public, including identification documents, residential addresses and banking details, exposing customers to identity theft and financial fraud.²⁵⁸

SOUTH AFRICA (2024)

In June 2024, a ransomware attack on the South African National Health Laboratory Service severely disrupted the public health system, taking its website offline for the weekend and making laboratory documents, testing and sample processing inaccessible. The breach also put sensitive medical data of millions of patients at risk.²⁵⁹

WEST AFRICA

GHANA (2024)

Ransomware attacks against the country's primary power distributor, the Electricity Company of Ghana disabled the company's electricity vending capabilities, affecting service delivery across the country. The week-long disruption resulted in financial losses estimated at US\$34–42 million and severely affected the company's operations and millions of customers.²⁶⁰

NIGERIA (2024)

In December 2024, the National Bureau of Statistics was attacked, leaving its website displaying only a blank page with the message: 'Page hacked'.²⁶¹

The most prevalent and growing forms of cyber-dependent crime are ransomware and distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. As the examples in Figure 9.3 illustrate, ransomware attacks can have severe consequences for businesses, government and individuals, disrupting critical infrastructure and services and resulting in financial losses. In 2024, the number of monthly detections of ransomware attacks rose compared to 2023,²⁶² with Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa experiencing the highest number of attacks in Africa – more than 30 000 incidents were detected for these three countries. Many of these attacks were carried out by 'ransomware-as-a-service' groups, such as LockBit and Hunters International, which use malware bought or leased from ransomware developers.²⁶³ Cyber criminals are increasingly using Africa as a testing ground for new types of ransomware and other cyber-dependent attacks.²⁶⁴ They fine-tune their methods by focusing initially on vulnerable

enterprises (large and small) across sectors (including finance, energy and manufacturing) in countries with limited cybersecurity, before launching attacks in more fortified regions.²⁶⁵

DDoS attacks are also increasing in Africa, especially in countries with high levels of internet penetration. In DDoS attacks, a flood of internet traffic is used to overwhelm networks or servers, disrupting their availability and limiting access for legitimate users. During the first half of 2024, South Africa recorded by far the most DDoS attacks of any African country, with 230 000 compared to 75 000 in Namibia and 60 000 in Morocco. The attacks affected critical infrastructure sectors, including wireless telecommunications carriers, computer-related services, insurance agencies and electronic computer manufacturing.²⁶⁶ The increase in DDoS attacks is motivated not only by financial gain (when hackers seek to extort businesses) but also

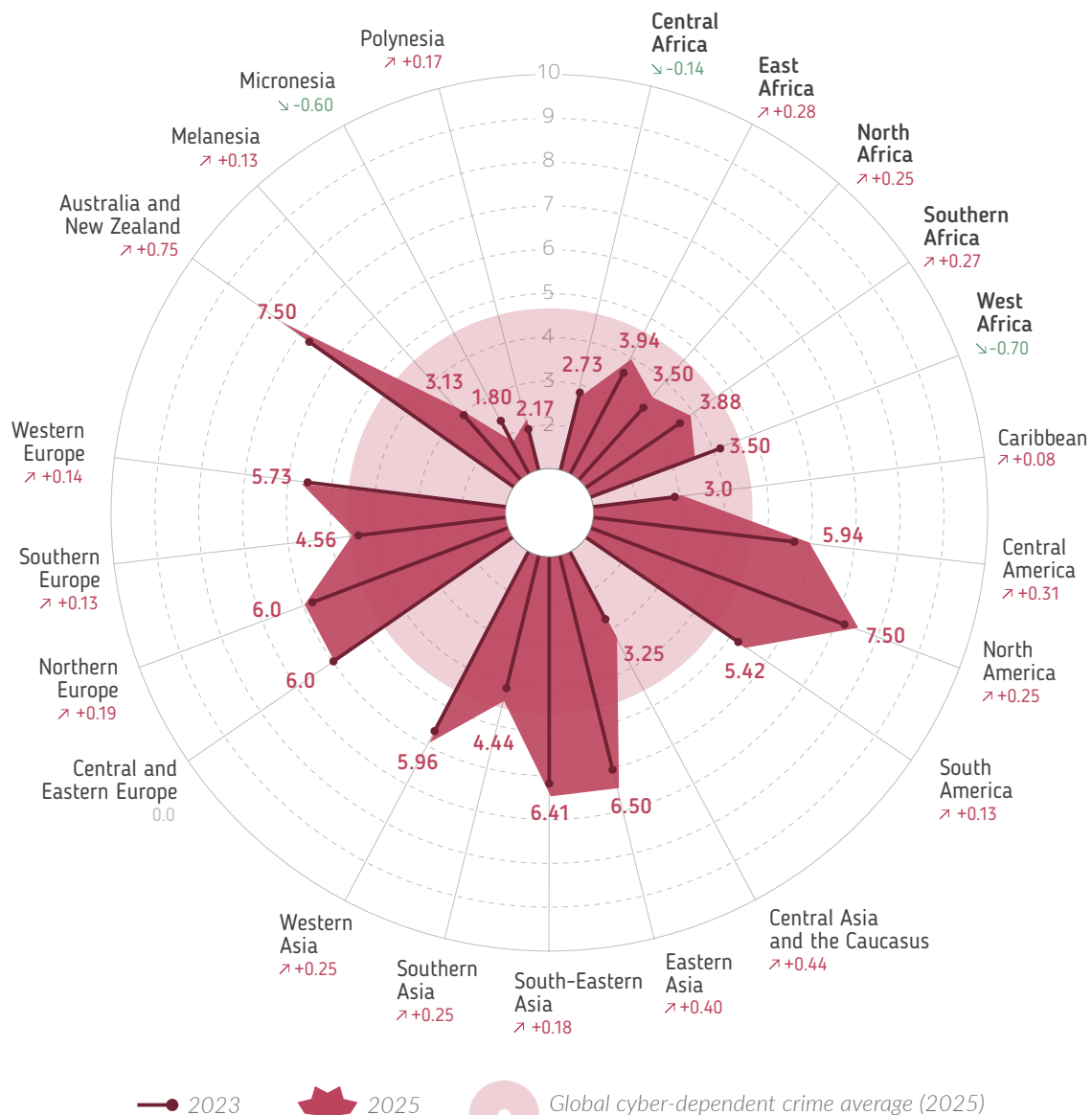
by political ideology (when state-sponsored groups or 'hacktivists' seek to cause maximum disruption) in regions where geopolitical tensions spill over into the digital world.²⁶⁷ This blurring of the line between political activism and organised crime can make it difficult for the Index to capture all cyber-related criminal activity.

The true scale of cyber-dependent crime in Africa is probably underestimated due to the continent's limited detection capacity, underdeveloped reporting mechanisms and inadequate data collection. This means that the cases that make the headlines represent a small fraction of the complete picture. To put things into perspective,

in 2024, cybersecurity firms estimated that there were more than 4.5 million ransomware detections and over 20 million DDoS attacks worldwide.²⁶⁸ These figures dwarf the reported incidents in Africa. This is why it is critical to complement the Index's quantitative scores with deeper contextual and qualitative analysis. Such analysis is essential to uncover the hidden dynamics, emerging threats and local nuances that numbers alone may fail to reflect. Only through this comprehensive lens can we gain a clearer understanding of the developing cybercrime landscape in Africa and prepare for the challenges that lie ahead.

FIGURE 9.4

Cyber-dependent crimes across global regions (2023–2025)



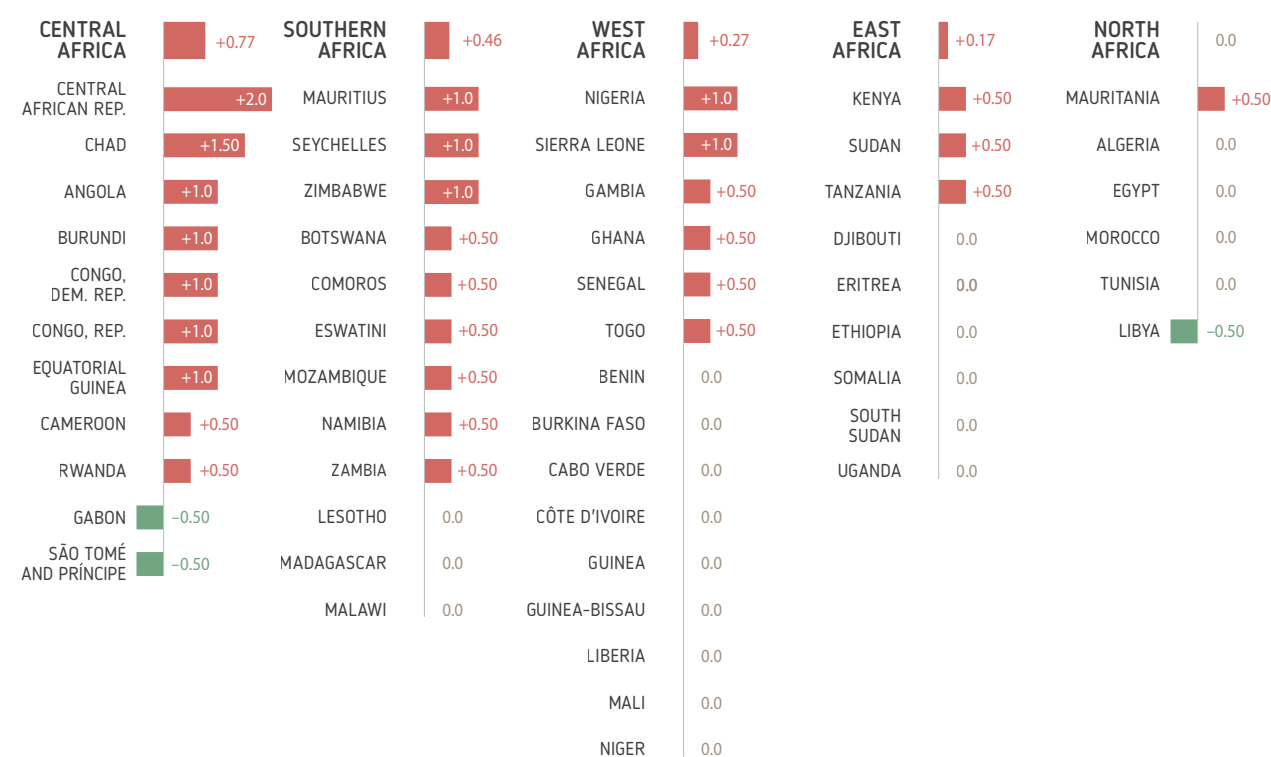
9.2 Cyber-enabled financial crimes

Introduced as a new indicator in the 2023 Index, financial crimes were the fastest-growing criminal market in Africa between 2023 and 2025, especially in Central Africa, which recorded the highest increase across all regions globally. A major contributing factor appears to be the surge in cyber-enabled fraud, as reflected in the scores of countries known to have high levels of cybercrime – since

2023, Nigeria and Angola, for example, have each recorded a full-point increase in their financial crime scores, while Ghana, Zambia and Kenya have each seen increases of half a point. These upward trends underscore the rising prominence of online fraud that poses a cross-border threat for both Africa and the rest of the world.

FIGURE 9.5

Financial crimes in Africa (2023–2025)



With the growing use of social media, digital banking, e-commerce and other online services, scammers are increasingly exploiting digital platforms for deception and profit.²⁶⁹ In 2023, nearly 40% of people surveyed across Africa said that they had been affected by some form of online fraud, highlighting the scale of these problems on the continent.²⁷⁰ The economic impact of online scams is particularly profound for developing countries. In 2024, Kenya and South Africa lost 3.6% and 3.4% respectively of their GDP to online scams.²⁷¹

In Africa, the most common types of online scams are phishing and romance scams, which have grown

more sophisticated through the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and social engineering techniques. Phishing-based financial scams accounted for over 30% of detected cyber-related incidents in 2025.²⁷² In these scams, cybercriminals deceive victims into revealing sensitive information, such as banking credentials, that is used to gain unauthorised access, steal identities and commit financial fraud. The widespread availability of low-cost phishing kits and tools on illicit online marketplaces has fuelled the growth of these operations. Criminals enhance the realism and effectiveness of phishing campaigns by using AI to tailor messages to local languages and cultural contexts.²⁷³

Romance scams are on the rise particularly in West Africa,²⁷⁴ which is home to some infamous global scammers. They include Nigeria's Yahoo Boys, Ghana's Sakawa Boys, and Côte d'Ivoire's Brouteurs.²⁷⁵ What began decades ago with hard-copy letters and faxes has developed into sophisticated digital fraud schemes that leverage AI to deceive victims. Scammers purchase hacked

Facebook or Twitter accounts and use them to create fake online personas. Through these personas, they target comparatively wealthy individuals, primarily in the Global North, with the initial aim of forming emotional and romantic connections with victims. Once trust has been established, they manipulate and exploit their targets, both financially and emotionally.

HISTORY OF SCAMMING IN WEST AFRICA

Long before the rise of the internet, West Africa, particularly Nigeria, had gained notoriety for sophisticated financial fraud schemes. One of the best-known schemes was the advance-fee fraud, commonly referred to as '419 fraud' (after Section 419 of the Nigerian Criminal Code), where victims were convinced to pay upfront fees with the promise of large financial returns that never materialised. The origins of such schemes can be traced back to the early 1900s,²⁷⁶ when newspaper advertisements appeared across the US and the UK offering everything from miracle cures and spiritual services to business opportunities, gold and land investments, and messages from so-called Nigerian princes seeking pen pals – all were designed to lure victims with promises of wealth, exotic goods (ivory or emeralds) and other rewards.²⁷⁷

The modern successors of these early scams are highly sophisticated cyber-enabled operations that use AI-generated chatbots, hyper-realistic photo manipulation and deepfakes to defraud unsuspecting individuals on dating apps and social media platforms.²⁷⁸

In recent years, informal online training networks (often referred to by scammers as 'hustle academies') have emerged. These underground cybercrime schools have flourished in West African countries, particularly in Nigeria and Ghana. They have become transnational hubs of cyber fraud education, training recruits in strategy, manipulation techniques and the use of digital tools. They are decentralised and increasingly global in reach.²⁷⁹

A growing number of young people are being drawn to these networks, driven by socio-economic pressures and high unemployment, which exceeds 30% in Ghana, for example.²⁸⁰ The allure of wealth and the glamorisation of material success play an important role in normalising cybercrimes. Fraudsters flaunt luxury cars, houses and designer brands, presenting themselves as successful

and self-made.²⁸¹ The inability of most African governments to provide their growing population with viable economic opportunities makes these criminal activities more appealing to young people.

In addition to the threat of homegrown online scams, foreign cybercriminals – particularly members of major Asian criminal networks – are increasingly involved on the African continent.²⁸² Law enforcement operations in Angola, Nigeria and Zambia have uncovered cybercriminal schemes led by foreign nationals, including from East and South East Asia, with a notable rise in Chinese involvement.²⁸³ The illicit operations included illegal online gambling platforms and cyber-enabled fraud schemes, often run through complex and well-resourced structures.

These operations have exposed concerning new links between African countries and notorious Asian organised crime groups, particularly those known for managing cyber-enabled scam compounds.²⁸⁴ Experts have warned of a two-way flow, where

African nationals are being trafficked to work in scam compounds abroad, while experienced 'professional scammers' from Asia are relocating to African countries to establish scam centres based on models used in South East Asia.²⁸⁵

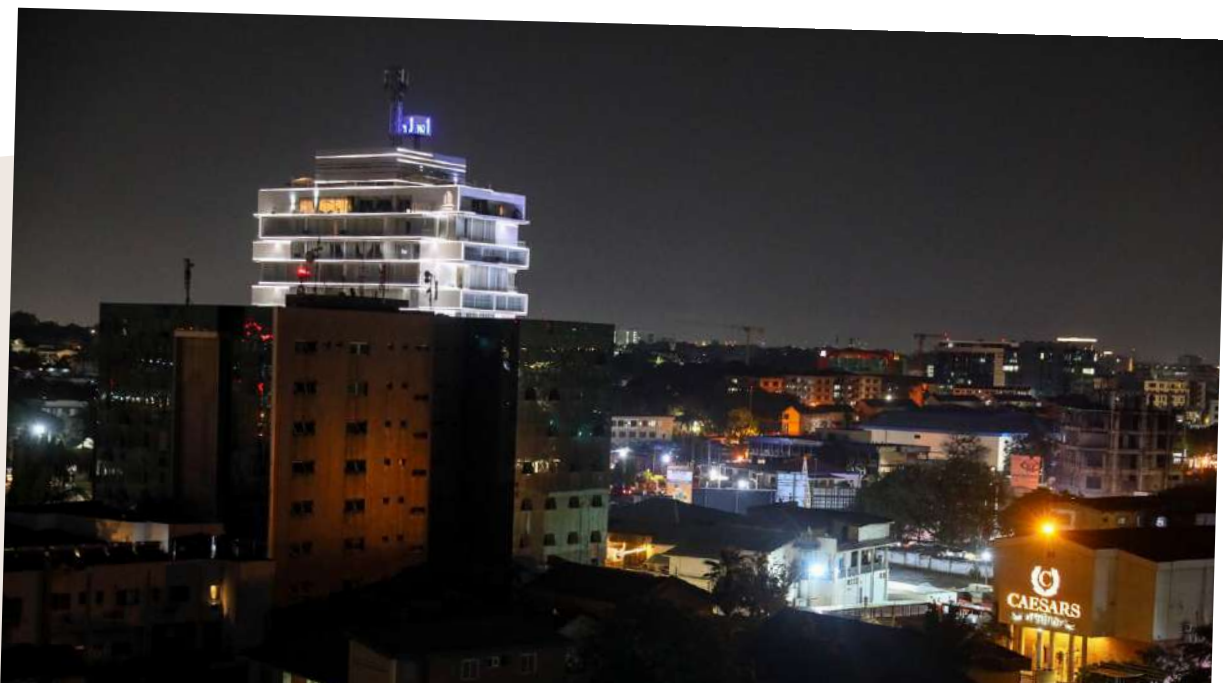
MONEY LAUNDERING THROUGH CYBERSPACE

Criminals are exploiting cyberspace for money laundering and other IFFs.²⁸⁶ Across Africa, the rapid expansion of emerging financial technologies (fintech), including cryptocurrencies and e-wallets, has boosted financial inclusion, especially among young populations. At the same time, FinTech has created new avenues for IFFs, offering speed, cross-border reach and a degree of anonymity, all of which are appealing to criminal actors.²⁸⁷

Nigeria leads the continent in adopting cryptocurrency,²⁸⁸ which has surged since 2023 amid economic pressures (currency depreciation and rising inflation), the removal of fuel subsidies and the lifting of a ban on crypto-related banking.²⁸⁹ There, criminal networks such as Black Axe have been linked to the use of cryptocurrencies to conceal illicit profits and facilitate cross-border transfers.²⁹⁰ Black Axe is a highly structured network believed to be responsible for a large share of the world's cyber-enabled financial fraud,²⁹¹ in addition to involvement in human and drug trafficking.²⁹²

Cyber-dependent crimes will continue to grow in scale and complexity in Africa, as internet penetration and digital services expand, and the continent integrates further into the global digital economy. This will create new opportunities and new vulnerabilities. The continent may increasingly become both a target and a base of operations for cyber-dependent crime, as local and global criminal

actors exploit gaps in regulations, enforcement and infrastructure. The growing involvement of transnational organised crime groups, particularly those with links to Asian cybercrime networks, signals a shift towards more globalised and networked threats. If left unaddressed, these threats could have a severe impact on services, financial systems and public trust.



9.3 Resilience to Africa's rising cyber threat

Africa's growing connectivity has been accompanied by serious vulnerabilities, particularly in countries with fragmented regulatory frameworks, limited detection capacities, weak reporting systems and insufficient data collection. In most African countries, legal and prosecutorial frameworks were found to be inadequate, underscoring systemic gaps in national cyber resilience.²⁹³

In an attempt to close these gaps, several countries – notably Burkina Faso, Gambia, Nigeria and Zambia – have strengthened their cybercrime legal frameworks, aligning national efforts with international standards.²⁹⁴ This reflects a growing political commitment to addressing cyber threats. However, these laws are not without controversy. For example, broad and vaguely defined provisions in the recently enacted laws in Gambia and Zambia have raised concerns that, without adequate safeguards, such laws could be weaponised to restrict online expression and media freedoms.²⁹⁵ The challenge for policymakers is balancing digital security and civil rights.

Many African states have increased their law enforcement capacity by establishing or expanding specialised cybercrime units and improving technical readiness. For instance, Algeria has enhanced the operational scope of its Central Cybercrime Unit and Benin has established a National Cybercrime Centre.

Beyond enforcement, governments have launched extensive awareness campaigns in schools, on the radio and on social media to educate the public on cyber hygiene and resilience, often with support from civil society and international partners.²⁹⁶ Furthermore, governments are increasingly collaborating with private sector actors, particularly telecommunications and internet providers, as part of mounting a preventive response.²⁹⁷

Despite some encouraging progress, African nations still face serious challenges in curbing cyber threats due to a lack of capabilities and of cooperation among states. Most African law enforcement agencies lack the necessary technical tools, such as advanced digital forensics laboratories, secure digital evidence storage systems and real-time network monitoring technologies,²⁹⁸ to conduct timely investigations, trace digital evidence and dismantle transnational networks.²⁹⁹ At the same time, cybercriminals are adopting encryption, anonymisation software and other tools at a rate that outpaces the capabilities of most national systems. The asymmetry between the capabilities of states and the sophisticated digital tools used by cybercriminals risks widening the enforcement gap further still.³⁰⁰ This is reflected in the 2025 Index, where the continent's average 'law enforcement' score has declined by 0.41 points since 2019.

In addition, African countries have not yet achieved the level of legal harmonisation, data sharing or international cooperation required to tackle cybercrime effectively, given that it is an inherently cross-border issue. Fragmented legislation, a lack of interoperability between systems and limited access to digital evidence from foreign-based platforms hinder efforts to pursue perpetrators beyond national borders. As a result, many investigations remain stalled or inconclusive, leaving the continent increasingly exposed to transnational cybercriminal networks.³⁰¹

A holistic and integrated approach is needed to tackle cybercrime, including strong legal frameworks, improved technical capacities and regulatory reforms grounded in human rights principles with robust oversight mechanisms. Unless cybersecurity becomes a fundamental component of Africa's development strategies instead of a reactive policy response, cybercrime will continue to outpace enforcement, undermining the continent's digital future before its full potential can be realised.

SECTION 10

Conclusion



ONE YEAR LATER

**WHAT HAS
CHANGED?**

10

Conclusion

For the past seven years, the ENACT Africa Organised Crime Index has traced the development, diversification and geographical spread of a number of influential criminal markets and actors. A combination of economic, political and social drivers has shaped the threat of organised crime confronting the continent today. Globalisation, free movement and digitalisation have created fertile ground for illicit markets, while limited economic growth prospects and a rapidly expanding workforce have meant increased reliance on the informal economy and sustained trafficking and smuggling flows. The foreign relations and geopolitical ambitions of some countries have also facilitated criminal networks and exacerbated criminal economies.

At the same time, resilience has failed to keep pace with criminality, which poses multiple risks for the continent.

- Already strained public health systems are increasingly unable to manage the mounting health challenges brought on by growing drug and substance abuse.
- The illicit economy continues to overshadow the licit sector, even in countries that have seen modest economic growth, diminishing incentives and political will to combat it.
- Internet penetration is relatively low, but cyber-dependent crimes (including online fraud, malware and ransomware) are likely to increase if not addressed.
- Reliance on the informal economy is set to increase, as economies struggle to accommodate the growing workforce.
- The rise of authoritarian political regimes signals a shift toward more fragmented and self-interested governance structures. These rising sentiments must be actively countered.

In Africa, resilience to organised crime is insufficient for several reasons:

- Ongoing conflicts limit the capacity of states to anticipate and respond effectively to criminal threats.
- The involvement of state-embedded actors complicates interventions, diminishes political will and weakens governance structures, leaving gaps that organised crime can exploit.

- Responses to organised crime tend to prioritise institutional mechanisms, such as enacting laws, ratifying international instruments and running campaigns as part of political rhetoric and national strategies, with little practical follow-through.
- Limited investments in technology to combat cyber-dependent crimes, support for victims and witnesses, and the empowerment of non-state actors have resulted in an imbalanced framework.

Despite these challenges, the tide can – and must – be turned. This requires making changes that can build resilience frameworks able to withstand the threat of organised crime. Signs of these changes are already visible, for example in the high-level regional advocacy bodies convened to engender new approaches to drug-related issues, and resources must be directed towards supporting these kinds of initiatives.³⁰²

Other realistic changes that can be made include

- better regulation of informal sectors, to alleviate pressure on people to engage in informal economies;
- implementing safety nets in sectors that are prone to criminal capture; and
- enhancing oversight mechanisms that allow the government to be held to account, particularly by non-state actors, and to deter state-embedded actors.

To break the mutually reinforcing cycle of conflict and organised crime, solutions for long-term peace must be prioritised, including implementing processes that provide legal alternative livelihoods and addressing the social and economic grievances that underpin conflict.

The role of civil society actors in building resilience is crucial. Despite operating in increasingly restrictive environments, civil society actors support those who are the most vulnerable and affected by criminality. They expose corruption, often at considerable risk, and build community-based initiatives to support and build resilience at a local level.



African states can also turn to their advantage those conditions that have made the continent vulnerable to combat transnational organised crime. These include harnessing new technologies and human capital, to reduce systemic socio-economic vulnerabilities to organised crime, and leveraging the growing demand for natural resources, to create economic opportunities.

In addition to a holistic and inclusive approach to tackling organised crime, ongoing data collection and monitoring are crucial. Without reliable and comparable data, it is impossible to accurately

gauge the scale of organised crime or measure improvements in responses. Although the ENACT project has now come to its end, it has laid a foundation that will live on through the Global Organized Crime Index, ensuring continued monitoring, richer comparisons and highlighting shared lessons. Africa is cemented within the global criminal economy and should be assessed within this broader context to ensure that it is included in international efforts to understand and respond to organised crime.

10.1 Key action points

- **Prioritise investment in young people.** Young people make up the majority of the growing workforce in Africa and are not receiving sufficient support, which consequently exposes them to organised crime as either victims or perpetrators. Any efforts to reduce vulnerability to organised crime should place young people at the centre.
- **Monitor organised crime.** The biggest challenges in combating organised crime and building resilience to it are its clandestine nature and the diversity of criminal markets and actors. Considerable knowledge gaps exist regarding the nature, extent and impact of organised crime, even within official country statistics, seizure data and empirical research. Monitoring organised crime is essential to close information gaps, and capacity needs to be built to enable the collection, retention and sharing of information that can inform policy responses.
- **Ensure the AU prioritises organised crime.** The continent recognises that international cooperation is a key pillar for building resilience to transnational organised crime, as highlighted by the high scores for 'international cooperation' in the 2025 Africa Index. Although organised crime is mentioned in various AU conventions and resolutions, it is seldom foregrounded. The AU should prioritise tackling organised crime to build the requisite political support for a coordinated response and ensure the synchronisation of legal instruments and approaches (instead of the current individualistic national policies and laws, and isolated instances of international cooperation).
- **Strengthen civil society and support local resilience.** Local communities are the most affected by organised crime, while civil society actors are at the forefront of building community resilience and offering support to victims. Declines in the 'non-state actors' resilience indicator show that civil society actors are now operating in increasingly constrained and challenging environments. To ensure a whole-of-society approach, greater attention and investment should be devoted to enhancing community resilience to organised crime and supporting civil society actors.
- **Establish independent investigative bodies to tackle entrenched criminality.** The substantial role of state-embedded actors in driving organised crime (as evidenced by their high scores in the 2025 Index) highlights how organised crime has become deeply embedded within state structures. To ensure that state-embedded actors are held accountable for their role in organised crime, independent investigative bodies should be established to uncover their links with other criminal actors.
- **Consolidate democracy and good governance.** Conflict, fragility and weak governance structures are key drivers of organised crime in Africa. In order to create environments in which impunity, political instability, wars and

conflicts are eliminated, or at least minimised, it is important to consolidate democracy and good governance practices, such as ensuring free and fair elections.

- **Use technology to disrupt illicit activities.** ICT infrastructures have created new frontiers for organised crime, giving rise to new forms such as online human trafficking, cyber-enabled IFFs and money laundering, and the spread of ransomware and malware. However, technology can also be used by law enforcement as a tool to disrupt illicit markets. To achieve this, the technological capacity of law enforcement and investigative bodies should be strengthened and investment in technology and ICT systems prioritised.
- **Build resilient security and governance partnerships.** The cases of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger demonstrate how geopolitical dynamics and organised crime have become mutually reinforcing factors that shape developments in contemporary international relations. Governments and international organisations should prioritise establishing robust security and governance partnerships with vulnerable states. This would include coordinated multilateral engagement to prevent criminal actors from exploiting instability and the integration of anti-organised crime strategies into broader geopolitical, economic and foreign policy frameworks.
- **Tighten financial regulations in major transit and destination jurisdictions for African IFFs.** Countries such as Cyprus, Panama and the UAE have been identified as primary destinations for IFFs from Africa, enabled by weaknesses in their financial regulatory systems. Establishing public beneficial ownership registries and expanding legal and administrative tools to track suspicious financial and property transactions are critical to addressing the problem.
- **Design integrated peacebuilding and development strategies.** The trajectory of organised crime in Africa shows that economic, social, historical and political factors often underpin the intersection of crime and conflict. In order to confront this issue, countries must invest in community needs, create alternative livelihoods and provide pathways out of illicit economies for conflict actors.



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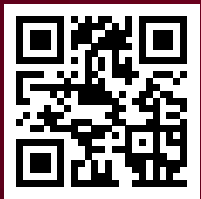




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The European Union has placed security in Africa at the forefront of its international agenda, notably through its Pan-African Programme – the first programme of its kind to centre on development and cooperation, and covering Africa as a whole. One project under the Pan-African Programme is ENACT: Enhancing Africa's capacity to respond more effectively to transnational organised crime. ENACT works to mitigate the impact of transnational organised crime in Africa on development, governance, security and the rule of law. It achieves this in two ways: firstly, by building knowledge and offering evidence-based analysis of organised crime in Africa, which will inform policy and enhance cooperation at the regional and continental level. Secondly, ENACT builds skills and capacity among key African stakeholders to better respond to transnational organised crime and mitigate its impact.

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