

Enablers of transnational organized crime in Africa: A 21st-century perspective

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Abstract

Transnational organized crime (TOC) persists as a significant catalyst for illicit economies and social upheaval in Africa. While comprehensive national estimates quantifying TOC's impact remain elusive for numerous African nations, recent research underscores its pervasive nature across the continent. Notably, sophisticated cybercrime networks originating in West Africa have extended their reach globally, affecting millions and resulting in substantial financial losses. This study presents a scoping review of the existing literature, pinpointing the primary factors that enable and influence TOC proliferation in Africa. Conducted in June 2024, the review utilized Boolean search strategies to sift through multiple databases, including JSTOR, Springer Nature, and publications from the U.S. Department of Justice and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). From this extensive search, twenty relevant studies were identified. These studies revealed that TOC in Africa is enabled by chronic political instability, systemic corruption, and enduring socioeconomic hardship. The illegal enterprise model is adopted as a theoretical framework to understand the evolution and adaptation of transnational organized crime. The rapid advancement of digital technologies and increasing globalization have further expanded the operational capabilities of these networks, facilitating cross-border crime and undermining state control. Limited institutional capacity, under-resourced law enforcement, and fragmented responses exacerbate the challenge. TOCs continue to undermine governance, economic growth, and social cohesion, and require coordinated and adaptive regional strategies for sustained intervention.

Keywords: *transnational organized crime, globalization, technology, criminal entrepreneurship, cybercrime*

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1. Introduction

Transnational crime is among the predominant forms of organized crime in Africa. It is a conceptual phenomenon used by scholars to understand and explain offenses committed across national borders (Bouchard, 2020). Although this explanation seems straightforward, defining transnational crime has proved to be challenging, largely due to the inconsistent application of related terminology associated with the concept. In contemporary criminological discourse, employing terms such as transnational, cross-border, and organized crime is quite prevalent when analysing criminal activities that extend beyond the confines of individual jurisdictions. The frequent use of these terminologies often results in conceptual ambiguity surrounding crime that transcends national boundaries. The term "transnational" typically refers to criminal activities that involve actors, methods, or impacts that operate on a global scale, across multiple countries, whereas "cross-border" highlights crimes that span across national borders, emphasizing the geographical aspect of such activities (Frowd, 2018; Enderwick, 2019). Meanwhile, "organized crime" suggests a structured group or network engaging in illicit operations for profit (Bouchard, 2020). The overlap and nuances among these terms often create confusion, making it increasingly difficult to clearly understand what constitutes transnational organized crime. Despite the definitional conundrum, transnational crime is defined as criminal activities that cross national boundaries, involving multiple jurisdictions and often exploiting disparities in legal systems, economic conditions, or enforcement capabilities (Eyo et al., 2024). Extant literature also describes transnational organized crime (TOC) as a broad spectrum of serious, profit-driven criminal activities that transcend national borders and involve the participation of more than one country (Barak, 2015). Many activities can be characterised as transnational organized crimes; these illicit activities include but are not limited to human trafficking, smuggling, wildlife crimes, firearm trafficking, drug trafficking, as well as cyber-related crimes (Sergie et al., 2021). In today's digitalized society, TOC operations have benefited from advanced technologies to transcend national boundaries through encrypted communication platforms and dark web marketplaces (Kassab & Rosen, 2018; Saito, 2021). This operation reflects the modern reality of transnational organized crime as a complex and dynamic threat, characterized by its integration with technology and global criminal networks.

Globally, the influence of TOC is substantial and pervasive. According to the Global Organized Crime Index (2023), 83% of the world's population lives in countries with high

levels of criminality, suggesting the extensive reach of organized crime globally. In Africa, the impact of TOC is more profound because organized crime groups operate on a much larger scale, embedding themselves within economies, governance structures, and societies (Shaw & Reitano, 2019; Sergi & Storti, 2021). While there is no reliable estimate of the full burden of transnational organized crime in Africa, the Enhancing Africa's Response to Transnational Organized Crime (ENACT) initiative, through its Africa Organized Crime Index 2023, reports a prevalence of widespread illicit activities across the continent, with human trafficking ranking as the most dominant threat, while wildlife crime affects a significant portion of Southern Africa's ecosystems. Equally, drug trafficking prevalence is expanding rapidly across over half of the continent's trafficking routes (UNODC, 2020; ENACT, 2023). Hall et al. (2021) indicate that widespread cybercrime activities have impacted a vast majority of digital interactions, while arms trafficking promotes a notable share of conflict zones (Small Arms Survey, 2021). Conversely, the Global Initiative report reveals that illegal gold mining accounts for a significant share of unlawful mineral exports in Africa, while oil theft diverts a notable amount of energy resources (Hunter et al., 2021). These different forms of illegitimate activity are deeply embedded in transnational organized crime networks that exploit Africa's porous borders and global economic ties (ENACT, 2023).

The literature surrounding transnational organized crime in Africa is abundant, exploring its historical roots and evolution from earlier contexts to the complex realities of the 21st century. Many of these discussions have undergone thorough examination, offering valuable insights into the various dimensions of this issue. However, they have different focuses distinct from the focus of this study. This study employs a scoping review approach to map the extent of current research, identify gaps in the literature, and reveal underexplored aspects of this phenomenon that warrant further investigation. This study examines the intricate interplay of social, economic, and globalization factors that contribute to the persistence and evolution of organized criminal networks in Africa, particularly investigating how traditional regional illicit activities have transformed into sophisticated, globally connected operations in the 21st century. The central question guiding this study is: What are the key factors enabling the persistence and transformation of transnational organized crime in Africa?

2. Theoretical Framework

This article proposes the need to consider the discourse on transnational organized crime beyond the limited challenges it poses to Africa. The importance of exploring how organized criminal groups have evolved and adapted to the complexities of today's world cannot be overstated. Thus, by incorporating this nuanced discussion stimulate a new perspective on how to deal with the changing landscape of organized crime. A framework for analysing TOC is provided by illegal enterprise theory. It views criminal organizations as rational, profit-driven entities (Haller, 1990; De Franco, 2041). Taking this perspective, it is possible to compare organized criminal networks with legitimate businesses across a number of operational factors (Albanese, 2023; Stephen, 2024). The purpose of this paper is to explore how organized criminal groups evolve and adapt through the prism of the illegal enterprise theory.

According to previous research (Wyatt et al., 2020), organized criminal groups are rational economic actors that adapt to market dynamics. As a fundamental component of their business strategy aimed at generating profit, these individuals engage in illegal activities often described as risk-taking. An indicator of the sophistication of organized criminal groups is their capability to blend the profits acquired through illegal means into the legitimate mainstream financial community. As a result, their illicit profits are effectively laundered. This integration not only amplifies the scale of their operations but also enables them to maintain a facade of legitimacy.

The evolution of TOC in Africa demonstrates its ability to adjust to changing socioeconomic and technological environments, particularly in the context of globalization. Among the main factors influencing this transformation are technological advancements, the impact of globalization, the implementation of liberalized trade policies, and weak border controls (Von Lampe, 2021). According to these indicators, the scope of criminal activity has expanded, which has resulted in a greater variety of participants and methods. Thus, the emergence of structured cybercriminal organizations in West Africa illustrates how transnational organized groups are evolving as technology advances. In recent years, fraud schemes have evolved from simple operations to complex, global networks that are capable of carrying out highly profitable crimes (Gulyás, 2041). The advancement of technology, especially the internet, cryptocurrencies, and sophisticated malware, has facilitated the operations of these groups on a global scale while maintaining a high degree of anonymity

(Cretu-Adatte et al., 2024). The decentralised digital frameworks used by these organized cybercriminal groups have enabled transnational operations with a reduced physical footprint, indicating a departure from conventional criminal organizations.

Similarly, TOC is incorporated into international markets through illegal wildlife trafficking and unauthorised exportation of natural resources in various African countries. It involves sophisticated criminal networks exploiting natural resources and wildlife for financial gain, often at the expense of local ecosystems and national economies (Wyatt et al., 2020). This fusion of illicit operations with legitimate economic sectors creates a complex landscape where profitability intersects with significant risks (Medina & Schneider, 2021). By exploiting both legal and illegal avenues, this merger presents a highly lucrative opportunity for organized criminal groups. From this perspective, transnational organized crime's integration into global markets has changed the dynamics of crime in the 21st century, supporting the argument of illegal enterprise theory. The argument is advanced from the standpoint that criminal organizations are quickly adapting to technological advancements, globalization, and weak governance as well as other socioeconomic issues. With this reconfiguration of crime within global markets, the traditional dynamics of supply and demand have been reshaped, with criminal organizations now able to create demand through sophisticated and clandestine networks that operate outside the legal framework.

3. Methods

A scoping review was employed to map the existing literature on the factors enabling the transformation and persistence of transnational organized crime in Africa. Specifically, a scoping review permits the incorporation and synthesis of evidence from various methodological perspectives (Khalil et al., 2016). In this context, this approach is strengthened by its capacity to explore and thoroughly delineate a phenomenon such as transnational organized crime that is evolving and remains complex across diverse institutional and socio-political landscapes in Africa.

As Arksey and O'Malley (2005; 2010) articulated, a scoping review serves as a research methodology designed to delineate the existing literature on a wide-ranging topic, pinpoint essential concepts, recognize evidence gaps, and observe trends. The process generally encompasses five distinct phases: (1) defining the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting studies based on inclusion criteria, (4) charting the data (e.g., key

findings, themes), and (5) summarizing and reporting results. In contrast to systematic reviews, scoping reviews emphasize a wider perspective rather than an in-depth analysis, providing a descriptive synthesis instead of an evaluative one, and frequently ending with considerations for future research or policy implications (Peters et al., 2020).

3.1 Defining the Research Question

Arkey and O'Malley (2005) recommend beginning with expansive and inclusive definitions of the research population, the phenomenon being studied, and the context in which the research is situated to ensure that the search is thorough. This broad initial approach allows for identifying a wide range of relevant literature. As the search progresses and more references are collected, researchers should then systematically refine and narrow their search criteria. Accordingly, the research question for this study is: What are the key factors enabling the persistence and transformation of transnational organized crime in Africa?

Table 1

Keywords for search operation

Concept	Search Operation
Transnational organized crime (TOC)	Organized crime, transnational organized crime, criminal networks, illicit trade, criminal enterprises, cross-border crime
Vulnerabilities	Systemic corruption, socio-economic problems, weak governance, porous borders, conflict zones, regulatory gaps, digitalized society, fragile state
Globalization	Globalization, global economy, international trade, global connectivity, Western underground economy, transnational networks, digital globalization
Evolution of TOC	Technology in crime, digital crime, entrepreneurial crime, cybercrime
Specific crimes	Drug trafficking, wildlife crime, human trafficking, cybercrime, arms trafficking, gold mining crime, oil bunkering, money laundering
Technology and tools	Encrypted platforms, dark web, cryptocurrency, AI in crime
Policy and implications	International cooperation, technological innovation, socio-economic reforms,

3.2 Identifying Relevant Studies

A deliberate and systematic Boolean search was conducted across several academic databases to identify literature relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. This search was meticulously designed to encompass all articles published over the past ten years,

specifically between 2015 and 2025. This time frame was deliberately chosen to maintain a broad scope, reflecting TOC as a global phenomenon that persisted and evolved well before 2015, as well as ongoing scrutiny and debate within the academic community. The literature search for this review consisted of journals and articles.

Study selection criteria. The selection of studies for this review began in June 2024 and was updated in January 2025 to capture the latest information concerning the evolving TOC landscape in Africa. The literature on TOC from 2015–2025 was explored to examine recent developments, building upon a pilot scoped literature search that assessed database suitability, literature scope, and essential search terms. This period reflects a decade of evolving transnational organized crime dynamics between 2015–2025, characterized by notable increases in drug trafficking, wildlife crime, and human trafficking in Africa, influenced by regional conflicts and corruption. Since 2020, particularly in the wake of the pandemic, there have been notable advancements in the activities of organized criminal groups. These developments have been largely influenced by technological progress, including the rise of artificial intelligence and criminal activities involving cryptocurrency (Blum, 2024). This situation has sparked important discussions about TOC complexities and its global implications, and highlighted how modern challenges are reshaping the field.

As part of the primary investigation, all studies identified from multiple databases were analysed. During the review process, duplicate studies and those that did not address the research question were excluded, followed by systematic screening of titles based on the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. A comprehensive list of relevant titles was then compiled and distributed among the authors for further evaluation. Through this process, an extensive synthesis of existing scholarship is achieved, highlighting how technological advancements, as exemplified by AI-based fraud and cybercrime, have altered TOC's trajectory in Africa.

Data charting. A narrative and descriptive approach was employed to synthesize and interpret TOC data in Africa. The analysis was structured using a spreadsheet with key thematic headings, including author(s), year of publication, title of study, research aim, enablers of TOC, its evolution, the impact of vulnerabilities, and findings with recommendations. The study identified critical enablers such as weak governance, corruption, socio-economic inequalities, porous borders, and technological advancements, which have facilitated TOC expansion. The evolution of TOC was mapped from traditional illicit activities

to complex transnational crimes, including cybercrime, human trafficking, and international drug trade, exemplified by Nigerian cybercriminal networks operating globally. The impact of these vulnerabilities has reinforced criminal networks, necessitating policy recommendations such as strengthening regional cooperation, enhancing intelligence-sharing, and implementing targeted economic reforms to address structural weaknesses. This structured synthesis provides a deeper understanding of TOC persistence and transformation in Africa, offering a foundation for effective intervention.

Collection, summarising, and reporting the results. According to Arksey and O'Malley (2005), the fifth stage of a scoping review, "Collating, Summarising, and Reporting the Results," involves synthesizing the data extracted in the previous charting phase to provide a coherent overview of the literature, identify key themes, and communicate findings effectively. This stage employs a qualitative, descriptive approach to map the breadth of evidence, addressing the research question. This study extended the analysis by providing detailed thematic discussions that delve into the various themes emerging from the synthesized data. To ensure transparency, this study employed the PRISMA framework (illustrated in figure 1) to meticulously document the number of studies identified, screened, and selected for inclusion at each stage of the scoping review process. This review unfolded through a structured data collection, presentation, and results reporting process. The authors engaged in a thorough thematic analysis, with all identified themes rigorously cross-examined to ascertain their relevance and relationship to the overarching research question. The careful examination not only enhances the validity of the conclusions drawn from the review but also enriches the findings.

Presentation of results. The evolution of transnational organized crime in Africa, transitioning from traditional trafficking in drugs, arms, and humans, is fundamentally linked to structural inequalities and societal norms that perpetuate poverty, corruption, and weak governance. These factors contribute to the adaptation and proliferation of criminal networks because of globalization and technological advancements. It is crucial to recognize that analysing the evolution of transnational organized crime in Africa through an intersectional lens offers valuable insights into its transformation from conventional, localized criminal activities to highly sophisticated, entrepreneurial networks that exploit globalized systems and socio-economic susceptibilities. This approach mirrors how systemic factors, structural inequalities, pervasive corruption, and weak governance intersect with individual experiences,

such as economic desperation and cultural acceptance of illicit hustles, to enhance and sustain TOC's adaptability and resilience in a globalized, technologically advanced environment.

Figure 1

Application of PRISMA flowchart

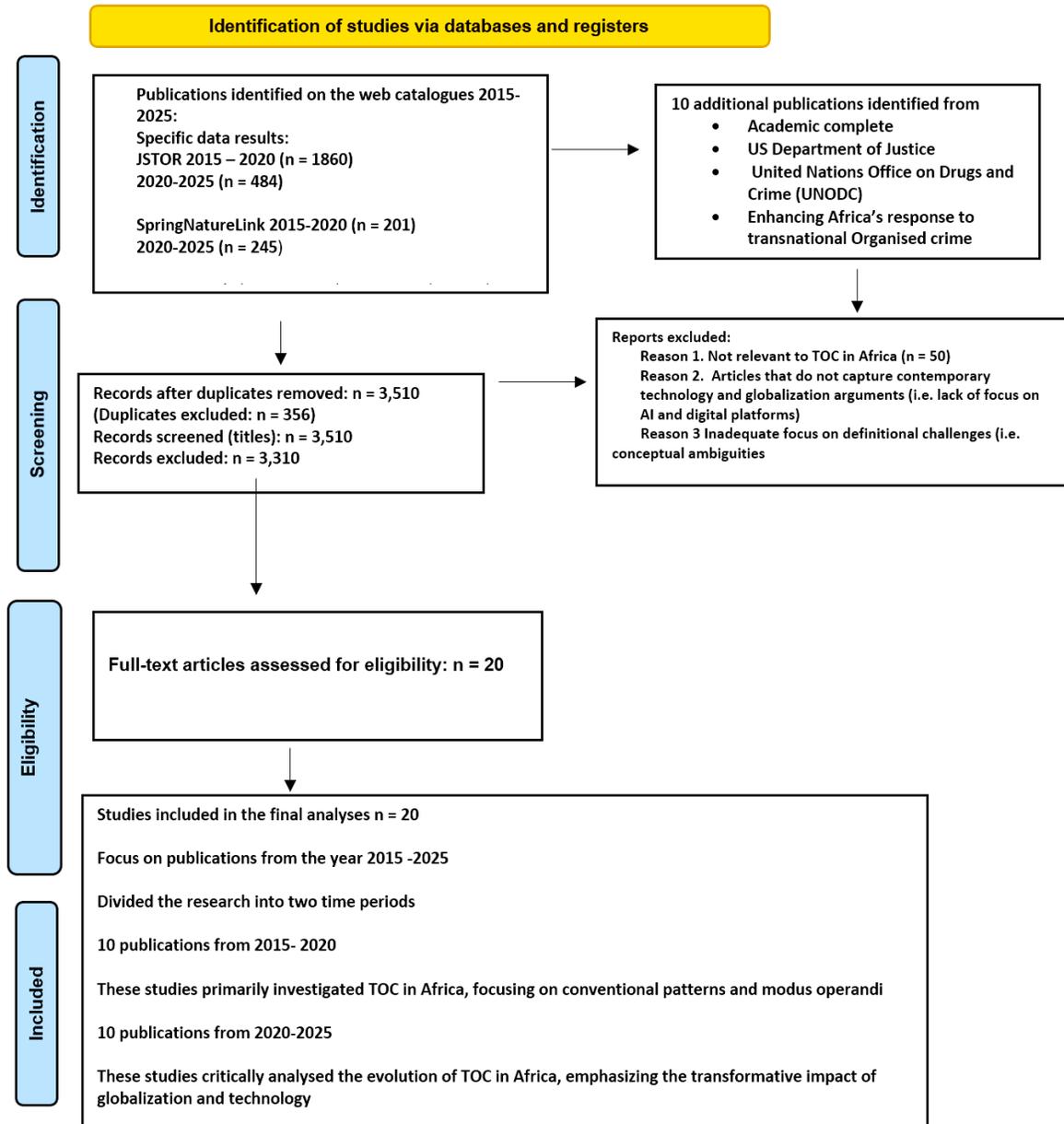


Table 2*Articles reviewed on Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) in Africa*

Author	Year	Enablers of TOC in the 21st century	Impact
Ellis & Shaw	2015	Weak state capacity and historical governance gaps	Erodes the integrity and authority of the state, resulting in a detrimental impact on its legitimacy; concurrently, this situation creates an environment conducive to the expansion and proliferation of criminal networks that function beyond the confines of law and governance
UNODC Threat Assessment	2015	Fragile legal system and illicit market demand	Enables seamless transportation of illegal drugs (cocaine), arms, and human flows; threatens public health and stability
Cockayne & Roth	2017	Systemic corruption and fragile institutions	Facilitate organized crime and allow criminal groups to penetrate state institutions
Felbab-Brown	2017	Socioeconomic inequality and informal economies	Promoting illicit markets compromises conservation efforts to safeguard endangered species and their ecosystems
Reitano & Shaw	2017	Criminal networks leverage political instability and corruption to run profit-driven operations.	Promulgating criminal economies that weaken states' institutions
Hübschle, & van der Spuy	2017	Fragmented regional problems	Promotes insurgencies and destabilizes the economy
Reitano & Shaw	2018	High demand for migration caused by socio-economic adversity	Undermines regional stability and human security
ENACT	2019	Systemic corruption in critical state institutions such as law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system	Perpetuates impunity and erodes the rule of law

Author	Year	Enablers of TOC in the 21st century	Impact
ENACT (Organised Crime Index)	2021	Digital connectivity and governance gaps	Heightens cybercrime and financial fraud, challenges state resilience
Aning & Edu-Afful	2022	Global connectivity	Expansion of the illicit economy and upsetting legitimate businesses
Li	2022	Criminal Entrepreneurship	Provide a pathway for organized criminal groups to mask their illicit operation
Adedeji & Ibrahim	2023	Technological Advancement	Intensifies cyber-dependent crimes and financial crimes
ENACT (Index Update)	2023	Post-pandemic economic strain and technological proliferation	Exacerbated public health challenges as transnational organized crime groups exploited vulnerabilities in governance, security, and demand for illicit goods.
GI-TOC (OCWAR-T Report)	2023	Climate change and resource scarcity	Promotes environmental crimes such as the illegal exportation of wildlife products
Campana & Meneghini	2024	Criminal networking and collaboration with the Western underground economy	Develop strategies to amplify the operations of the TOC criminal network and reinforce the operations of the illicit markets
Blum	2024	The use of Artificial intelligence and cryptocurrency	Increases the complexity of fraud and cybercrime, resulting in higher untraceable illicit profits
GI-TOC (Resilience Framework)	2025	Legislative gaps and weak regional cooperation	Restrains countermeasures to tackle transnational organized crimes
UNODC (Nigeria TOCTA)	2025	Globalization and the proliferation of digital platforms	Revolutionise the 419 scams from localized crime to a global phenomenon

Source: Researcher's compilation 2025

4. Discussion

The following discussion categorises the factors influencing the surge and resilience of transnational organized crime in Africa into three main categories: social enablers, structural and systemic enablers, and socioeconomic enablers. Each of these themes is further explored through the identification and analysis of relevant sub-themes.

4.1 Social Enablers of Transnational Organized Crime in Africa

The social enablers, according to the data, are corruption, the gap in governance, informal economies, social normalisation of criminal enterprises, and fragmented regional problems.

Corruption and gaps in governance. There is a significant connection between corruption and transnational organized crime in Africa, especially when government institutions tasked with enforcing the law are compromised. Cockayne and Roth (2017) report that this infiltration weakens these institutions' capacity to uphold the law effectively. This is usually because organized criminal networks exploit governmental institutions to operate with impunity. Furthermore, Reitano and Shaw (2017) note that corruption fosters a protective alliance between political elites and criminal actors, thereby embedding TOC within formal governance structures.

The normalisation of this culture within government settings breeds an environment where unethical practices proliferate in many law enforcement institutions, making it increasingly difficult to combat crime. In situations where societal demands exceed the resources available to individuals, organized crime groups can take advantage of this gap. They may find ways to operate within or influence the government institutions that are meant to uphold justice. Instead of serving their intended purpose, these institutions can become instruments that facilitate criminal enterprise. The vulnerability of these law enforcement institutions cannot be downplayed. Thus, institutional fragility in the context of organized crime in Africa serves as an indicator and a driving force that prevents countries from effectively addressing and alleviating various threats. This situation affects many nations to such an extent that they find themselves powerless to implement punitive actions in response to challenges related to economy, politics, society, and security, leading to significant deficiencies where the state's capacity is inadequate.

Informal economy and social normalisation of criminal enterprise. The informal economy is a critical enabler of transnational organized crime in Africa. Contextually, the informal economy does not stand in isolation; it is intricately linked to a multifaceted interplay of socio-economic, economic and governance deficiencies. In numerous areas characterized by limited economic opportunities, communities resort to informal and illicit activities as feasible strategies for survival. Titeca (2019) argues that in marginalised communities in Africa, illicit trade activities are perceived as a victimless crime and are consequently regarded as more socially acceptable compared to other forms of criminal behaviour. This perspective greatly enhances the acceptance and legitimisation of informal and criminal economic activities. The argument is that societal hardship has created an environment where illicit trade can become prevalent, ethically justified, and socially endorsed.

Felbab-Brown (2017) posits that state institutions fail to deliver economic alternatives or essential services resulting in the entrenchment of illicit markets, including smuggling, unregulated mining, and drug trafficking, to local livelihoods. Over time, these practices transition from being perceived as criminal to being integrated into everyday economic life, thereby obscuring the distinction between legality and necessity. This perception creates a social legitimisation that protects criminal actors from scrutiny and integrates them into local economies. Reitano and Shaw (2017) assert that TOC succeeds not only by evading the law but also by co-opting communities that perceive its operations as more dependable than state institutions. The informal economy does not just coexist with organized criminal groups; they often act as its infrastructure, offering logistical channels and social cover. From a practical standpoint, organized criminal groups operate similarly to legitimate businesses, systematically identifying and exploiting gaps within societal frameworks (Shaw & Reitano, 2019; Campana & Meneghini, 2024). Organized criminal groups operating within legitimate businesses highlight the evolution of transnational organized crime from opportunistic actions to more structured, business-oriented operations. This illustrates how organized criminal enterprises demonstrate a remarkable adaptability capacity, similar to legitimate entrepreneurs. They recognize market demands, manage their supply chains effectively, and reinvest profits strategically (Campana & Meneghini, 2024).

Williams (2019) observes that the convergence of business dynamics with transnational organized crime entrepreneurial facets blurs the lines between legal and illegal activities, permitting criminal enterprises to leverage legitimate economic structures for unlawful gains.

Therefore, this interplay enables criminal organizations to integrate illegal earnings into the legitimate economy, employing lawful business practices to conceal illicit activities and utilizing strategic approaches to enhance their influence and control. Contemporary discussions around organized crime recognize that criminal operations have evolved far beyond the confines of traditional economic and capitalist paradigms. This entrepreneurial dimension is essential, functioning as the driving force behind the creation and increase of illicit wealth. In contrast, rather than organized criminal groups adhering to traditional market norms, they strategically exploit global economic disparities and systemic loopholes in governance.

Fragmented and regional problems. In recent years, events in Africa have supported the notion that a web of connections is emerging between transnational organized crime and various terrorist networks. The intersection of organized criminal groups and insurgent operations has created a complex ecosystem in which illegal economies thrive alongside ideological violence (Hübschle & van der Spuy, 2017). For instance, in West Africa, the militant organization Boko Haram has progressively adopted tactics commonly associated with organized crime, including the smuggling of weapons, narcotics trafficking, and kidnappings for ransom (Adisa, 2021). These activities have shifted from opportunistic measures to essential components of the group's financial operations. These activities not only generate revenue but also create informal economies in which both criminals and insurgents benefit from further weakening state structures (UNODC, 2019; GI-TOC, 2021).

Similarly, the connection between organized crime and terrorism is not limited to Boko Haram. In the Sahel region, terrorist groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin utilize comparable transnational organized crime pathways, particularly those associated with drug and arms trafficking that traverse Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali (Rizk, 2024). This region is characterized by porous borders and weak governance; thus, they have become a transit route for transporting illicit drugs such as cocaine, which is trafficked from Latin America through West Africa to Europe (Shaw & Mangan, 2014). In this context, organized criminal groups offer essential logistical and financial support that insurgent groups require to maintain their violent operations.

Consequently, terrorist groups have adopted this organizational model to enhance their resilience and operations, which is a core characteristic of transnational organized crime, namely decentralization, network-based operation, and profit-driven orientation. By

mimicking this adaptability as seen in illicit enterprises, terrorist organizations like Boko Haram and armed groups in the Sahel can operate across vast, poorly governed territories and exploit local informal economies for logistical and financial support. This is consistent with the enterprise model of organized crime, which perceives individuals as rational entrepreneurs who are responsive to market incentives and enforcement pressures (Albanese, 2023). The threat of terrorism in Africa has therefore evolved beyond a mere ideological or religious one, and has increasingly become an economic venture intertwined with criminal markets (Udo & Agbai, 2024). The widespread presence of transnational organized crime throughout the continent, particularly in vulnerable states, fosters the growth, recruitment, and expansion of insurgent groups.

4.2 Structural and Systemic Enablers of Transnational Organized Crime in Africa

It is important to note that TOC in Africa is not simply a collection of isolated criminal activities; it is fundamentally linked to structural and systemic factors that facilitate its proliferation. Globalization, technological advancements, and the emergence of digital finance systems have all contributed to this change. These elements are not simply passive tools for misuse by criminal actors; rather, they represent substantial changes in society and fundamental operations.

Globalization. The data indicate that TOC experienced a notable transformation in the 2020s, influenced by globalization and technological advancements. This altered its structure, scope, and methods. This resonates with the idea that globalization has been one of the most consistent phenomena in recent times. While often associated with economic growth and connectivity, it has also inadvertently nurtured an environment that enables TOC expansion in Africa.

At its core, globalization reduces trade barriers, accelerates the movement of goods, people, and capital, and integrates market factors that TOC networks exploit to scale their operations across borders (Boyd & Henkin, 2020). Obia (2021) notes that globalization has not only spurred economic growth and cultural exchange but has also opened new avenues for criminal organizations to exploit. The surge in international trade has expanded the volume of goods crossing borders, making it increasingly difficult for authorities to detect concealed illicit items. As Hignett (2021) observes, the erosion of traditional territorial boundaries in the name of economic liberalization has not only enabled the free movement of legal commodities

and people, but simultaneously promoted an environment ripe for transnational organized crime. Stoica (2016) critiques the foundational assumptions of global market liberalism by arguing that while liberalization promotes economic dynamism, it also creates regulatory vacuums that TOC actors readily exploit. The free movement of capital and reduction of trade barriers, originally designed to empower transnational corporations, have simultaneously offered criminal enterprises the structural freedom to operate with minimal oversight. This is especially problematic in regions like Africa, where governance institutions may be under-resourced.

However, analysing the intricate interplay between globalization and organized crime in Africa reveals a profoundly impactful relationship. In recent years, organized criminal networks have significantly altered the landscape of TOC, allowing these syndicates to expand their operations across national borders with unprecedented ease and efficiency (Hignett, 2021). Rapid developments in communication technologies have revolutionized information exchange, enabling criminal organizations to coordinate their activities more effectively and operate in real-time across various regions (UNODC, 2020). Furthermore, the integration of global financial systems has provided organized crime with diverse avenues to transfer and launder illicit profits (ENACT, 2021). The context for this integration highlights organized criminal groups' traditional operations in Africa. These groups engage in localized crimes such as wildlife trafficking, drug and arms smuggling, illegal resource extraction, human trafficking, and money laundering. However, these groups have largely taken advantage of globalization and the interconnectedness of the global economy to expand and enhance their illicit activities. For example, in Southern Africa, criminal syndicates take advantage of the global demand for wildlife products to traffic poached ivory, rhino horns, and pangolin scales to Asian markets, thus establishing complex exportation networks that connect local poachers with international buyers (Gonzalez Estrada, 2022; Stiles, 2024).

Technology and digital innovation. In the twenty-first century, technology and digital innovation have emerged as transformative forces fundamentally reshaping economies, societies, and governance systems. Technology integration into all areas of life changes how individuals and organizations operate. Everything, from business processes to personal habits, has been impacted by digital transformation. As Lupton (2015) asserts, individuals are increasingly shaped by the technological revolution, often without their conscious choice or control.

Organized criminal groups have effectively utilized technological advancements to enhance their operational capabilities, helping them evade law enforcement detection and discover new markets for illicit activities, while expanding their reach and detrimental impacts (Li, 2022). Therefore, technological advances are not only enhancing specific crimes such as cybercrime, identity theft, financial crimes, and phishing; they are also being strategically leveraged by traditional organized crime groups to enhance and expand their operations (Di Nicola, 2022; Blum, 2024). In this context, a striking example is how increased availability and access to digital technologies have prompted several transformations in the market dynamics of the international illicit drug trade. According to The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime reports that trafficking networks are increasingly using electronic financial tools, including mobile payment applications, to facilitate transactions (GI-TOC, 2021). The change allows consumers and traffickers to avoid the risks associated with physical cash and the possibility of being tracked. Consequently, the use of digital transactions reduces evidentiary trails for law enforcement while enhancing operational efficiency for illicit enterprises. The trend indicates a significant shift in TOC toward advanced technology to improve anonymity, scalability, and resilience. Similarly, the rise of mobile payments and dark web marketplaces has transformed the criminal landscape. These platforms have removed traditional barriers to market entry, enabling new participants, often independent of established cartels or syndicates, to engage in global illegal supply chains (Adedeji & Ibrahim, 2023). Illicit drug sales, weapons trafficking, and human exploitation services are increasingly conducted through encrypted marketplaces, and payments are made through cryptocurrency, complicating enforcement and decentralising operations (Europol, 2020). The democratisation of criminal enterprises, facilitated by digital anonymity and transnational reach, highlights the impact of evolving technology on organised crime networks' structure and strategies.

In Africa, these global trends are especially evident and have distinct implications. Technological landscape and global connectivity have opened new opportunities for socio-economic development. However, they have also highlighted significant structural vulnerabilities in various facets of the global business ecosystem. In West Africa, cybercrime has become a dominant form of TOC, with countries like Nigeria and Ghana witnessing the evolution of criminal organizations from traditional scams to sophisticated cybercriminal enterprises (Li, 2021; Ojolo & Singh, 2024). Soni et al. (2024) observed that cybercrime perpetrators in these regions often employ advanced hacking techniques, social engineering

tactics, identity theft, and malware to execute their schemes. The anonymity provided by the internet and its vast reach, enable these groups to target individuals and institutions. This facilitates various types of crime such as financial fraud and ransomware attacks. These crimes generate significant revenue while evading traditional law enforcement and regulatory oversight.

Correspondingly, in Southern Africa, especially in countries like South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, wildlife crimes have adopted technologies for both poaching and trafficking. Wildlife trafficking networks involved in the illegal capture and transportation of ivory, pangolin scales, and rare species often rely on in-person transactions and trusted couriers (Lau, 2021). As of today, however, these networks use encrypted messaging applications to evade surveillance, track shipments using GPS technology, and market illegal wildlife products through hidden online marketplaces (Osman, 2022). These developments signpost a significant change in operational capability, as traditional crime organizations increasingly adopt digital technologies, not only for increased efficiency but also to hide their activities from law enforcement scrutiny. Furthermore, human trafficking networks in West, North, and East Africa are changing, with a notable transition to digital platforms. These networks are increasingly utilising social media and messaging tools not only for recruiting but also for manipulation and dominance of their victims (UNODC, 2020; Tung, 2021; Blum, 2024). The widespread use of these internet platforms enables traffickers to access a broader audience, preying on vulnerable individuals who seek better opportunities. These examples demonstrate that the technological landscape in Africa is far from neutral; it increases both illegal activities and legitimate opportunities for progress. As TOC actors evolve and become more adept, the existing developmental and governance challenges across the continent heighten Africa's susceptibility to this alarming digital crime transformation.

5.2 Socioeconomic Enablers of Transnational Organized Crime in Africa

Socio-economic enablers constitute the fundamental basis for TOC expansion in Africa. Pervasive poverty, economic disparity, high youth unemployment, and insufficient viable livelihood opportunities breed an environment where engagement in illicit economies is perceived as a rational survival strategy for numerous individuals.

Poverty, unemployment, and income levels. Young people, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds, are among the most vulnerable individuals recruited into TOC

networks due to persistent poverty, unemployment, and limited access to legitimate employment opportunities. In numerous African countries, crime and participation in the informal or illicit economy often seem to be the only viable avenues for survival or upward mobility (Felbab-Brown, 2017; Teyi et al., 2023). The emphasis on survival in low-income areas means that involvement in illicit economic activities is often perceived not as a moral transgression, but as a rational response to structural deprivation. In contexts where the state is absent or perceived as ineffective in providing social safety, education, or employment, communities may view engagement in TOC as a pragmatic survival strategy rather than a criminal offense. This is particularly evident in regions where survival means outweigh legitimate means. As such, this perspective is consistent with strain theory, which states that individuals engage in deviant behaviour when societal goals and the legitimate means to achieve them are divergent (Merton 1957: 132).

Poverty is a complex issue, yet it plays a significant role as a socio-economic driver of TOC in Africa. Economists conventionally define poverty through income thresholds and material deprivation; however, this narrow lens frequently neglects the social dimensions of exclusion associated with economic hardship. Some scholars contend that poverty is a subjective element, characterised not only by material deprivation but also by individuals' social and political positioning relative to their society (UNDP, 2022). This expanded interpretation is essential for analysing the connections of this phenomenon to TOC. For instance, in many African contexts, high unemployment rates and low income levels are prevalent among young people. This leads to economic marginalization and disenfranchisement. The interplay of material deprivation and social exclusion increases individuals' susceptibility to recruitment by criminal organisations which offer immediate financial rewards and social status. As such, organized crime networks exploit this vulnerability by providing illicit alternatives in the absence of accessible formal employment opportunities. Thus, informal and criminal economies emerge as viable options, often perceived as the sole means of survival and social inclusion. This dynamic results from systemic failures, including chronic underinvestment in education, limited job creation, and governance deficits that impede economic development. TOC serves as both a symptom and a consequence of deep-rooted socio-economic inequality.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study identifies and discusses the factors that enable transnational organized crime disruption in Africa. A combination of social and socioeconomic enablers influences transnational organized crime. Critical enablers, such as technology, globalization, and socioeconomic challenges, continue to contribute to the prevalence of the activities of organized criminal groups across many regions of the continent. Despite existing knowledge of the devastating effects ranging from the destabilization of local economies to the erosion of state institutions, systemic corruption, and the undermining of social structures, to far-reaching socio-economic consequences, these critical enablers persist in exacerbating TOC's reach and sophistication in Africa. As technological advancements, global connectivity, and socio-economic inequalities intertwine, organized criminal groups continue to exploit these factors, undermining governance, perpetuating instability, and hindering sustainable development across the continent.

The evolution of TOC in Africa reflects a progression from limited regional activities to a multifaceted, globally interconnected threat, influenced by globalization and technological advancements. Rapid technological progress has led to Africa's integration into the global economy, which has, in turn, facilitated TOC growth. These processes have facilitated legitimate trade and mobility; however, they have also allowed criminal networks to develop into highly organized, profit-driven, cross-border enterprises. The continent's strategic location has established it as a crucial hub for drug trafficking, human smuggling, and the movement of illegal goods, with these activities becoming more advanced and reliant on technology. However, this evolution has not been accompanied by improvements in state capacity or institutional response mechanisms. Criminal organizations increasingly utilise encrypted communications, GPS routing, and digital financial systems, whereas numerous African law enforcement and border control agencies lack adequate technological infrastructure (Adedeji & Ibrahim, 2023; ENACT, 2023). This results in a significant asymmetry: the forces that facilitate legitimate economic activity in turn enhance criminal actors' efficiency more than the institutions designed to counter them. To address this imbalance, African states need to invest in modern technologies, surveillance, detection, and data analytics. Also, strategic transit hubs require advanced scanning technologies and forensic equipment that identify contraband and counterfeit goods in real time. Additionally, it is essential to institutionalize regional cooperation in intelligence sharing and cross-border tracking systems. Contraband and

counterfeit goods in real time. Additionally, it is essential to institutionalize regional cooperation in intelligence sharing and cross-border tracking systems.

Though the socio-economic enablers of TOC in Africa, such as corruption, poverty, and unemployment, are deeply entrenched and difficult to eradicate, stemming not only from underdevelopment but also from systemic failure. Fundamentally, a lack of economic growth and efficient income redistribution mechanisms facilitates the proliferation of illicit economies. However, addressing these root causes requires more than just economic intervention; it demands institutional accountability, judicial integrity, and political stability.

Using a scoping review methodology, this paper examines the enablers that facilitate transnational organized crime in Africa from 2015 to 2025. Current developments, such as technology, cybercrime, globalization, and criminal entrepreneurship, are highlighted. This method emphasizes current empirical data about TOC development. Beyond its stated scope, the analysis does not cover the historical context of African organized crime, such as smuggling networks from the colonial era or early post-independence syndicates. Transnational organized crime analysis needs to consider the rapidly evolving technological landscape that influences and creates increasing levels and complexity of crime.

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