



## United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

### Topic A. Strategies to address the links between corruption and transnational organized crime

#### Introduction:

Throughout the years, the links between corruption and transnational organized crime have been an important issue to discuss within the UNODC. Nations from all around the world have manifested their concern about the constant and alarming growth of transnational organized crime networks and their strategies to improve their modus operandi, evolving alongside society and its new technologies. In this sense, it has become clear that organized crime, especially in the transnational dimension, is fueled by corruption that has often impregnated governmental and business structures.

As a result, criminal networks usually operate through bribes and illicit payments to carry on with their activities, such as the trafficking of drugs, people, endangered species, arms, among others. Therefore, to tackle transnational organized crime, the links it has with national governments and corporations through corruption must be addressed and, since it is impossible for any State to do this on its own, the international community must engage in cooperation efforts, considering also an approach that involves judicial integrity.

#### Concepts and definitions:

- **Abuse of functions:** the act of a public official violating the law to obtain an unfair advantage for themselves or others.
- **Bribing:** giving money or something of value, often illegally, to persuade others to do something one wants.
- **Concealment:** the crime of not providing information that a court, customer, insurance company or similar actor has a legal right to know.





- **Corruption:** any form of dishonest and generally illegal behavior that entails the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, which may be financial, but not necessarily. It includes bribery, embezzlement, money laundering, concealment, obstruction of justice, trading in influence, abuse of functions, and illicit enrichment, among others.
- **Embezzlement:** theft or misappropriation of funds placed in one's trust.
- **Illicit enrichment:** situation in which someone's public or private official's assets increase significantly, but not in relation to their lawful income.
- **Judicial integrity:** irreprehensible ethical behavior by the legal professionals, particularly judges, which has an essential role in the legitimacy of the judicial system, as necessarily based on a bond of trust with the involved community.<sup>1</sup>
- **Money laundering:** processing of criminal proceeds to disguise their illegal origin, which generally enables delinquents to enjoy these profits without jeopardizing their source.<sup>2</sup>
- **Obstruction of justice:** the act of intentionally interfering with the legal process that the pursuit of justice involves.
- **Organized crime:** criminal enterprise that rationally works to profit from illicit activities that are often in great public demand. Its continuing existence is usually maintained through corruption of public officials and the use of intimidation, threats or force to protect its operations.<sup>3</sup>
- **Trading in influence:** using one's influence or connections to get preferential treatment or favors for another party, often in exchange for payment.

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<sup>1</sup> UNODC. *Judicial integrity: a fundamental commitment*. UNODC, Austria, Vienna. "No update date". In: <https://www.unodc.org/dohadeclaration/en/news/2017/08/judicial-integrity-a-fundamental-commitment.html> (16/11/24).

<sup>2</sup> UNODC. *Money Laundering*. UNODC, Austria. "No update date". In: <https://www.unodc.org/romena/en/money-laundering.html> (17/11/24).

<sup>3</sup> UNODC. *E4J University Module Series: Organized Crime. Module 1: Definitions of Organized Crime*. UNODC, Austria, 2020. In: <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-1/key-issues/defining-organized-crime.html> (17/11/24).





- **Transnational criminal organizations:** illicit business that transcends cultural, social, linguistic and geographical boundaries and that respects no borders or rules.<sup>4</sup>

#### Current issue:

Organized crime has quickly gained an international dimension.<sup>5</sup> People and governments are becoming increasingly concerned about violence and instability associated with criminality. The recent crises in Haiti and Ecuador are some examples of how severely the exponential growth of organized crime can impact society. This situation is accompanied by a wide array of emerging threats, from synthetic drugs to piracy and from cybercrime to transnational fraud. Unfortunately, corruption only fuels transnational organized crime, especially when public officials protect organized criminal groups from law enforcement and disruption.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the link between corruption and transnational organized crime represents a significant challenge to global security, governance, and development. Corruption facilitates criminal networks by providing them with access to State resources, protection, and impunity. These illicit networks thrive in environments where transparency and accountability are weak, exploiting systemic vulnerabilities to expand their reach and influence. The symbiotic relationship between corruption and organized crime undermines democratic institutions, weakens the rule of law, and erodes public trust in governments.

In turn, this fosters cycles of inequality and violence, which further destabilize societies and impede sustainable development. The consequences of this relationship

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<sup>4</sup> UNODC. *Transnational Organized Crime: Let's put them out of business*. UNODC, Austria. "No update date". In: <https://www.unodc.org/toc/en/crimes/organized-crime.html> (17/11/2024).

<sup>5</sup> UNODC. *Addressing the Links between Corruption and Transnational Organized Crime*. UNODC, Austria. "No update date." In: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/ngos/CN15-Addressing-the-links-between-corruption-and-transnational-organised-crime.html> (17/11/2024).

<sup>6</sup> UNODC. *UNODC World Drug Report 2024: Harms of world drug problem continue to mount amid expansions in drug use and markets*. UNODC, Austria, 26/06/2024. In: <https://www.unodc.org/conig/en/links/unodc-world-drug-report-2024-harms-of-world-drug-problem-continue-to-mount-amid-expansions-in-drug-use-and-markets.html> (13/12/2024).





extend far beyond national borders. Transnational organized crime groups often rely on corruption to launder money, secure illegal trade routes, and evade law enforcement. These actions not only enrich criminal organizations but also deprive States of valuable resources needed for public services, infrastructure, and economic development.

Basically, the link between transnational organized crime and corruption is a serious and ongoing challenge for nations worldwide. As criminal networks become more sophisticated and pervasive, the role of corruption in sustaining their activities becomes increasingly apparent. To effectively combat organized crime, it is crucial to address corruption at all levels of government, strengthen law enforcement institutions, and promote greater transparency and accountability. Only through sustained international cooperation and an integral approach can the global community hope to disrupt these harmful and destabilizing forces.

In this regard, one of the key challenges in addressing the intersection of crime and corruption is the often-deep-rooted nature of both phenomena within certain countries and regions. In many cases, organized crime groups have established significant influence over local economies, politics, and even social structures. This influence can extend to sectors as varied as public health, education, and infrastructure, where criminal actors are able to control or manipulate essential services for their benefit. In such environments, anti-corruption measures alone may not suffice if they are not accompanied by wider reforms that target the economic and social drivers of criminal activity.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the financial resources at the disposal of criminal organizations often allow them to corrupt not only individual officials but entire institutions. Therefore, combating corruption requires robust financial monitoring and the implementation of asset recovery mechanisms that can trace illicit profits and disrupt the flow of money that sustains organized crime. For example, the use of "follow-the-money" strategies, which track financial transactions to identify criminal networks and their enablers, has

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<sup>7</sup> UNODC. *Guía práctica para elaborar estrategias de alto impacto contra la delincuencia organizada*. UNODC, Austria, 2022. (17/11/2024).



been an increasingly important tool in global anti-crime efforts. Also, in addition to institutional reforms, the engagement of civil society is indispensable. Non-governmental agencies, the media, and grassroots organizations often have a pivotal role in exposing corruption and holding governments accountable. Their efforts, combined with international pressure and assistance, can help build public awareness and foster a culture of integrity and transparency. In countries with weak governance structures, the role of civil society can be particularly significant in advocating for reforms, monitoring public spending, and providing support to victims of organized crime.<sup>8</sup>

So, in sum, criminal networks often operate across borders, using global trade routes, digital technologies, and complex financial systems to move illicit goods, launder money, and evade law enforcement. The rise of cybercrime, for example, has introduced new challenges, as hackers and criminal organizations exploit vulnerabilities in digital infrastructure to conduct illicit activities, from fraud to identity theft and ransomware attacks. There is also the widespread use of bribes, which end up facilitating the trafficking of people or illegal goods, or the existence of illicit payments to relevant officials to get away with certain criminal activities, such as illegal logging.

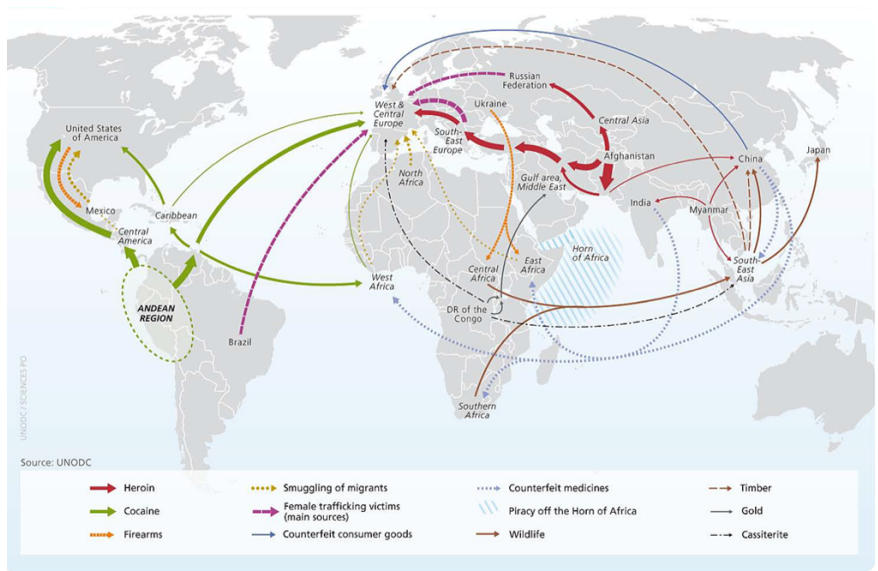


Figure 1. Global Flows of Transnational Organized Crime (2010).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> UNODC. *Guía práctica para elaborar estrategias de alto impacto contra la delincuencia organizada*.

<sup>9</sup> UNODC. *The Globalization of Crime. A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment*. UNODC. 2010. In: [www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta/TOCTA\\_Report\\_2010\\_low\\_res.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta/TOCTA_Report_2010_low_res.pdf). (17/11/2024)





Hence, addressing the complex relationship between transnational organized crime and corruption requires a comprehensive and coordinated response from both national governments and the international community. While corruption remains one of the primary enablers of organized crime, tackling it will require not only legal and institutional reforms but also broader efforts to address the economic, social, and political conditions that allow criminal networks to thrive.

### **Initiatives taken by the international community:**

Recognizing the severity of this complex issue, the international community has actively participated in various international conferences and initiatives aimed at finding solutions to it. Through these platforms, governments, international organizations, and civil society have worked together to develop frameworks and share best practices to combat the growing links between corruption and organized crime. Efforts to address this global threat have highlighted the importance of fostering international collaboration, as no single nation can tackle these problems alone.

Corruption and organized crime are dynamic and evolving threats, thus requiring innovative solutions and adaptive strategies. While progress has been made, the continued rise of sophisticated criminal networks demands heightened cooperation to effectively dismantle their operations. This includes strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing cross-border collaboration, and promoting transparency and accountability on a global scale.

### **Efforts fostered by the UNODC:**

The UNODC has been at the forefront of addressing the links between corruption and organized crime. Therefore, on October 2014, the UNODC Civil Society Team organized a side event at the seventh session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, which was called "Addressing the Links Between Corruption and Transnational Organized Crime". There, representatives from various non-governmental organizations presented their perspectives on the ways





in which corruption enables organized crime and the measures that can be taken to address these challenges.

One of the key messages from these discussions was the need for stronger international cooperation and transparency to disrupt the networks of corruption that enable organized crime. By improving the accountability of public officials, strengthening anti-corruption laws, and promoting more effective law enforcement, governments can begin to undermine the foundations of organized crime. However, this requires a collective effort at the global level, as many criminal networks operate across borders, exploiting weak governance structures and gaps in international coordination.<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, the UNODC usually joins with specialized agencies, such as the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which also do essential work in facilitating international cooperation and providing the necessary resources, expertise, and guidance on this matter. By promoting multilateral frameworks for action, these organizations help ensure that anti-crime strategies are aligned and effective at the global level.<sup>11</sup>

#### International legal frameworks:

To effectively combat the links between corruption and transnational organized crime, States must collaborate on sharing intelligence, coordinating enforcement actions, and harmonizing legal frameworks to ensure that criminal groups cannot exploit the differences in national laws in their favor. In this regard, there are two conventions that constitute the backbone of international legal efforts to stop corruption and dismantle organized crime networks, trying to ensure a cohesive and unified global response to these pressing issues. These are the following:

- The United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), also known as the Palermo Convention, adopted in 2000, focuses on combating transnational organized crime. It promotes prevention, prosecution, and judicial

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<sup>10</sup> UNODC. *Addressing the Links between Corruption and Transnational Organized Crime*.

<sup>11</sup> UNODC. *UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols thereto*. UNODC, Austria. "No update date". In: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html> (14/12/2024).







cooperation while providing protocols for the establishment of specialized units, extradition mechanisms, and shared investigative strategies.<sup>12</sup>

- Similarly, the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), created in 2005, is a key global effort to combat corruption. It establishes comprehensive standards for prevention, criminalization, and asset recovery. This treaty addresses both public and private sector corruption, ensuring that measures are in place to prevent and prosecute such activities. Importantly, UNCAC emphasizes the necessity of international cooperation to track and recover stolen assets, enhancing global accountability and fostering trust among nations. The treaty serves as a cornerstone for anti-corruption efforts, encouraging States to adopt transparent practices and stronger legal measures.<sup>13</sup>

#### Regional initiatives and programs:

In addition to international legal frameworks, regional initiatives and programs have accomplished a pivotal role in addressing the links between corruption and transnational organized crime. The following stand out:

- The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) focuses on anti-money laundering efforts, which are closely tied to combating organized crime and corruption. The FATF develops global standards to ensure that financial systems are not exploited by criminals or corrupt officials. By promoting transparency in financial transactions, the FATF helps disrupt illicit financial flows that sustain criminal networks.<sup>14</sup>
- In Europe, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL) is critical to tackle transnational organized crime. Through cross-border operations, the EUROPOL collaborates with law enforcement agencies across the region to fight corruption and dismantle organized crime groups.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> UNODC. *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto*. United Nations, New York, 12/11/2000. (17/11/2024).

<sup>13</sup> UNODC. *Learn about UNCAC*. UNODC, Austria. "No update date". In: <https://www.unodc.org/corruption/en/uncac/learn-about-uncac.html> (14/12/2024).

<sup>14</sup> FATF. *Financial Action Task Force*. FATF, France. "No update date". In: <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/home.html> (14/12/2024).

<sup>15</sup> EUROPOL. *Acerca de Europol*. EUROPOL, Europe, 11/07/2024. In: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/about-europol/es> (14/12/2024).







- Similarly, the Organization of American States (OAS) promotes regional cooperation to strengthen judicial institutions and combat corruption and organized crime in America. Specifically, the OAS has created a Department against Transnational Organized Crime (DTOC) to provide technical and legislative assistance to its members to confront transnational organized crime and its various manifestations.<sup>16</sup>

#### Collaborative models:

Cooperation across borders and institutions is essential for effectively addressing the challenges concerning the links between corruption and transnational organized crime. Hence, Joint Task Force Initiatives (JITs), consisting of multinational teams, are designed to investigate complex crimes, including those linked to corruption and transnational organized crime. By enabling real-time cooperation between countries, these initiatives enhance the efficiency of law enforcement and reduce jurisdictional barriers.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, specialized agencies, such as UNODC, INTERPOL and the World Bank work together to address corruption and organized crime through intelligence-sharing, capacity-building programs, and joint action plans. These partnerships not only strengthen the capabilities of individual nations but also foster trust and coordination among international stakeholders, ensuring a unified and effective response to evolving threats.<sup>18</sup>

#### Transparency and access to information:

Transparency is a critical component in combating corruption and organized crime. Transparency initiatives, led by organizations like Transparency International and the Open Government Partnership, advocate for greater openness in government processes. These initiatives aim to reduce opportunities for corruption and organized crime by

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<sup>16</sup> OAS. *Department against Transnational Organized Crime*. OAS, Washington D. C. “No update date”. In: <https://www.oas.org/ext/en/main/oas/our-structure/ga/sms/dtoc> (14/12/2024).

<sup>17</sup> EUROPOL. *Joint Investigation Teams - JITs*. EUROPOL, Europe. “No update date”. In: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/partners-collaboration/joint-investigation-teams> (17/11/2024).

<sup>18</sup> Kemp. *Time for a global strategy against organized crime*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Geneva. “No update date”. In: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/global-strategy-against-organized-crime/> (17/11/2024).





promoting accountability, citizen participation, and access to information. Additionally, governments are encouraged to implement reforms that empower citizens to monitor public resources, report illicit activities, and participate actively in governance.

Efforts to increase transparency and access to information are crucial for creating an environment where corruption and organized crime cannot flourish unchecked. However, these measures must be accompanied by robust legal and institutional frameworks to ensure their effectiveness. While much has been achieved through these frameworks and initiatives, sustained effort and innovation are necessary to confront the dynamic nature of corruption and transnational organized crime. Strengthening international cooperation, enhancing transparency, and bolstering institutional resilience remain fundamental to addressing these pressing global challenges.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Guiding questions:**

1. Which kinds of transnational organized crime are present in your delegation?
2. In your delegation, do the governmental and business structures hold ties with transnational organized crime groups?
3. Is corruption an alarming issue within your delegation and, if so, which are its negative effects?
4. How does corruption within your delegation enable transnational organized crime networks to operate?
5. Is there enough research or data that the public can easily access about the connections between transnational organized crime and corruption in governmental and business structures in your delegation?
6. What measures has your delegation implemented to counter corruption as a way of tackling organized crime within its territory?

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<sup>19</sup> Transparency International. *Two principles Open Government Partnership needs to embrace to end corporate secrecy*. Transparency International, Berlin. "No update date". In: <https://www.transparency.org/en/blog/two-principles-open-government-partnership-needs-to-embrace-to-end-corporate-secrecy> (14/12/2024).





7. How does your delegation's judicial and law enforcement system address corrupt officials who collaborate with transnational criminal networks?
8. What are the main challenges about addressing corruption linked to transnational organized crime in your delegation?
9. Is your delegation involved in any regional or international initiative to tackle corruption against transnational organized crime?
10. Which further efforts, either domestic, regional or international, would your delegation be willing to implement or participate in to combat transnational organized crime by fighting corruption?

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