# POLICY BRIEF

## Community Engagement in Fighting Transnational Organised Crime in the Liptako-Gourma

By Moussa Soumahoro



## Key Points

▸ The involvement of local communities in transnational organised crime in the Liptako-Gourma is driven by poor governance-related issues that include quasi-state absence and the inability of the states in the Liptako-Gourma region to provide decent livelihood to the local communities, which resulted in precarious socio-economic conditions and a security vacuum, especially in the borderlands. As a result, local communities were, to some extent, forced to find parallel alternatives for survival.

▸ The phenomenon of state criminalisation fosters the mobilisation of local communities as criminal foot soldiers and facilitate the anchorage of criminal armed groups in the region.

▸ Communities are key components of transnational organised crime systems in the region. They are either criminal entrepreneurs, intermediaries (go-between and protectors of illicit activities) or end users.

▸ Incomes generated from transnational organised crime and the strategic opportunities it offers to armed and terrorist groups as well as local militias fuel insecurity in the region.

▸ Responses in the Liptako-Gourma seem to neglect transnational organised crime on the one hand, and generally focus on military interventions rather than community-centred programmes on the other.

## Executive Summary

Although transnational organised crime (ToC) has, for decades, been going on in the three-border region spanning Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (known as the Liptako-Gourma), analyses show that socio-economic vulnerabilities and state criminalisation drive community involvement in the phenomenon. In addition, the phenomenon overlaps with other security threats such as violent extremism and various local conflicts. This policy brief scrutinises the critical need and approaches to engage local communities in combating transnational organised crime (ToC) in order to break the cross-border criminal systems operating in the Liptako-Gourma and defuse other security threats such as violent extremism and local conflicts it fuels.

## Introduction

The Liptako-Gourma is a three-border region spanning Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali. The Liptako is a borderland between Niger and Burkina Faso that hosted an ancient kingdom in the 19th century.[1] Gourma is located on the right bank of the Niger River in Mali.[2] The economy in this three-border region is dominated by informal activities including licit and illicit goods whose interwoven flows make the distinction between licit and criminal activities a serious challenge.[3] For about five years (starting from 2015), the region has seen an escalation of armed conflicts linked to violent extremist groups, revival of local conflicts, and persistence of transnational organised crime; three overlapping phenomena. In due course, stabilising the region has become a hard nut to crack. Peculiarly, transnational organised crime, acknowledged as a strategic means

used by criminal entrepreneurs to fuel violence in the region, seems to be neglected by the quasi-totality of the practical security responses given by both national (Liptako-Gourma States) and international actors (especially Barkhane, the United Nations and the G5 Sahel) that are generally military over-centred rather than community-oriented. It is against this background that this paper argues that a sustainable response to the current security hurdles in the Liptako-Gourma would necessitate combating transnational organised crime through community-centred approaches.

## Understanding Local Communities' Involvement in Transnational Organised Crime from the Context of Liptako-Gourma

### A Communal Involvement in Illicit Activities Driven by Poor Socio-economic Conditions

Local communities' involvement in transnational organised crime-related activities in the Liptako-Gourma is essentially driven by persistent governance concerns rooted in the region for decades.[4] On the one hand, the quasi-absence of state in certain remote areas (rural zones mainly) and poor social service delivery by over-stretched state institutions on the other (security, health, water, electricity and employment services among others) paved the way to the degradation of socio-economic conditions in the Liptako-Gourma.[5] The combination of these factors turned the region into an area of limited statehood. In due course, vulnerabilities were fostered among local communities to whom alternative sources of livelihood became critical for surviving. This brought about the creation of parallel networks, mostly unlawful, across Liptako-Gourma's borderlands that enabled the anchorage of transnational organised crime as socle of community resilience. Communities are generally involved in cross-border weapons and drug trafficking, poaching of endangered species, cigarette and migrants smuggling, artisanal unlawful mining, cattle rustling and other persisting phenomena such as contraband of licit goods including fuel and motorbikes. Moreover, the phenomenon of State criminalisation could be considered as an additional key driver of community engagement in criminal activities.[6] Knowing that certain state officials, both at the national and local levels, have ties in criminal networks operating in the region, they might have helped to mobilise local communities in the traffic chain to ensure community leverage.[7] This could explain the territorial anchorage of certain armed groups in the region. State criminalisation may have also contributed to the consolidation of several shadow economic networks protected and fuelled by local communities.

### Communities as Indissociable Part of the Traffic Chain

**["Actors of organised crime in the Liptako-Gourma are part of the communities. It is very hard to make a clear differentiation between the communities and traffickers."][8]**
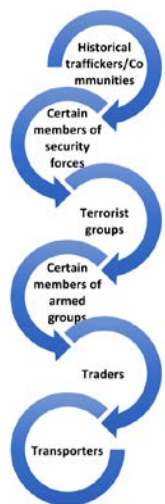


Communities are inextricably part of the cross-border trafficking systems in the Liptako-Gourma. Social categories involved vary depending on the area and type of illicit activity. In drug trafficking, mainly cannabis, diazepam, tramadol and other psychotropic drugs, communities intervene at all levels.[9] They are either criminal entrepreneurs, intermediaries facilitating the drug flow in the region or end users. The criminal entrepreneurs and intermediaries are mostly traders within the communities who transact with other traffickers conveying drugs from Ghana (cannabis) and Benin (tramadol) through the borderlands of Niger and Burkina Faso.[10] The local traders, then, distribute drugs in Liptako-Gourma, including in the remote rural areas. Although this phenomenon is relatively accentuated at the borderlands between Niger and Burkina Faso, the drug flow could be cyclical rather than linear. Indeed, drugs may be produced and sold locally considering the general growth of drug production and consumption in West Africa. In fact, the growth of West Africa's drug market is forecasted to more than double from 5.7 million users in 2018 to approximately 13 million in 2050.[11] This not only indicates the gradual growth of drug demand but also a probable increase of local production to satisfy the growing needs. As such, the Liptako-Gourma is particularly at risk as it could be a strategic zone both for drug production and consumption. Yet, this is difficult to precisely measure due to the hidden or taboo nature of the phenomenon.[12] As well, various drug trafficking schemes could be existing in the region. For instance, in Mali analyses show that militarised drug trafficking seriously threatens the ongoing peace process.[13]

Weapons trafficking system seems slightly different as main criminal entrepreneurs are either from the armed groups or among the security forces.[14] Certain members of armed groups and official security forces smuggle arms to feed the needs of bandits or local communal militias for diverse purposes, including attacks against traders and other civilians for cash and other goods or fuelling local conflicts.[15] This is common in northern Mali. Therefore, local communities essentially constitute the clientele. Yet, these intricate connections could be identity driven as beyond the economic goals they could indicate that if not all arms providers, some of them are somehow members of the communities they deal with. If this seems to be more accentuated in Northern and Central Mali where local conflicts escalated respectively from 2012 and 2015, similar systems of arms trafficking could exist in Niger and Burkina Faso due to active vigilante groups such as Koglwéogo and violent conflict opposing Dawsahak and Fulani communities at the borderlands between Mali and Niger.[16]

Local communities are also variably involved in other illicit cross-border activities related to organised crime in the Liptako-Gourma. These illicit activities, as already mentioned, comprise smuggling migrants, artisanal illegal mining, cattle rustling, poaching of endangered species (especially in the woody eastern Burkina Faso) as well as fuel and motorbike trafficking. Smuggling migrants involved local transporters who ensure clandestine movements of people through the Liptako-Gourma towards the Maghreb region to generate cash.[17] Although armed and violent extremist groups participate in the traffic chain for economic and strategic purposes, the role of local transporters remains critical for sustaining the illicit flow of migrants in the Liptako-Gourma as the original legality of transportation helps to shadow and grow the trafficking system. Beyond smuggling migrants, another kind of human trafficking that involves violent extremist groups in the Liptako-Gourma is kidnapping for ransom. This has been gradually evolving since 2015 to become an important trend. If the remote ungoverned spaces of Liptako-Gourma remain strategic hideouts (both for high-ranked criminals and their hostages) to facilitate this unlawful activity, the role of local intermediaries, although unclear, could be a key factor because of the control they have on strategic cross-border clandestine routes. Artisanal illegal mining is mainly steered by local communities to generate incomes necessary for their survival. However, some communities tend to collaborate with violent extremists, especially in the Tillabery region (Niger) and eastern Burkina Faso, bringing about the formation of criminal networks over gold and other precious mining products on the one hand, and the generation of finance for feeding violent extremism on the other.[18]

In that context, communities are used as valid hands to illegally exploit mineral resources and most of them, to some extent, involuntarily support the funding of violent extremists within the Liptako-Gourma and the Greater Sahel region. Nevertheless, the state security forces blindly criminalise and combat artisanal miners who are often considered as illegal. The protection provided by violent extremist groups for cash is particularly seen by illegal miners as a security forfeit in Mali and Burkina Faso. As it is, this could be analysed as a fair economic transaction fostered by both the need for security linked to the high stakes in mining activities and the blind repression from states.

Cattle rustling is not new in the Liptako-Gourma. It is widespread, well organised and transboundary.[19] However, since the outbreak of the current security crisis, the phenomenon seems aggravated. From an "ordinary banditry," cattle rustling was transformed into a financing means and a source of livelihood for violent extremist groups and also fuel for local conflicts. For instance, the sale of stolen cattle by violent extremist groups provides them with arms, motorbikes and fuel that are key operational means. This is facilitated by traders and butchers holding membership cards in legal livestock dealers' associations in a system of "dirty" cattle laundering.[20] In Tillabéry region (Niger) and the Sahel (Northern Burkina Faso) where the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) reputedly operates, herders and other livestock farmers are obliged to pay tax to the jihadist for protection against bandits.[21] Hence, community members, butchers and livestock traders essentially contribute to the growth of cattle rustling business and help to nurture a whole criminal system that weakens the security context most probably to generate incomes.

This could certainly be a consequence of the inability of Liptako-Gourma States' security forces to protect local communities from cattle rustlers. The weak protection of local communities by security forces was found by terrorist groups as a gap to fill. As such, the lack of trust by the local communities in the security apparatus of Liptako-Gourma States fosters a paradoxal relationship between them and the violent extremist groups in which the latter substitute the State security apparatus and provide security against taxes to sustain their activities and to some extent secure allies.

## Why Engaging Local Communities in Combating ToC Matters in the Liptako-Gourma?

Engaging local communities in combating transnational organised crime in the Liptako-Gourma would deeply help both international and national stabilisation initiatives and programmes to achieve their ultimate goals which are about improving the security context, restoring state authority and rebuilding social cohesion. As the current analysis shows, transnational organised crime in the context of Liptako-Gourma fuels violent extremism and destabilises social cohesion through the local conflicts that it generates. It is, therefore, urgent for Liptako-Gourma States and their partners (the United Nations, the European Union, the African Union as well as ECOWAS) to particularly address the phenomenon. Moreover, it would help to reorient over-centred military responses such as Barkhane and the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel (JFG5) that showed limited impacts in addressing the current security quagmire toward a combination between military interventions and community-centred approaches. Such reorientation is peculiarly critical for the achievement of the JFG5's mandate that explicitly includes combating transnational organised crime and violent extremism regarding the nexus between these phenomena.[22] Although Burkina Faso and Mali have respectively undertaken initiatives on the emergency plan for the Sahel and the integrated security plan of central Mali (PSIRC in French) that theoretically aims to address governance issues among communities, reports of human rights abuses perpetrated by military in both countries may not foster pragmatic implementations on the ground.

In addition, local communities face several socio-economic and security vulnerabilities that prompt their involvement in cross-border illicit activities in the Liptako-Gourma. Rather than considering transnational organised crime-related activities as ones that fuel the current insecurity context, local communities generally take them as sources of livelihood, means of resilience or survival. The analysis of this particular local perception helps to generate an understanding of key motivations that led communities to criminalise themselves notwithstanding that some of their members - traders, transporters, butchers among others - may certainly be driven by greed. As an indissociable part of the traffic chain and the most accessible link, local communities tend to be the key entry point to combat transnational organised crime in the Liptako-Gourma and the Greater Sahel region. Engaging them in combating transboundary crime, especially in the Liptako-Gourma, could help to achieve at least three main results.

First, engaging local communities would highly contribute to breaking the transboundary illicit traffic chains in the Liptako-Gourma. Generalised awareness raising campaigns combine participatory and inclusive consultations that aim at identifying alternative endogenous licit sources of livelihood which would be the key in rebuilding the image of the State as a trustworthy provider of socio-economic services and security. This would in turn gradually disengage most of local communities from illicit activities as their involvement in transnational organised illicit activities is mainly driven by their need to improve their socio-economic conditions. It would also facilitate the restoration of State authority in the region as trust renewal would be fostered between States and their respective citizens in the region. However, the conditionality of the success of these campaigns is to be followed by concrete actions on the ground that provide endogenous solutions as opposed to the current initiatives of similar nature that show limited impacts. As illustrations, the failure of some past and ongoing initiatives (from Liptako-Gourma States and their partners as well as NGOs) to fit their awareness raising campaigns in the local context that requires concrete and concerted alternative sources of livelihood for local communities caused those initiatives to bring about poor or unquantifiable results.[23] In addition, adequate conditions for the reorganisation of the local administration and judicial apparatus to get them closer to local communities have to be rethought by considering local aspirations and conceptions of justice in the Liptako-Gourma. Such an approach could critically contribute to the success of ongoing initiatives by holding local dialogue and reconciliation schemes to be implemented under the mandate of the G5-Sahel.

Second, it becomes urgent to prevent armed and terrorist groups from accessing vital operational means that sustain, allow them to grow and nurture their networks within the local communities. In this context, impelling the withdrawal of local communities, particularly their members (traders, transporters and other social categories) who are involved in transboundary illicit activities for cash and self-belonging would cause violent extremist and armed groups to lose strategic partners in crime and the subsequent incomes currently generated from the illicit activities they directly instigate or protect for financial dividends. These lawless activities may, though not exhaustive, include motorbikes and fuel trafficking, cattle rustling, drugs and arms trafficking, migrant smuggling and illegal mining which are all overlapping and interconnected.
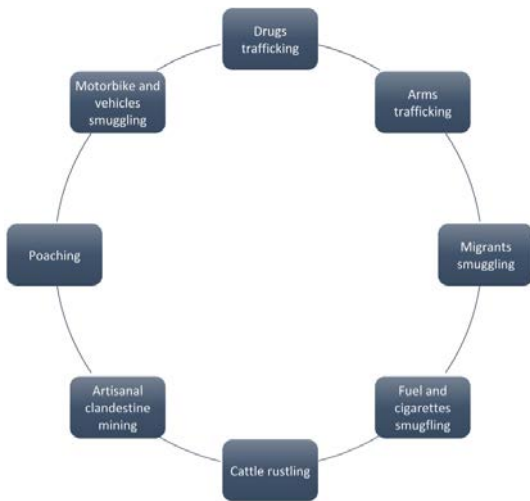


Figure 2: Overlapping and interconnected unlawful transboundary activities in the Liptako-

Third, community engagement in combating transnational organised crime in the Liptako-Gourma is critical to rebuilding and reinforcing social cohesion among and between local communities. The clashes over trafficking products, territory and routes exacerbate rivalries between the plethora of groups involved in the competition for survival fostered by State weakness and criminalisation in Liptako-Gourma three-border area.[24] Knowing that they generally draw on clannish or ethnic lines, clashes over the control of means and products of crime (illicit activities, strategic routes and the subsequent incomes) frequently contribute to the spark and escalation of local conflicts like those in Central and Northern Mali.[25] So, breaking the trafficking chain by fostering the withdrawal of local communities would suppress a nodal point of divergence that negatively affects social cohesion in the Liptako-Gourma.

At least, these three arguments should attentively be regarded by all the stabilisation initiatives implemented in the Liptako-Gourma to better meet the local needs and efficiently achieve their ultimate goals.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion
Communal engagement in transnational organised crime in the Liptako-Gourma is enabled by several factors deeply related to states' inability to efficiently administrate and control the region. That failure paved the way for parallel illegal transboundary overlapping activities including drug, wildlife and weapons trafficking, migrants and cigarette smuggling, fuel and motorbikes trafficking, illegal artisanal mining and cattle rustling. Notwithstanding that these illicit activities are not new in the region and involve a range of actors, local communities became an indissociable part of the trafficking chain playing various roles essentially for survival. Yet, engaging them in addressing transnational organised crime appears to be critical to resolving the current security quagmire in the Liptako-Gourma. Criminal networks exploit, to some extent, their economic vulnerabilities and rely on their know-how to enhance their influence, generate incomes or use them for other strategic advantages such as controlling porous parts of the region's borderlands that are crucial for the growth of illicit activities and cross-border "military" operations. Hence, fostering local communities' withdrawal from transnational organised criminal networks would severely

compromise the growth and sustainability of criminal networks (violent extremist and armed groups as well as other criminal entrepreneurs) in the Liptako-Gourma and the Greater Sahel region.

**Policy Recommendations**

Regarding all the concerns highlighted above, there is an emergent need to define synergetic and multi-dimensional community-centred strategies aiming at efficiently combating transnational organised crime in the Liptako-Gourma. Hence, we recommend the following measures:

► All the counter-terrorism operations in the Liptako-Gourma region (Barkhane and the JFG5) should immediately consider combating transnational organised crime as a step to minimise terrorism, considering it as a sustaining means for extremist groups in the region. In due course, existing or potential routes of traffic, remote areas and porous borderlands of the region should be thoroughly and frequently monitored by joint patrols featuring national security forces of Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and other counter-terror forces in collaboration with local communities.

► The States of the Liptako-Gourma with the support of the United Nations, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) and in light of the African Peace and Security Architecture roadmap (2016-2020) should rebuild trust with their respective local communities to decrease the resentment that resulted from their quasi-absence from a large part of the region. The requirement here is to develop common transnational organised crime-oriented strategies with specific aspects fitting their particular context and centred to local communities. This could include the reorganisation of the local administration and the judicial apparatus in close collaboration with local leaders and their communities.

► Undertake awareness raising campaigns within the local communities on the threat caused by transnational organised crime in the region. This could be done through local civil society organisations by mobilising local leaders and their respective communities to foster endogenous responses fitting the context. Yet, this should be followed by concrete actions on the ground.

► Define and implement alternative sources of livelihood for local communities as illegal activities are viewed as means of survival. That should be realised collaboratively with state authorities and local communities to foster endogenous and sustainable solutions. Sharing eco-tourism responsibilities and benefits with local communities in Eastern Burkina Faso, for example, could help to minimise wildlife trafficking in the region.

► Install a zero-tolerance policy for all the members of security forces involved in illicit activities to dissuade other agents to follow their paths. A joint transparency committee could be put in place in order to monitor and prosecute agents identified as criminal entrepreneurs.

► Operationalise the civil component of the JFG5 to foster community-centred approaches in light of its mandate that include combating transnational organised crime and human trafficking in the Sahel.

# Endnotes

1     Assanvo, W., Dakono B., Théroux-Bénoni, L-A., & Maïga, I. (2019, December). Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma. Institute for Security Studies (ISS). Africa report no. 26. Page 3.

2     Assanvo, W., Dakono B., Théroux-Bénoni, L-A., & Maïga, I. (2019, December). Ibid. Page 3.

3     Interview with an ISS West Africa/Sahel expert on transnational organised crime via Skype, April 20, 2020.

4     Interview with an IISS West Africa/Sahel expert on transnational organised crime. Ibid.

5     ISS West Africa/Sahel expert on organised crime. Ibid.

6     Cockayne, J. (2011). (Rep.). Global Center on Cooperative Security. doi:10.2307/resrep20359. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20359?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

7     Interview with an independent security expert on the Sahel region via google form, April 16, 2020.

8     ISS West Africa/Sahel expert on transnational organised crime. Ibid.

9     Interview with an independent security expert onthe Sahel region. Ibid

10     Interview with an ISS West Africa/Sahel expert on transnational organised crime. Ibid.

11     Donnenfeld, Z., Bello-Schunemann & Welborn, L. (2019, August 9). Drug demand and use in Africa. Modelling trend to 2050. Research paper. Institute for Security Studies. Page 10.

12     Donnenfeld, Z., Bello-Schunemann & Welborn, L. (2019, August 9). Ibid. Page 3.

13     International Crisis Group. (2018, December 13). Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali. Africa report n°267. Retrieved from https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotrafic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali

14     Interview with an ISS West Africa/Sahel expert on transnational organised crime. Ibid.

15     Interview with an ISS West Africa/Sahel expert on transnational organised crime. Ibid.

16     Assanvo, W., Dakono B., Théroux-Bénoni, L-A., & Maïga, I. (2019, December). Ibid. Page 14.

17     Interview with an ISS West Africa/Sahel expert on transnational organised crime. Ibid.

18     International Crisis Group. (2019, November 13). Getting a Grip on Central Sahel's Gold Rush. Africa report no. 282. Retrieved from https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/282%20Getting%20a%20Grip%20.pdf

19     Assanvo, W., Dakono B., Théroux-Bénoni, L-A., & Maïga, I. (2019, December). Ibid. Page 14.

20     Assanvo, W., Dakono B., Théroux-Bénoni, L-A., & Maïga, I. (2019, December). Ibid. Page 15.

21     Assanvo, W., Dakono B., Théroux-Bénoni, L-A., & Maïga, I. (2019, December). Ibid. Page 15.

22     International Crisis Group. (2017 December 12). Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Africa report no. 258. Retrieved from https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/258-finding-the-right-role-for-the-g5-sahel-joint-force.pdf

23     Interview with an independent security expert on the Sahel region. Ibid.

24     International Crisis Group. (2018, December 13). Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali. Africa report no. 267. Retrieved from https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotrafic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali

25     International Crisis Group. (2018, December 13). Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali. Africa report no. 267. Retrieved from https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotrafic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali

## About the Author

Moussa SOUMAHORO is a Researcher at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS). Prior to joining IPSS, Moussa respectively served as Field Monitor for the ECOWAS early Warning System (ECOWARN) and a Consultant for the Country Risks and Vulnerabilities Assessment (CRVA) project in Côte d'Ivoire, jointly conducted by ECOWAS Early Warning Directorate (EWD), the Fund for Peace, Creative, the USAID and the US Department of State. He also worked as a Program Assistant for Mali and the Sahel at the Interpeace regional office for West Africa. Moussa's research focusses on conflict analysis and transnational organised crime in West Africa and central Sahel.