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# Organized crime and armed conflicts in Eastern Africa

ANALYTICAL REPORT



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## Executive Summary

Across the globe, the proliferation of new armed groups (including rebels, militias, criminal groups and gangs) has made conflict prevention and resolution even more complex<sup>1</sup>. Armed groups are diversifying their revenues, which are increasingly based on organized crime activities<sup>2</sup>.

Organized Crime Groups (OCGs) often benefit from the turmoil of armed conflicts and violence. They can engage in violence to protect their illicit business, undermining national economic development and security. Furthermore, OCGs can team up with armed groups to access and control natural resources, competing with the state to provide public goods or even protection to their community.

Different situations of violent conflict affect countries in the Eastern African region. Crime dynamics that emerge from instability in one country of the region can spill over into a neighbouring country, posing a threat to regional peace and security. The emergence of hybrid criminal groups engaged in transnational organized crime and in armed conflict most likely represents a relevant dimension of contemporary conflict in Eastern Africa. Yet, the knowledge on the multiple ways in which OCGs prey, or even amplify, local conflicts for their own benefit remains limited.

In many instances, the scale of criminal activities in Eastern Africa contributes to an increase in the risk of conflict or in its prolongation. Organized crime thrives in conflict and other situations of violence in the region when goods and supplies are scarce, filling the demand often in association with armed groups. In some cases, revenue from criminal activities enables armed groups to finance their activities.

The illicit circulation of weapons in the region from and into conflict-affected settings fuels violence and criminal activities. Information suggests that in some occasions, armed groups and OCGs collude to smuggle goods, migrants and drugs through the region and beyond. Moreover, the illicit extraction, control and taxation of natural resources in the region is often a source of revenue for armed groups and often links them with criminal actors.

Information shows that livestock theft, or cattle rustling, poses a serious threat to many countries in the region and fuels the increase in the demand for small arms and light weapons in two aspects: for fighters to steal cattle and for ranchers to protect their livestock against such attacks. Higher levels of violence have been reported in cattle rustling cases affecting local economies and security.

Organized violence for profit continues to affect Eastern Africa. Kidnapping for ransom, looting, threats and sexual gender-based violence are among the most reported incidents in the region. The driving factors for those crimes are sometimes difficult to discern and involve a combination of reasons such as economic gain, firearms sourcing (notably for cases of looting security forces), intention to control a community or territory.

Illicit financial flows, and particularly, illicit taxation, allow OCGs and armed groups to generate revenue through commodity taxes, by imposing taxes on the community to move through certain areas or to run their business.

## Key Findings

- ❖ Organized crime in Eastern Africa is likely driven by vulnerabilities linked to armed conflict, violence, and instability combined with a high presence of natural resources, growing youth unemployment and corruption.
- ❖ Alliances between and among armed groups and criminal organizations in Eastern Africa may evolve over time, often related to the groups' motivation and potential economic profit.
- ❖ OCGs can contribute to prolonging conflicts in Eastern Africa by enabling armed groups' financing, recruiting of fighters and illicit exploitation of natural resources.
- ❖ In Eastern Africa, armed groups have allegedly been involved in a variety of criminal activities from natural resources control and exploitation, trafficking of wildlife, drugs and arms, looting, organized violence, human trafficking and people smuggling.
- ❖ The expansion of some criminal markets can be more destabilizing than others. For instance, in some countries in Eastern Africa, livestock theft, or cattle rustling, is exacerbating levels of violence and fueling illicit weapons demand.
- ❖ Conflicts in Eastern Africa have led to shortages of goods and supplies in some countries. These can be exploited by OCGs and armed groups who are increasingly involved in the smuggling of such goods as a source of revenue.
- ❖ OCGs most likely profit from the high levels of movement of people in Eastern Africa notably for people smuggling and human trafficking purposes, and in some cases they collude with armed groups to get safe passage along smuggling routes.
- ❖ In the region, armed groups continue to target children, notably for soldiering and human trafficking purposes.
- ❖ It is very likely that armed groups and OCGs will benefit from the instability derived from armed groups' fighting to poach and traffic wildlife trophies.
- ❖ OCGs and armed groups perpetrate several acts of organized violence in the region, notably kidnapping for ransom, looting, threats and sexual gender based violence.
- ❖ In Eastern Africa, illicit taxation allows OCGs and armed groups to generate revenue through criminal taxation (commodity taxes on certain goods, safe passage or as extortion).

## Introduction

Globally, violent conflict has increased since the beginning of the century. The World Bank estimates that in 2016 more countries experienced violent conflict than at any time in nearly 30 years<sup>3</sup>. Violent conflict can open up opportunities for criminality to emerge and persist over time<sup>4</sup>.

Many factors enable organized crime to thrive in conflict-affected environments worldwide, notably fragile rule of law, limited control of borders, disruption of the legitimate economy and the lack of economic opportunities<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, it is often the case that criminal activities increase in post-conflict settings and during the transition to peace as well due to the legacy of violence, fragile economy, high presence of unemployed former combatants and circulation of weapons<sup>6 7</sup>.

To combat organized crime effectively, it is fundamental for law enforcement and decision makers across Eastern Africa to understand the multiple ways in which OCGs prey on or amplify local conflicts for their own benefit. It is fundamental to assess OCGs dynamics and illicit flows that are interconnected with armed conflicts and other context of violence in the Eastern African region in order to form effective law enforcement strategies. Therefore, the EU funded Project ENACT has undertaken this assessment on organized crime and armed conflicts in Eastern Africa to better inform law enforcement at a strategic level.

This strategic assessment is divided into five sections. The first describes the geographical scope and purpose of this report as well as the methodology implemented to collect and analyse data. The second section assesses the dynamics that are particular to violent conflicts in Eastern Africa, to understand in which dimensions OCGs profit from the instability of armed conflict and violence. The third section presents an overview of the most prevalent illicit markets in Eastern Africa. The fourth part of this report aims at identifying the key actors involved in organized crime and armed conflict in the region. The fifth section assesses how criminals thrive in situations of conflict and violence to perform illicit activities.

## 1. STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

### 1.1. Scope and Objective

The objective of this strategic assessment is to provide member countries with actionable strategic intelligence on the dynamics of OCGs and illicit flows that are influenced by armed conflicts and other contexts of violence in the Eastern African region. This report aims to assess the predominant armed groups and criminal actors that are most dependent on criminal activities as sources of funding. Moreover, the assessment intends to be a tool to strengthen law enforcement cooperation among Eastern African countries affected by armed conflicts and violence.

The geographical scope of this strategic assessment covers the Eastern Africa region, defined at INTERPOL on the basis of countries' participation in the East African Police Chiefs Cooperation Organisation (EAPCCO). Therefore, this assessment covers: Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. The assessment covers the timeframe from January 2017 to January 2022.

### 1.2. Methodology

This assessment follows an all source intelligence analysis methodology. It is the result of integrating multi-level data sources to have the most accurate picture of organized crime and armed conflicts in Eastern Africa.

Contributions from the Serious and Organized Crime Focal Points Network from the United Nations Police (UNPOL) constituted a valuable source of information for cross-references purposes.

Open source information was collected, compiled and analysed in order to substantiate police data and shed light on discrepancies between open sources data and police information which resulted in a better understanding on how OCGs profit from the instability of armed conflicts and violence in Eastern Africa, how it is detected or not, as well as the level of priority a crime issue is given by law enforcement.

Open source data on global conflict used in this assessment resulted from searches conducted on databases from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) and academic journal articles. In addition, searches on transnational organized crime were also conducted on the Thomson Reuters World Check database and the World Wide Web in general.

Information collected from all aforementioned data sources was collated using a data collation matrix, in order to draw out consistencies across all data, which identified current patterns and trends as well all identifiable convergences. A systemic qualitative analysis of all available

information was also done and conclusions were drawn about network dynamics, scope of operations and various modus operandi relating to OCGs and armed groups in Eastern Africa.

This assessment acknowledges that dynamics between OCGs, illicit markets, armed conflict and other situations of violence are specific to each conflict. However, a regional approach was retained when drafting this report as the aim is to understand the means by which OCGs thrive in conflict and violence in the Eastern Africa region. If some national examples are quoted for illustrative purposes, it is regional dynamics and presentations, which have been put forward.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF ILLICIT MARKETS IN EASTERN AFRICA

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the serious and organized crimes affecting Eastern Africa and the illegal commodities that are being trafficked by criminal organizations in the region. Understanding the scope of transnational organized crime in the region is crucial to assess how OCGs can thrive in situations of armed conflict and instability to maximize profits.

The Eastern Africa region is home to a large amount of natural resources (including oil and gold), an extensive variety of flora and fauna and economic growth driven by the development of industry and agriculture. In 2021, the African Development Bank (AfDB) reported that Eastern Africa is the only region in the continent that avoided a recession in 2020 (related to the Covid-19 pandemic). The same AfDB report highlighted that political fragility, insecurity and limited economic diversification in some countries of the region were major impediments to growth<sup>8</sup>.

Organized crime in Eastern Africa is likely driven by vulnerabilities linked to armed conflicts, violence, and instability combined with a high presence of natural resources, growing youth unemployment and corruption<sup>9</sup>. Analysis suggests that various local criminal organizations operate in Eastern Africa and are able to exploit many aspects of the region's economy and civil society. Often local criminal organizations have direct ties with other regions in the world, notably Europe, North America and Asia<sup>10</sup>.

Criminal organizations are involved notably in a range of frauds and financial crimes but also in other illicit markets such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, poaching, wildlife trafficking, armed robberies and illegal trafficking of goods across airports and sea ports<sup>11</sup>. Arms trafficking is most likely driven by armed conflicts and other situations of violence in the region<sup>12</sup> and at the same time fuels other illicit activities, notably armed robberies and organized violence.

Analysis of open sources indicates that financial crime, terrorism, human trafficking and drug trafficking are the most predominant offences in Eastern Africa. Searches against the World Check database shows that financial crime is the most prevalent illicit market for Eastern Africa followed by terrorism related offences and drug trafficking. In contrast, the Africa Organised Crime Index reveals that human trafficking is the most pervasive criminal market in Eastern Africa followed by human smuggling and arms trafficking<sup>13</sup>. Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia are the countries most affected by human trafficking in Africa according to open source data<sup>14</sup>.

### **3. ARMED CONFLICTS AND OTHER SITUATIONS OF VIOLENCE IN EASTERN AFRICA**

Analysis of conflicts and levels of violence is important as it allows to assess states' vulnerability to organized criminal activities and to understand which dimensions of armed conflict and violence enable OCGs to thrive. The following section explores the organized crime dynamics that are particular to armed conflicts and other situations of violence in Eastern Africa.

Research shows that OCGs can use violence to undermine peace agreements and development but they can also adjust their strategies over time to maximize profits in post-conflict contexts<sup>15</sup>. In some cases, established criminal networks may shift to criminal markets with higher levels of stability for their business operations<sup>16</sup>.

Also, OCGs can profit from the instability inherent to conflict as they can associate with armed groups when seeking new sources of revenues. By facilitating the enrichment of such armed groups, OCGs may ultimately facilitate the protraction of violence,<sup>17</sup> which can undermine stability, peace and development.

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enrichment of  
armed groups.

Countries in Eastern Africa have experienced different levels of violence, instability and armed conflicts for the period from 2017 to 2021. Open source data shows a high level on both violent events (particularly battles, violence against civilians, explosions and riots) and fatalities from violence in the region for the reporting period (Figure 1).

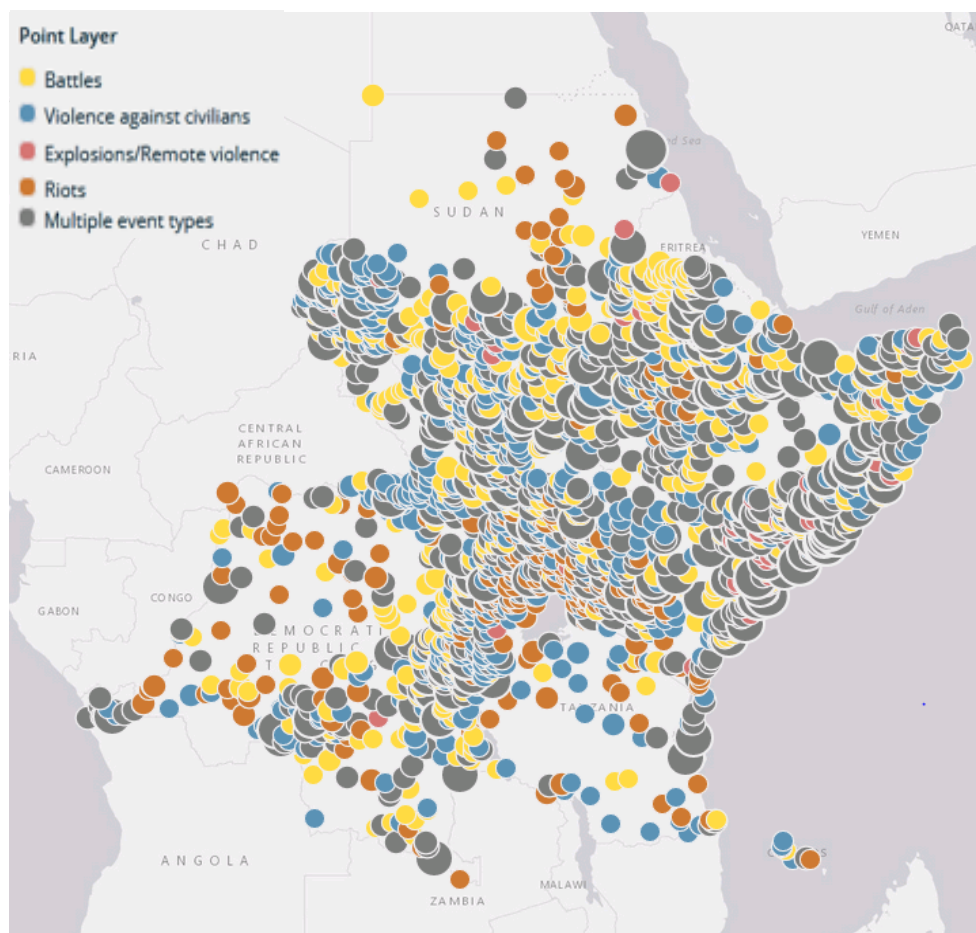


FIGURE 1 VIOLENT EVENTS IN EASTERN AFRICA FOR 2017-2021. SOURCE: ACLED DATA

Analysis of data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) shows that almost all countries in the region have experienced the interstate, intrastate, non-state and one-sided categories of UCDP organized violence<sup>18 19</sup>.

In some Eastern African countries, armed groups hamper peace and security in several countries as is the case of Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda.

Moreover, all levels of violence raised in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2020 with some armed groups shifting fighting methodologies and targeting more civil population<sup>20</sup>.

Intercommunal violence between different groups engaged in cattle raids or in dispute over grazing rights and water also affects some countries in the region, notably Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and South Sudan<sup>21</sup>.

Moreover, there is a high international presence in the region supporting countries with peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations as it is illustrated in Figure 2<sup>22</sup>. Since 2015, the United Nations Police Division within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) has been tasked with providing technical expertise and assistance to national police and law enforcement institutions in post-conflict settings to prevent, disrupt and dismantle organized criminal activities, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, firearms trafficking and exploitation of natural resources<sup>23</sup>. This incorporation of a serious and organized crime component in post-conflict settings evidences the United Nations concerns on challenges that serious and organized crime pose to peace, security, human rights and development.

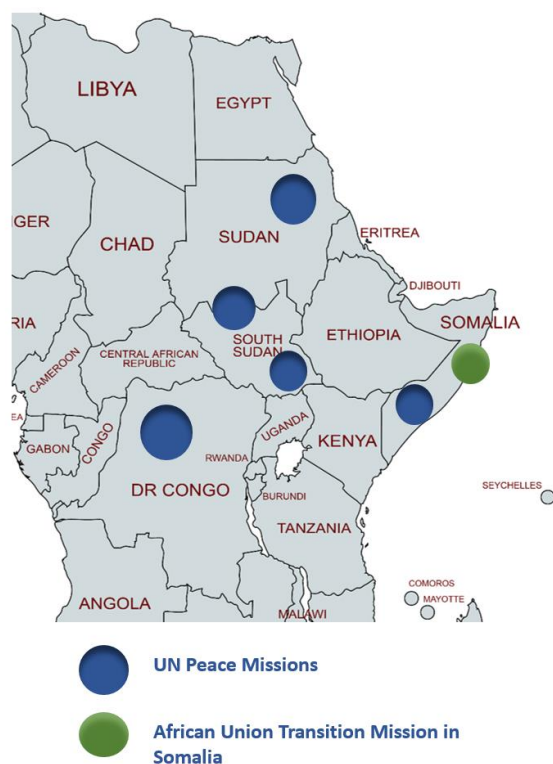


FIGURE 2 PEACE MISSIONS IN EASTERN AFRICA.

SOURCE: UN DEPARTMENT OF PEACE OPERATIONS AND AFRICAN UNION PEACE SUPPORT OPERATIONS

In some cases, criminal and illicit market activity is at the heart of the armed conflict itself (see section 5). Moreover, interactions between armed conflicts and illicit markets evolve over time. For instance, new restrictions on natural resource exploitation can limit the ability of armed groups to acquire financial resources and, therefore, they will more likely turn to other criminal markets in search of new sources of income. This behaviour, in consequence, can cause other illicit markets to grow. In the region, some armed groups rely on commodities as

source of financing whereas others on financial flows from illicit taxation. Most often, however, they depend on several sources of financing.

It is important to note that in violent contexts, the expansion of some criminal markets can be more destabilizing than others. For instance, in some countries in Eastern Africa, livestock theft, or cattle rustling, is exacerbating community violence and, in turn, fueling illicit weapons demand. Also, conflicts in Eastern Africa have led to shortages of goods and supplies in some countries, notably in Sudan, Somalia and South Sudan. This deficit can be exploited by OCGs and armed groups who are likely to get involved in the smuggling of such goods as a source of revenue.

OCGs most likely profit from the high levels of movement of people in Eastern Africa notably for people smuggling and human trafficking purposes, and in some cases they collude with armed groups to get safe passage along smuggling routes<sup>24</sup>. Armed conflict is the third most reported reason for migration in Eastern Africa and the Horn of Africa, after economic and education reasons<sup>25</sup>. For example, clashes in Boosaaso, Somalia, in December 2021 caused significant casualties and civilian displacement and disrupted the movement of people and trade as the country was undergoing severe drought conditions.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region hosts some 4.97 million refugees and asylum seekers, with the majority of them being from South Sudan. Moreover, UNHCR data indicates that a further 12.64 million people are internally displaced in the region, as a result of conflicts and natural disasters<sup>26</sup>. Sudan hosts over 1 million refugees and Uganda is likely to remain the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa in 2022 according to UNCHR. Furthermore, the Covid-19 Pandemic has reduced incomes, including from remittances, and access to work, while food prices have increased. Displaced populations were driven towards negative coping mechanisms such as reducing food consumption, depleting savings and selling assets<sup>27</sup>.

Open source information also estimates the risk of further displacement arising from conflict in Northern Ethiopia, tensions along the Sudan-Ethiopia-Eritrea border, the ongoing peace process in South Sudan, inter-communal tensions in Sudan, ongoing conflict in Somalia and Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and post-crisis challenges in Burundi also present risks of new displacement in the region. Climate change related issues and food insecurity in some Eastern Africa countries are likely to increase the risk of people fleeing as well<sup>28</sup>.

Conflicts and violence undermine investor confidence in the region and jeopardize economic recovery, which affects job market development and youth access to employment<sup>29</sup>. In addition, the African Development Bank reported in 2021 that lockdown restrictions implemented in response to Covid-19 have precipitated an education emergency across the globe and Eastern Africa has not been spared<sup>30</sup>. High levels of youth unemployment and socio-economic issues are two major enablers of organized crime in the region<sup>31</sup>.

Children are particularly at risk of exploitation in contexts of armed conflicts and violence. In the region, armed groups continue to target children, notably for soldiering and human

trafficking purposes. Information shows that children in Eastern Africa are vulnerable to labour and sexual exploitation by both armed groups and OCGs<sup>32</sup>.

#### 4. KEY ACTORS: ARMED GROUPS AND CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The following is not a comprehensive inventory of all armed groups in the region, but rather, a highlight of those that reveal the ongoing suspected connections between armed groups and criminal activities in some Eastern African countries.

##### OCGs and Criminal Networks

The presence of OCGs is suspected to be widespread across most Eastern African countries, with indicators of groups present in Eritrea, Tanzania, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, Comoros and Seychelles revealing a number of detected individuals being involved in criminal networks, some of them with connections to Europe, Asia and South America<sup>33</sup>.

Analysis of open source data suggests a high presence of criminal organizations in Kenya. In 2016, Kenyan authorities identified a number of local gangs active in the country that have been listed as criminal organizations. The listed OCGs were allegedly involved in armed robbery and organized violence<sup>34</sup>.

A previous ENACT report highlighted that it is difficult for national authorities to identify the scope of illicit activities conducted by transnational criminal syndicates beyond their respective borders, as well as their connections to other international criminal organizations. Therefore, the full extent of the operations by international criminal organizations in the region is largely unknown, yet is highly suspected<sup>35</sup>.

##### Armed groups in Eastern Africa: intent and capabilities

A joint report drafted by the United Nations and the World Bank highlighted in 2018 that globally, armed groups have grown in number, diversity, and scope. In most of the cases, such groups are not linked to states and include rebels, militias and armed trafficking groups. They can be motivated by a grievance, an identity, an ideology, or a claim to economic or political resources<sup>36</sup>. A previous ENACT publication considered armed groups as “hybrid entities” that exhibit similar characteristics to OCGs<sup>37</sup>.

Armed groups active in some countries in Eastern Africa demonstrate a wide range of motivations, capabilities and structures. Some groups manifest a specific ideology whereas others have emerged as self-defence groups. Their structures and alliances often change over time.

Analysis of all sources of information indicates that in some Eastern African countries, armed groups often challenge the state and sometimes one another, most likely in Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The LRA group, funded in the late 1980s and which initially operated in northern Uganda, has reportedly kidnapped and recruited child soldiers and has been involved in elephant poaching and elephant trafficking from Central African Republic and Sudan for revenue

generation<sup>38</sup>. In 2005, LRA's leaders have been subject of International Criminal Court arrest warrants for war crimes and crimes against humanity<sup>39</sup>. Although LRA's activities have decreased in the last years, information suggests that the group remains active in some countries in the region. In Burundi, the LRA were reportedly active in 2018 according to police data<sup>40</sup>. Allegedly, they promise recruits with better economic opportunities and were also allegedly involved in human and firearms trafficking<sup>41</sup>. Limited LRA activity has been recently reported in the Western Equatoria State of South Sudan. Information suggests that confrontation with other armed groups, notably Arrow Boys, has repelled LRA from the area<sup>42</sup>. Therefore, the group can turn to other countries in the region to conduct their operations.

ADF emerged as a rebel group in Uganda in mid 1990s. In July 2019, ADF swore allegiance to the Islamic State and subsequently became part of its Central African wilayat<sup>43</sup>. ADF attacks in North Kivu have intensified despite operations of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (*Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo, FARDC*), according to open sources information<sup>44</sup>. Mai Mai (also referred as Mayi Mayi or Māi Māi) emerged as local militias rather as a cohesive movement in the Kivu region in the Democratic Republic of Congo with some groups already active in the 1960s. Over time some Mai Mai factions have merged and other disbanded. They have different agendas and structures<sup>45</sup>.

## 5. THE NEXUS BETWEEN ILLICIT MARKETS, ARMED CONFLICTS AND OTHER SITUATIONS OF VIOLENCE IN EASTERN AFRICA

This section highlights how illicit markets and armed conflict are mutually sustaining. Where possible, this section draws attention to specific connections between armed groups and criminal actors identified in the framework of this assessment. Even where criminal organizations and armed groups are engaged in multiple markets at the same time, each criminal market will be analyzed separately. The following section is not a comprehensive inventory of all illicit markets in the region but an assessment of those that reveal the likely connections between armed groups and criminal activities.

Armed groups may resort to organized criminal activities motivated by economic profit with the aim to finance the group's activities or to provide services to supporters<sup>46 47</sup>. In Eastern Africa, armed groups have allegedly been involved in a variety of criminal activities from natural resource control and exploitation, trafficking of wildlife, drugs and arms, looting, organized violence, human trafficking and people smuggling<sup>48 49</sup>. For instance, one of the alleged major sources of revenues for armed groups in Darfur were driven by smuggling activities carried out in Libya. Some armed groups in Darfur engaged in the smuggling of vehicles, alcohol, drugs, cosmetics and gold, as well as trafficking in arms and persons (from and to South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Chad and Libya) as source of financing<sup>50</sup>.

Moreover, information reveals that some armed groups operate in more than one country in Eastern Africa, evidencing the potential for local conflicts to spill over into neighbouring countries and contribute to regional instability.

In addition, alliances between armed groups and criminal organizations in Eastern Africa may evolve over time, often related to the group's motivation and potential economic profit.

### 5.1. Human Trafficking and People Smuggling

Human trafficking, largely for labor and sexual exploitation, continues to pose a serious threat in Eastern Africa. Trafficking in persons for the purpose of organ removal has also been detected in the region, particularly affecting vulnerable communities that seek asylum in other African regions fleeing conflict. The exploitation of vulnerable populations for material gain by criminal organizations is intrinsically linked to the mass movement of persons, both fleeing armed conflict and seeking out greater economic opportunities as previously described in this assessment. People smuggling is separate and distinct from human trafficking but included in this area as it is often interrelated and dealt with in overlapping ways by law enforcement agencies in the region.

Analysis of open source information estimates that Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan and Somalia are the countries most affected by human trafficking in the region<sup>51</sup>. People smuggling is linked mostly to nationals from Eritrea, although it is persistent across Eastern Africa<sup>52</sup>. Persons from Eastern Africa are typically trafficked to Europe, the Middle East, or Southern Africa. Typically, men, women and children are trafficked intra-regionally<sup>53</sup>. Asylum seekers, refugees and migrants from Eastern Africa who transit via Egypt and destined for Europe are potentially at risk of being trafficked for the purpose of organ removal<sup>54 55 56</sup>.

The prevalence of this illicit market in the region is being exploited by OCGs and armed groups for sexual exploitation, forced military service and labour (including smuggling of minerals, digging and cleaning mine sites). It is very likely that armed groups provide protection and safe passage to smugglers in areas controlled by them<sup>57 58</sup>.

Child recruitment by armed groups has also been detected in the region. In Somalia, open sources reported staggering numbers of grave violations by armed actors, in particular the recruitment and use, killing and maiming, and abduction of children and rising levels of sexual violence against children<sup>59</sup>. The UN Working Group on Children in Armed Conflict reported several cases of recruitment, abduction, servitude and sexual exploitation of girls and boys by armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan (Darfur)<sup>60</sup>. In addition, the Working Group reported the recruitment of children by the FARDC to spy on armed groups<sup>61</sup>.

### 5.2. Drug Trafficking

Drug trafficking continues to pose a major organized crime threat to the region with some drug markets notably more pervasive than others. The drug trade in Eastern Africa continues to increase its connectivity to the rest of the continent and world. Eastern Africa is affected by a range of drug commodities, noting cannabis, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, khat, synthetic drugs, and both counterfeited and diverted pharmaceuticals, which are all illicitly traded, trafficked, and manufactured in the region<sup>62</sup>. It is most likely that armed groups

benefit from the prevalence of the drug trafficking market in the region, as they will try to engage in drug trafficking for financial gain.

All sources of information indicate that Tanzania forms part of a major transshipment route for heroin entering the region<sup>63</sup>, whereas cocaine and synthetic drugs are much smaller markets in the country yet playing some role as a transit point<sup>64</sup>. Kenya remains a transit point for heroin from Afghanistan with Europe as final destination, mainly through Mombasa port<sup>65</sup>. Open source information suggests that cannabis production takes place across the region, notably in Sudan followed by Tanzania and Kenya to a lesser scale<sup>66</sup>. Synthetic drugs are also found in the region with Kenya allegedly having a growing domestic market for synthetic drugs<sup>67</sup>.

In terms of linkages between drug trafficking, conflicts and violence, information shows that several armed group are believed to be engaged in drug trafficking as a source of revenue<sup>68</sup>. In several occasions, some members of armed groups from Darfur participated in drug smuggling in Libya by providing safe passage to drug convoys crossing southern Libya, between the border with Niger and the border with Egypt<sup>69</sup>.

### 5.3. Theft and Armed Robbery

Theft and armed robbery are serious threats in Eastern Africa. Offenders often use physical violence and weapons for the theft of a range of high-value goods for financial gain.

The theft of livestock, or cattle rustling, was traditionally practiced by pastoralist and nomadic communities in Eastern Africa either as a way of restocking after a severe drought or a disease had killed their livestock or as a practice related to the acquisition of cattle by young boys to pay the “bride price” required for a marriage. These practices were commonly conducted without lethal violence<sup>70</sup>. However, data indicates an increase in the level of violence involved in cattle rustling for the reporting period 2017-2021 as well as changes in the motivations behind livestock theft, often driven by commercial reasons and sometimes in collusion with criminal networks<sup>71</sup>.

In 2008, EAPCCO member states signed the ‘EAPCCO Protocol on the Prevention, Combating and Eradication of Cattle Rustling in Eastern Africa’ with the aim to address cattle rustling and prevent criminal activities related to it. In 2021, the EAPCCO Legal Sub-

Data indicates an increase in the level of violence involved in cattle rustling as well as changes in the motivations behind livestock theft

committee met to deliver on the Protocol signed in 2008. They proposed amendments to the Protocol and a concrete implementation mechanism<sup>72</sup>, evidencing the need to address livestock theft in the region.

Some of the enabling factors which have led to livestock theft becoming more commercial and violent are related to diminishing pasture lands, lack of effective regional instruments to control cattle rustling, the increasing demand for livestock and a decreasing number of cattle and the ease of concealment and transportation (i.e. it is very likely that cattle transportation rises less alarms among law enforcement agencies since it is not an illicit good)<sup>73</sup>.

All source analysis suggests that cattle rustling increasingly poses a serious threat to Eastern Africa as it can trigger violence among communities and often links armed groups with criminal networks<sup>74</sup>. Armed groups can intervene to support interests of farmer or herder communities by agreeing to protect their livestock, or even by providing justice mechanisms for aggrieved farmers or herders<sup>75</sup>. Cattle rustling occurs both within and across borders in the region. It is possible that this type of crime fuels an increased demand for weapons in the region for offenders to attack communities for cattle rustling purposes and for local communities as a self-defense mechanism<sup>76</sup>.

In Sudan, for instance, intercommunal tensions are often characterized by violence involving settled farmers and pastoralist or nomad communities. These situations of violence have led to a significant number of people killed and injured, damage and destruction of property, looting of livestock and kidnappings<sup>77</sup>. Cattle rustling has been reported in South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, allegedly perpetrated by self-defense armed groups that exploit intercommunal tensions. Nationals from Burundi may cross borders to the Democratic Republic of Congo for cattle rustling purposes<sup>78</sup>.

A case study from Uganda illustrates these findings (Box I). Although this example evidences the scope and dynamics of cattle rustling in the Karamoja region and its neighbouring districts in Uganda, it is estimated that such activities may also affect other countries from the region.

## Cattle rustling in Karamoja Sub-Region

**This summary is based primarily on collaborative work with the Uganda Police Crime Intelligence Analytical Unit and their national analysis of organized crime related to cattle rustling. As such, a redacted account is provided to inform the reader of the threat posed by this activity whilst maintaining the integrity of ongoing investigations.**

Cattle rustling is common in Karamoja sub-region and its neighbouring districts of Kapelebyong, Katakwi (Teso) and Bulambuli, Bukwo, Kween in Elgon/Sipi Sub-regions. Cattle rustling is a cultural practice for the Karamojong community. Traditionally, cows are used for bride price, making the youths hunt for animals. But currently, cattle rustling motivation's has shifted to financial gain.

This shift in motivation is increasingly facilitated by the use of firearms by rustlers in the pastoral communities of Jie, Matheniko, Bokora, Dodoth, Pokot, Pian and Tebeth in Karamoja Sub-region. Cattle raids have increased the tension in the communities such as Jie, Matheniko, Bokora, Pian and Dodoth due to continuous firearm proliferation for perceived self-protection, escalating violence across communities.

Cattle rustling in Uganda is also carried out by foreign communities. Notably, the Turkana from Kenya and Toposa from South Sudan who illicitly cross the porous borders of Uganda, attack and drive away animals.

Often, the stolen cattle is transported in trucks by businessmen to markets in Busoga region, Mbale Soroti, Tororo, Busia, Mukono and Kampala for sale. In occasions, the dealers connive with some veterinary officers and local council leaders in forging movement permits.

Cattle thefts discourages the community from undertaking livestock farming which is the main economic activity in the region, therefore leading to poverty and exacerbating socioeconomic issues.

## Box 1 CASE STUDY - CATTLE RUSTLING IN KARAMOJA, UGANDA

Cases of armed groups looting from communities and/or military and security agencies have also been detected in Eastern Africa. Police information indicates that in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo armed groups loot houses and private properties more often during the night. Furthermore, a UN report indicates cases where ADF attacked and kidnaped farmers in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. ADF and its collaborators undertook isolated acts of cocoa harvesting, theft and trade<sup>79</sup>.

Theft of goods from governmental and former African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) facilities has been reported in Sudan<sup>80</sup>.

#### **5.4. Environmental Crimes and Wildlife**

Environmental crimes are widespread across Eastern Africa, posing great risks to various species and ecosystems found across the region. The poaching of a range of animal species and the exploitation of natural resources that is taking place in the region have a severe impact not just on the environment, but also on development and the economy. These crimes yield large profits for the region's criminal actors, and are typically transnational<sup>81</sup>.

In Eastern Africa, environmental crime offences are most likely related to wildlife crimes and illicit extraction and trafficking of natural resources. The region is a hub for the trafficking of a variety of live species and wildlife parts, notably destined for Asia<sup>82</sup>. In addition, illegal gold mining cases have been detected in the region, notably in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. Gold from the Democratic Republic of Congo is most likely trafficked to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania in Eastern Africa and to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)<sup>83</sup>.

A previous report drafted by INTERPOL, the Norwegian Center for Global Analyses and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime estimates that, globally, the proceeds of environmental crimes have become the largest source of income for armed groups<sup>84</sup>. The report evidences an increasing interest in natural

Interactions  
between armed  
groups, criminal  
networks and illegal  
exploitation of  
natural resources  
contributes to the  
insecurity in Eastern  
Africa

resources among many armed and criminal groups, especially gold and other minerals, and timber<sup>85</sup>.

It is almost certain that armed groups exploit the large availability of natural resources and biodiversity in Eastern Africa, often in association with OCGs. Furthermore, armed groups can provide security (to protect mining operations from militias for example), steal minerals and control the supply chain from extraction to distribution<sup>86</sup>. Rewards from resource control are maximised by insurgents when resources are easily accessible and marketable and sufficiently valuable<sup>87</sup>, thus armed groups will try to exploit resources in areas they control, that require less investment and are easier to conceal and transport.

The presence of armed groups in forest areas jeopardizes the work of rangers and conservationists, sometimes leading to the closure of ranger posts. In South Sudan, for example, continued fighting in Tambura County posed challenges in protecting the parks and it forced one ranger post to close in the Southern National Park<sup>88</sup>. It is very likely that armed groups and OCGs will benefit from the instability derived from the armed conflict to poach and traffic wildlife derivatives.

Elephant ivory trafficking is linked to funding a portion of income raised by armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and is probably a primary source of income to the LRA operating in the border triangle of Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan<sup>89</sup>. Moreover, the Mai-Mai Yakutumba group in the Democratic Republic of Congo allegedly benefited from illegal logging (from forest reserves under its control), taxation and trade of redwood, in association with criminal networks<sup>90</sup>.

Information suggest that interactions between armed groups, criminal networks and illegal exploitation of natural resources contributes to the insecurity in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, notably in the regions of North-Kivu, South-Kivu and Ituri<sup>91 92</sup>. All sources of information indicate the presence of several armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo with some of them competing for territorial and resource control and others establishing alliances to ensure weapons supply and monetary resources<sup>93 94</sup>.

In addition, controlling some gold mining sites and smuggling routes, as well as using extortion through illegal taxation are some of the sources of financing for some armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo<sup>95</sup>. Some armed groups known to finance their activities through illegal trading in gold in the Democratic Republic of Congo are Mai-Mai Yakutumba, Lendu factions, Mai-Mai Malaika, NDC-R and the LRA<sup>96 97</sup>. However, open source information shows that the major part of illicit profits generated from environmental crimes goes to OCGs. Such OCGs thrive on the instability exacerbated by the presence of armed groups, as they facilitate illicit gold mining by generating insecurity and inducing lower buying prices on sites<sup>98</sup>.

Information shows that artisanal gold mines in Jebel Marra, Sudan were a major source of financing for the Sudan Liberation Army/Abdul Wahid (SLA/AW)<sup>99</sup>. In January 2022, national authorities in Sudan announced new regulations that allow private traders to export gold (previously only the Central Bank was authorized to export gold) in an effort to tackle gold smuggling and to boost the country's economy<sup>100 101</sup>. It is possible that armed groups and criminal networks will try to associate with private companies for gold exportation.

## 5.5. Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons and Explosives

The widespread availability of small arms and light weapons (SALW), and increasingly, explosives, is a serious threat for the security and stability of Eastern Africa as it perpetuates violence and underlies a range of organized crime activities. Across Eastern Africa, firearms are used in the commission of crimes, notably for offences such as armed robbery, livestock theft and sexual and gender based violence. In the region, the illicit trade in arms involve multiple actors, including state-embedded actors, militias, and criminal networks<sup>102</sup>.

A previous study conducted by Small Arms Survey estimates that illicit transfers of armament to Africa have the potential to rapidly reach countries and regions affected by insecurity and armed violence<sup>103</sup>. In Eastern Africa, armed groups thrive in the high circulation of SALW to project violence, carry out their operations and control communities through violence<sup>104 105 106</sup>. Moreover, in some cases the increase of firearms demand is fuelled by situations of violence related to cattle rustling or as a self-protection mechanisms for communities with a high presence of armed groups<sup>107</sup>.

Sourcing of weapons can be done through exchanges between armed groups and/or criminal networks, cross-border trafficking, by looting security forces facilities and attacking armed personnel or by illicit transfer or diversion of arms from countries outside the region<sup>108 109</sup>. Furthermore, it is very possible that some armed groups illicitly purchase arms in exchange for cattle<sup>110</sup>.

Allegedly, one of the main source of weapons and ammunition for Mai-Mai groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, are derived from attacks on FARDC, in-country trafficking and diversion of FARDC weaponry<sup>111</sup>.

In Darfur, Sudan, the presence of individual elements from armed groups that returned to Darfur after having previously fought in Libya can contribute to the large availability of firearms and an increase in crime<sup>112</sup>. Open source information suggests that the diversion of Chinese weapon transfers to the FARDC to armed groups fuels the illicit trade of weapons in the Democratic Republic of Congo<sup>113</sup>.

Investigations of the UN Panel of Experts on Somalia indicates that arms smuggling networks from Yemen to Puntland (Somalia) persists, with a case of armament seizure allegedly intended for Al-Shabaab reported in 2021<sup>114</sup>. According to open source information, illicit arms imported into Puntland from Yemen typically consist of SALW (pistols, AK-pattern assault rifles, light and heavy Soviet-pattern machine guns and rocket-propelled-grenade launchers) together with their corresponding ammunition<sup>115</sup>.

## 5.6. Illicit Flows of Money

Illicit flows of money in Eastern Africa have been previously reported to be significantly transnational, with money laundering schemes frequently including more than one country at a time. Often, money laundering schemes can be used as a means to obscure

or conceal the origin of illicit proceeds. The financial flows underpinning the illicit markets previously assessed in context of violence are certainly of a far greater magnitude than those described in this section. This section highlights illicit taxation and its nexus with armed conflicts and other situations of violence in Eastern Africa.

### Illicit Taxation

A previous ENACT assessment on Trafficking of Illicit Goods at Ports and Airports in Africa indicated that armed groups operating in Africa heavily rely on illicit taxation to fund their criminal activities<sup>116</sup>. In Eastern Africa, illicit taxation allows OCGs and armed groups to generate revenue through commodity taxes, by imposing taxes on the community to move through certain areas or to run their business. Illicit taxation is a recurrent source of financing for many armed groups because it provides constant revenue over time. For instance, information indicates that the NDC-R group imposed taxes on Congolese adults before and after combat, resorting to physical violence as punishment for those who would not pay the tax<sup>117</sup>.

Illicit taxation on the extraction, selling and transportation of natural resources (such as gold, teak, redwood) by armed groups has been detected in some countries in Eastern Africa<sup>118</sup>. Often, armed groups illegally exploit, tax and trade natural resources in collaboration with criminal networks. A UN report of the Panel of Experts on the Democratic Republic of Congo reported that in 2021 the Mai-Mai Yakutumba group continued to benefit from the illegal logging, taxation and trade of redwood in collusion with criminal organizations<sup>119</sup>.

The shortages of goods and supplies in Sudan as a consequence of armed conflict and violence can be exploited by criminal groups to smuggle goods. It is very likely that armed groups in control of some areas will apply a tax to OCGs to grant access to such smuggling routes<sup>120</sup>. It is possible that this taxation system is being imposed in other countries with increasing smuggling of goods and supplies activities.

## Conclusion

This strategic assessment explores the dynamics that are particular to violent conflicts in Eastern Africa, to understand which dimensions of conflict OCGs can exploit to expand their illicit activities. It draws attention to the fact that by colluding with armed groups for natural resources exploitation and smuggling of goods, OCGs can contribute to prolonging conflicts in Eastern Africa posing a serious threat to peace and stability in the region. Furthermore, the assessment shows that the prevalence of some criminal markets can have more destabilizing effects than others as it is suspected to be the case for livestock theft in some Eastern African countries. Moreover, high levels of movement of people in the region as consequence of violent conflict or natural disasters, are suspected to be exploited by OCGs for human trafficking and people smuggling purposes often in cooperation with armed groups.

The assessment also analyses the most prevalent illicit markets in Eastern Africa and the illegal commodities that are being trafficked by criminal organizations in the region in order to better understand the potential scope of OCGs that thrive in situations of armed conflict and instability to maximize profits. High levels of youth unemployment and socio-economic issues in the region are among the major enablers for organized crime. These issues are particularly exacerbated in conflict-affected areas and affected by economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic. The most prevalent offences in the region are related to a range of frauds and financial crimes, drug trafficking, human trafficking, poaching, wildlife trafficking, armed robberies and illegal trafficking of goods across airports and ports. Moreover, this report shows that arms trafficking is most likely driven by violent conflict, fueling other illicit activities, notably armed robberies and organized violence.

There are several actors involved in organized crime and armed conflict in the region. Armed groups rely on multiple sources of financing to sustain their activities, including profits derived from organized crime such as armed robberies, kidnapping for ransom, extracting rents and revenues from natural resources, imposing rents and 'taxing' on the local population. Connections between armed groups and illicit flows pose a threat to security and peace in the region. Moreover, the assessment shows that some armed groups are active in more than one country in Eastern Africa, evidencing the potential for local conflicts to trigger regional instability.

Finally, the assessment analyses the multiple modus operandi adopted by criminals to benefit from violent conflict and to adapt to change upon governmental efforts to prevent, end and control conflict. Connection between OCGs and armed groups have been identified in several illicit markets. Armed groups continue to target children in Eastern Africa, notably for soldiering and human trafficking purposes. Information shows that children in Eastern Africa are vulnerable to labour and sexual exploitation by both armed groups and OCGs.

Moreover, the assessment shows that in some instances armed groups collude with smugglers to provide protection and safe passage in areas controlled by them. Similar cooperation has been detected for drug trafficking purposes.

The assessment draws attention to the increasing threat that livestock theft, or cattle rustling, cases pose to Eastern Africa as it can trigger violence among communities and often link armed groups with criminal networks. Furthermore, livestock theft is fueling the demand for weapons in the region for offenders to attack communities for cattle rustling purposes and for local communities as a self-defense mechanism.

Environmental crimes and wildlife trafficking are influenced by violent conflict in the region. Armed groups exploit the large availability of natural resources and biodiversity in Eastern Africa, often in association with OCGs. Illicit extraction and taxation of natural resources and minerals is one of the most reported source of revenue for armed groups in the region.

This report also assesses organized violence in the region. It shows that organized violence activities, notably kidnapping for ransom, sexual and gender based violence, looting and attacks to communities undertaken by OCGs, extremist groups and armed actors are widespread across Eastern Africa. High levels of violence are most often facilitated by illicit weapon circulation in the region.

Finally, the assessment explores how illicit flows are being used to finance armed groups activities. Illicit taxation is used in the region by OCGs and armed groups as sources of revenue.

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- <sup>18</sup> UCDP Definitions:  
Interstate Conflict: A conflict between two or more governments.

**Intrastate Conflict:** A conflict between a government and a non-governmental party, with no interference from other countries.

**Non-state Conflict:** The use of armed force between two organised armed groups, neither of which is the government of a state, which results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year.

**One-Sided Violence:** The deliberate use of armed force by the government of a state or by a formally organised group against civilians which results in at least 25 deaths in a year.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> 'Project ENACT Strategic Assessment: Overview of Serious and Organized Crime in the Eastern African Region', *INTERPOL*, Op. Cit.

<sup>36</sup> 'Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict', *United Nations and World Bank*, Op. Cit.

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