**Hidden Narratives of Transnational Organised Crime in West Africa**

**RESEARCH AND METHODS**

1. Research project

This project investigated the understandings of activities labelled transnational organised crime (TNOC) in West Africa. The project assumed that the ways illicit and state actors speak about and understand their roles, i.e. their 'narratives', provides a helpful entry point into a better understanding of the everyday reality of participating in and seeking to counter criminalised activities. The project was built on the observation that much of our understanding of TNOC in West Africa is based on official reports, statistics and other largely detached assessments. Using the cases of the illicit opioid trade and the illicit transport of migrants, the project sought to uncover the 'hidden narratives' of these activities in West Africa in order to question and challenge the dominant official views and policies. The project asked three overarching research questions: (1) Is there such as thing as TNOC in West Africa? (2) What are the local narratives and understandings around it? And finally, (3) how useful are our conceptual tools for understanding these activities in the regional context?

The project focussed on informal narratives from state actors (e.g. policymakers, law enforcement officials), as well as what we called 'market insiders' (e.g. transporters, illicit traders) in the two trade hubs of Lagos (Nigeria) and Agadez (Niger). This data was analysed by focusing on common threads about how these actors understood their work, its legality and the ethics of their work. The project also sought to connect these micro-level narratives to draw conclusions about the broader governance of TNOC and related illicit livelihoods in West Africa and explored how a rethinking of TNOC in the light of the uncovered narratives could help to inform and improve related policies in West Africa and beyond.

Main findings: Our research findings revealed the embeddedness and complexity of these illicit activities and that they were not new, despite claims about their novelty. In fact, they were an integral part of the regional transport economy in Agadez and the pharmaceutical market in Lagos, opioids like tramadol providing cheap medicine and work performance enhancement for the poor. These illicit activities also enjoyed relatively high levels of local legitimacy, despite society’s moral objections. This social legitimacy of activities labelled TNOC also meant they persisted despite state restrictions.

One of our project’s aims was to explore the conceptual and theoretical limitations of TNOC, in the West African context. Our own fieldwork showed TNOC to be a problematic and state-centric concept which sidelined sub-national and non-organised dimensions as well as related state harms, such as corruption. We proposed to focus instead on the marginalised ‘illicit livelihoods’ that are entangled with so-called TNOC activities.

Regarding policy lessons, our research observed a process of growing criminalisation of these livelihoods and a further marginalisation of the communities they were based in. This was in part a consequence of state discourses on TNOC, which tried to label marginal livelihoods as serious crime and thus delegitimise them. These state attempts to criminalise, such as a 2015 law on human trafficking in Niger, were ignorant of the complexity and embeddedness of these illicit activities and often worsened the livelihoods of the most vulnerable, including migrants and drug users.

1. Research data

The foundation of the project was pioneering and ethically rigorous fieldwork on insider narratives of activities labelled transnational organised crime (TNOC). This was done through in-depth interviews with difficult to access market insiders and regulators in the illicit migrant transport economy in Agadez and the illicit opioid economy in Lagos.

We shared/archived the core of this interview data in the form of redacted interview transcripts. Interviews were of diverse lengths, from a few minutes to up to an hour. Interviews used a general interview topic guide with open questions; but they explored different elements of this guide depending on the expertise of the interviewee. Due to geographical focus of the research, the archived transcripts are in three different languages (English, Nigerian Pidgin and French).

Note that from the outset of this project, it was clear that we would not be able to publicly share all the data gathered for ethical and safety reasons. Given the small sample sizes, especially in Niger, as well as the small number of gatekeepers through which they were obtained, we assessed the risk of our research participants being identifiable as moderate to high. In turn, identification would likely lead to repercussions for these research participants as the local government has been steadfast in its prosecutions of market insiders.

Nonetheless, we have attempted to archive and share as much of our interview data (17 of 40 interviews), especially as it was the project’s aim to share the ‘hidden narratives’ of activities labelled TNOC.

1. Research methods

The project drew on a mix of documentary and interview methods. The first exploratory stage of the project drew on documentary data, which was primarily garnered from publicly available contemporary sources, including government and international organisation crime reports, statistics, as well as a few small-scale empirical studies on organised crime in Africa. This existing documentary data on TNOC had its limitations, primarily as it did not provide an understanding of insider views and it was thus used primarily for a broad historical and geographical description of the drug trade and migration in West Africa and to provide a context for our exploration of narratives.

The main focus of our project, the reconstruction of hidden narratives of TNOC, came from three major sources. The first element of narrative gathering was through reviews of local media in Niger and Nigeria. The second part of narrative collection was through semi-structured interviews with key officials (ca 5-8 in each study site). This was primarily focused on mid-level state officials, who were often the government’s interface with international partners. The investigators’ prior contacts as well as snowball sampling helped to identify and interview this group of informants. The third part involved interviews and observation with what we called ‘market insiders’, i.e. individuals associated with illicit practices. This involved ca 15 semi-structured interviews with people associated with the migrant transport in Agadez (Niger) and the illicit opioid economy in Lagos (Nigeria). More specifically, this involved interviews with local drug sellers, drug importers, transporters, importers and smugglers in the two sites, as well as individuals with good knowledge of the trade, such as NGO workers and academics having worked with market insiders. These interviews were conducted in safe places, such as the offices of informants or NGO offices, and under the observance of strictest ethical guidelines.

Throughout our interviews, we were looking to understand the ways that our interlocutors’ narratives reflect understandings of legality, legitimacy, and formality. The legality of migration and drugs we focussed on was deeply contested, and diverse actors pursued (or rejected) legitimacy in different ways. Once all the interview data was collected, the preliminary thematic analysis worked through a categorisation of what practices and forms of understanding various narratives enabled. For instance, ways of framing ethnicity or gender were particularly salient when it came to the identification of potential smugglers or victims.

**Study site selection and access**: The two main study sites were chosen purposely, as they are both major licit and illicit trade hubs in West Africa. Agadez is the northern smuggling hub of Niger and one of the major ‘gates to the Sahara.’ As such the city is a critical hub on the ancient trans-Saharan trade route linking West Africa to North Africa and the Mediterranean. Lagos is West Africa’s most important commercial centre and seaport, where much of the region’s container, as well as airborne trade, flows through. It is at these two critical transport hubs that the licit and illicit movement of people and drugs is most openly conducted and thus most researchable. It is also in these two sites that the project team had extensive research experience. This previous experience also helped to make research on illicit activities and gaining access to research informants possible. In the two study sites, the investigators also already had good research connections to some of the potential interviewees for the project and based on these connections a wider net of interviewees was recruited, largely through snowballing.