Illicit Drugs, Organised Crime, and Violent Extremism: Addressing the Nexus, Countermeasures, and Implications

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Abstract

This article explores how illicit drug traffickers, organised criminals, and violent extremists interact along intricate pathways to perpetrate their illegal activities and recommends how security agents, especially the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) can better tackle the activities of illicit drug racketeers linked to organised criminal groups and violent extremists. Against this backdrop, the article provides an analysis of the association between illicit drugs, organised crime, and violent extremism. The study was an exploratory research design, carried out in Tsafe Area of Zamfara State. It was conducted using a Key Informant and In-depth Interview. The research was conducted using the snowballing sampling method. Findings revealed that while efforts to curtail the phenomenon are ongoing, the linkages are getting stronger daily. Therefore, to combat the increasing activities of these organised criminal groups, the article recommends a multi-sectoral and "whole systems" approach using modern technology, and synergy among agencies of government, as well as non-governmental stakeholders, who have the wherewithal to support actions being undertaken by the government.

Keywords: Crime, Extremism, Illicit Drugs, Law Enforcement, Violent.

Introduction

The unholy and intricately complex interplay between illicit drugs, organised crime, and violent extremism (from now on DOVE) poses a fundamental threat to the holistic well-being of any society (Mangena and Pherudi, 2019). The convergence of DOVE has negative social and public health outcomes such that most countries

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including Nigeria, are deploying massive State resources to disrupt and possibly stop the surges currently being experienced in these criminal networks (Okereke, 2020). However, despite spirited and concerted efforts by law enforcement agencies in these countries to disrupt the activities of illicit drug traffickers, by arresting and prosecuting some, and confiscating their illegal assets, the perpetrators continually up their game to escape law enforcement radar (Okereke, 2020). Evidence from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021) indicates that there are no sufficient resources to support multi-agency initiatives to prevent illegal drug production, distribution, and use, arguably fed by violent criminal activities, thereby constituting serious challenges to addressing its colossal impact on nations' formal economies, including social and political institutions (Canton, 2021). The situation, many have argued, is exacerbated by the complex relationship illicit drug traffickers have established with organised criminal groups, and the availability of ready markets in terms of the need for and use by different extremist groups, including terrorist and insurgent organisations (Cornell, 2012)). Seen in isolation or together, illicit drug traffickers, organised criminal groups, and extremist organisations constitute significant threats to the welfare of States and the global ecosystem (Mangena and Pherudi, 2019). Therefore, a need for a timely intervention to stem the threats.

Understanding and addressing the linkages between (DOVE) and their impact now and in the future, and finding solutions to the threats they pose is paramount and requires urgent consideration by all well-meaning individuals and groups. Given this, in early 2000, the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organised Crimes and related Protocols, otherwise known as the Palermo Convention was adopted by member States, as measures towards combating drug trafficking globally and locally. Nigeria being a signatory to the convention, has since undertaken to address the threats of drug trafficking and related issues through the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) (Okereke, 202). The agency in partnership with other stakeholders has the onerous task of ensuring that they stop or reduce the increasing criminal activities of drug cultivation, trafficking, sales, and consumption. This situation has become quite alarming and detrimental to both human and national security (Aning and Pokoo, 2014). Disrupting the relationship between DOVE in Nigeria is an ongoing and enormous battle that requires continuous collaboration among researchers, statutory bodies like the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), and non-governmental organisations. Scaling the programmes and activities of law enforcement agencies through the provision of adequate funding and capacity-building of staff can help to address the prevalence of illicit drugs, organised crime, and violent extremism in Nigeria.

Most of the narratives around the nexus between DOVE until now, have centered on the activities of illicit drug traffickers and the potential impact of the same

on national security without examining conceptual issues relating to the phenomena and analysing the areas of intersection between them. This paper, therefore, fills the gap by adopting the qualitative method to examine people's involvement in illicit drugs; assess the implications of involvement in illicit drugs; it examine how illicit drugs and organised crime interface to foster violent extremism in the Tsafe area of Zamfara State, and examine the strategies that are required to address the linkages for better and more effective and impactful outcomes.

Conceptual Clarification

Any attempt to understand and discuss the nexus between drugs, organised crime, and violent extremism without first providing an analytical conceptualisation of the terms, would be a futile expedition. Even while acknowledging that there is no consensus on the definition of these concepts, this paper examines some definitions in extant literature that are relevant to the discussion around the DOVE relationship.

Illicit Drugs

Illicit drug use is a term used for different licit drugs, that is, drugs legally approved by constituted authorities for use for various purposes such as the treatment of diseases – mental, psychological, or physical – depending on the particular situation. Some examples of illicit drugs include heroin, cocaine, and cannabis, with their long and short-term effects such as high levels of pleasure and pain relief, drowsiness and clumsiness, sadness, anxiety, pendency, and loss of inhibition (UNOD, 2017). Omage and Omage (n.d) argued that illicit drug use is culturally defined and seen as unhealthy or problematic as may be determined by the society in which it is used. Drugs are generally substances which affect the thinking and reasoning ability of an individual and which may influence their action or behaviour for good or ill. Illicit drugs, therefore, are those drugs, whose purchase, use and possession are termed illegal based on the society's definition (Omage and Omage, n.d). Further, illicit drug use is also referred to as drug abuse or misuse and connotes excessive use of illegal drugs or misuse of prescribed drugs by an individual or group of individuals (Omage and Omage, n.d).

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported in 2010 the use of illicit drugs which indicated that only a minority of the world's population consume illicit substances with between 3.5% and 5.7% having done so at least once. It noted that "cannabis has the highest prevalence of use followed by amphetamine, cocaine, and heroin (Morgan, C. J. A., Noronha, L. A., Muetzelfeldt, M., Fielding, A., & Curran, H. V, 2013, p.497). The report also showed how in the United Kingdom alone, drug use of Class A substances (ecstasy and hallucinogens) costs society 15.4

billion pounds annually, out of which 13.9 billion pounds is linked to criminal offences. Further, as noted by Morgan, Noronha, Muetzelfeldt, Fielding & Curran (2013), the United States Department of Justice National Drugs Intelligence Centre report in 2011, indicated the combined effect of illicit drugs on society amounting to over $193 billion, with crime and incarceration accounting for over $100 billion of these costs.

Organised Crime

Africa remains a region of the world where organised crime manifests in various nomenclatures such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, natural resources (e.g. oil) smuggling, banditry, kidnapping and money laundering, maritime piracy, armed robbery, among others, has generated a lot of anxiety, especially since the 1990s (Mangena and Pherudi, 2019).

The concept of organised crime (OC) which is today known as "organized criminal group" became prominent at the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime in 2004. Under the convention, an organised criminal group is described as ". . . a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a while and acting in concert to commit one or more serious crimes or offences established per this Convention, to obtain, directly or indirectly, financial or other material benefits" (United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, Article 2. Use of terms, 2004, p.5). However, for Reitano, Clarke & Adal, (2017) this definition lacks depth considering the evolving nature and influence of DOVE in recent times.

Early attempts to define OC through the prism of the "mafia-type hierarchical criminal organisations, which existed outside the formal economy" were suspicious and presumptive (Hübschle, 2011, p. 83). It is an assumption that has been viewed as being problematic in that it fails to account for the role of State actors such as politicians, law enforcement agents, government officials, and business entrepreneurs within the legal economy who usually connive with and facilitate organised crime networks and their activities (Hübschle, 2011).

OC sometimes involves cross-border activities with local and external partners and collaborates, all working in concert to achieve their objectives. This type of organised crime which is commonly referred to as Trans-national organised crime (TOC) includes: drug trafficking, smuggling, cross-border robberies, money laundering, illicit trafficking in Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), and human trafficking (Okereke, 2020). TOC is coordinated across national borders, involving networks of individuals working across different countries to plan and perpetrate their

illegal activities for financial and sundry benefits (Okoli, and Okpaleke, 2014)). Being that the activities of TOC are illegal and subject to legal scrutiny and prosecution (if caught), the group tends to operate almost always in the dark under the radar, and away from the prying eyes of law enforcement officials, but not completely without the public or community's knowledge, who seldom report the activities of the criminal group to the Police or other law enforcement officers; perhaps, for fear of being attacked or victimised (Kelly and Levy, 2012).

It has been noted that issues and discussions around organised crime and what it means went through a long and arduous process. After a prolonged debate on an internationally agreed definition of the concept of organised crime, despite the visible threat it poses to the international community, the UN Ad-Hoc Committee meetings in Vienna, at the end of last the century, got the buy-in of member states for consensus definition of organised crime and criminalisation of participation in any such group (Hübschle, 2011). Consequently, in 2010, adopting the South African Police Chiefs Cooperation Organisation (SARPCCO) definition of OC, derived from the Palermo Convention, member states, then defined *organised crime* as any act "committed by two or more perpetrators, who are aware of each other's existence and general role, and who are acting in concert; is serious; committed repeatedly; the crimes are motivated by the pursuit of material and financial gain" (Hübschle, 2014, p. 33).

Violent Extremism

Violent extremism is today the bane of the global community with many countries having to face its highly rated threat and varied consequences evidenced in most parts of the world (Sørensen, G., Møller, J., & Jackson, 2022). The UNODC admits that the cost in terms of loss of life and economic havoc precipitated by violent extremists is incomparable to the seeds of division it sows between communities which inadvertently precipitate further extremist ideas in other parts of society, and elicit aggressive and violent responses (Canton, 2021).

Agreeing on a singular definition of violent extremism (VE) remains a subject of debate among scholars. However, a recent study has supported the conceptualization of VE indicating that it is individuals' views and behaviours that encourage or utilize violence to further their political, religious, or ideological objectives (Webber, Kruglanski, Molinario & Jasko, 2020). VE, therefore, pertains to efforts or activities aimed at changing the status quo through the instrumentality of fear and intimidation and not by peaceful means (Chukwurah, Okechukwu, & Ogbeje, 2015). The employment of a violent rather than peaceful approach to seeking redress in terms of changing an existing condition is driven by a perceived feeling of denial of socio-economic, political, and cultural or religious rights and privileges by a segment

of the population (Laplante, 2008)). How this relates to illicit drugs and organised criminal activities will be examined in the segment on the linkages between illicit drugs, organised crime, and violent extremism. It has been observed that violent extremism includes acts of terrorism and it can be motivated by political or religious ideology or a combination of both (Pressman, 2009).

The United Nations *Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners* (Richards, 2017)) notes that there can be several motivating factors for acts of VE, but groups them under the following three broad headings:

i. *Ideological violence*, including (a) Political ideologies such as nationalist, neo-Nazi groups, white supremacy or hate groups that advocate the use of violence; (b)extreme interpretations of religious ideologies and beliefs that advocate the use of violence; or (c) violence left-wing, anarchists, and right-wing ideologies.

ii. *Issue-based violence*, including (a) Violent animal liberation and animal rights movements; (b) environmental or eco-related violent extremism; or (c) anti-government, anti-globalisation or anti-capitalist movements that advocate the use of violence.

iii. Ethno-nationalist or separatist violence involves violent political or independence struggles based on race, culture, geography, or ethnicity.

The Nigeria Boko Haram sect that began operations in the Northeastern geo-political zone of the country is an example of an extremist group (Ebonyi, 2019). The Bandits are outlaws or robbers that often belong to a gang and operate in lawless or isolated areas. They have arms and ammunition and are into activities of kidnapping humans and demanding ransom (Bello and Abdullahi, 2021)

Illicit Drugs, Organised Crime, and Links to Violent Extremism in Nigeria

This section examines the pathways or patterns of illicit drugs, organised crime, and violent extremism generally, including within the Nigerian environment. Exploring the linkages between DOVE is not an easy task because all three are inconspicuously interwoven. How illicit drugs and organised crime merge to fuel violent crime manifesting in various forms (for example, terrorism/insurgency, kidnapping, banditry, rape, and associated crimes) has been a subject of controversy among scholars and other interested parties (Mullins & Wither, 2016). This is not to assume that these linkages do not exist. They do, but it requires a systematic and critical approach to explicate the nuances.

A critical analysis suggests that there is no clear-cut distinction between DOVE, rather what obtains is certain similarities and differences and an overlap (Sahgal & Zeuthen, 2020; Mullins & Wither, 2016). However, in analysing these linkages, Cornell, (2012), argues against the general trepidations and reactions occasioned by the synergy, a situation that he attributes to inadequate analysis of the problem. Mullins and Wither (2016) reckoned that the energy put into the controversy and fears often entertained should be deployed into designing more effective mechanisms to mitigate the threats.

Mangena and Pherudi, (2019) contend that lately there has been increased global drug trafficking activities due largely to the activities of organised criminal networks operating within the West African sub-region, which remains a transit route and destination for drugs. UNODC (2005) report also pointed out that while West African organised crime might not be as violent as that of others, such as Russian organised crime, its scale, and scope are nonetheless disturbing. For example, Nigeria is reported to have an alarmingly high proliferation of psychotropic substances, including tramadol, amphetamine, and codeine, which are imported into the country through the seaports (Kwaskebe, Atolagbe & Kayode, 2021). The threats inherent in the activities of organised criminal groups in Nigeria have glaringly been captured in the Africa Organised Crime Index (AOCI) 2021 (Wada, 2021). It shows Nigeria having 7.15 on the criminality score; and 1st of 15 West African countries, as well as 2nd of 54 African countries. The country scored 7.05 on organised criminal markets, and 7.25 indicates the criminal actors within the criminal networks (AOCI, 2021). Details are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Criminality Score for Criminal Markets and Criminal Actors in Nigeria*

| CRIMINALITY SCORE	7.15
2nd of 54 African countries	
1st of 15 West African countries	
CRIMINAL MARKETS	**7.05**
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	7.50
HUMAN SMUGGLING	6.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	8.00
FLORA CRIMES	6.00
FAUNA CRIMES	6.50
NON–RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	8.00
HEROIN TRADE	6.00
COCAINE TRADE	6.50
CANNABIS TRADE	8.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	8.00
CRIMINAL ACTORS	**7.25**
MAFIA–STYLE GROUPS	5.50
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	9.00
STATE–EMBEDDED ACTORS	7.50
FOREIGN ACTORS	7.00

Source: Africa Organised Crime Index (AOCI) 2021.

The Africa Organised Crime Index 2021 reports that Nigeria has become notorious for being not only a transit and destination country, but also a source country where the Nigerian criminal networks collaborate with foreign nationals (Mexican cartels) to establish crystal meth production facilities, so that illicit drugs such as methamphetamine produced in Nigeria is transported to other parts of Africa, including South Africa, and countries in Asia. The AOCI notes further that aside from methamphetamine, Nigeria is the hub for global cocaine destination and trans-shipment, adding that the country's organised criminal groups are major players in the global cocaine market, where they influence, organise, and determine market forces (AOCI, 2021).

Pinson (2022), argued that the differences between criminal and conflict actors are always blurred. This informs the need to examine how organised criminal groups engage in illicit drug trafficking as a business venture, how illicit drug trafficking facilitates various forms of organised crime, and how violent extremism allows organised crime to grow. The figure below illustrates the intricate DOVE networks.

Figure 2: *The Linkages between Illicit Drugs, Organized Crime and Violent Extremism*
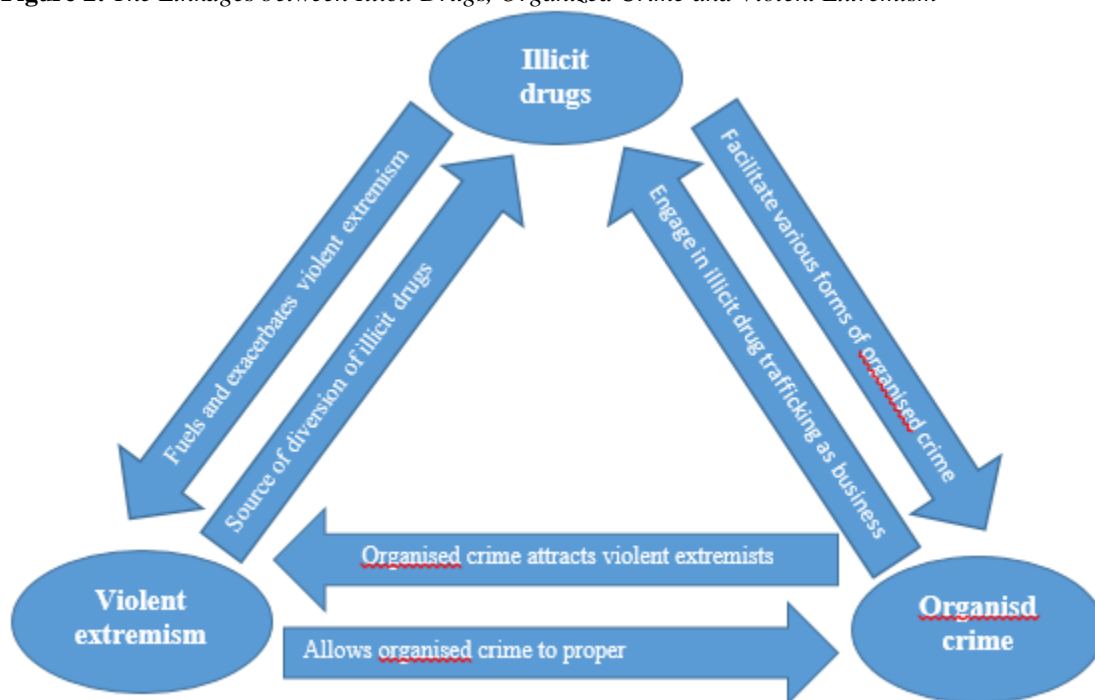
Source: Adapted with modification from Pinson (2022).

Similarly, Ruggiero & Leyva (2017), citing several scholars, argued that researchers of macro-structural bent, having suggested that neoliberal policy inputs and outputs have caused widespread economic deprivation and weakened social

control, point to the manner organised criminal groups compete in illicit markets while re-enforcing their regional control by:

i.   establishing and working with legitimate enterprises to conduct criminal activities (Milhaupt and West, 2000);

ii.   exploiting weak regulations and ineffective judicial systems (Tzvetkova, 2008);

iii.   fostering links with low to mid-level officials, particularly those from the criminal justice system, who overlook their illicit activities and provide immunity in exchange for bribes (Wang, 2013);

iv.   possessing the skills required to adapt to rapidly changing conditions, including the ability to expand operations transnationally (Silverstone and Whittle, 2016).

Considering the arguments above, an attempt is made to examine the apparent connection between organised crime (OC) and violent extremism (VE) – also referred to as terrorism in certain quarters, before discussing how both interface with illicit drugs. However, it should be mentioned that OC or crime generally and VE or terrorism are similar judging by the fact that both "undermine social trust and cohesion, producing similarly damaging effects on wider society," (Sahgal & Zeuthen, 2020, p. 56); just in the same way as "individuals who commit non-terrorism-related criminal offences and those who perpetrate acts of VE have also been found to be similar in terms of basic demographic characteristics such as age, gender and economic background" (Sahgal & Zeuthen, 2020).

On this score, Sahgal and Zeuthen (2020), while acknowledging the importance of the apparent differences and similarities between the OC and VE, note that most organised criminals differ from violent extremists in that they do not employ any ideology in justification for their actions as do violent extremists who ride on the wings of ideology to perpetrate their heinous acts. Different organised criminal groups perceive their illegal behaviour as simply humane or philanthropic, whereas violent extremists always consider their actions as beneficial for their members and for the greater good of all. Also, criminals tend to stay out of law enforcement radar, but VE seeks wider public attention and approval in the best way they possibly can (Sahgal & Zeuthen, 2020). In the process, an extremist group elicits public sympathy, garners massive support for their course, and gets to recruit the most vulnerable segment of the population, especially youths into their membership. This has been the case with the Boko Haram terrorists, since they adopted violent tactics in 2009, after the death of their leader, Yusuf Mohammed (Ebonyi, 2019).

Sahgal and Zeuthen (2020) have identified three reasons and theories that are put forward in extant literature to highlight the extent of the convergence and dissonance between OC and VE. This is based on three separate approaches: "(i) individual or agency-oriented, which highlights the individual motivations that may guide those with a criminal history to join VE groups; (i) organizational, which focuses on the networks of collaboration and overlap between criminal networks and VE organisations; and (iii) institutional, which emphasises the influence of institutions, such as prisons, in creating conditions for recruitment of criminals to VE groups" (Sahgal & Zeuthen, 2020, p. 56).

The third approach addressing the extent to which OC and VE interface and the reason for it, perhaps explains the reason why some observers have argued against the incarceration of violent extremist groups (such as Boko Haram terrorists), but rather grant them amnesty, deradicalise, and build their capacity, and reintegrate them into their communities, so that they can participate in the task of rebuilding what they have destroyed (Ebonyi, 2019). However, certain mechanisms need to be factored into any programme that seeks to achieve such objectives (this is outside the scope of the current paper).

On the over-lap between OC and VE, Chelin (2020), notes that in theory, one differs from the other in terms of their objectives and modalities, arguing that terrorist groups employ violence or the threat of violence and on an ideological basis to cause change in the structure of the State. While terrorist or extremist groups almost always depend on resources (usually illegally acquired or sought) to accomplish their goals as against the resources being the goal itself, organised criminal groups' main goal is in material acquisition and financial benefits or simply profit. In which case they may occasionally resort to the use of violence to actualise it. Herein, too, is the important difference between OC groups and violent extremist groups as shown in Table 1; although the author used transnational terrorist groups as the preferred terminology, it is adopted here because terrorist groups are also extremist groups who use violent tactics to drive home their ideology.

Table 1: *Differences and Similarities between Organised-Crime Groups and Transnational Terrorist Groups*

	Organised-crime groups	Transnational terrorist groups
Differences	Are motivated by economic gain and greed	Are motivated by political ideology and grievance
	Have a status-quo orientation	Have a revolutionary orientation
	Shun media attention	Seek media attention
	Do not legitimate their actions	Claim legitimacy for their actions
	Deny responsibility for their acts	Accept responsibility for their acts
	Develop working relations with state organisations	Rarely develop working relations with state organisations
Similarities	Are rational actors	
	Use or threaten severe violence	
	Use kidnapping, assassinations and/or extortions	
	Act clandestinely	
	Act illegally under national and international law	
	Pose an asymmetrical threat to states	
	Are highly adaptable and resilient organisations	
	Often act in sympathetic environments	
	Profit from globalisation and new technologies	
	Increasingly develop networks	
	Are particularly strong if operating from safe havens	

Source: Adapted from Chelin (2020).

Chelin (2020), in what he terms "transactional nexus", the first two of four phases of the nexus between OC and VE, reiterates that extremist groups get funding for their operations by engaging in illicit criminal activities such as arms, human and drug trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, among others. This assertion has been given credence by a recent report in the Nigeria media, where the Commissioner, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Kaduna State, stated that the dreaded bandit leader terrorising communities in Kaduna State, was killed by security forces. He was said to have been involved in cattle rustling, and drug and arms deals (Ekpo, Tobi & Stanley, 2018). Notwithstanding, sometimes organised criminals may try to enter the political space through violent means solely for the protection of their illicit businesses; and intent on keeping government institutions like the Police, NDLEA (in the case of Nigeria) at bay, as well as strategically working with and patronizing corrupt government officials to further their aims. Given this, drawing a clear line between OC and VE, including illicit drugs becomes a challenging task (Chelin, 2020).

Organised criminal groups and violent extremists are known to form alliances either tactical – one-off deal or short-term negotiation, or strategic over the long run –

to promote their interests (Chelin, 2020). In the same breadth, both groups appropriate and maximise each other's methods and tactics in furtherance of their set objectives. In this regard, Chelin, notes that extremist or terrorist groups "engage in criminal activities as a means to fund their cause, while organised-crime entities employ 'selected and calibrated violence to destroy competitors or threaten counter-narcotic authorities'" (Chelin, 2020).

A third phase involves a merger or convergence such that the two groups melt together into a "single hybrid entity" – one which is driven by ideological and economic considerations as it engages in violent acts and organises crime for maximum profit. This poses a serious challenge to the government and its law enforcement agencies who might be unable to determine the nature and modus operandi of each group, therefore leading to their being overlooked by the same law enforcement agencies (Chelin, 2020).

The fourth phase constitutes the transformation stage wherein a terrorist or extremist group becomes organizationally and operationally a single organised criminal entity or vice versa. Chelin (2020) averred that "the last two phases constitute the organisational nexus whereby terrorist groups and organised crime entities occupy the same space and time", co-mingling, coordinating, and executing their nefarious objectives. Here again, is the challenge of effectively detecting and countering the activities of the criminal networks.

The analysis above can be understood as meaning all three entities are dependent on, yet independent of each other, to the extent that their interests and circumstantial requirements are taken into consideration for individual and collective benefits.

Countering Illicit Drugs, Organised Crime, and Violent Extremism, and its Challenges

Several efforts have been made in the past by previous administrations in Nigeria to halt the damaging impact of illicit drugs, including its production, trafficking, and consumption. One such effort was the establishment of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). Since coming on board the agency, it has "become the reference point and leading light in global efforts against drug cultivation, trafficking, and abuse" (Nwannennaya & Abiodun, 2017, p. 1).

While these efforts are still ongoing, the illicit drug business continues to grow because of some government and security personnel's collusion in the illicit trade.

Any attempts aimed at halting the illegal activities of drug dealers, organised criminal groups, and violent extremist groups, must be aware of the following factors

Ebonyi and Bello

that are most likely to pose serious challenges, but also serve as a guide to law enforcement agents:

i. *the intricate interface between DOVE (with emphasis on the strongest link).*

   Based on preceding discussions on the linkages between DOVE, it has been established that within the triangular relationship illicit drug and organised crime link is the strongest (*AOCI, 2021;* Chelin, 2020; UNODC, 2009). That being the case, measures designed to counter the activities of the two should be tailored towards breaking the link between them using all available resources, including humans and technology. This may not be as easy as it seems because as these measures are put in place, the criminals themselves never go to sleep, they are constantly at their best, scaling up their game and ensuring that they beat law enforcement officials at their own game as well. The criminals are technology savvy, fluid, and can always cover up their tracks. So, it requires a well-thought-out, well-coordinated strategy on the part of law enforcement agencies, to discover and arrest the criminals and bring them to justice.

ii. *The pattern of activities, path-ways, and modus operandi of the actors.*

   Again, this, too, is as challenging as it can get since most of the activities of DOVE are clandestine and difficult to uncover by even the most sophisticated gadgets available to law enforcement organisations. That is not to suggest that it is an impossible task. With determination and a high level of commitment, it is achievable. Therefore, the pattern of activities or pathways of DOVE as examined by Pinson (2022) needs consideration.

   As Pinson (2022) has observed, "the distinction between criminal and conflict actors is often blurred" (p.1); and Ruggiero and Leyva (2017), have noted how poor governance structure, economic hardship, and an eroding social control system combine to provide an enabling space for organised criminal groups to ally with legitimate businesses, explore the weak legal systems, connive with corrupt officials (in the criminal justice system), and armed with requisite skills, compete in the illegal economy, to perpetuate their influence on the entire systems and strengthen their hegemony. This suggests that the strategy to combat them and their illegal activities could be a herculean even though achievable task if the government is committed enough.

   The government's commitment to the efforts to stem the tide of violent extremism, especially as demonstrated by terrorists, bandits, and kidnappers, can be seen in the recent arrest of some top Nigerians, who have been

implicated as extremists' sponsors and spokespersons. For example, the chief negotiator for the bandits terrorising most parts of the North-East, West, and Central regions of Nigeria, Mr. Manu, a Journalist and business entrepreneur, was arrested and taken into custody for questioning, on his alleged role in the activities of the criminal groups. Perhaps this example will send the right signals (even though the accused person has not been found culpable by any law court) to would-be terrorists' sympathisers and sponsors, to stay clear of criminal networks, and subsequently curb the rising incidences of violence currently being experienced in the afore-mentioned regions of the country.

iii. *Target group beneficiaries.*

Organised criminal groups, in furtherance of their businesses, would almost always, carefully choose their targets for purposes of perpetuating their illicit activities. Their target group cut across all segments of the population and classes. According to a study conducted on how to control organised crime and corruption in the public sector, Buscaglia and Dijk (2003) found that poverty and unemployment provide the enabling environment for organised crime to thrive. Specifically, the statistical outcomes of the study, showed that organised criminal networks are capable of leveraging on the poor socio-economic conditions within a country. By inference, therefore, it can be argued that to the extent that a large percentage of the population is poor and unemployed, they become easy targets for the "supply of potential labour" and recruits for illicit drug businesses, organised criminal activities, and violent extremism. So, the question is, what can be done to reduce vulnerabilities to potential labour for the illicit drug trade, organised crime, and violent extremism, both locally and internationally?

iv. *External influence/State-collaborators.*

While there may yet be empirical evidence to suggest that illicit drug markets, organised criminals, and violent extremists enjoy the support or backing of people in government, in carrying out their criminal activities, available studies point to some sort of collaboration with public officials (UNDOC, 2005). Addressing the complicit role of State actors and other groups in facilitating or exacerbating the challenges posed by trafficking or criminal networks in West Africa, Aning and Pokoo (2014) underscores the fact that business owners, politicians, security and judicial personnel, religious and traditional leaders, as well as youth, are not exonerated. Their argument is premised on the volume of seizures and arrests effected in several countries within the region in recent times, where State actors were found to be accomplices.

Ebonyi and Bello

The Implications of Illicit Drugs, Organised Crime, and Violent Extremism

There are multiple implications of the interface between DOVE that are unexplored or yet unknown even though they have always existed. The lack of capacity and/or inadequate resources to unravel the dangerous effects of the unholy alliance of DOVE suggests that the current drug policy is not serving to address the enormous challenges DOVE poses to society generally. However, there is an informed need to expand the conversation around DOVE and its implications in the hope that in doing so, necessary actions would be taken to do the needful for everyone's good and wellbeing, and for Nigeria's national development.

Having said that, the Federal Government of Nigeria's National Drug Control Master Plan (NDCMP) – 2021-2025, is a commendable attempt to tackle the troubling issue of not only illicit drugs but also organised crime-related challenges such as violent extremism. The plan may not solve the perennial problem of illicit drug cultivation, trafficking, and consumption in Nigeria, but at least it has given a ray of hope to a society trying hard to reduce the impact of drug, crime, and violence on its citizens as well as its developmental process.

Speaking as a guest speaker at the 40th Olumide Memorial Lecture, organised by the Nigerian Institution of Surveyors entitled: "Dangers of Illicit Substances to National Development", the Chairman, of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, Brig. Gen. Buba Marwa (retd.) harped on the negative consequences of illicit drugs stressing that when we discuss the threats posed by illicit substances to national development, we are examining how proliferation—the manufacturing, trafficking, and consumption of illicit substances—threatens to undermine a nation's natural progress. Stated differently, the drug is preventing economic progress, undermining social cohesiveness, preventing residents from realizing their full potential, and costing the government much-needed money that could be used for other developmental projects (Aina, 2022)

Invariably, the General has debunked the view held by some, especially analysts and politicians, and rejected their call for the legalisation of the cultivation of cannabis sativa which the agitators reason is a source of revenue and a potential for Nigeria's economic growth. This provides the basis for the argument canvassed that, government officials are complicit in the growing nexus between DOVE (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNDOC, 2005]; Aning & Pokoo, 2014; Ruggiero & Leyva, 2017).

The threat of illicit drugs has been attributed to the compounded infiltration and weakening of the military, police, and customs as well as other border agencies

(Aning and Pokoo, 2014). It has also been captured similarly that the government's inability to counter such penetration, or that acquiesce in it, runs the risk of becoming criminalized (Gastrow, 2012, as cited in Aning and Pokoo, 2014).

Thus, the clarion call by the NDLEA boss for the urgent need to tackle the problem of illicit drugs and related challenges in the country, to guard against any national and international embarrassments, and to protect the lives of teaming Nigerians and ensure their wellbeing.

Study Setting and Methods

Tsafe is a Local Government Area in Zamfara State of Nigeria. It is a town at $11°56'00''$N $6°54'00''$E; with an area of $1,698$ km^2 and a population of $266,008$ according to the 2006 census. The postal code of the area is 880. Zamfara is a state located in northwestern Nigeria and it is dominated by Hausa and Fulani languages spoken people.

The population of the study includes the purposively selected National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) staff; snowballed selected illicit drug racketeers linked to organised criminal groups and violent extremists (such as the bandits). Exploratory research design and a qualitative method were employed and this implied the use of Key Informant Interview (KII) and in-depth Interview (IDI) for the collection of primary data from the NDLEA staff and illicit drug racketeers respectively. The Key Informant Interview involves interacting and interviewing six (6) staff of the NDLEA and (6) snowballed selected illicit drug racketeers linked to organised criminal groups and violent extremists. The following are some of the questions that were asked of the respondents:

a) Why do people get involved in illicit drugs?

b) What are the implications of getting involved in illicit drugs?

c) What are the nexus between illicit drugs, and organised criminal groups such as the bandits?

d) What are the proper countermeasures to adopt?

The data that were generated from the recorded interview were transcribed, patterns identified, and organized according to objectives. It was also recorded verbatim and converted into written form. Data were enumerated and thematic analysis and categorization were provided. The researchers thereafter provided highlighted quotes that were coded and then sorted into themes based on the patterns

that were generated. In a bid to differentiate between respondents, the following coding method was adopted Sani/IDI/Female/Tsafe. Spurious names such as, Sani, KII 1, 2, and 3 were used to identify the participants; IDI as the type of interview; Female (F) or Male (M) as the type of respondent and Tsafe as the place of the respondent

Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion have been subdivided into four: reasons why people get involved in illicit drugs; the Implications of getting involved in illicit drugs; the nexus between illicit drugs and the pervasive organized criminal groups such as the bandits and countermeasures that have been adopted

Reasons why people get involved in illicit drugs?

This study found that, although, people are into illicit drugs, however, only a few world populations are into drugs. It is also obvious that many are into drugs because of the availability and involvement in some activities that facilitate the use of the drugs. The use of the drug has been attributed to several social vices that have been major challenges to the social setting. This is consistent with the observation of Mullins and Wither (2016) who were of the view that one should not assume that there are no linkages between social vices and the use of illicit drugs.

The study also found that there are complex relationships illicit drug traffickers have established with organised criminal groups. The availability of the drug and the market for it has also been found to be a major challenge. This is similar to the observation of Cornell, (2012) who found that the availability of ready markets in terms of the need for and use by different extremist groups should be attributed to why people are involved in illicit drugs

People are involved in the use of drugs according to some of the participants because of the following:

> Some are involved in illicit drugs because of the availability of the drugs. Some are basically into drugs because they are seeking stimulation and a kind of addiction as a result of that. (Musa/M/IDI)

In another session with some other participants, there was a further reiteration that people are into drugs because of the availability of the drugs. It was emphasised that peer groups may also be responsible but the availability of those illicit drugs is responsible for why people are into drugs. The following illuminated the discussion further:

> Many probably would not be so addicted to the use of drugs. However, because of the availability of the drugs people continue consuming and it has become part of them and continues affecting their social lives. (Fati/F/IDI)

Key Informant Interview conducted with some of the staff of the NDLEA illuminates the discussion further as thus:

> Many of those who are into drugs are doing so because there is availability of those illicit drugs. However, if there are no illicit drugs no one will be consuming them. (Staff/M/KII/NDLEA)

> The proportions of those consuming illicit drugs are not much in comparison with those who are not consuming. However, that notwithstanding, those drugs need to be taken away from the sight of those consuming them. Importantly, there should be a way of mitigating the supply and availability of illicit drugs. (Staff/M/KII/NDLEA)

The **IDI** and the **KII** interview revealed that the proportions of those consuming the illicit drug are not much compared to those not taking it. It is, however, pertinent that the availability of illicit drugs is responsible for why people are consuming them.

The implications of getting involved in illicit drugs

The study found that there is an unholy and intricately complex interplay between illicit drugs, organised crime, and violent extremism which poses a fundamental threat to the holistic wellbeing of the society. It has also been found to constitute significant threats to the welfare of States and the global ecosystem. This is consistent with the findings of Mangena and Pherudi (2019). The study also discovered that illicit drug abuse has negative social and public health outcomes. This is similar to the argument of Okereke (2020).

The following represent the responses of the participants on the implications of getting involved in illicit drugs:

> Many of the social vices, such as the acts of banditry and kidnapping are a result of the illicit drug. Many of those youth who have decided to be part of crime were primarily because of their involvement in illicit drugs. Illicit drugs have negative implications on society generally. (Salisu/M/IDI)

In another session with some other participants, the following illuminated the implications of illicit drugs.

> The fact is that illicit drugs have negative consequences on the generality of society. The basis for some individuals who kidnapped for ransom; who assaulted, raped, and manhandled women was a result of their involvement in illicit drugs. (Ladi/F/IDI)

Key Informant Interviews conducted with some of the staff of the NDLEA illuminates the discussion further as thus:

> Several of those arrested are those who have committed crimes they have gotten involved with illicit drugs. The fact remained that illicit drugs exposed people to various criminal acts. (Staff/M/KII/NDLEA).

> Consuming illicit drugs has been responsible for the increase in the rate of crimes. It has been responsible for various social vices that the society is witnessing today. (Staff/M/KII/NDLEA)

The IDI and the KII interview revealed that the various criminal acts should be attributed to the involvement in illicit drugs.

The nexus between illicit drugs and the pervasive organized criminal groups such as bandits

The study found that there is an unholy and intricately complex interplay between illicit drugs, organised crime, and violent extremism. It found there is an increase in interconnectivity between illicit drugs and criminal activities. This is similar to the assertion of Mangena and Pherudi, (2019) who contend that lately there has been increased global drug trafficking activities due largely to the activities of organised criminal networks. It is also consistent with Chelin, (2020) who argued that organised criminal groups and violent extremists are known to form alliances either tactical – one-off deal or short-term negotiation, or strategic over the long run – to promote their individual interests.

Interviewee responses elucidated the nexus between illicit drugs and organised crime. The following represents the responses:

> Illicit drugs provide certain instigation to criminals. Several social vices might have failed instinctively but illicit drugs provide the connections that are needed for criminals. Therefore, a kind such as banditry will require the intake of illicit drugs for the enhancement of their nefarious activities. (Abu/M/IDI)

In another session with some other participants, the responses below illuminate the discussion further:

> Many of the bandits have some certain level of human feelings, however, consumption of illicit drugs permits the execution of many of their negative impulses. Bandits for example are organised crime that require illicit drugs to erase any form of compassion in the execution of their activities. (Sale/F/IDI)

Key Informant Interviews conducted with some of the staff of the NDLEA illuminates the discussion further as thus:

> Illicit drugs certainly enhance various criminal activities. Those bandits that surrender eventually have to go for drug rehabilitation because their activities were enhanced with illicit drugs. (Staff/M/KII/NDLEA)

> A larger percentage of those in the acts of banditry are instigated to do the negative act of raping, assaulting and manhandling women because of illicit drug inducement. There is a connection between illicit drugs and any kind of criminal act. (Staff/M/KII/NDLEA)

The **IDI** and the **KII** interviews revealed that there is a connection between illicit drugs and organized crime.

Countermeasures that have been Adopted

The study found that despite concerted efforts by law enforcement agencies to disrupt the activities of illicit drug traffickers, the perpetrators continually up their game to escape law enforcement radar. Yet, the government at the federal and state levels has not deployed resources to disrupt and possibly stop the surges currently being experienced in these criminal networks. There are efforts geared towards addressing the threats of drug trafficking and related issues through the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). The agency has been saddled with the responsibility of ensuring a reduction in criminal activities of drug cultivation, trafficking, sales, and consumption. This is consistent with the arguments of Aning and Pokoo, (2014) and Okereke, (2020) who noted that various efforts have been put in place through the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) to curb the menaces of illicit drugs and related crimes

The following represented the responses from In-depth interview participants regarding proper countermeasures:

> It is pertinent that there is closer cooperation among relevant stakeholders. This will help combat DOVE at all levels. Cooperation within each agency should come first, followed by inter-agency cooperation and then cooperation with external actors: such as NGOs. (Rabe/M/IDI)

In another session with some other participants, the following illuminated the discussion further:

> There should be stricter enforcement of existing laws and a reduction in the length of the judicial process that many times constitutes a clog in the will of the NDLEA's progress in its fight against illicit drug production, transaction, distribution, and consumption. (Ali/F/IDI)

Key Informant Interviews conducted with some of the staff of the **NDLEA** illuminate the discussion further:

> *It is also essential that there should be general capacity building. This would benefit the fight against DOVE. Capacity building includes research, training, and the funds necessary to make such advancements possible.* (Staff/M/KII/NDLEA).

> Since drug trafficking is fueled by the demand for drugs (especially from terrorist groups and other non-state actors), it is recommended that relevant stakeholders focus their priority on drug demand reduction policies. (Staff/M/KII/NDLEA)

The IDI and the KII interview revealed various countermeasures that should be adopted to reduce the various vices of illicit drugs

Conclusion

The cost, in terms of loss of human lives, health challenges, erosion of societal values and norms, and reduced national developmental strides arising from the activities of illicit drug traffickers, organised criminals, and violent extremists, is unquantifiable; and efforts aimed at curbing the troubling menace appear to be continually thwarted by the perpetrators and their collaborators. As the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has since acknowledged regarding illicit drugs and associated crimes, "drug trafficking is an enemy of the state and the rule of law, existing as a parallel power that rivals the legal system and we are compelled to fight it" (ECOWAS, 2009, UNSC, 2012)

Recommendations

This study draws on the recommendations of the study on Thailand's Transnational Organised Crime (TOC) situation conducted by UNICJRI & TIJ in 2021.

i.   Closer cooperation among relevant stakeholders will help combat DOVE at all levels. Cooperation within each agency should come first, followed by inter-agency cooperation and then cooperation with external actors: such as NGOs. Better cooperation and collaboration will lead to better information sharing with other countries. Information in Nigeria is centralized, which makes it challenging for local information to be shared far and wide. Officers need better data technology skills to manage information sharing across the country.

ii.   There should be stricter enforcement of existing laws and a reduction in the length of the judicial process that many times constitutes a clog in the will of the NDLEA's progress in its fight against illicit drug production, transaction, distribution, and consumption. Law enforcement should maintain its independence from the executive power. Perhaps immunity should be extended to foreign law enforcement agents operating undercover in Nigeria since it is difficult for foreign agents to penetrate criminal groups without full immunity. There is a need for the establishment of a specific unit within the courts of justice to arrest people who fail to attend their mandated court appointments since it appears the police are already overwhelmed with duties.

iii.   Capacity building on the whole would benefit the fight against DOVE. Capacity building includes research, training, and the funds necessary to make such advancements possible. Research, including information sharing among agencies and strategic intelligence capabilities, is essential. Improving specific technical capabilities such as biometric and fingerprint detection, and the ability to intercept phone calls, and other electronic communications would give stakeholders more tools to track and prosecute crimes.

Some officials lack awareness of how to handle situations involving DOVE or even how to properly identify them. Capacity building requires sustained funding for law enforcement, especially for research, training, technical equipment, and reasonable salaries.

iv.   Since drug trafficking is fueled by the demand for drugs (especially from terrorist groups and other non-state actors), it is recommended that relevant stakeholders focus their priority on drug demand reduction policies. Additionally, the competence of officers in intercepting shipments of drug precursors and in implementing anti-drug policy should be promoted in a sustained manner.

v.   The government needs to implement a 'whole systems' approach to tackling DOVE, informed by research on the link between them. An approach that can address the factors contributing to people's vulnerability, including poverty, exclusion and lack of support, so it can intervene before harm occurs.

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