

Preliminary report

Examining wildlife trafficking networks in East Africa through the lens of social network analysis

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Executive summary

This report provides a first iteration of preliminary insights from the social network analysis of transnational wildlife trafficking networks operating along the East Africa – Southeast Asia trading chain.

Initial insights on the *structure and characteristics* of social networks engaged in wildlife trafficking in East Africa suggest that they operate: (a) as a form of transnational organised crime; (b) as a form of business enterprise; (c) with both bottom-up and top-down mechanisms; (d) with a social infrastructure; and (e) with more complexity in transit countries like Uganda.

In terms of the *strategies and operations* of these social networks, the early research suggests that members of different networks cooperate – within an organised crime framework – in the process of moving the goods from parks in Africa to the homes of buyers in Asia.

The use of social network analysis to support law enforcement efforts against organised criminal networks involved in IWT is novel in itself. Critical reflections on these preliminary insights are therefore crucial to exploring the contribution of social network analysis towards the prevention and effective combating of illegal wildlife trade (IWT). Feedback to the author is very welcome.

1 Introduction

The Basel Institute on Governance is implementing a cross-divisional initiative to promote systematic, intelligence-led action against organised crime networks involved in IWT along the East Africa – Southeast Asia trading chain.

The research and community engagement component of the project focuses on developing a better understanding of the context-specific drivers of trafficking and the role of informal social networks and their associated corrupt practices in facilitating such illicit behaviours.

The three main research questions addressed by this component are:

- Why does wildlife trafficking happen?
- How does wildlife trafficking happen?
- What can be done to curb it?

This report reflects on the preliminary insights derived from the second research question on how wildlife trafficking happens. The research focuses on analysing the characteristics, structures, functions and operations of social networks engaged in wildlife trafficking in East Africa. This type of analytical lens, called social network analysis, focuses on understanding structural, relational and sociometric characteristics of networks, in other words, mapping networks created by social interactions between individuals and groups.

The data on trafficking networks is derived from anonymised intelligence products coming out of East Africa and Uganda in particular and that are developed as part of the wider project. The anonymised

relational and sociometric data are organised in a matrix and complemented by information obtained through document analysis of various online sources. The data are thereafter analysed using quantitative software designed for social network analysis, namely UCINET 6.

While the analysis is still underway, insights are slowly emerging on the structure and characteristics as well as strategies and operations of different actors within the trafficking networks under consideration. By articulating these emerging themes, we would like to invite practitioners and scholars to critically reflect on these and through such discussions support our ongoing endeavours to explore the potential complementary approach of social network analysis towards the prevention and effective combating of IWT.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides a main overview of the preliminary insights on illicit wildlife trafficking networks in East Africa. It describes the key findings in terms of the structure, characteristics and the role of social capital in trafficking networks. Section 3 elaborates the main findings regarding the roles of different actors, alongside strategies and operations that are employed by trafficking networks to facilitate the movement of goods from source to destination countries.

2 Structure and characteristics

Preliminary research insights on the structure and characteristics of social networks engaged in wildlife trafficking between East Africa and Southeast Asia suggest that they operate:

- (a) as a form of transnational organised crime;
- (b) as a form of business enterprise;
- (c) with both bottom-up and top-down mechanisms;
- (d) with a social infrastructure;
- (e) with more complexity in transit countries like Uganda.

These five points are elaborated below. Note that although the focus of this report is the East Africa-Southeast Asia trading chain, the research has taken us on a wider journey by indicating connections with trafficking networks and buyers in the wider African and Asian regions.

2.1 IWT is transnational organised crime

Though it is increasingly common to refer to IWT as transnational organised crime, this assertion needs to be deconstructed and supported with evidence. The first emerging findings of the research suggest that IWT is indeed a form of transnational organised crime (Wasser et al., 2018), understood as a form of crime that comprises the coordinated activities of groups/organisations of individuals operating and committing their illicit business between different countries and along an indefinite time horizon to achieve illicit profits (Albanese, 2012; Albanese and Reichel, 2019; Sabatino, 2016).

To consider IWT as a form of transnational organised crime is based on the observed cooperation in the research data between Asian and West African actors along the East Africa and Southeast Asia route. This cooperation satisfies the minimal conditions for the existence of a transnational organised crime, i.e. two or more individuals who co-offend in two or more countries to achieve the illegal goals and the illicit profit (Albanese, 2012).

Not only does the research suggest that there is a form of transnational cooperation, it is also possible to identify systemic sets of global connections and ties linking actors in important cities and trade and commercial hubs in West and East Africa as well as in East Africa with North America, Europe and the Middle East.

Moreover, the sheer complexity of functions and tasks needed to facilitate the illicit trade of goods between source and destination countries also necessitates a certain level of organisation. Tasks requiring high levels of organisation include:

- matching demand with the supply of goods;
- stockpiling and packaging/concealing of goods;
- shipping illicit goods from one region and continent to another;
- moving money from one country to another;
- maintaining control and discipline within the different networks involved in the trafficking.

The research thus suggests that IWT is a form of transnational organised crime. It is important to clarify the meaning of this concept today. The term “organised crime” can bring to mind an organisational structure that is hierarchical, rigid, monolithic or mafia-style. This is a widespread but incorrect narrative (Cressey, 1969; Paoli, 2002). Rather, the research builds on the idea of organised crime viewed as:

- a set of “recurrent and persistent crime behaviours and strategies” that can also happen in an unorganised or opportunistic manner in respect to the supply, exchange of goods or broader logistics (Albanese and Reichel, 2019; Bouchard and Morselli, 2014; Galeotti, 2001; Paoli, 2002; Titeca, 2019, 2018; Wall, 2015); and
- where the borders between organised crime and the crime that is organised can be quite blurry (Lavorgna, 2014; Leukfeldt et al., 2017; Lusthaus, 2013; Wall, 2015)¹.

At the higher level, IWT resembles a highly organised and stable phenomenon, due to the systemic connections which exist along the East Africa / South-East Asia route and are formalised into organised crime structures. At the lower levels, the supply chain can be unorganised and unregulated. Functions such as supply, exchange and logistics can be dis-organised, opportunistic and sub-contracted to small-scale traffickers or normal citizens. In a few words, the illicit goals of the criminal networks can be achieved through unorganised strategies such as ant-trade and bottom-up supply of wildlife goods (Jancsics, 2019; Titeca, 2019, 2018; Titeca and Célestin, 2012; Titeca and Herdt, 2010). The fact that the supply of ivory or rhino horns from few suppliers – such as small-scale traffickers or ordinary citizens – is short-term and opportunistic does not mean the fact that the whole supply chain involved in ivory trafficking loses its repeated, organised and regulated nature.

In this perspective, IWT as a transnational organised crime can be defined as a set of operative and functional connections - more or less stable and durable depending on the cases (Bouchard and Morselli, 2014; Galeotti, 2001; Morselli, 2005) - between different crime networks established by local, regional and global individual or collective criminal actors operating in different countries and illicit markets to

¹ “Organised crime” requests an organized entity (structure & functions) which is able to manage, promote and control the execution of a criminal strategy; “crime that is organised” means the basic logistical and operative organization which is needed to implement a criminal strategy (functions), and that can be achieved without the support of an organised entity. In the second case, we can have a “disorganised” or distributed model of organization, rather than a hierarchical command and control structure (Wall, 2015, p. 1)

extract illicit profits in the global-local illicit arena (Albanese and Reichel, 2019; Morselli, 2009; Williams, 2001, 1994). The different networks groups of actors within the supply chain can have different structures, strategies and hierarchical relations. The groups can be structured and well-organised criminal organisations or fluid and loosely connected networks of actors and “consultants”, as well as individual firms of “professional advisors” (Sabatino, 2016).

Thus, opportunism, fluidity, flexibility, adaptability and loose structures are the main characteristics of transnational organised crime networks involved in illicit trade. Establishing coalitions between structured/loose networks of individual and collective actors is also important (Bouchard and Morselli, 2014; Gottschalk, 2009; Morselli, 2009; Williams, 2001).

2.2 IWT is a business enterprise

The second emerging finding of the research is that IWT can be viewed as a form of business enterprise (Albanese, 2012, 2010; Albanese and Reichel, 2019; Edwards and Gill, 2002; Gottschalk, 2009; Paoli, 2002). From this theoretical perspective, it is possible to compare the global-local chain of IWT to an entrepreneurial model operating in the legal global economic market.

The transnational criminal organisations can resemble multinational entities (Costa, 2018; Hobbs, 2001, 1998) that are able to cover different markets and contexts. To do that, they rely on the cooperation of different networks of business and entrepreneurial actors, such as suppliers, manufacturers, distributors and transporters, clearing agents and freight forwarders, advisors, lawyers and accountants. Flexible and adaptive crime firms can be small or big in size. They can be structured in a hierarchical, complex or compartmentalised way. They can operate in an international, regional or local market.

It is important to be mindful of blindly comparing enterprise models between legal and illegal sectors (Paoli, 2002). The structural limits of the illegal markets where illicit enterprises operate – including law enforcement activities, the illicit nature of the traded goods, the risk of betrayal and cooperation breakdowns – constrain their capacity to grow in size and numbers (Albanese, 2010; Albanese and Reichel, 2019; Gottschalk, 2009; Paoli, 2002). These illegal enterprises are more similar to family firms that have developed their capacity to move and operate in global illegal markets over the last 20 years (Hobbs, 2001, 1998).

These criminal enterprises have to acquire products, services, skills, know-how and professional capacities of other actors in order to achieve their illicit endeavours and financial returns (Baker and Faulkner, 1993; Galeotti, 2001; Morselli, 2009, 2005; Ruggiero, 1997; Williams, 2001).

2.3 IWT involves top-down and bottom-up mechanisms

The third emerging finding of the research is that IWT reflects both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms. These mechanisms refer to the direction of the flows connecting the upper and lower dimensions of the local-global supply chain. The implications are important in understanding how wildlife trafficking works. Are the wildlife goods requested by the trafficking networks in the higher echelons through orders, inputs and guidelines? Or are the wildlife goods opportunistically offered by normal citizens and small-scale traffickers and then siphoned into the transnational supply chain from below?

The preliminary findings suggest that both dynamics are at play in the different stages of the IWT supply chain. This resembles what has emerged in other works on transnational organised crime (Costa, 2018). On the one hand, transnational crime organisations transfer orders, inputs and resources from the upper

dimensions to the lower levels, thus connecting buyers in Asia to traffickers in East Africa. On the other hand, the opportunistic behaviours of regular citizens and small-scale traffickers supply the illicit markets of wildlife goods with a certain number of raw products or live animals (Titeca, 2019, 2018; Titeca and Célestin, 2012; Titeca and Herdt, 2010).

This mechanism permits the collection of inputs and resources from the demand side of the Asian syndicates, and their transfer down to the supply side of traffickers in Africa, who in turn provide the goods. More than a one-directional flow, this mechanism resembles a decentralised process of aggregation, communication and coordination happening in both directions. The data confirms this mechanism, showing a dense web of interlocking inputs and operative feedback flowing between the upper and lower levels along the East Africa – Southeast Asia axis. This is evident, for example, in the relations between West African organisations based in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique, and Asian syndicates operating between Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia. Demand and supply, orders and illicit goods, money and logistical support continuously flow in the two directions.

To properly understand this point, a better conceptualisation of the relation between local and global spaces – both typical concepts of our globalised world (Hobbs, 1998; Robertson, 1995; Strathern, 2012) – is needed. Crime behaviours happen in a local/global dimension. What does this concretely mean? Infinite local spaces exist along a transnational supply chain involved in supporting a crime behaviour; events and facts happen in these local spaces due to the activities and behaviours of different actors. Some of these actors are constrained at the local level (local actors), while others have an operative projection towards the more complex global space (global actors).

This “global” space is physically fictional, but absolutely concrete with respect to structures, functions and operations. It is built by the non-linear summation of events and facts happening in all the different local spaces, which are concrete and physical in nature (Homer-Dixon, 2002; Landa, 2000). Those we label as global actors have enough know-how, resources and ingenuity to act in this upper level, fostering and managing flows, exchanges and traffics with the lower levels.

More importantly, these global actors – given their skills in acting between different local spaces – can mediate the local requests, inputs, resources and goods and bring them to the global level. Here, demand and supply, which are locally elaborated and would not match otherwise, can find an equilibrium in the global space due to the operative mediation of the global actors. They have specific characteristics: global projection and capacity to operate in a cross-border dimension; a professional and semi-professional standard in leading their criminal activities; a minimal level of organisation and division of labour.

Concerning IWT, two different local spaces exist, those of the Asian final markets (demand-side, financial flows) and poachers/small-scale traffickers in East Africa (supply-side, wildlife goods flows). These actors operate in a local dimension and have no global projection. Without a criminal intermediate, financial resources (demand) and illicit goods (supply) – both originated in local spaces – would never match together.

This crime mediation is offered by two distinct global actors, i.e. the Asian syndicates (demand-side, financial flows) and African trafficking rings (supply-side, wildlife goods flows). Operatively, these actors create durable alliances along the East Africa – Southeast Asia axis to manage IWT. They produce a mixed crime model which helps to cut the distances between demand (Asian final markets) and supply (African poachers and small-scale traffickers), and consequentially the costs, time and risks of IWT. At the same time, it helps to ensure a global projection to mechanisms of demand and supply that would otherwise remain local in nature and scope. To do that, the global actors are able to metabolise – each for its own

side - the unorganised, unregulated and opportunistic inputs coming from below (money on one side, illicit goods on the other), so assuring organisation, order and regularity to the illicit trade of wildlife.

The literature suggests that poaching and small-scale trading in wildlife goods are driven by the constrained socio-economic conditions of individuals living near parks. Poverty, lack of infrastructure and economic opportunities, human-animal conflicts, inefficiencies in the redistribution of revenue from wildlife resources, alongside corruption and constrained local state capacities (amongst others) persist in these countries and regions (Kassa et al., 2019). All these factors can push ordinary citizens living near wildlife areas to engage in poaching with the aim of opportunistically creating a supply or responding specifically to a particular demand for wildlife goods. These goods then enter the transnational illicit supply chain through local middlemen or small-scale traffickers.

2.4 IWT is a social infrastructure: the role of social capital

The fourth emerging finding of the research is that IWT is founded upon a dense informal social infrastructure of connections and relations. These connections reflect an invaluable resource: a capital that is not financial, but social (Coleman, 1988; Farr, 2004; Putnam, 2000, 1994). This social capital translates into trust, which is fundamental in successfully operating in an illicit market (Harris, 2007; Mastropaolo, 2009; Morselli, 2009; Morselli et al., 2010; Numerato and Baglioni, 2012; Tarrow, 1996).

The research data suggest that family and “allied” families and diaspora (individuals that share a similar nationality) characterise the main linkages and ties between the members of the network. The resulting trust, reciprocity and institutionalised cooperation norms reduce cost, time and risks, and increase the efficiency and profits of the trade (Albanese and Reichel, 2019; Bayart et al., 1999; Binmore, 2011, 2010; Harris, 2007; Mastropaolo, 2009; Tilly, 2005).

This social infrastructure appears to connect different regions along the transnational supply chain of wildlife goods. Note that all of the below findings are preliminary and require further exploration.

2.4.1 West and East Africa

West African actors - coming mainly from Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria and Mali - play a fundamental basic role in managing IWT in East African countries, such as Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique and Kenya. As stated in a recent report (Interpol, 2018), the use of the diaspora and family links is a common strategy for West African organisations. Similarly, Bayart et al. (1999) underline the relevance of these diaspora mechanisms for the entire Sub-Saharan African context.

In the context of IWT, the family and diaspora mechanisms could represent the systemic backbone of the connections between the headquarters of criminal organisations in West Africa and their foreign chapters in East Africa. West African traffickers are based in East Africa for numerous reasons: the illicit trade naturally moves in an eastbound direction along the Africa-Asia axis, air and sea ports are present and law enforcement is typically constrained. The evidence suggests that illicit goods and financial resources flow between West and East Africa, and that these flows are based on family and diaspora ties.

2.4.2 Within East Africa

Traffickers and crime organisations rely on relatives or members of other allied families to manage the illicit business in the region. For example, a trafficker based in Uganda may transmit inputs and resources to relatives in surrounding countries (Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania), who in turn cooperate with members of a local chapter of a criminal Asian network.

These decentralised structures are used to move illicit goods from particular “source” countries (e.g. Mozambique) to Uganda – where it is stockpiled in ware- and safety houses – or to directly manage the shipment from these “source” countries to Asian final destinations.

2.4.3 East Africa and the Middle East

Shared family ties provide basic support for the movement of goods along international routes connecting East Africa and Asia. These actors are placed in “hot points”, i.e. particularly sensitive junctions of the global trade routes such as intermodal freight centres, changing stations, harbours or airports. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are examples of such hot points.

Here, the goods are transferred from ships and planes to other ships, planes or modes of transport. This is a crucial step in the successful movement of the goods. The evidence suggests that relatives and individuals close to the traffickers manage the logistics and organisation of this process, in cooperation with clearing agents and freight forwarders.

2.4.4 East Africa and Asia

Actors from West Africa not only manage some of the IWT taking place in East Africa, but also directly facilitate the illicit trade between the region and Asian countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Malaysia and South Korea. In this case, these actors cooperate directly with members of the Asian trafficking networks that have representatives in both East Africa and their own countries. To do that, African co-offenders and traffickers are also placed in these Asian countries, where they closely cooperate with Asian rings on deliveries, financial flows and logistics. This allows the West African networks based in East Africa to manage – in strict coordination with their Asian counterparts – the finalisation of the shipment, the delivery and payment of the goods, and the communication between the two different geographical areas.

Similarly, the connections between the Asian actors placed in East Africa and those based in Asia are structured by diaspora mechanisms. The Asia-based trafficking networks exploit connections and relations with individuals from the diaspora – who are temporarily or permanently located in East Africa – to foster *in loco* the trafficking of wildlife goods. Other members of their crime networks may be intentionally positioned in East Africa with the aim of managing the illicit business and the activities of these “boots in the field”.

2.5 Uganda is more than a “transit country”

The fifth emerging finding of the research concerns the role of Uganda in the bigger picture of IWT in East Africa. The illicit trade in wildlife products is often framed in terms of the manner in which the goods move through the supply chain. In other words, they go from “source countries” to “destination countries” via “transit countries”, where goods just “move through”. Uganda is often referred to as such a transit country.

The research evidence supports the assertion that Uganda’s role in East Africa is not just that of a mere transit country (Runhovde, 2018), but resembles more a crime-trade hub. The term “transit” does not do justice to the different functions and tasks that are undertaken in Uganda, according to the preliminary findings. East African, West African and Asian-based trafficking networks undertake a very wide set of functions and tasks within Ugandan borders including:

- centralisation, accumulation and stockpiling of wildlife goods;
- demand-supply match, in vertical (global) and horizontal (cross-regional) terms;
- management of trade routes, shipment and delivering logistics;
- strategic management of the operations in surrounding countries;
- coordination of geographically fractionalised but pervasive financial flows;
- decision-making capacity in respect to business strategies, goods, clients and operative tactics.

3 Strategies and operations

Preliminary research insights on the strategies and operations of social networks engaged in wildlife trafficking in East Africa suggest that members of the different networks cooperate in the process of moving the goods from parks in Africa to the homes of buyers in Asia. This cooperation is based on a division of labour between different African and Asian actors within the network.

The roles of the trafficking networks, alongside those of freight and clearing agents, middlemen and poachers, are elaborated below. These preliminary categorisations and role definitions are initially defined through analysis of the literature (Rossi, 2018; Titeca, 2019; Wittig, 2016). They are then developed and tailored using the preliminary results of social network analysis and network ethnography based on intelligence data (Berlusconi, 2013; Berthod et al., 2017; Campana, 2016; Campana and Varese, 2012; Edwards, 2010; Jones et al., 2018). Reports of NGOs and activist organisations, as well as newspaper articles, also contribute to the analysis.

3.1 Trafficking networks in Asia

Trafficking organisations in Asia are based in several countries, including China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia (Ward and Mabrey, 2014). They are large, pervasive and structured crime syndicates (EIA, 2018). Their operative crime networks control the supply to final illegal markets where raw and manufactured wildlife goods are mainly delivered and consumed (EIA, 2018, 2017; EMS Foundation and Ban Animal Trading, 2018). This is due to their capacity to source these goods where they are historically poached and traded (Beachey, 1967; EIA, 2017, 2014; Feinberg and Johnson, 1982; Rademeyer, 2012).

The Asian trafficking networks cover the empty spaces (Burt, 1992; Morselli and Roy, 2008; Stovel and Shaw, 2012) dividing the Asian final markets from the African countries where wildlife goods are poached and traded. They are able to cover the wide and differentiated demand on the Asian market for wildlife goods. The demand comes from sectors including luxury items and furniture (e.g. ivory, animal skins, precious timber), traditional Chinese medicine (e.g. rhino horns, pangolin scales, big cat bones) and food supply (e.g. bushmeat, illegal fish and seafood).

The literature indicates that structurally, the activities of the Asian criminal networks are organised in two different operative dimensions (EIA, 2018, 2017; EMS Foundation and Ban Animal Trading, 2018; Rademeyer, 2012). This point is confirmed by the preliminary results of the social network analysis and network ethnography.

First, they have a headquarter in one of those Asian countries. In this head office, there is a “boss” and other members of the networks. The head office is characterised by the presence of some forms of hierarchies, membership and organisation (Ward and Mabrey, 2014). These criminal organisations own the property of companies and firms operating in different sectors, such as transport and shipments, logistics and freight agencies, import/export, second-hand clothing and shoes, small factories or retail centres. In this way, the network can create a legal façade for their illegal activities (EMS Foundation and Ban Animal Trading, 2018). Such formal business façades make it easier to facilitate the concealment and trade of illegal wildlife goods.

Studies on the most powerful Laotian syndicate (EMS Foundation & Ban Animal Trading, 2018; Rademeyer, 2012) add another point. The legal companies and firms of this Laotian criminal organisation are located within a business district that is full of other companies and organisations doing exactly the same façade trade (legal import and export of wildlife). This gives rise to a dense web of dark social capital (Mastro Paolo, 2009; Numerato and Baglioni, 2012) of relations and social norms between members of different criminal organisations. This provides an important social background and justification of their activities in this specific local context, making them particularly powerful, influential and well-connected with the elite and political power.

The fact that these big illegal structures are concealed behind a veil of secrecy (Baker and Faulkner, 1993) makes it difficult for law enforcement agencies to identify and dismantle them. Despite their need to remain concealed, however, these criminal organisations are able to provide direct orders, monetary resources and logistical support to the activities taking place lower in the supply chain through the connections with the communities of the Asian diaspora on the African continent.

These Asian communities have been on the African continent for a long time, moving around from one region to another to engage in diverse business and economic activities, such as goods trading and resale, mining, agriculture, retail, furniture stores and construction. One influential diaspora group, namely the Chinese community, is sustained and fostered by agreements signed between various African governments with China in the fields of trade, energy, infrastructure, primary resources, agriculture and others.

By nature, these diaspora communities have no kingpins, loose hierarchies and weak organisational structures. The Asian syndicates therefore send groups of trusted men and women to East Africa to give direction and control to the activities and operations of the members of the diaspora. The Asian communities on the continent provide them with “boots in the field” and the ability to acquire know-how, information and social capital. Crucially, it is these people who are able to connect with traffickers and middlemen who can supply ivory, rhino horns and other wildlife products. These actors represent the operative branch in the field, and they operate in close proximity with the West African criminal networks and groups based in East Africa.

By co-opting the diaspora, the Asian criminal networks can control their business and trade in this region. These Asian organisations have a global projection: they are able to supply the illegal Asian markets by sourcing from illegal East African markets. These organisations are collectors, buyers and sellers of huge amounts of different types of wildlife goods from different countries and regions. In this way, they create the conditions to satisfy the demand from home.

The preliminary research insights suggest that in Uganda and its surrounding countries, it is possible to identify something similar to a “mixed criminal model” that involves both Asians and Africans. These networks cooperate to acquire wildlife goods, and to conceal, package and load them into shipments to

Asia. When a shipment is organised, there is someone on the other side of the global-local chain – in a specific region, city, district – ready to receive and handle it.

The research insights indicate that all the destinations are characterised by the presence of manufacturing or trade of specific types of products (timber, plastics, fish, fruits, textile, chemical products, and so on). The consignment is organised by the freight forwarders in a manner that would avoid arousing suspicion, i.e. usually concealed in a set of legal products that are common in the final destination. The documentation is forged accordingly and the shipment is directed, by ship or aeroplane, along a route that is normal for these specific products used in the business activities of the final destination (EIA, 2017).

Initial analysis of trafficking operations in one key East African country show this mechanism in action. Clearing agents and freight forwarders conceal the illicit goods under a shipment of semi-precious and rough stones sent by mining companies. They are delivered via air cargo shipments to companies using and trading these legal goods located in Southeast Asian countries. All these steps are undertaken in a joint endeavour between Asian, West African and East African networks. This highlights once more the transnational and organised nature of IWT along the East Africa and Southeast Asia nexus.

3.2 Freight forwarders and clearing agents

The role of freight forwarders and clearing agents in IWT is both obscure and absolutely crucial. The clearing agents and freight forwarders in question are often small-scale or individual firms in West and East Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. The firms sell and supply social capital, professional know-how and technical skills in loading, delivery and shipping to the trafficking networks.

Freight forwarders and clearing agents can be the same individuals or companies. In most cases, however, they are different entities with specific functions. Freight forwarders are directly involved in the shipping of goods in that they manage the movement of the goods in the name of their owner. The freight forwarder's role is to ensure that the goods are collected from the seller and delivered to the buyer without obstacles, problems or additional costs and risks. Conversely, clearing agents are not directly involved in the shipping, but rather manage issues related to customs clearance. They take care of important tasks such as loading documents, import/export taxation, payment and duty drawback.

The role of freight forwarders and clearing agents in facilitating IWT along the East Africa and Southeast Asia axis is crucial. As highlighted by the preliminary findings of the social network analysis, clearing agents and freight forwarders can be captured by transnational and cross-border criminal networks. In this way, these actors facilitate the smooth, ordered and unproblematic shipping of the illegal goods between Africa and Asia. Clearing agents and freight forwarders achieve these results thanks to the set of social and economic relations they have in the field with transport companies and drivers, shipment firms and their employees, other clearing and freight agents, custom agents and other public officials. For these reasons, they are based in those points that represent the exit gates for licit and illicit trade: Nairobi and Mombasa in Kenya; Kampala and Entebbe in Uganda; Dar es Salaam in Tanzania; and Maputo, Pemba and Nampula in Mozambique.

The preliminary research findings emerging from the social network analysis and network ethnography suggest that some clearing agents and freight forwarders are complicit actors in the global illicit trade of wildlife goods.

First, the freight forwarders organise – together with Asian and African traffickers – the shipping of these goods towards Asia, choosing routes and concealment strategies that are rational for the final destination.

In parallel, the clearing agents receive the illicit wildlife goods already packaged and prepared for delivery; their task is to conceal these packaged goods under other legal products that are to be sent by flights, ships or trucks, also producing the necessary documentation.

Second, the freight forwarders and clearing agents prepare the documents, such as the air waybill for the air cargo or the loading documents, to attach to the shipments. These documents certify the nature of the licit goods stocked in the containers but conceal the presence of the hidden illicit goods. At every stage of the trade route – such as in trade hubs or trade junctures, e.g. Dubai or Doha as global hubs, and Mombasa or Cairo as regional hubs – the concealed goods can be moved to other cargos or shipments. In that event, new documents and certificates are produced by the freight forwarders and clearing agents and their counterparts based in these trade hubs.

Third, the clearing agents physically go with the illicit goods during the loading phases, together with employees of the shipment and logistics companies. In this way, they control the sending of the goods and their correct placement and concealment within the cargo. They also take pictures of the goods placed into the hold of the airplane or into the container to give visual confirmation to their criminal customers of the successful shipment.

Fourth, the clearing agents deal with any necessary bribery of public officials to turn a blind eye. These may be border officials, customs agents, and law enforcement agents such as the police or revenue authority officials.

Fifth, both freight forwarders and clearing agents ensure that at the sensitive stages of the global trade route, such as trade junctures and hubs, everything will go smoothly. To achieve these results, the clearing agents and freight forwarders have delegates at these points who prepare the documentation and ensure the correct placement of the illicit goods in the shipments.

3.3 Large-scale trafficking networks

The preliminary research insights point towards the importance of large-scale and high-level trafficking networks based in capitals, megalopolises and trade cities within East Africa. These large-scale traffickers have a regional and global projection, and are able to operate in different countries and continents. They are collectors and buyers of significant amounts of ivory and other wildlife products from the peripheries of the countries where they are based. This is facilitated through a national supply chain established by local middlemen, small and medium-scale traffickers and poachers. At the same time, these traffickers can also source – in a horizontal illegal market – wildlife goods from similar organisations that operate in surrounding countries.

These crime organisations, similarly to the family firms described by Hobbs (Hobbs, 2001), are organised around families. Family relations represent the operative and organisational core of the network. Around this family core, other traffickers and co-offenders operate in close coordination with the main trafficker and key offenders. Innovation, flexibility and adaptability allow these trafficking organisations to efficiently and effectively source and sell different types of illicit goods.

These trafficking networks can comprise different nationalities:

- Citizens of countries in East Africa, often of Indian, Asian or Arab origin (e.g. Feisal Ali, the Akasha family and the Sheikh family in Kenya)².
- West Africans based in East African countries, who manage pervasive and effective crime networks (e.g. Moazu Kromah in Uganda)³.
- Chinese and other Asians. When Chinese are based in East Africa for a long time, they can start their own business in supplying wildlife goods to the Asian networks (e.g. the “Ivory Queen” Yang Feng Glan in Tanzania).⁴

3.3.1 West African networks in East Africa

The activity of West African networks is particularly striking. As noted, an emerging finding of the research is that actors from West Africa – mainly from Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Mali – play an important role in organising and managing IWT in East African countries. Why is this and how does it happen?

A wave of migration flows connects West and East Africa (Bayart et al., 1999). Criminals and traffickers from West Africa operate as business people and traders in several fields, such as the trade of second-hand clothes and shoes. These legitimate economic activities act as a façade for the illegal trade.

Many choose Uganda to establish their criminal business due to its strategic location along regional and global IWT routes, its weak institutions and law enforcement capacity and its high levels of corruption. These last factors make the state and its officials more vulnerable to bribery and illicit interests. On the other hand, the presence of functioning infrastructure – such as roads, bridges, ports, airports – facilitate the movement, transportation and exit of illicit wildlife goods from the region.

Once established in Uganda, the West African traders can easily set up operative structures and connections that facilitate the management of the business and illicit activities. An example of this mechanism are the safe houses and warehouses that are rented or bought in Kampala and its surroundings, where the traffickers store and accumulate illicit wildlife goods.

A recent report (Interpol, 2018) identifies specific characteristics of West African rings in Nigeria, Guinea, Togo, Mali, Ivory Coast and Liberia. First, they have cohesive systems with clear hierarchies and membership. Second, they are capable of building transnational networks with associates in the diaspora communities (Interpol, 2018, p. 8).

This last point seems to be supported by the initial results of the social network analysis, which reveal significant connections between traffickers based in East Africa and individuals based in West Africa. Again, family links seem to play a fundamental role in establishing connections with countries such as Liberia, Guinea, Ivory Coast and Mali. On the one hand, this could mean that an organised crime framework based in West Africa is ramified in East Africa. On the other hand, it could also simply mean that between these two regions there are illicit trade relations, goods shipments and financial flows that feed the demand for illicit wildlife goods from Asian and West African criminal networks.

² McConnel T., “*They’re like the mafia: the super gangs behind Africa’s poaching crisis*”, The Guardian, 19.08.2017; Mkongo M., “*State to bring Thai evidence in Sh576m ivory smuggling case*”, The Star, 14.11.2018; Dasgupta S., “*Ivory poaching kingpin gets 20 years in jail*”, Mongabay, 25.07.2016;

³ Morris C., “*Moazu Kromah and the Case of the West African Ivory Cartel*”, International Policy Digest, 24.08.2019;

⁴ Ng’wanakilala F., Obulutsa G. and MacSwan A., “*Tanzania court sentences Chinese “Ivory Queen” to 15 years for smuggling*”, Reuters, 19.02.2019;

Preliminary insights on the structure of the West African groups located in East Africa suggest that they could have unique and distinctive characteristics. They can be flexible and fluid alliances between different family groups rather than hierarchical and structured organisations. Crucially, these criminal organisations are marked by the prestige and status of the main offenders and their family. Relatives play a role in the trafficking of wildlife goods, both in Uganda and in the surrounding countries. Other traffickers and their families seem to be affiliated – on a more or less equal level in terms of power relations – to this organisation on the grounds of trust and reciprocity with the main offenders.

3.3.2 Families and affiliates

Indeed, what emerges from the data is a dense web of interlinked family relations. These form a continuous social fabric that sustains the global movement of inputs and instructions, illicit goods, financial flows and logistics. Loose hierarchies and raw division of labour between the different co-offenders seem to be in place, more for geographical areas than for tasks.

Different affiliates and co-offenders cover the activities and business of the trafficking ring in the countries surrounding or near to Uganda, such as Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, the DRC and South Sudan. They find new sources of wildlife goods and maintain relations with existing ones with the aim of ensuring a continuous supply. The affiliates facilitate the delivery of these illicit goods to key trade hubs such as Uganda or organise the delivery directly to Asia. The affiliates also manage the logistics of the illicit agreement with the Asian networks based in the region, cooperating in stockpiling, packaging and concealing the illicit goods ready for shipment to Asia. Finally, these affiliates manage the transfer and exchange of money between Uganda and different Asian countries.

The affiliates based in various East African countries receive their inputs from the lead trafficking network in Uganda. This is done by telephone or face-to-face during visits. Based on these inputs, they are able to manage the business in the most effective way.

3.3.3 Operational flexibility

The initial research indicates that West African traffickers directly interface with Asian affiliates in the region. They have the capacity to cover all the tasks that the Asian criminal organisations require. The West African criminal networks – through their multitude of ramifications and relational tentacles – are able to supply almost limitless amounts of wildlife goods. They are able to operate in different countries across the region and have operative structures capable of managing all the different steps involved in handling the products, such as stockpiling, concealing, packaging and delivering.

They are able to exchange significant financial flows through different channels, such as cash, the mobile money service M-Pesa, money transfer services such as MoneyGram and Western Union, the hawala system and others.

Moreover, they have the ability to engage in a horizontal illicit market in the region. This means they can exchange wildlife goods with other crime networks. They can also engage with criminal organisations involved in other illicit business, such as the drug and weapons trade, human smuggling and prostitution, stolen car trafficking and information fraud, to name just the most common. At the same time, the preliminary insights do not confirm that the networks trafficking wildlife goods in East Africa are also directly involved in other crime activities.

3.4 Small and medium-scale middlemen

Small and medium-scale middlemen is a label that covers different actors operating in a national and regional dimension. They connect the lower and higher levels of the global-local supply chain. The preliminary research insights indicate that these actors, thanks to their pervasive relations and social capital (Burt, 1992; Jancsics, 2015; Morselli and Roy, 2008; Stovel and Shaw, 2012), are able to insulate the large-scale traffickers from the lower level of poachers and citizens.

The evidence suggests that different types of actors can be listed under this category:

- Ordinary citizens mediate between different actors and dimensions, thereby acquiring a certain social and economic status.
- National small and medium-scale traffickers/criminals operate within and between countries' borders.

Traffickers and middlemen collect wildlife goods from organised poachers, ordinary citizens and other small and medium-scale crime rings operating within the country or regionally. The evidence suggests that all these traffickers know who can provide them with wildlife goods from the field and who is interested in purchasing these products at the higher level. They then supply these wildlife goods to the large-scale organisations that operate in the upper levels of the chain.

Their role is crucial to cover the empty space between the actors in the field and those that have a regional and global projection. These small and medium-scale middlemen operate within the local communities in the vicinity of national parks, natural areas or borders, with the aim of efficiently collecting goods and opportunities as they present themselves from the surrounding areas. They are the first to start the process of accumulation and centralisation of the goods.

3.5 Poachers

The last category, paradoxically, is the one where it all starts: the poachers. The poachers illegally source animals and wildlife products from natural parks and game reserves. The broader research evidence suggest that the poaching represents the bottom-up dimension of the wildlife trade. It is the space where the goods – opportunistically or otherwise – are hunted in the field and thereafter siphoned into the global illicit supply chain of wildlife. The evidence suggests that the mechanisms and strategies of poaching can be organised or unorganised, depending on the types of actors involved.

On the one hand, ordinary citizens promote opportunistic and unorganised schemes of poaching. Adverse socio-economic conditions can push ordinary citizens to hunt and kill animals for small monetary gains. Once the ordinary citizens have killed an animal, they look for a small and medium-scale middleman who can buy the illicit products at a very cheap price. While this model can explain the dynamics for small wildlife animals, such as pangolin, birds or reptiles, it does not seem to explain how large animals such as elephants or rhinos are sourced.

The evidence suggests that in the case of big mammals, it is much more likely that the poaching happens in an organised manner. Groups of poachers are well-organised and prepared for the hunting. They have access to weapons, resources and logistical support as well as to established vertical and horizontal trade channels. These groups of poachers participate in the coordinated hunting of the larger animals, thereby increasing their capacity to track and/or kill the animals.

These well-organised groups of poachers and hunters operate in two ways. First, they can follow the inputs and orders coming from the middlemen (top-down mechanism). Second, they can also independently collect wildlife goods with the aim of opportunistically selling these to the actors in the upper level.

3.6 Proto-categories of actors and functions in trafficking networks

The preliminary insights on the strategies and operations of actors in different trafficking networks can be summarised in the figure below. This is a living document. As the research moves ahead, and the conversation with practitioners and academia continues, these insights will be further elaborated and refined accordingly.

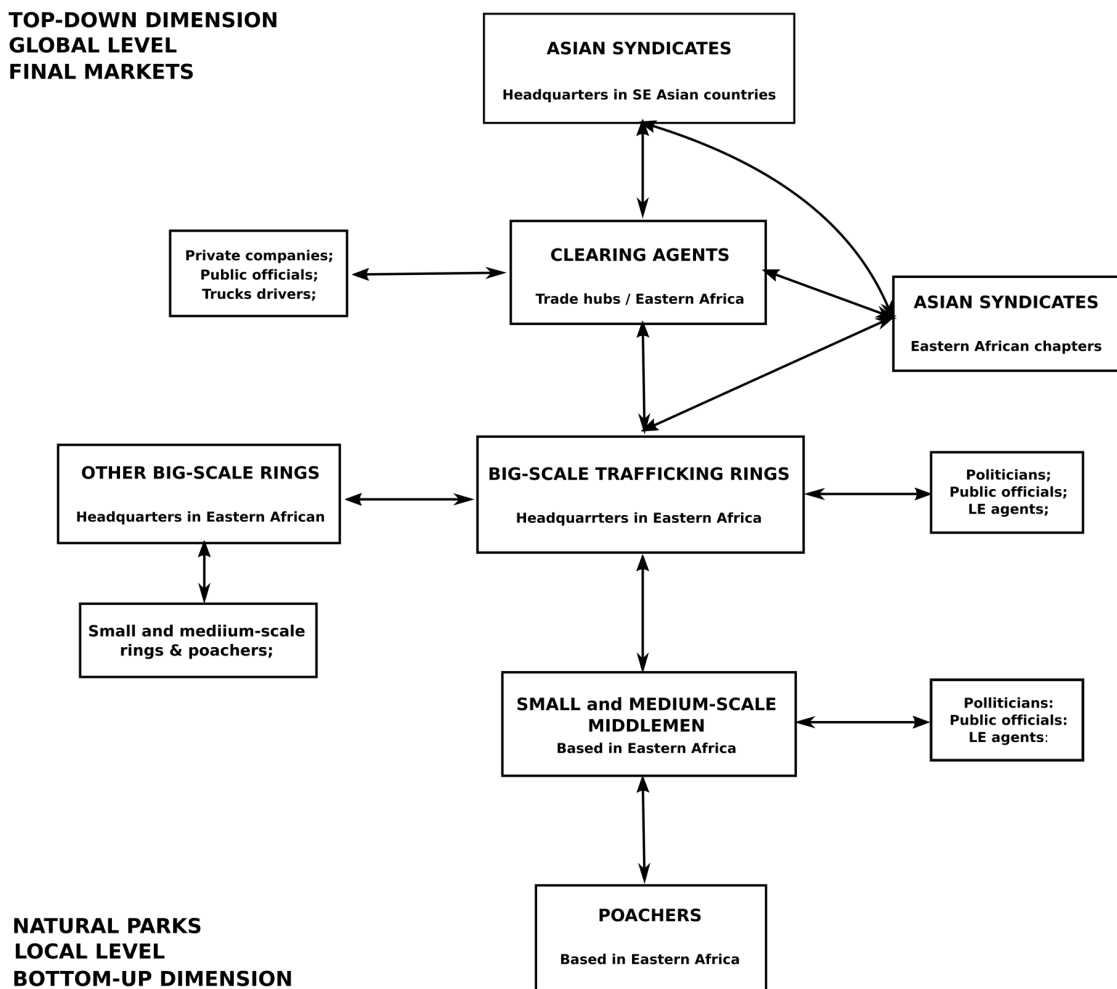


Figure 1 Proto-categories of actors and functions in IWT

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