

# Illicit trafficking of cocaine in Western and Northern Africa

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**ANALYTICAL REPORT**



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***\*\* There are two versions of this report on illicit cocaine trafficking in Western and Northern Africa. A full version for law enforcement in INTERPOL member countries and a sanitised public version. This report is the public version. \*\****

## Executive Summary

The global cocaine trade is on the rise globally, driven by record cocaine production and growing demand. North and West African countries are playing an increasingly important role as transit points for cocaine flows destined for the European market and, to a lesser extent, the Middle East.

Cocaine seizures rebounded sharply in West Africa from 2019 onwards, indicating an increase in trafficking and the reactivation of the West African route after years of waning. Conversely, quantities seized in North Africa have declined, which could indicate that trafficking is moving away from this road.

Due to the continuous increase of coca bush cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia, which represents the bulk of the world's cocaine production, the overall quantity of cocaine placed on the world market is likely to continue increasing in the years ahead, as is the amount shipped through North and West Africa.

The majority of cocaine transiting through North and West Africa arrives through the maritime route on board bulk carriers, fishing boats, and, increasingly, sailing vessels. The drug is then re-expedited towards Europe by sea, hidden in legitimate cargo. A part of the cocaine arriving in West African coastal countries takes the Sahelian route, bringing it towards North African ports. Mali and Niger are key passage points on this route, while Libya is a significant destination. From North African ports, cocaine is shipped to Europe, the Middle East or the Arabic Peninsula.

Drug mules transporting cocaine by commercial flights contribute to a fraction of the trafficked volumes. They enable significant quantities of drugs to be transported quickly and to satisfy local consumption in the two sub-regions or foreign markets. Nigerian criminal groups are strongly involved in this type of trafficking.

The cocaine trade is a major source of revenue for organized crime groups in North and West Africa. Nigerian and Moroccan criminal groups are the leading regional players involved in cocaine trafficking, in which they often associate with foreign criminal groups. These foreign organized crime groups (OCGs) include the 'Ndrangheta, the Camorra, the Brazilian Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), Colombian OCGs and organized crime groups from the Balkans, which have gained a foothold in North and West Africa and organize and supervise the trafficking. North and West African OCGs are also involved in both trafficking and reselling of cocaine in foreign markets.

Finally, cocaine consumption tends to increase in transit countries, posing a threat to public health and safety. If left unabated, the trafficking of cocaine has the potential to destabilize the economies and the societies of transit countries because of the corruption, violence and public health issues that often accompany the expansion of drug markets.

## Key Findings

The following are the key findings of this report resulting from an analysis of a range of available data sources on the trafficking of cocaine in North and West Africa:

- ❖ The global context is one of increasing global cocaine production and consumption. In this framework, the countries of North and West Africa are transit points for cocaine flows, mainly destined for a lucrative European market.
- ❖ The overall quantity of cocaine placed on the world market is likely to continue increasing in the years ahead as a result of a continued rise of coca bush cultivation and cocaine production in Colombia, which is the principal world cocaine producer.
- ❖ More significant quantities are shipped through North and West Africa, and the traffickers are multiplying entry and transit points, which suggests that criminal networks are gaining a firmer foothold in the two regions.
- ❖ Cocaine seizures rebounded sharply in West Africa from 2019 onwards after five years of tendential decline, indicating an increase in trafficking, while seizures in North Africa conversely declined. However, the importance of some North African countries like Libya and Tunisia as transit hubs is likely underestimated due to insufficient data.
- ❖ Most of the cocaine arrives in the region by sea and leaves via this route for the European market.
- ❖ The Sahelian route bringing cocaine from the coastal countries of West Africa remains active. Along this road, Mali and Niger are key passage points, and Libya is a major destination.
- ❖ Cocaine consumption in transit countries is increasing, posing a threat to public health and safety.
- ❖ The cocaine trade is a major source of revenue for organized crime groups in North and West Africa.
- ❖ Foreign organized crime groups have gained a foothold in North and West Africa. They organise and supervise trafficking through both sub-regions. These include the 'Ndrangheta, the Camorra, the Brazilian Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), Colombian OCGs, and organized crime groups from the Balkans.
- ❖ Nigerian and Moroccan criminal groups are the leading regional players involved in cocaine trafficking, in which they often associate with foreign criminal groups. They are strongly active in the two sub-regions as well as abroad.

## List of Acronyms

ENACT	Enhancing Africa's capacity to respond more effectively to transnational organised crime
ICIS	INTERPOL's Criminal Information System
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organisation
IPSG	INTERPOL General Secretariat
MAOC-N	Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre (Narcotics)
EMCDDA	European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction
NCB	INTERPOL National Central Bureau
OCG	Organised Criminal Group
ONDCP	Office of National Drug Control Policy
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WAPCCO	West African Police Chiefs Committee

## 1. Introduction

Coca bush cultivation and cocaine production in Latin America are at historically high levels while global cocaine consumption and trafficking are significantly increasing<sup>1</sup>. In particular, Europe has overtaken the United States as the market of choice for cocaine traffickers, given both the strength of European demand for the drug and the higher prices charged in that market<sup>2</sup>.

In this context, North and West African countries are more than ever exposed to cocaine trafficking and to the criminal groups that use the countries from these two regions as transit points to the European market.

This trafficking poses risks for local populations who may be led to consume these drugs. It also has the potential to destabilise the economies and the societies of transit countries because of criminal groups that can entrench exposed African countries and steer up corruption, money laundering, violence and, in some instances, fuel local conflicts.

This analytical report proposes to look into the illicit transnational trafficking of cocaine in Western and Northern Africa. It will take stock of major cocaine seizures destined for or transiting through these two regions over the last five years in order to assess the importance of the traffic, its development and methods used by criminal groups behind it.

This report is divided into four sections. First, the introduction announces the context and presents the overall objectives of this assessment. The second section presents its scope, objectives, and methodology employed. Section three constitutes the core of the analytical work. It presents the global context of cocaine trafficking and explains how this context drives cocaine trafficking in North and West Africa. In this section, we also examine the magnitude of this crime, the trafficking routes and modalities, as well as the main OCGs involved in this trafficking. Finally, we draw our conclusions in the fourth section.

## 2. Structure of the report

### 2.1 Objectives and scope

In accordance with ENACT's project mandate and geographical scope, the report will focus on Western and Northern Africa. It will take stock of major cocaine seizures destined for or transiting through these two regions via maritime, air or land routes (for inter-regional trafficking) over the last five years to assess the importance of the traffic and its evolution, identify concealment methods and establish modus operandi of organised crime groups involved in the trafficking of cocaine to or through Western and Northern Africa.

In terms of geographic scope, in this report, the Western African region refers to the countries of the West African Police Chiefs Committee (WAPCCO), which includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. North Africa refers to the following countries: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia. The study period runs from January 2018 to June 2023.

The assessment draws upon an analysis of available data. It presents the nature, scope, dynamics, and activities of organised crime linked to cocaine trafficking in the regions covered by the report, commensurate to information obtained from member countries and found in open sources. When possible, it also provides an overview of the active groups throughout the

region and the type of illegal enterprises in relation to cocaine trafficking in which they are engaged. This report intends to provide the concerned countries with actionable strategic intelligence to enable them to devise appropriate countering strategies and to be a tool for eliciting law enforcement cooperation among the countries impacted by this crime and those at risk of being affected in the future.

## 2.2 Methodology

This assessment follows an all-source intelligence analysis methodology. It results from integrating multiple data sources, including information available to INTERPOL and open sources.

Open sources used in the framework of this report include news articles and reports from various private entities, international organisations, and think tanks. Whenever identified, official statistics and data were used and given preference over other sources.

Information from the aforementioned sources was aggregated to identify consistencies across all data, convergences, patterns and trends.

A regional approach was retained when drafting this report. Therefore, when national examples are quoted, it is done for illustrative purposes to emphasise regional dynamics.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1 Global cocaine market

Like all markets, the global cocaine market is driven by supply and demand. On the supply side, available data indicates that the global cocaine supply is at record levels. It is estimated that between 2,064 metric tonnes and 2,304 metric tonnes of 100 per cent pure cocaine were produced in 2021 globally<sup>3,4</sup>.

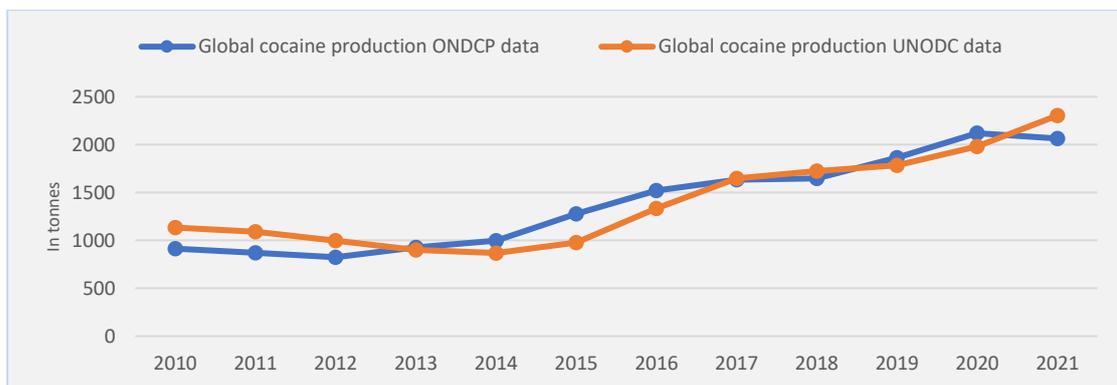


Figure 1: Estimated global cocaine production<sup>56</sup>

This record supply is likely due to three main factors. First, the overall increase in coca bush cultivation initiated since 2015 in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia (Plurinational State of), which account for almost the entire world production. This increase in cultivated area is shown in both United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) data (see Figure 3), despite some differences between the two datasets as regards the overall cocaine bush cultivated area. The UNODC data indicates that the global coca bush cultivated surface was of 315,481



**Figure 2: Illustration of coca bush cultivation. From left to right, cultivation of Coca in Colombia<sup>6</sup> and leaves and berries of a *Erythroxylum novogranatense* variety coca plant<sup>7,8</sup>.**

hectares (ha) in 2021, while the ONDPC estimated it at 358,100 ha. According to UN data, between 2015 and 2021, coca bush cultivated area more than doubled in Colombia (+113 per cent) and in Peru (+100 per cent) and, increased by 46 per cent in Bolivia (Plurinational State of). Though less impressive, the increase indicated by the ONDCP data remains remarkable, with an estimated surge in cultivated area of 47 per cent in Colombia, 59 per cent in Peru and 9 per cent in Bolivia (Plurinational State of).

The second factor explaining the growth in the global cocaine production, is an overall improvement in the productivity of coca bush cultivation, resulting in higher yields per cultivated area and coca leaves with a higher cocaine concentration<sup>9</sup>. Thirdly, greater efficiency in extracting cocaine from coca leaves and converting it into export-ready cocaine hydrochloride significantly contributes to the increase in global supply of cocaine<sup>10</sup>.

Finally, the latest UNODC data on coca bush cultivation in Colombia for 2022 indicate an increase of 13 per cent in cultivated area, reaching 230,000 ha and of 24 per cent in potential production of 100 per cent pure cocaine hydrochloride to 1,738 metric tonnes<sup>11,12</sup>. Given Colombia's leading position with more than 60 per cent of the global coca bush cultivated area and the correlation between cultivated area and cocaine production, it is likely that the overall quantity of cocaine placed on the world market will continue to increase in the years ahead.

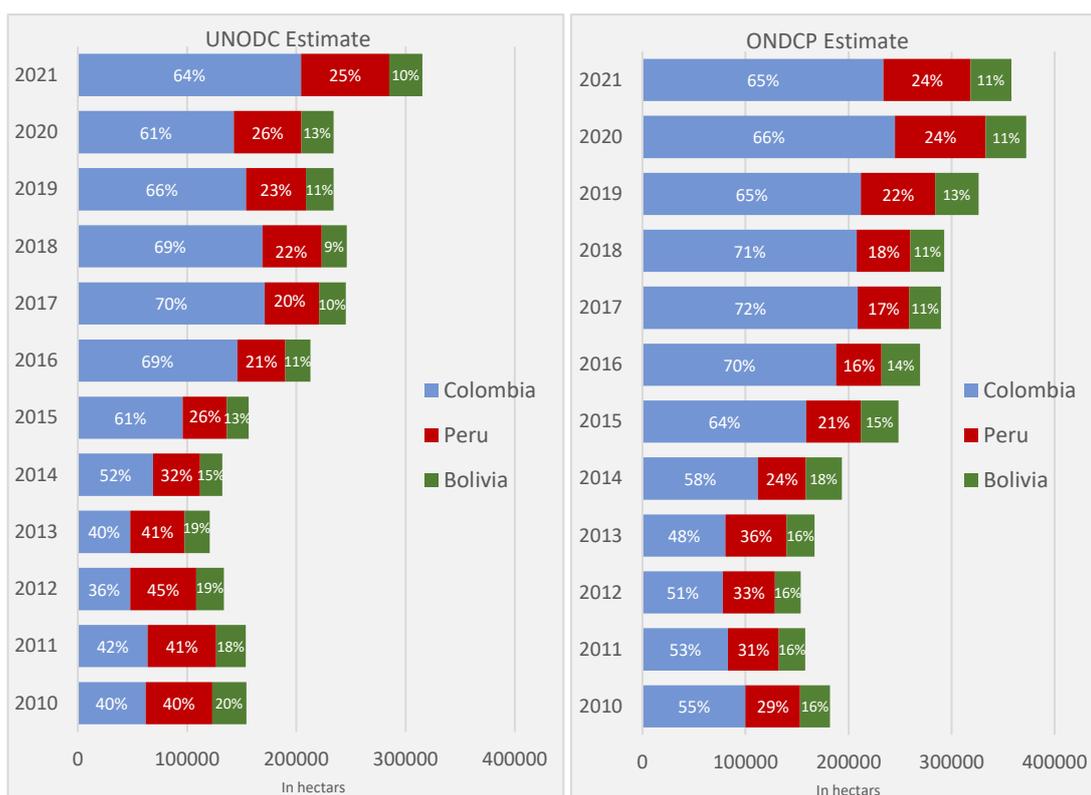


Figure 3: Estimated global coca bush cultivation in hectares (ha) and respective countries' share in a percentage of the overall cultivated surface<sup>1314</sup>.

On the demand side, data from the UNODC's World Cocaine Report 2023 indicate that between 2010 and 2020, the number of cocaine users worldwide rose by more than 30 per cent to around 21.5 million. This increase can be explained in part by population growth but also by a rise in the prevalence of cocaine use across the world<sup>15</sup> (see Figure 4).

Over the last five years for which data is available (2017-2021), Oceania has experienced the most vigorous growth in the number of users (+74 per cent), followed by Africa (+73 per cent), Central and South America and the Caribbean (+66 per cent), Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (+28 per cent), Asia (+23 per cent), Western and Central Europe (+8 per cent), while North America recorded a decrease in the number of users of 9 per cent.

However, these growth figures need to be weighed against the actual number of users in the different regions of the world. From this perspective, the North American market is the most significant (6.18 million estimated users in 2021), followed by Europe (5.3 million estimated users in 2021) and Central and South America and the Caribbean (5.17 million estimated users in 2021).

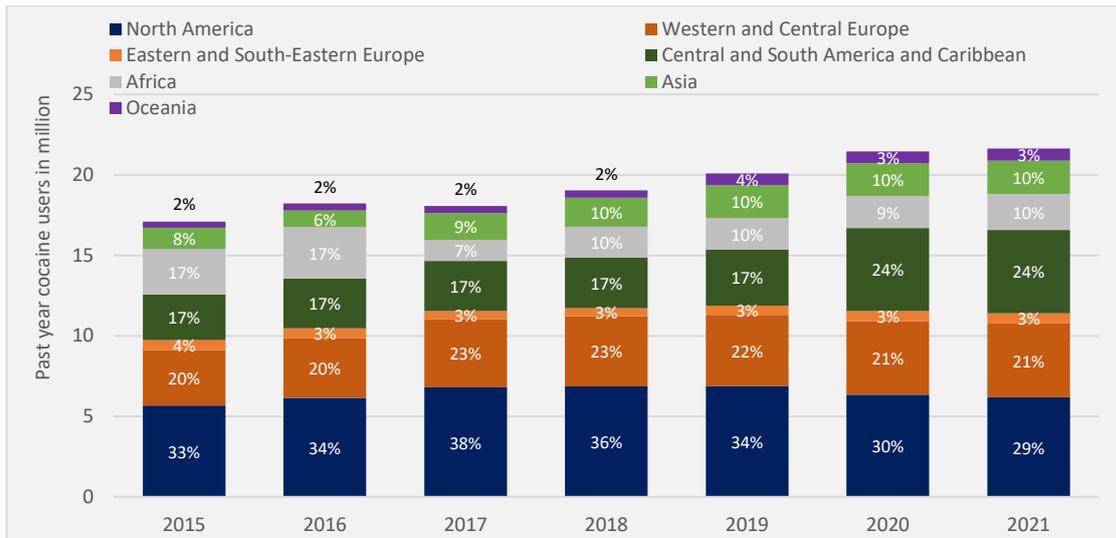


Figure 4: Share per region of past year cocaine users worldwide (best estimates) 2015–2021<sup>16</sup>

Price is another major market component besides the number of users/customers. Available data indicates that average prices in Europe are significantly higher than in the United States (the principal North American cocaine market) and with no comparison whatsoever with Central and South America and the Caribbean (see Figure 5). For this reason, the combination of a large consumer base and high prices has made Europe particularly attractive for cocaine traffickers for several decades now.

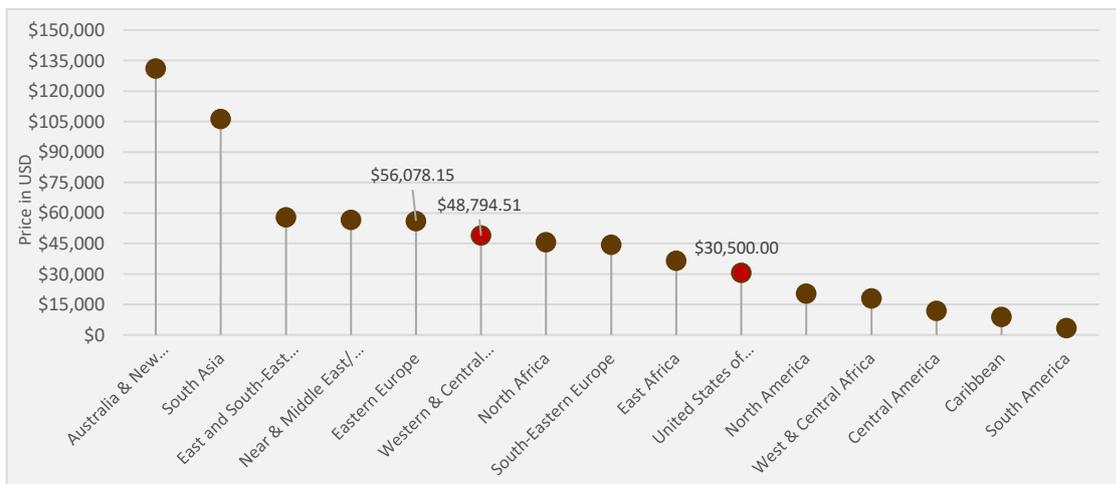


Figure 5: Average cocaine hydrochloride wholesale prices in USD per kilogram per region in 2021<sup>17</sup>

As pointed out in the research report “The cocaine pipeline to Europe” by GI-TOC and InSight Crime<sup>18</sup>, Europe’s market is arguably the most attractive in the world because of its size and high prices, as previously mentioned, but also because of its shipping and road infrastructure facilitating the transportation of cocaine into and within Europe, openness because of the multiplicity of actors compared to the quasi-monopoly of Mexican cartels over cocaine trafficking into the United States and moderate risk levels (including of interdiction, harshness of prison sentences, extradition and seizure of assets) when compared to the United States’ market.

The boom in cocaine trafficking to Europe dates back to the mid-1980s, when Colombian cartels made their first agreements with Galician smugglers and the Italian mafia to move cocaine to Europe, as the United States-led war on drugs intensified. Subsequently, the size of the European market increased throughout the 1990s and by 2009 trafficking to Europe accounted for half the

profits made by cocaine traffickers in South America, Central America and the Caribbean, while the United States market accounted for a third<sup>19</sup>.

It is against this backdrop of a soaring European cocaine market worth an estimated EUR 10 billion<sup>20</sup>, particularly attractive to South American and European criminal groups, that West and Northern African countries, by virtue of their geographical position but also other characteristics, have become hubs for cocaine trafficking between Latin America and Europe.

## 3.2 West and North Africa as cocaine trafficking hubs

### 3.2.1 Local consumption

Due to a lack of reliable data on the subject, it is difficult to accurately assess the extent of cocaine use in Africa. Nevertheless, the available data indicate that the past-year prevalence of cocaine use in 2020 was estimated at 0.27 per cent (414,000 users) for North Africa and 0.15 per cent for West and Central Africa (445,000 users)<sup>21</sup>. Available data also suggest that cocaine consumption overlaps to a large extent with cocaine transit routes between West and Central Africa and North Africa<sup>22</sup>. Several local press articles report an increased availability and use of cocaine in West African countries. For instance, a Mali open-source report that a range of research studies drawn up by anti-drug campaigners, including the “Association Malièenne de Lutte Contre la Drogue (AMLD)”, show that synthetic cocaine derivatives are present, sold and consumed in Mali<sup>23</sup>.

Cocaine consumption in West and North Africa is, therefore, driven by the trafficking of this drug through the two sub-regions, and the quantities of drugs passing through them are primarily destined for markets beyond them.

### 3.2.2 Trafficking dynamics and volumes

Due to a lack of consistency in the reporting of drug seizures by several countries in North and West Africa, it is difficult to get an accurate picture of the volume of drugs seized in these two African regions. Nonetheless, available figures indicate a continuous overall increase in drug seizures since the mid-2010s. After a low point of 883 kg of cocaine seized in 2015 in the two regions, seizures have continuously risen, reaching around 15 tonnes in 2022.

While cocaine seizures in West Africa between 2010 and 2015 were much higher than those in North Africa, the trend reversed between 2016 and 2018 before picking up again with greater force from 2019 onwards. The “air gap” in seizures in West Africa over the period 2016-2018 could be explained by the intensification

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during this period, of fighting in the Sahel, which started in 2012 with the war in Mali. The conflict may have disrupted the logistical networks set up to move cocaine from the western side of the continent via the Sahel to European countries.

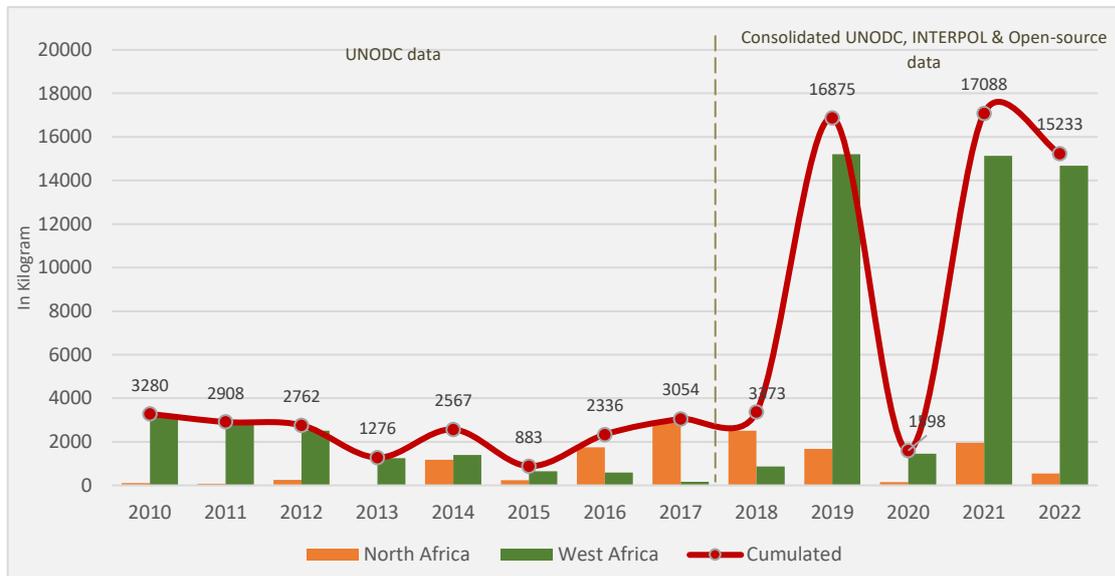


Figure 6: Cocaine seizures in Kg equivalent in North and West Africa 2010-2022<sup>24</sup>

Of note, seizures only partially reflect the actual volumes trafficked, since law enforcement agencies only intercept a fraction of them. It is therefore more than likely that the quantities of cocaine arriving in North and West Africa are much higher than the seizure figures indicate. In the report "The Cocaine Pipeline To Europe", a European expert, speaking on condition of anonymity, stated that it is estimated that only 10-20 per cent of cocaine transported to Europe is intercepted<sup>25</sup> despite the resources deployed by European countries. Given that police forces in African countries generally have fewer resources than their European counterparts, their interception rate is likely lower. Nevertheless, the increase in the volume of seizures made by African countries in the recent years indicates a strengthening of their anti-trafficking capabilities, thanks in particular to international cooperation and intelligence sharing, which are at the roots of the largest seizures. Indeed, national naval forces made most of the large seizures at sea on the basis of intelligence obtained through cooperation with foreign law enforcement agencies and international organisations.

### 3.2.2.1 North Africa

As mentioned above, the increase in cocaine seizures, with as corollary an increase in trafficking via this region of Africa, rose sharply in 2014, with more than a tonne (1,172 kg) of cocaine seized. The following year (2015), seizures fell back to 233.65 kg but, from that point on, regularly exceeded one and a half tonnes, reaching a record of 2.8 tonnes in 2017. The year 2020 was an exception, with only 149.04 kg of cocaine seized in the region. Restrictions on the movement of people and goods to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus impacted global supply chains, including those related to drug trafficking (see Figure 7). Nonetheless, even in 2020, 1.8 tonnes of cocaine destined for North Africa or meant to transit through it were seized outside the region (see Figure 8). In 2021, cocaine seizures went up again, as did the amount of cocaine intercepted en route to the region.

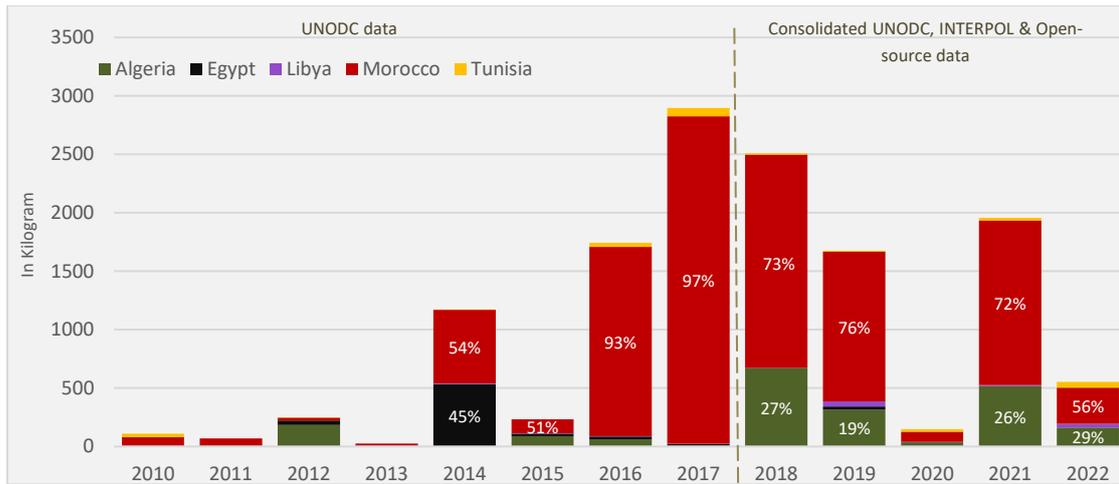


Figure 7: Cocaine seizures in Kg equivalent in North Africa between 2010 and 2022<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, the drop in seizures in 2022 is an anomaly that could suggest a potential change in practice and route by traffickers, including in favour of West Africa and potentially other African regions such as Southern and East Africa<sup>27</sup>. This seems all the truer given that cocaine seizures destined for North Africa and made outside this region are also at their lowest level for three years (see Figure 8).

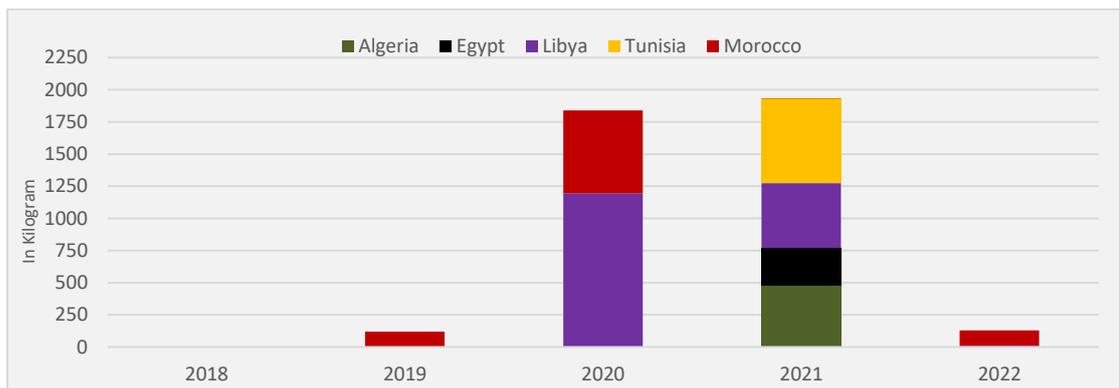


Figure 8: Cocaine seizures in Kg equivalent outside North Africa, with the region as destination or transit between 2018 and 2022<sup>28,29</sup>.

However, the decline in cocaine seizures in North African countries may be misleading and not indicative of a decline in trafficking through this region. For instance, the record seizure of 9.5 tonnes of cocaine made in Cabo Verde in January 2019 on board a Panamanian-flagged vessel crewed by Russian sailors was destined for the port of Tangiers in Morocco<sup>30</sup>.

Available data indicates that Morocco dominates in terms of seizures in North Africa. Over the last five years, the country seized close to 5 metric tonnes of cocaine (4,909kg). These interdiction efforts show the determination of the country's authorities to combat trafficking, but also the country's attractiveness to traffickers.

Indeed, Morocco enjoys an advantageous geographical location: a 3,500 km coastline stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, a strategic position on the Strait of Gibraltar facing Spain and excellent port connectivity. The country has 38 ports, 13 open to foreign trade. These include the port of Tangier Med, the largest port in North Africa and even on the continent. It ranks 24<sup>th</sup> globally for container facilities and is linked to more than 180 ports in 70 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Mediterranean and the Far East<sup>31</sup>. These logistical facilities offer a multitude of possibilities for bringing cocaine into the country by sea or shipping it to numerous

... a comparison of seizures made in the region over two extended periods, 2010 to 2017 and 2018 to 2022, shows that the relative position of each country has been stable for more than a decade, long-established networks are still operating despite past seizures and interdiction operations, or that new criminal actors are regularly replacing those that are put out of business.

destinations abroad. Morocco also has two major airports, Mohammed V International Airport in Casablanca and Menara Airport in Marrakech, which are respectively the fourth and twelfth busiest airports on the African continent<sup>32</sup> and are linked to more than 85 and 84 foreign destinations, respectively.

Algeria ranks second in terms of cocaine seizures in North Africa over the last five years, although the volumes seized are much lower than those in Morocco, with around 1.69 tonnes. Nevertheless, in 2018 and 2021, the country recorded seizures of over half a ton, indicating that cocaine trafficking through Algeria is significant, clearly exceeds the domestic demand and is instead aimed at foreign markets. The country's geographical position is also favourable to traffickers, with the Spanish coast no more than 150 km from Oran. It was precisely in the Oran region that, according to open sources, 701 kg of cocaine were seized from the MC Vega in 2018, and 490 kg were found drifting at sea in 2021<sup>33</sup>. Still, in 2021, Brazilian authorities reported a seizure of 481 kg of cocaine heading to Algeria.

Over the last five years, Tunisia ranks third with 114.72 kg of cocaine seized. This is a small quantity compared with Algeria and, of course, Morocco, but there has been a steady increase in seizures since 2018. Such a limited quantity of drugs seems to be destined for the local market, especially as the largest quantities seized came from abroad by land from Europe. However, according to open sources, Ecuador authorities confiscated in December 2021 a shipment of 656 kg of cocaine dissimulated in a banana container bound for Tunisia<sup>34,35</sup>. It is likely that Tunisia was not the destination for such a large quantity of drugs. This case would, therefore, tend to confirm that Tunisia is a transit point for cocaine destined for the European market, neighbouring countries, or the Middle East.

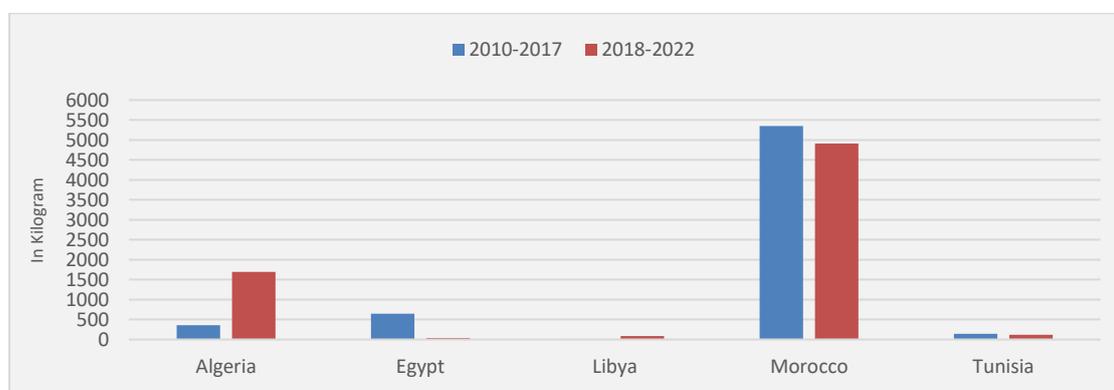
With 87.58 kg and 34.08 kg of cocaine seized between 2018 and 2022, Libya and Egypt appear to be minor cocaine destinations or hubs. However, these figures likely downplay the real importance of these two countries as cocaine destinations or transit points.

Available information indicates that between 2018 and 2022, at least 1.7 tonnes of cocaine bound for Libya or meant to transit the country were confiscated in Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador. These seizures suggest that the quantities of drugs transiting through Libya are far greater than those seized locally. The record for local seizures was broken in February 2023 when the Libyan Customs Authority snatched 269 kg of cocaine at Al-Khoms, a port town in northwest Libya lying 120 kilometres east of Tripoli. The cocaine was found in a container loaded with frozen chicken from Brazil<sup>36</sup>.

A seizure of 30 Kg had already taken place in the same town in May 2022<sup>37</sup>, suggesting that it plays a significant role in cocaine trafficking in Libya.

In the case of Egypt, as in the case of Libya, seizures made outside the country must be considered when assessing the extent of trafficking into or through the country. For example, in August 2021, Brazilian law enforcement made in Paranaguá a significant seizure of 289 kg of cocaine on board a vessel bound for Egypt. Such a large quantity of cocaine is likely to be trafficked across the Egyptian border. Numerous attempts to smuggle several kilos of cocaine into Israel from the Egyptian border have been reported in open sources in recent years, illustrating Egypt's role as a transit hub for cocaine to Middle Eastern countries<sup>38,39,40</sup>.

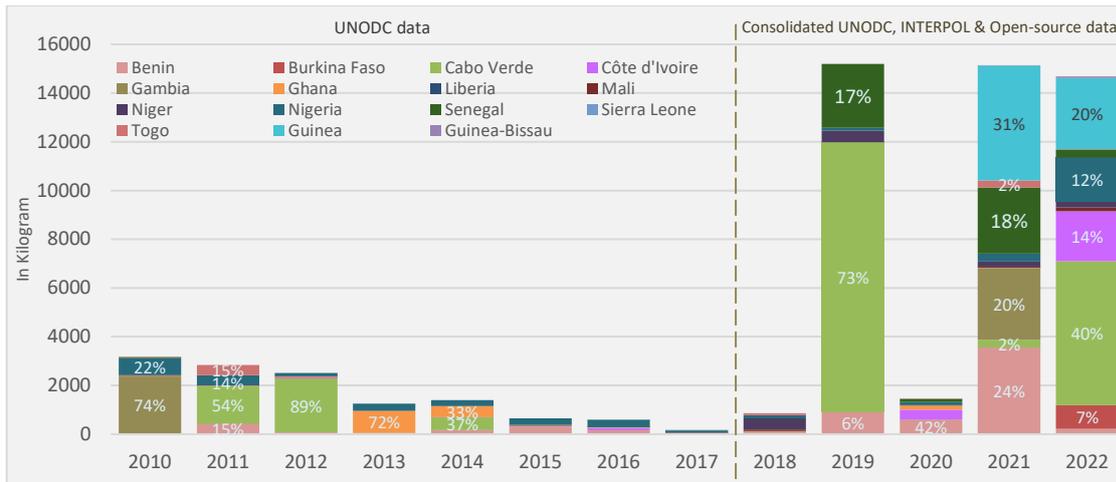
Finally, a comparison of seizures made in the region over two extended periods, 2010 to 2017 and 2018 to 2022, shows that the relative position of each country has been stable for more than a decade, suggesting that either long-established networks are still operating despite past seizures and interdiction operations, or that new criminal actors are regularly replacing those that are put out of business.



**Figure 9: Comparison of cocaine seizures in Kg equivalent in North Africa between 2010-2017 and 2018-2022<sup>41</sup>**

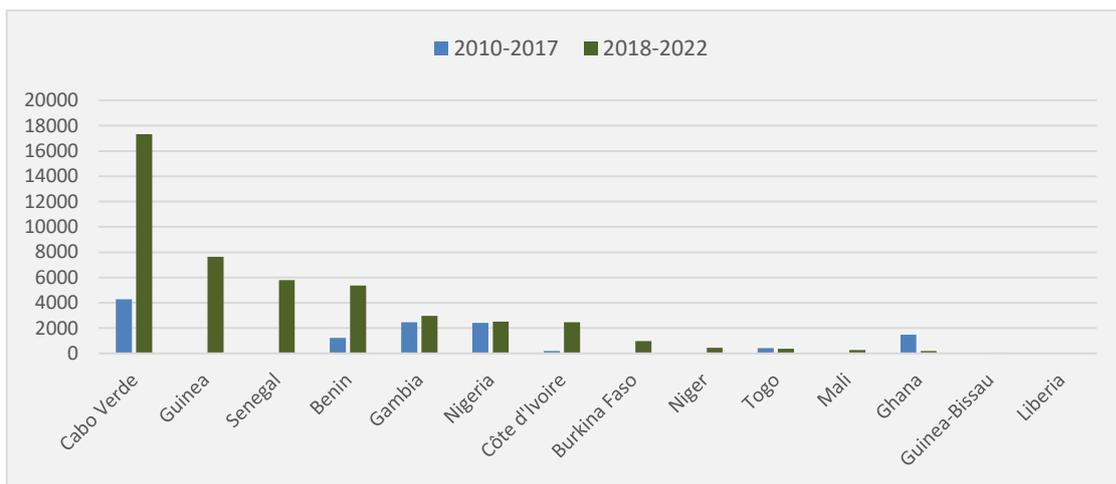
### 3.2.2.2 West Africa

In West Africa, after a steady decline since the early 2010s, cocaine seizures rebounded spectacularly in 2019, with more than 14 tonnes seized in the region, including a record 9.5 tonnes catch by Cape Verde on board a Panamanian-flagged vessel bound for Tangier Med<sup>42</sup>. That same year, Senegal also broke its seizure record, with more than 2.6 tonnes, as did Benin, with 909 kg seized. The drop in seizures observed in 2020 is due to the restrictive measures put in place to combat COVID-19, and by 2021, seizures had returned to historic levels without practically weakening by 2022.



**Figure 10: Cocaine seizures in Kg equivalent in West Africa between 2010 and 2022<sup>43</sup>**

Countries such as Cape Verde, Benin, Gambia and Nigeria, which recorded the highest seizures between 2010 and 2017, saw the latter increase sharply (Cape Verde and Benin) or moderately (Gambia and Nigeria) between 2018 and 2022 (see Figure 11). This leads to believe that long-time existing networks are still at play despite past seizures and interdiction operations.



**Figure 11: Comparison of cocaine seizures in Kg equivalent in West Africa between 2010-2017 and 2018-2022<sup>44</sup>**

There has also been a dramatic increase in seizures by new entrants such as Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, suggesting that traffickers are multiplying cocaine entry and transit points, which in turn implies that criminal networks are gaining a firmer foothold in the region, finding local relays there. Both countries are essential logistical nodes with booming air and port traffic<sup>45,46,47</sup>, which provides more opportunities to conceal illegitimate cargo within regular merchandise flows. Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire are also gateways to landlocked Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. These countries are known points of passage for cocaine destined for Europe via the Sahel corridor and, subsequently, North African ports. The increase in seizures in these two countries evidences the continuous functioning of that trafficking route.

Since 2019, several countries have recorded seizures of more than two tonnes, with single shipments above one tonne. This was notably the case for four countries in 2021 (Benin, Gambia, Guinea, and Senegal) and four in 2022 (Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Nigeria). Such high volumes shipped in a single cargo indicate that traffickers gained assurance and do not hesitate to send larger quantities, confident that they will reach their final destinations. Experts explain

that such large quantities are usually dispatched after one or more successful test shipments called "trial runs" or "dry runs"<sup>48</sup>.

Finally, cocaine seizures reported to INTERPOL between 2018 and 2021 and made outside West Africa indicate that a least further 3.1 tonnes (3,160 kg) of cocaine were destined to the region (see Figure 12). Available open sources information enables to count five additional tonnes destined for Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. This signals that countries such as Ghana or Sierra Leone, which reported few seizures, actually remain targeted by traffickers and that overall, larger quantities of cocaine are transiting through West Africa.

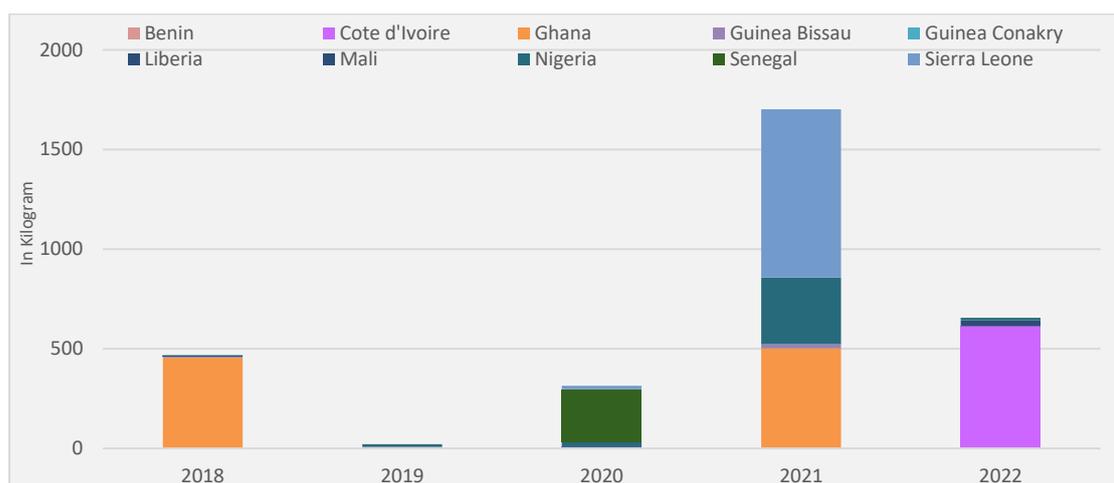


Figure 12: Cocaine seizures in Kg equivalent outside West Africa, with the region as destination or transit between 2018 and 2022<sup>49</sup>

### 3.3 Trafficking routes and modalities

An examination of cocaine seizure reports shows that cocaine from Andean countries is generally transported by multiple means, including sea, air and land, to reach destination markets in Europe via Africa. It passes through multiple storage points and changes hands from one player to another in a supply chain involving numerous actors, often acting autonomously<sup>50</sup>.

Traffickers don't necessarily choose the shortest geographical route but rather the path of least resistance, i.e., the one which ultimately ensures that the cocaine reaches its final destination with minimum risk of confiscation by law enforcement. As a result, they frequently change the drug's destination, path and means of transport<sup>51</sup>.

While the sea route carries the bulk of the volume transported to Africa, the air route conveys smaller quantities to many destinations, using many path combinations. Finally, the land route is mainly used to transfer cocaine between West African coastal countries or from the coasts to North Africa via the Sahel, from where the drug is shipped to Europe, the Middle East, or other destinations, using sea or air transport.

#### 3.3.1 The maritime route

Available information indicates that the maritime route is the most commonly used for transporting large quantities of cocaine. Seizures on board ships or in port areas represent the highest volumes.

59 per cent of cocaine seizures by volume reported to INTERPOL were made either at sea or in seaports. Furthermore, 25 per cent of seizures made on land in warehouses were linked to vast quantities of drugs that had arrived via the maritime route (see Figure 13).

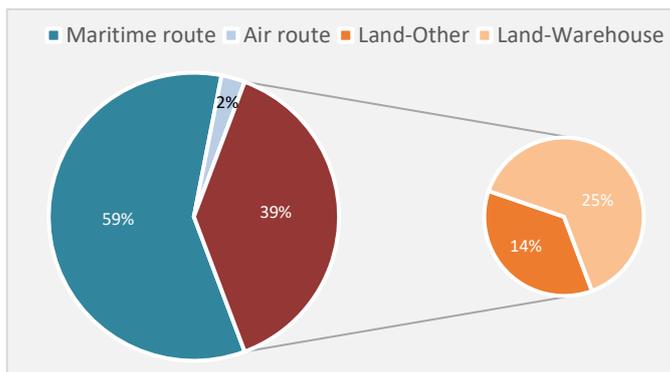


Figure 13: Volume of seizures per trafficking route<sup>52</sup>.

Cocaine leaves Southern America through a variety of ports. Available data show Brazilian harbours as the main departure points of cocaine seized in Northern and Western Africa.

These include Santos, Itapoa, Paranagua and Itajai. Colombia (Cartagena, Barranquilla) and Ecuador (Guayaquil) are also recorded as departure points. There are, however, a multitude of other possible departure points for cocaine, as illustrated in Figure 14 below. From there, the illicit merchandise heads for North or West African coasts as a stopover destination for the cocaine heading to Europe or other locations.

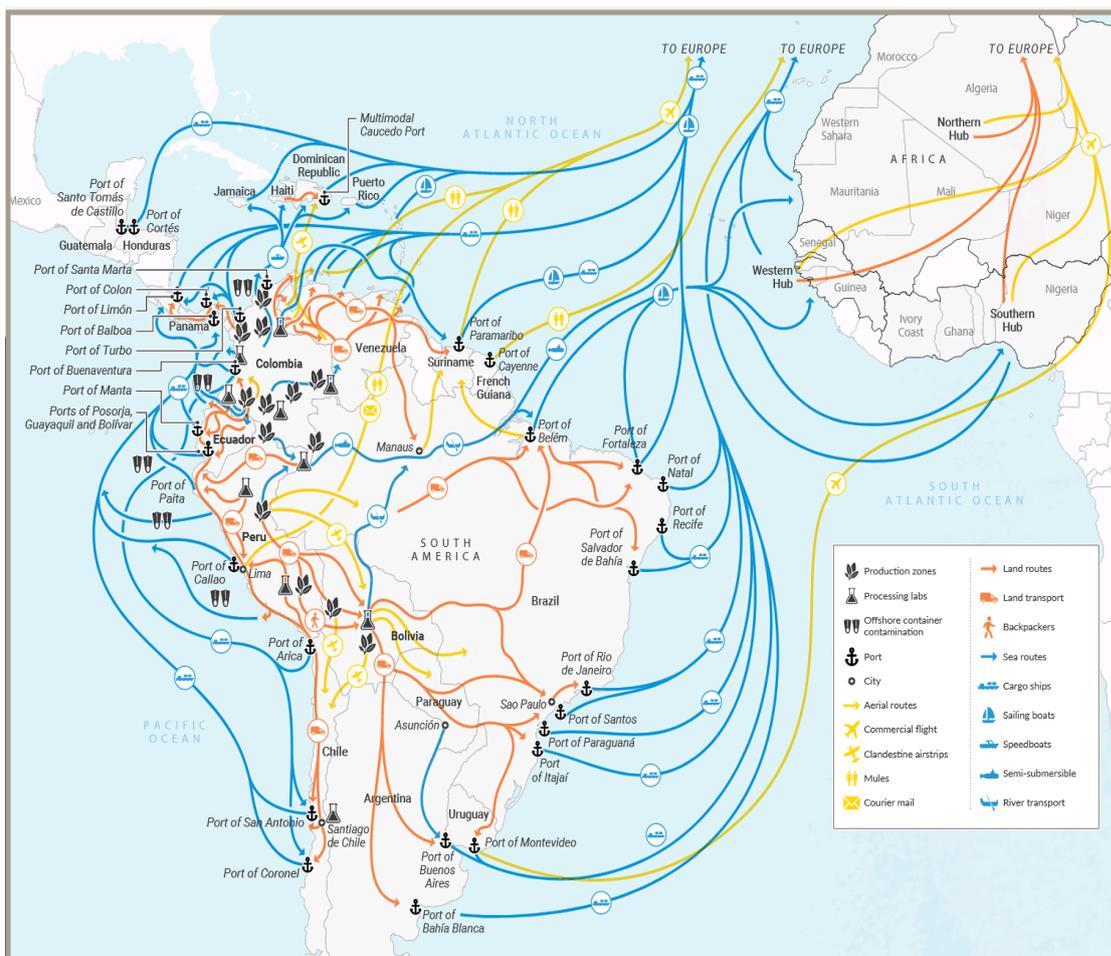
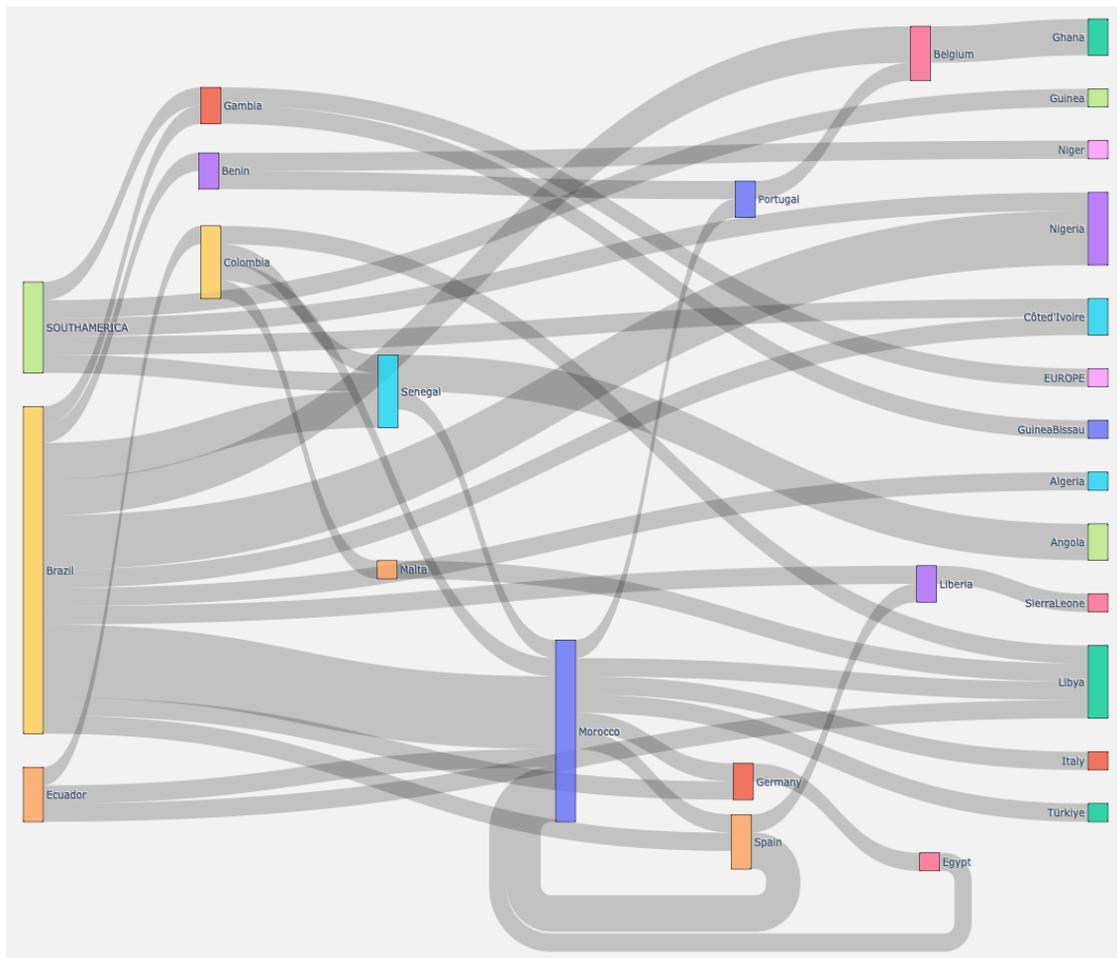


Figure 14: Cocaine trafficking routes to Europe, including departure ports. Map from “The Cocaine Pipeline To Europe” report<sup>53</sup>

A review of cocaine seizures on the maritime route shows that between 2018 and 2022, Brazil was the most frequent departure point for cocaine destined for North and West Africa.

The analysis likewise shows the multitude of North and Western African countries affected (15) by the trafficking. The importance of Morocco as a major transit point is highlighted. Libya and Nigeria are also frequently reported as hubs despite these two countries' relatively low volume of seizures. This may indicate that only a fraction of the volume of cocaine arriving in these countries is intercepted by law enforcement agencies.

Figure 15 below depicts the maritime routes reported to INTERPOL. The thickness of the lines indicates the number of reports and not the quantities seized.



**Figure 15: Actual or suspected maritime routes based on seizures reported to INTERPOL between 2018 and 2022<sup>54</sup>**

Traffickers use different types of vessels to traffic cocaine across the Atlantic Ocean. These include merchant vessels (tugboats, cargo vessels and bulk carriers), sailing ships, fishing vessels, speed boats (go-fast), semi-submersibles and water drones (see Figure 16 below).

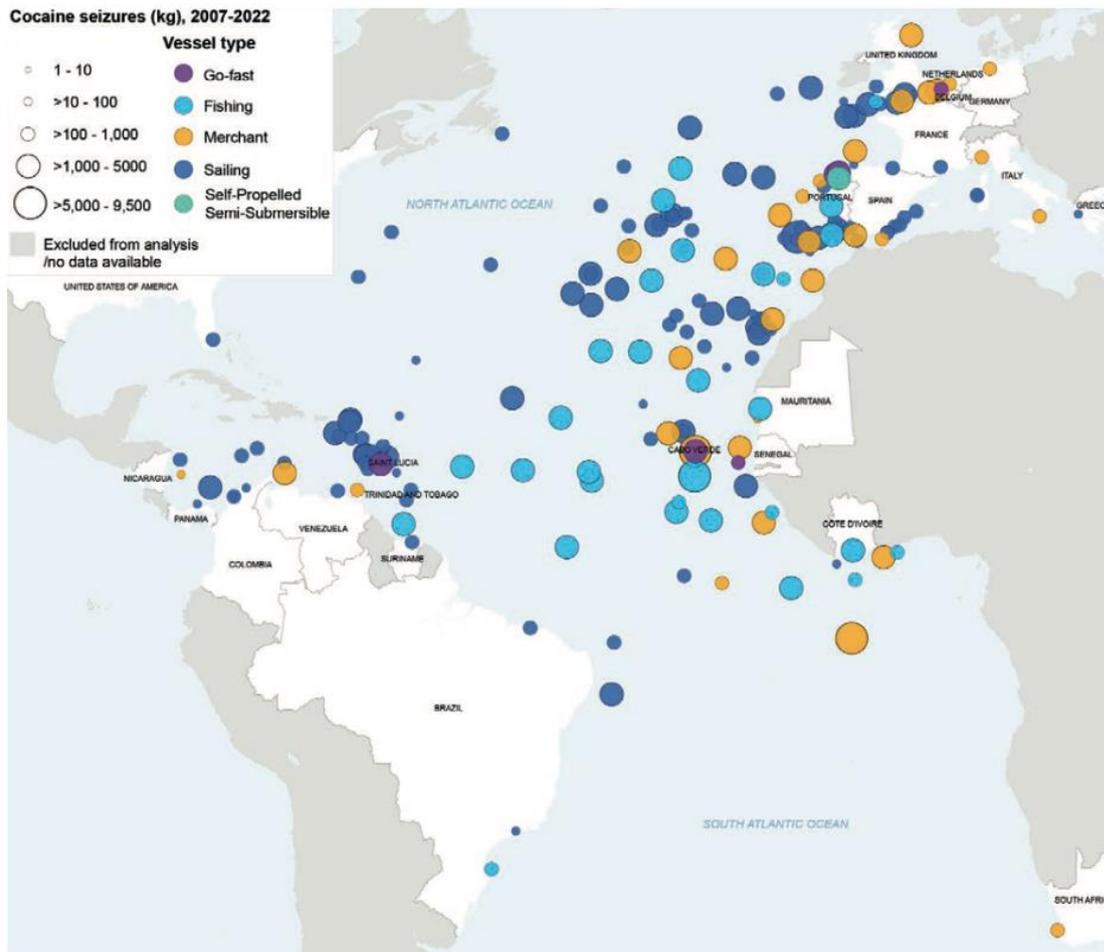


Figure 16: Location of cocaine seizures in the Atlantic Ocean coordinated by the MAOC-N, by type of vessel from which cocaine was seized, 2007 – April 2022. Map from report “Global Report on Cocaine 2023, Local dynamics, global challenges”, UNODC<sup>55</sup>

According to the World Cocaine Report 2023, the use of containers for transoceanic shipments of cocaine on cargo ships is increasing, taking advantage of the legal trade flows of containerized goods. When traffickers use containers to ship cocaine, they can either organize their shipments, usually using front companies to obtain the necessary documents to give a legitimate purpose to the cargo containing the cocaine and conceal it among the legal goods, or they can 'piggyback' on a legitimate shipment without the sender's knowledge. In the latter case, they generally introduce the cocaine into the containers either before they arrive at the port, or in transit to the port, or at the port itself, or even while at sea. Preferably, the "contamination" occurs in ports that are not a regular source of cocaine shipments, or the contaminated container can be routed through an unsuspecting transit port. Once it arrives at its destination, accomplices working in the ports recover the goods. Transporting large quantities of cocaine in this way requires a network of collaborators among port workers, transport companies, drivers or customs officials recruited through bribes or intimidation<sup>56</sup>.

In terms of concealment, traffickers often resort to creative camouflage methods. Seizure reports from member countries inform about numerous dissimulation methods, including in food products (fruit, soya, flour, sugar, cashew nuts, meat, etc.), machinery, tires, container structures, etc. Law enforcement officials quoted in the World Cocaine Report 2023, inform about a significant movement of contaminated containers from Panama, Ecuador, Costa Rica,

Dominican Republic, and Brazil. Finally, cocaine can also be concealed in the structures of ships or under their hulls.



**Figure 17: Illustration of cocaine concealed within the compactor of a road roller discovered as part of the seizure of 1.2 tonnes of cocaine bound for Côte d'Ivoire in the port of Santos in April 2018<sup>57</sup>.**

To avoid law enforcement at seaports, traffickers frequently offload cocaine from mother ships before reaching land. Ship-to-ship transfers occur at rendezvous points using small and medium-sized vessels such as speedboats, fishing boats, or pirogues. Several countries reported this modus operandi.

Sailing boats are increasingly used for drug trafficking. Technological advances in maritime navigation have enabled to diversify their departure points on the Atlantic coast, from where they transport cocaine to Africa and Europe<sup>58</sup>. In October 2021, Senegal authorities informed of a seizure of 2026 Kg of Cocaine aboard a Polish-flagged sailing boat coming from Gambia and heading to Guinea-Bissau. More recently, in October 2022, Cape Verdean authorities found 227 kg of cocaine aboard a sailing vessel coming from Brazil and making a technical stopover in São Vicente<sup>59</sup>. These cases tend to confirm that that Brazil has become a significant departure point for sailing vessels<sup>60</sup>.

Fishing vessels of all types have been used for drug trafficking for many years. Larger fishing vessels can act as "mother ships" for smaller vessels that traffic drugs to and from the mother ship. Medium and small fishing vessels can provide go-fast boats with fuel and supplies. Smaller fishing vessels traffic drugs in and out of harbours in smaller quantities, frequently transshipping drugs to or from mother ships outside territorial waters. Several West and North African countries reported the use of fishing vessels.

Regarding Speed boats, they are used along other boats to transport cocaine from African shores to Spain using hashish-trafficking lines that run from Morocco to the beaches along the Costa del Sol<sup>61</sup>.

Finally, trafficking by sea can also take place via ferries. Similarly, to cocaine trafficking by drug mules over commercial flights, it can involve couriers carrying small volumes of drugs on their bodies or in their luggage. Larger drug consignments are usually concealed in vehicles or trucks carrying legitimate goods. Trafficking via ferries mainly occurs along routes linking Spain, France and Italy with Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia and can be bi-directional<sup>62</sup>. For instance, On 4 November 2023, Spanish Guardia Civil seized 90 kilos of cocaine hidden in the boot and rear seats of a car that was about to board a ferry bound for Tangiers. The driver and passenger, both Moroccan nationals with Spanish residency permits, were arrested<sup>63</sup>.

The bulk of the cocaine arriving in West and North Africa is subsequently sent towards the main destination markets in Europe via the maritime route, as reported by several west African countries. The cocaine loads would often be reconditioned before further dispatch. The port of

Antwerp in Belgium appears as a major destination for cocaine transiting through West and North Africa.

However, Europe is not the unique destination for cocaine transiting through West Africa. For instance, in June 2019, in the space of a week, two shipments of cocaine weighing 238kg and 798kg respectively were intercepted by Senegalese customs on board a vessel bound for Angola from Brazil. The drug was concealed inside vehicles. However, it cannot be ruled out that the drugs was destined to be later transported to Europe or another destination.

Libya appears as an important cocaine trafficking hub for cocaine arriving there either by sea through ports such as Misrata, al-Khoms, Benghazi and Tobruk, as well as the Cyrenaica’s coastal area, or by land via the Sahel route connecting West African coastal countries to North African seaports through Mali and Niger. From Libya, the cocaine is either shipped to Italy, the Balkans, Turkey and via Egypt to the larger Middle East<sup>64</sup>. Cocaine from Libya is also trafficked to Egypt via land (See also 3.3.3 The land route).

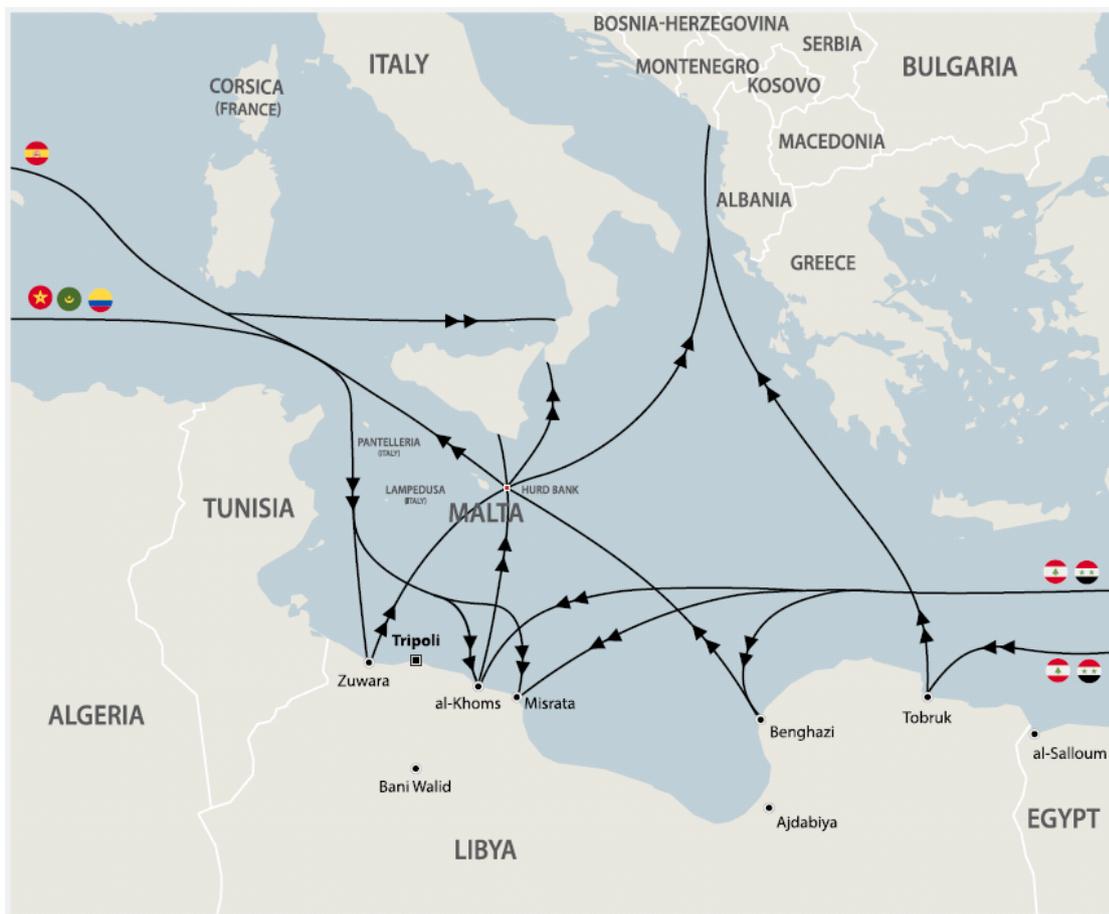


Figure 18: Indicative map of maritime trafficking routes for marijuana and cocaine involving Libya. The routes do not include trafficking through official container ports. Map from report “Shifting sands — Libya’s changing drug trafficking dynamics on the coastal and desert borders”, EMCDDA <sup>65</sup>

### 3.3.2 The air route

Cocaine trafficking by air represents substantially lower volumes than trafficking by sea. Only 2 per cent of volumes, according to seizures reported to INTERPOL (see Figure 13).

This traffic is carried out through the intermediary of passengers, crew members, freight and postal parcels (including express mail services) transported aboard commercial passenger and cargo flights (see Figure 19). Private flights are also used to carry out some of this trafficking.<sup>66</sup>

Analysis of cocaine seizures made between January 2018 and May 2023 at airports with a North or West African country as departure, destination or transit shows that passengers are the primary trafficking vector (71 per cent of cases), followed by postal items and freight.

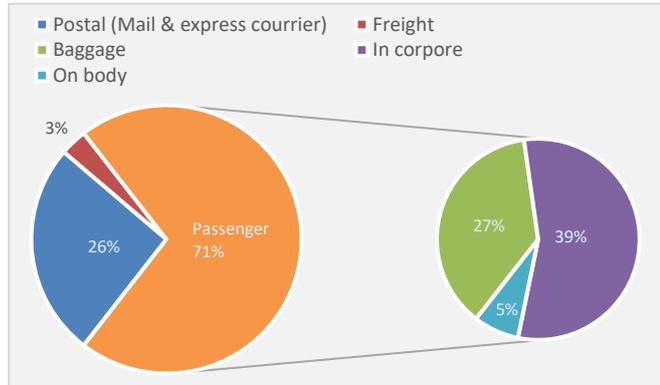


Figure 19: Seizures per used mean of transport and dissimulation method by passengers<sup>67</sup>

Passengers can conceal the drug in their luggage, on their bodies or in the body (*in corpore*), that is to say, in their stomach (swallowed) or other body cavities (rectal, vaginal). The dissimulation of the cocaine *in corpore* is the most frequent. Sometimes, the drug couriers, also called “mules”, combine various concealment methods.

When dissimulated on the body or in luggage, a multitude of cover-up methods are used by traffickers, including concealing the drug in foodstuffs, works of art, double-bottomed suitcases, clothing or footwear, as well as dissolving it in liquids, impregnating it into clothing, attaching it to the body, concealing it in underwear, wigs, and so on.



Figure 20: Examples of cocaine dissimulation methods used by drug mules. From left to right: In double-bottom suitcase, in a wig and swallowed pellets<sup>67</sup>.

“Redeeming” kilos or free space in unsuspecting passengers’ hold luggage has been observed, for instance, in Côte d’Ivoire, as a way for traffickers to avoid putting themselves in the front line in the event of a luggage inspection. If all goes well, the trafficker’s contact at the destination picks up the cocaine. With the same objective in mind, as reported in the Global Report on Cocaine 2023, traffickers have developed schemes in which a piece of luggage containing cocaine is exchanged between “mules” at a transit airport (Relay pattern) or a “mule” changes route after picking up cocaine in a transit zone (Shifting route pattern)<sup>68</sup>. There have been reports of workers in various positions in companies providing baggage handling or aircraft cleaning services have

been used by traffickers to remove cocaine from aircrafts and smuggle it out of airports. All these examples are just a few of a multitude of concealment methods and *modus operandi*.

Based on interdiction reports, Brazil is the principal departure point of cocaine couriers heading to or transiting through North and West Africa. Morocco is the principal layover, followed by Portugal, Ethiopia and Nigeria (see Figure 21). These gateways interconnect and serve as relays to other countries. The analysis further suggests that Ethiopia is a central transfer point for mules travelling from Brazil to Nigeria, while Morocco is the preferred springboard for Nigerian traffickers expediting the drug towards other countries.

However, data on seizures on air routes indicate a steady decline in the number of catches since 2018. The decline in the number of seizures has naturally been accompanied by a drop in the diversity of nationalities of those involved. It looks like the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the suspension of global air trafficking for several months, has had a lasting impact on trafficking patterns through Moroccan airports.

Available information suggests that Nigerians are the most frequently reported nationality for drug mules. Destinations of drug couriers include several West African countries, including Nigeria, as well as European and Asian countries.

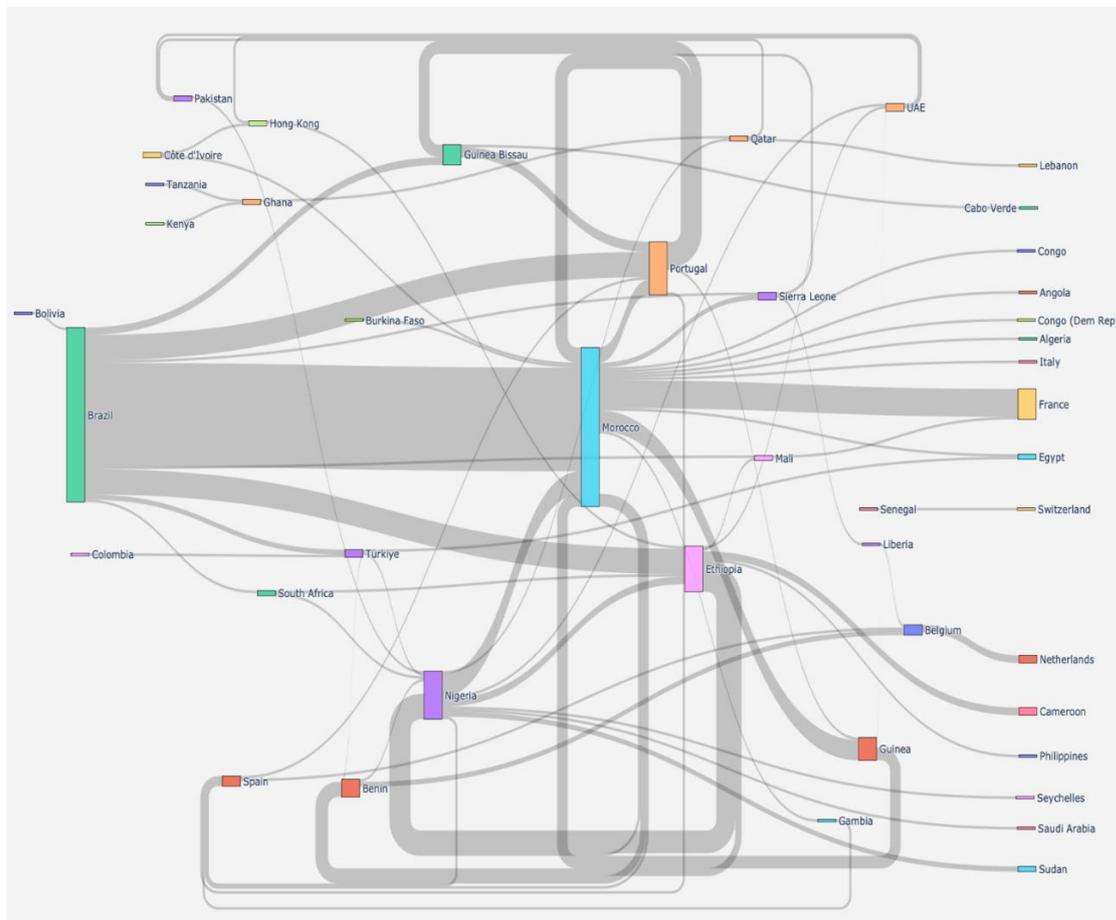
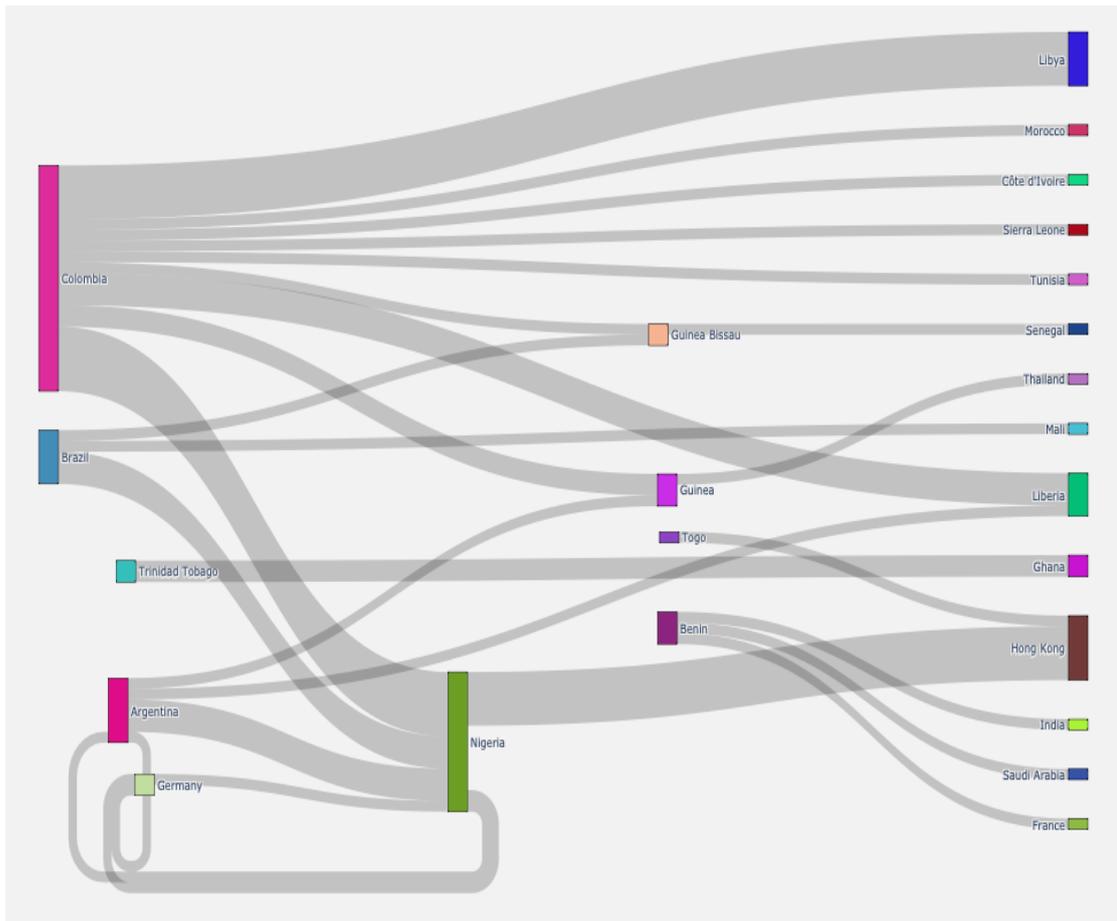


Figure 21: Actual or suspected air routes used by passengers based on interdiction reports between 2018 and 2023<sup>69</sup>.

Regarding freight and postal delivery, seizure data indicates that Colombia is a prominent source country, followed by Brazil and Argentina. When the cocaine is sent abroad from Africa, available data points to destinations in Europe (France and Germany), the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Hong Kong, China, and Thailand) (see Figure 22).



**Figure 22: Routes of cocaine seizures in freight and parcels reported to INTERPOL between 2018 and 2022<sup>70</sup>.**

Available information indicate that seizure of cocaine over cargo and mail peaked in 2020 and have been decreasing since then. However, this decline should be interpreted cautiously as postal and cargo seizures are irregular. It has also been noted that traffickers increasingly resort to nationals from departure countries to facilitate shipping and reduce suspicion by law enforcement agencies.

Nevertheless, available data indicates that between 2018 and 2023, more than 100 kg of cocaine were intercepted in Colombia before being shipped by parcel to Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Liberia, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Tunisia and Sierra Leone. This represents a significant quantity of cocaine and a wide variety of destinations, suggesting trafficking organised by networks of varying sizes. Consignments aimed at West African countries were probably organised by individuals of West African origin, possibly from Nigeria, while other actors likely arranged consignments destined for Tunisia and Libya.

Besides trafficking cocaine using drug couriers on commercial flights or sending cocaine through freight, OCGs can also move drugs between Latin America and West Africa using private planes. The 'Air Cocaine' case from 2009 is a well-known example of this modus operandi. In November of that year, a Boeing 727 suspected of carrying 10 tonnes of cocaine from Venezuela was found burnt to a crisp near Tarkint in the Gao region of northern Mali. The plane had apparently been set on fire by traffickers after getting stuck in the sand when it landed. Neither the plane's crew nor the illicit cargo it was carrying were found<sup>71,72,73</sup>. According to the GI-TOC report "Atlantic connections: The PCC And The Brazil–West Africa Cocaine Trade", there is some evidence that

small planes are still being used to move drugs between Latin America and West Africa,<sup>74</sup> while the UNODC’s Global Report on Cocaine 2023 notes that Nigerian OCGs are actively acquiring private planes to move cocaine around Africa. The report also mentions that there are numerous authorised airstrips in Mali and Côte d’Ivoire that could be used for drug flights<sup>75</sup>. As for North Africa, Moroccan law enforcement foiled an attempt by Colombian traffickers to set up a secret runway for small planes in the Dakhla region to establish an air bridge between Morocco and Latin America<sup>76,77</sup>.

### 3.3.3 The land route

Some of the cocaine arriving in the coastal countries of West Africa is transported overland through the Sahel region to the countries of North Africa for onward shipment to Europe and, to a lesser extent, to the Middle East. Mali and Niger are major crossroads on this route (see Figure 23).

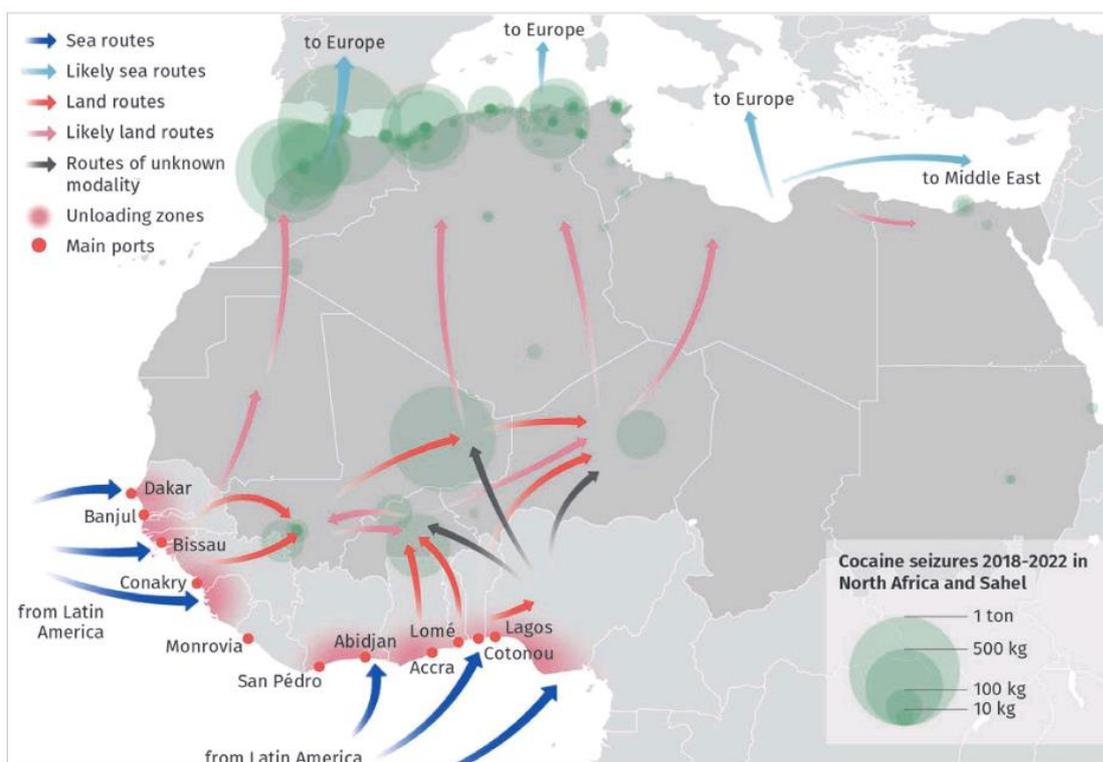


Figure 23: Cocaine trafficking routes across West and North Africa and significant cocaine seizures in the Sahel and North Africa between 2018-2022. Map from “Global Report on Cocaine 2023, local dynamics, global challenges”, UNODC <sup>78</sup>

Mali is the crossing point for cocaine from Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Guinea Bissau<sup>79</sup> and Guinea. In Senegal, the City of Tambacounda seems to be an essential node for cocaine on the way to Mali or Mauritania, as pointed out by several reports<sup>80,81,82</sup>. This also appears to be the case in the town of Kidira, further west on the border with Mali, where the Gendarmerie recently seized 300 kg of cocaine aboard a truck coming from Mali<sup>83,84</sup>. Along the road linking Guinea to Mali, the Mali town of Kourémalé appears to be a central cocaine transit point, with several seizures reported between 2020 and 2023, including a major one on 7 August 2022, when customs services seized 159.6 kg of cocaine aboard a 4x4 vehicle coming from Guinea<sup>85,86,87</sup>.

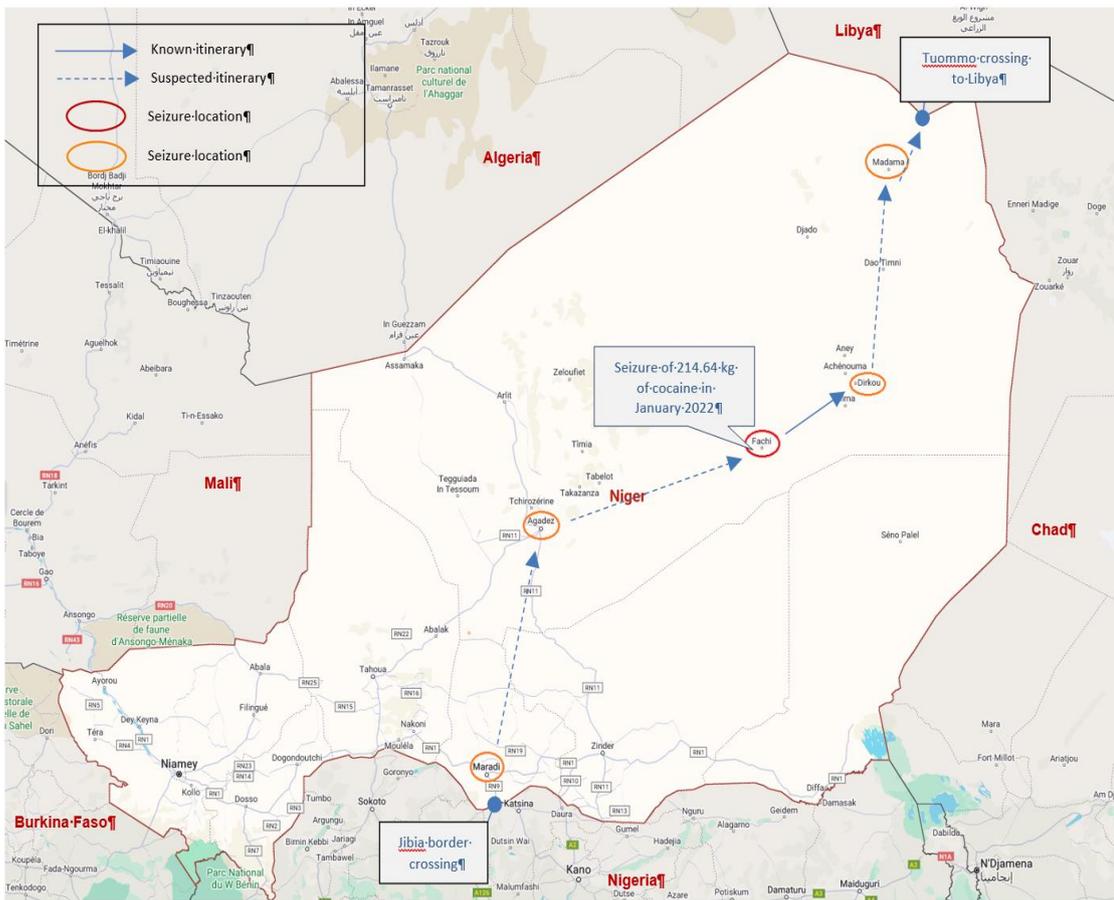
Some trafficking of cocaine into Mali may also occur across the border from Burkina Faso. For instance, in September 2022 a seizure of 596 kg of cocaine that was heading to Niger and coming from Guinea Conakry after transiting through Mali was made in Burkina-Faso. The 2023 Global

Report on Cocaine also indicates that Burkina Faso identified Nigeria, Togo and Ghana as the most frequently detected transit countries for cocaine on its territory in 2021<sup>88</sup>.

Once in Mali, the cocaine is trafficked through the two hubs of Timbuktu and Gao<sup>89</sup>, moving eastwards and northwards. From Mali, the drugs continue, in most cases, to Niger and, on some occasions, to Algeria.

Niger is a staging point for cocaine from Mali but also from Nigeria, Benin and Burkina Faso. From Niger, cocaine continues north into, in a few cases, Algeria, but in the majority of cases to Libya, notably through the Salvador pass<sup>90</sup> or the Tuommo border crossing point in the southwestern part of the country.

The seizure of 214.64 kg of cocaine in Niger in January 2022 in Fachi (400 km north of Agadez and 1200 north of Niamey) illustrates the country's importance as a transit point for cocaine travelling up the West African coast to Libya and further afield to Europe. The vehicle transporting the drug had left Fachi in the Agadez region in North Niger and was heading north to Dirkou<sup>91</sup>.



**Figure 24: Illustration of the probable route of the 214 kg of cocaine seized in January 2022 by Niger's security forces<sup>92</sup>**

The seizure was made as part of an investigation into a trafficking network operating between Niger and a number of neighbouring countries. Several suspects were subsequently arrested. The case revealed a trafficking route originating in Nigeria, crossing Niger and heading to Libya. From there, according to the Niger's Central Office for the Repression of Illicit Drug Trafficking (OCTIS) spokesperson statement, the drug destined for Europe would probably sail across the Mediterranean<sup>93</sup>.

...cocaine arrives in North and West Africa through various routes and trafficking methods. However, the two regions are no longer mere cocaine storage and transit areas but also locations where cocaine processing takes place

This latest case, as well as the seizures in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea described above, confirm the topicality of the Sahel route.

Overland routes are not only used to transport cocaine from coastal countries to North African countries. They are also used to transfer cocaine from one West African coastal country to another. Indeed, trafficking by land from Nigeria to Ghana, across Benin and Togo has been documented<sup>94</sup>. Another example of these transfers is the interception in May 2022 by Burkina Faso customs in the west of the country of 115 kg of cocaine from Sierra Leone bound for Ghana. Before being stopped by the Burkina authorities, the van loaded with cocaine crossed Guinea and Mali.

Once in North Africa, a fraction of the cocaine supplies the local market, while the bulk of it is sent across the Mediterranean to Europe, the Middle East and/or the Balkans<sup>95</sup>. Instances of cross-border trafficking between Libya, Tunisia and Algeria have been reported in the press<sup>96,97</sup> albeit for relatively small quantities. Cocaine arriving in Libya via sea (see 3.3.1 The maritime route) or land is trafficked by land to Egypt, from where a part is smuggled into Israel or sent to other countries in the Middle East (see 3.2.2.1 North Africa).

In conclusion, cocaine arrives in North and West Africa through various routes and trafficking methods. However, the two regions are no longer mere cocaine storage and transit areas but also locations where cocaine processing takes place. Indeed, as indicated in the UNODC's Global Report on Cocaine 2023, some clandestine cocaine processing laboratories have been dismantled in recent years, including in Niger (2017), Senegal (2021) and Côte d'Ivoire (2022). Regarding North Africa, in its 2018 "Overview of Serious and Organized Crime in the Northern African Region", INTERPOL had already referred to the discovery of a cocaine conversion laboratory, in September 2016 in the Oujda region in Morocco<sup>98</sup>.

### 3.4 Involvement of criminal groups

Once almost exclusively and vertically controlled by Colombian cartels, the global cocaine trade has become, since the demobilisation of the FARC in 2016, more fragmented and multifaceted. This led to an increased involvement in the trafficking of cocaine by foreign criminal groups, such as the Mexican cartels and European and Balkan criminal groups aiming to secure their access to the cocaine directly from production sites in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia<sup>99</sup>.

The fragmentation also led to small to medium-sized criminal groups playing an increasingly important role in global cocaine trafficking. These groups function like networks rather than well-

delineated organisations and often specialise in specific parts of the cocaine supply chain. The decentralisation of criminal networks has given rise to a system of "service providers" who manage parts of the supply chain without ever owning the drug. These service providers generally guarantee delivery of the cocaine. They are involved in collecting the cocaine from the port, providing local transportation, and protecting the shipments. Their remuneration is based on quantities transported, but they may also receive payment for their services in kind, which drives cocaine availability on the domestic market of the transit countries<sup>100</sup>. It is within this context that foreign and local actors are involved in the transnational cocaine trade in North and West Africa.

### 3.4.1 Foreign actors

European criminal groups are notorious for controlling the importation of cocaine into Europe. Intending to control the cocaine supply chain from production sites to consumer markets, foreign criminal groups using the African route maintain a presence in North and West Africa, where they collaborate with local criminal actors often involved in a range of illegal activities, including cannabis trafficking, human trafficking, etc.

The seizure of more than two tonnes of cocaine in Côte d'Ivoire in April 2022 is a prime example of the presence of foreign criminal groups in West Africa and their collaboration with local criminal groups. Further to the seizure several individuals including foreign nationals (Spanish, Colombian, Italian and Portuguese) were arrested. INTERPOL supported the local authorities in their investigation which revealed the implication of the Italian 'Ndrangheta. An Italian fugitive involved in the case who became subject of INTERPOL notifications from Côte d'Ivoire and Italy was subsequently arrested in July 2023 in Lebanon and extradited to Italy.

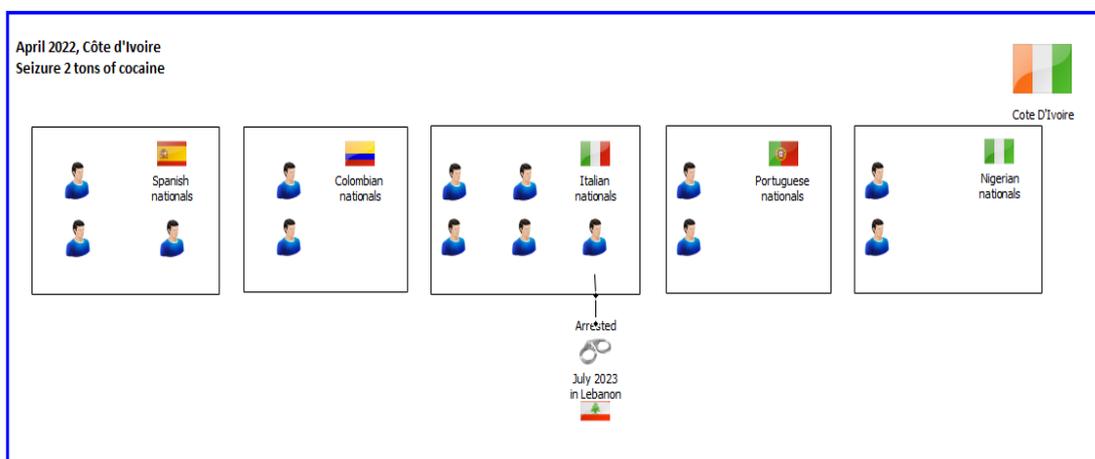


Figure 25: Focus on foreign actors involved in the April 2022 cocaine seizure in Côte d'Ivoire.

In September 2018, in the port of Santos in Brazil, 1,195 kg of cocaine concealed in construction equipment bound for the port of Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire were intercepted by local law enforcement. This seizure triggered the launch of "Operation Spaghetti" involving Ivorian, French, Italian and Brazilian polices. The involvement of foreign criminal groups was also proven in this case.

In other words, the seizures made in Côte d'Ivoire in April 2022 and the seizure made at the port of Santos in Brazil in 2018 are perfect illustrations of the collaboration between international criminal groups such as the 'Ndrangheta and the Camorra and their local relays made up of foreigners and national accomplices, often paid in kind, through a percentage of the cargo, or in

cash. Of note, Ivorian law enforcement reported the use of front and shell companies linked to the 'Ndrangheta to launder the proceeds of the trafficking.

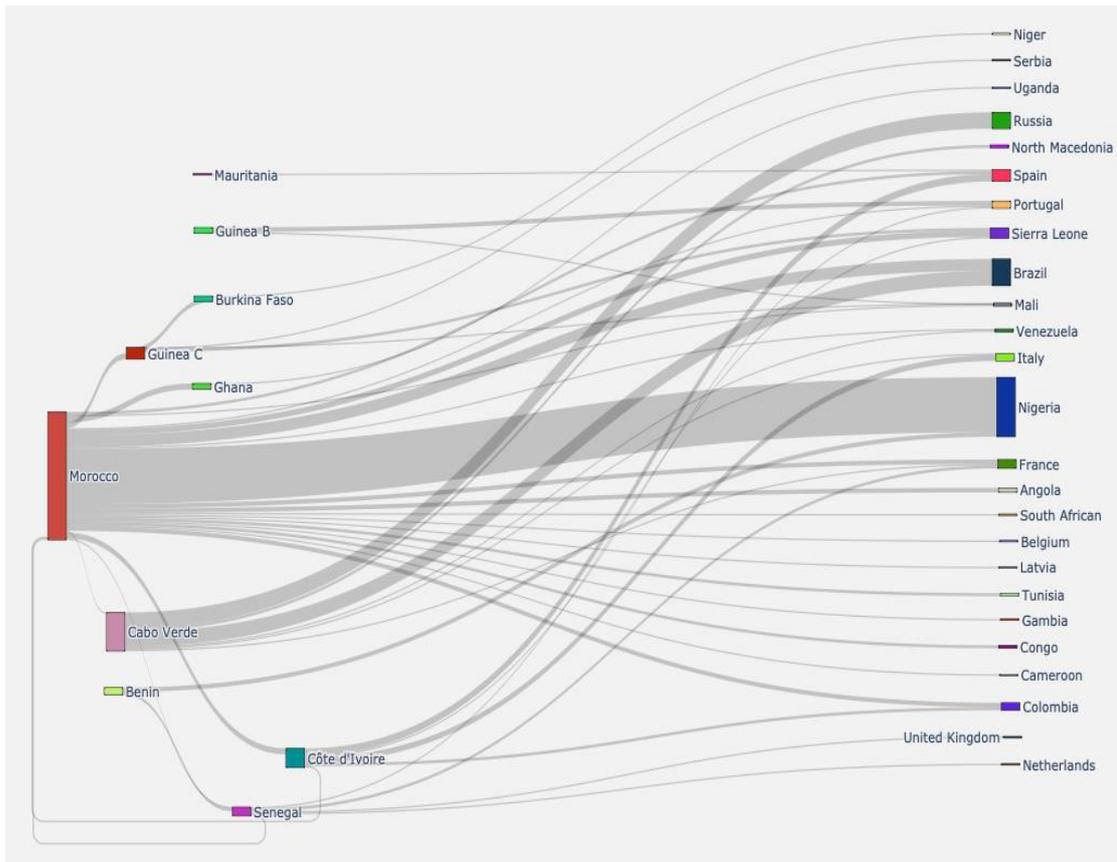
The Italian mafias are not the only ones active in West Africa. Criminal groups from the Balkans are present as well. In June 2023, Belgrade issued a Red Notice for an individual involved in a cocaine trafficking ring that also counted individuals from central Europe, the Balkans, Belgium, and Germany. For one of its operations in 2020, the criminal group procured cocaine in Brazil and had it delivered by fishing boat to Sierra Leone, where it was subsequently stored in a warehouse for several months, during which the cocaine was repacked and hidden in bags containing cocoa shells. Front and accomplice companies were used to obtain the necessary documentation for the transport of the cocaine as legitimate merchandise. The cargo was afterwards shipped in a container from the port of Freetown, Sierra Leone, to Antwerp, Belgium, where law enforcement seized the container with 1,247 kg of cocaine hidden in cocoa shell sacks.

Another player worth mentioning is the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). This Brazilian OCG, founded in the 1990s, has established itself as the leading player in cocaine trafficking in Brazil<sup>101</sup>. The PCC reputedly controls most of the cocaine transiting through the São Paulo region<sup>102</sup>, whose airport is the main departure point for mules transporting cocaine and whose port of Santos appears to be a major departure point for cocaine seized in North and West Africa. The PCC is said to have allied with the Italian 'Ndrangheta in the 2010s and consequently became the primary supplier of the cocaine trafficked by the 'Ndrangheta across Africa. One open source reports an even more direct involvement of the PCC in the control of the cocaine trade in Côte d'Ivoire<sup>103</sup>. It is also likely that in the case reported by Belgrade above, the drug was sourced from the PCC, and the transport of the cocaine by fishing boat towards Sierra Leone was coordinated by it.

Colombian cartels are also present in West Africa. Colombian nationals were implicated, as we have seen above, in the cocaine seizures in Côte d'Ivoire. Three others were arrested in September 2019, this time in Guinea Bissau, as reported by the national authorities of the country, following the seizure of 1,800 kg of cocaine.

Similarly, Colombian cartels operate in North Africa. Open sources reported that in December 2018, further to seizing a tonne of cocaine off the coast of El Jadida, the Moroccan Bureau Central d'Investigation Judiciaires (BCIJ) dismantled an international drug trafficking network headed by the Colombian mafia, which intended to set a cocaine logistical hub in the country to supply Moroccan OCGs and the European drug market, primarily Spain. According to media accounts, the traffickers had set up a secret runway for small planes in the Dakhla region to establish an air bridge between Morocco and Latin America. They teamed up with Moroccans experienced in trafficking in goods and drugs and established relations with gendarmerie and Royal Navy officials to ensure their impunity. Seventeen suspects were arrested as part of the investigation, including two members of the Royal Navy, three gendarmes, two Spaniards and three Colombians.<sup>104,105</sup> This case illustrates the collaboration of Latin American and Spanish OCGs with Moroccan criminal groups. Moroccan groups are also known to collaborate with the Italian 'Ndrangheta.

In addition to the above case studies, the analysis of the information available shows a wide range of nationalities among the individuals involved in trafficking cocaine to North and West Africa, including individuals from Europe, Africa and Latin America (see Figure 26 below).



**Figure 26: Nationalities of foreign nationals reported by North and West Africa countries over the period 2018-August 2023<sup>106</sup>.**

Finally, available information suggests a dynamic cross-border trafficking, for example, between Senegal and Gambia or between Benin and Nigeria.

### 3.4.2 Local actors.

Local criminal groups in North and West Africa are fully involved in cocaine trafficking between Latin America and Europe, as well as other cocaine consumption markets. They collaborate with foreign criminal groups and play an essential role in the cocaine trafficking supply chain. They are involved in the transshipment of cocaine when it arrives off the coasts of West and North Africa, in the storage of cocaine on land before it is reshipped, in its reception in the ports of the countries of the two sub-regions but also in the destination markets, and in its transport to Europe or other markets, whether by land, air or sea, and in the sale of cocaine in African, European and other countries.

Analysis of available information on seizures highlights the predominant role played by Nigerian and Moroccan criminal groups.

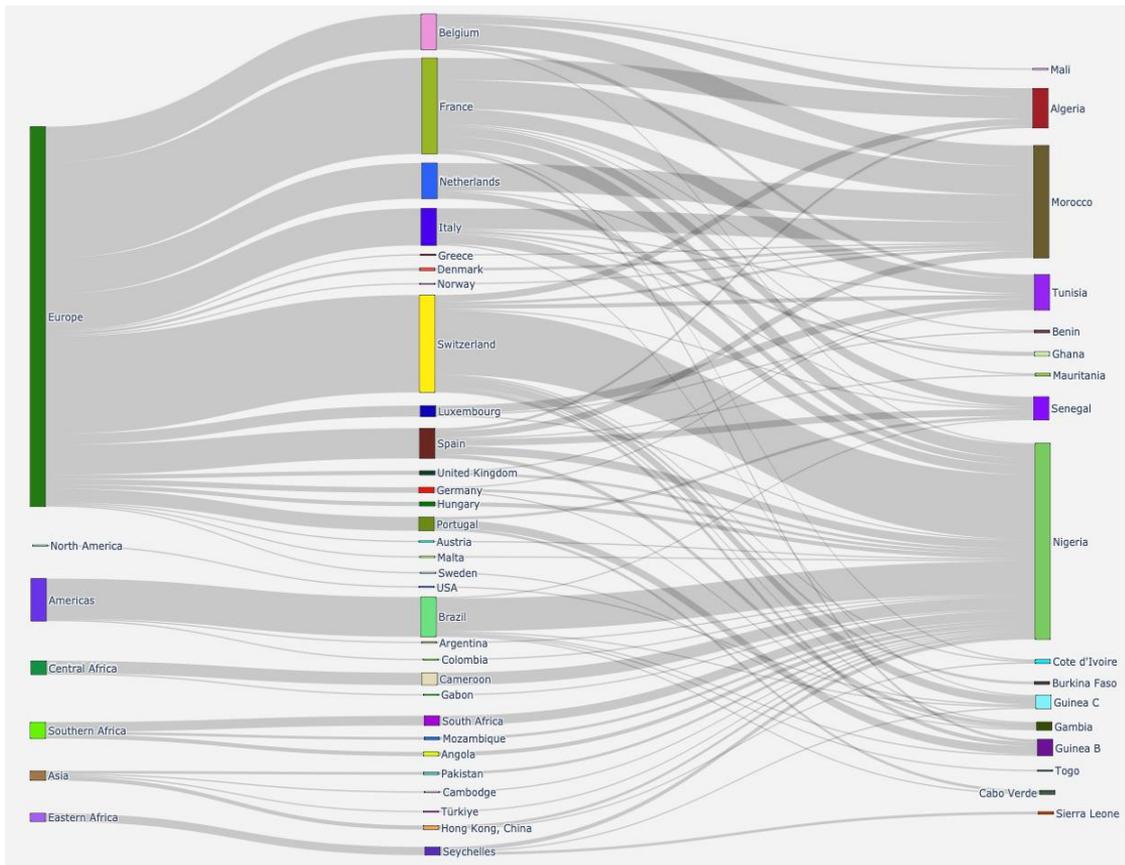


Figure 27: Most frequent North and West African nationalities reported to INTERPOL over 2018-2022<sup>107</sup>.

Analysis of available information highlights the involvement of Nigerian groups in the trafficking of cocaine by mules on passenger flights as previously mentioned. For instance, many Nigerians have been arrested in Brazil, where, according to open sources, Nigerian traffickers have forged business links with the PCC and other Brazilian criminal networks<sup>108</sup>. In June 2020 a PCC leader on the run for 20 years was arrested in Mozambique. This instance solidifies the hypothesis of a collaboration between the PCC and Nigerian criminal networks.

Nigerian networks are also likely behind the mules from West Africa and even Brazil arrested at Moroccan airports and elsewhere. Nigerian authorities quoted in the Global Cocaine Report 2023 likewise indicated that Nigerian traffickers are using Venezuelan nationals as drug mules to traffic cocaine from Africa to Europe by passenger planes<sup>109</sup>.

Several seizures in Brazilian ports of cocaine destined for Nigeria also attest to the involvement of Nigerian criminal groups in trafficking by sea. For instance, in July 2021, Brazil reported a seizure of 290 kg of cocaine at the port of Santos in Brazil on board a bulk carrier with sugar loads bound to Nigeria. In September of the same year, 32.90 kg of cocaine were seized by the NDLEA and Nigerian Customs on board a bulk carrier docked at the port of Lagos. But it is the record catch of 1.8 tonnes of cocaine in September 2020 at a Lagos warehouse<sup>110</sup>, which illustrates the extent of the maritime cocaine traffic in which Nigerian criminal groups are involved. Such a large quantity of drugs could certainly not have been transported by air. It must have therefore, been brought to Nigeria by sea either directly or indirectly (transshipment in another country or by land from a neighbouring country after an initial journey by sea). Benin, for instance, reported the involvement of Nigerian nationals in major maritime seizures in 2019 and 2021. According to the NDLEA press release, the value of the cocaine seized is estimated at USD 278,250,000. Four

persons were arrested, including a Jamaican national, which potentially indicates a connection with cartels controlling the Caribbean routes in which Jamaica has long played a central role<sup>111</sup>.

Available information indicates that Nigerian criminal groups are also involved in the retail sale of cocaine both at home and abroad. These individuals are often small-scale dealers who sell cocaine to pay for their living abroad or their passage to Europe via human smuggling networks.

Nigerian trafficking networks and OCGs are organised around confraternities or brotherhoods, such as the Black Axe, Supreme Eiye, Maphite, Buccaneers fraternities, and Supreme Vikings. These fraternities are present in Brazil<sup>112</sup> and across European countries, where they collaborate with other OCGs, including the Italian mafias, Spanish OCGs, and Balkan OCGs<sup>113</sup>. Describing their activities in Italy and some other European countries, a report of the Italian Direzione Investigativa Antimafia<sup>114</sup> indicates that Nigerian fraternities are polycriminal. They are involved in prostitution, trafficking in human beings, illegal immigration, drug trafficking, IT scams and money laundering. They are ethnic-based, well organised and have a “multilevel” structure. To some extent, they are comparable to the 'Ndrangheta, as the various criminal groups have autonomy of action at the local level but must nevertheless comply with the strategic orders of the parent group. The fraternities exercise a light control over the territories they control. They enforce the law of silence and practice the subjugation of the victims.

Available information suggests that OCGs involved in cocaine trafficking in Morocco operate at national, regional and international levels. As shown by the dismantling in December 2018 of a transnational cocaine trafficking network involving Colombian, Spanish and Moroccan nationals further to a seizure of a tonne of cocaine off the coast of El Jadida<sup>115,116</sup>, Moroccan criminal groups are involved in the trafficking of cocaine arriving in the country. These Moroccan criminal networks are reputed to be associated with the Moroccan mafia or Mocro Maffia. The Mocro Mafia is a loose-knit group of criminal gangs, mainly made up of European citizens of Moroccan origin living in the Netherlands and Belgium. The Mocro Mafia is believed to have played a major role in the growing involvement of Moroccan groups in cocaine trafficking<sup>117</sup>.

Mocro Mafia criminal groups reputedly dominate the European market for cocaine, cannabis and synthetic drugs, alongside the Italian 'Ndrangheta and Camorra, the Irish mafia, the Serbian mafia and the Albanian mafia<sup>118,119</sup>. Their involvement in cocaine trafficking gets speed at the beginning of the years 2000. After being involved in cannabis trafficking from the 1990s, they allied

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themselves with other gangs or cartels, such as the Calabrian mafia or Colombian drug traffickers, and from then on moved into the more lucrative narcotics such as cocaine and other synthetic drugs to gain higher profits<sup>120</sup>. Using the Moroccan diaspora, they infiltrated the ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp, reputed for being the principal entry points in Europe for cocaine from South America, particularly Peru and Colombia<sup>121</sup>. In the mid-2010s, these criminal organisations also established themselves in the south of Spain<sup>122,123</sup>, and Italy<sup>124</sup>, as well as in the rest of Europe, in South America<sup>125,126</sup> and, more recently, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)<sup>127,128</sup>.

Moroccan OCGs are suspected of being actively involved in a relatively new trend of swapping cocaine for cannabis. This trend was reported in an INTERPOL's ENACT report in 2018<sup>129</sup>. Available information suggests that this trend continues. In July 2023, the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre (Narcotics) (MAOC-N) reported the seizure by Spanish Customs of 6 tonnes of cannabis resin on board a sailing boat approximately 150 nautical miles south of the Canary Islands. The yacht had left southern Portugal bound for the west coast of Morocco, where it is suspected of having loaded the illicit cargo destined for Brazil. According to the MAOC-N, this seizure is a further indicator of the increase in trafficking of Moroccan 'hashish' to Brazil, where European and Brazilian criminal organisations are believed to be exchanging cannabis resin directly for cocaine from at least 2020.<sup>130</sup> Over the past years, several similar seizures have been reported. For instance, in June 2021, the Brazilian navy discovered in the north of the country 4.3 metric tonnes of hashish on a sailing boat from Portugal. A comparable capture was made in January 2019, when over two tonnes of hashish were recovered from another sailing vessel<sup>131</sup>. Portugal appears to be the common denominator in several of these seizures.

Lastly, Moroccan and Nigerian OCGs are known to sometimes federate around them culprits from neighbouring countries. For instance, Nigerian OCGs are known to work with Ghanaians<sup>132</sup>, while Moroccans and Tunisians have been found to work together on occasions in Italy<sup>133</sup>. While organised crime groups of Moroccan and Nigerian origin are at the forefront of cocaine trafficking in West and North Africa, local criminal elements in destination and transit countries are also fully involved.

Finally, a link can be established between some criminals involved in cocaine trafficking and armed groups in the Sahel region. In April 2019, Bissau reported two Malians involved in trafficking 789 kg of cocaine using a Senegalese-registered lorry bound for Mali. One of the two Malians, considered to be the owner of the seized consignment, is sanctioned by the UN Security Council for using the proceeds of drugs to support the UN sanctioned armed group Al Mourabitoum<sup>134</sup>.

By their very nature, illegal organizations such as terrorist and insurgent groups revert to illegal activities and interact with criminal groups. This does not mean that criminal organizations and terrorist groups are structurally connected. Instead, they operate in an interdependent manner that procures both sides benefits.

## 4. Conclusions

Based on available information this assessment explored the illicit transnational trafficking of cocaine in Western and Northern Africa. The report determined that cocaine trafficking in West and North Africa is increasing as a result of a global context, notably rising cocaine production in

Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, driven by a growing demand for cocaine in Europe and other parts of the world.

It established that the dynamics of cocaine trafficking in North and West Africa are diverging. Cocaine seizures strongly increased in West Africa from 2019, suggesting a surge in trafficking. Alongside the increase in overall quantities trafficked, the number of countries recording large cocaine seizures has increased, implying that the OCGs behind the trafficking are becoming bolder and expanding into West Africa. Conversely, the quantities seized in North Africa have fallen. However, this does not necessarily indicate an actual decline in trafficking in this region, as it is likely that volumes transiting through countries such as Libya and Tunisia have gone undetected.

The report shows that cocaine trafficking routes between production sites in South America and North and West Africa vary but that the shipping of cocaine by sea using different types of vessels is the main vector of the traffic to North and West African countries. From Africa, the drug is subsequently transported to Europe by sea, concealed in legitimate cargo. Some of the cocaine arriving in the coastal countries of West Africa takes the Sahel route to North African ports. Mali and Niger are key transit centres on this route, and Libya is a leading destination. From North African ports, cocaine is shipped principally to Europe but also to the Middle East or the Arabian Peninsula.

Drug mules transporting cocaine on commercial flights account for a fraction of the volumes trafficked. They enable the rapid movement of substantial quantities of cocaine to satisfy consumption, whether in local or foreign consumer markets. Nigerian criminal groups are particularly active in this trafficking segment.

Foreign organised crime groups, including the 'Ndrangheta, the Camorra, the Brazilian Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), Colombian and Balkan OCGs, have established a foothold in North and West Africa. They organise and supervise the transporting of cocaine into the African regions and their further expedition to Europe or other markets. These foreign OCGs ally themselves with local criminal elements.

Nigerian and Moroccan criminal groups are the principal regional players involved in the transnational cocaine trafficking. They work in association with foreign OCGs. They are involved in the logistics of transporting cocaine to African countries and its moving within and between the countries. They are also involved in transporting the drug to Europe and other destinations. Finally, they take part in the sale of narcotics both regionally and abroad.

Some clandestine cocaine processing laboratories have also been dismantled in recent years, underlying the fact that North and West Africa are no longer mere storage and transit areas but ones where cocaine is repackaged, processed and sometimes converted into crack cocaine.

Cocaine trafficking in North and West Africa has tangible negative consequences. Firstly, cocaine consumption tends to increase in transit countries, posing a threat to public health and safety. Secondly, trafficking generates corruption at small and large scales, as criminal groups need the protection of corrupted elements within law enforcement and political circles. Thirdly, trafficking harms honest players in the economy. Through the laundering of illicit funds generated by cocaine trafficking, criminal groups invest in many areas of the economy to the detriment of legitimate players. The economic power thus acquired by criminal groups strengthens their capacity for corruption and their influence, making it very difficult to eradicate them. Finally, drug trafficking is known to generate violence.

All these adverse effects resulting from transnational cocaine trafficking through the countries of West and North Africa have the potential to destabilise their societies. This traffic must, therefore, be combated with determination.

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INTERPOL's role is to enable police in our 196 member countries to work together to fight transnational crime and make the world a safer place. We maintain global databases containing police information on criminals and crime, and we provide operational and forensic support, analysis services and training. These policing capabilities are delivered worldwide and support four global programmes: financial crime and corruption; counter-terrorism; cybercrime; and organized and emerging crime.

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Our vision is that of a world where each and every law enforcement professional will be able through INTERPOL to securely communicate, share and access vital police information whenever and wherever needed, ensuring the safety of the world's citizens. We constantly provide and promote innovative and cutting-edge solutions to global challenges in policing and security.



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