Just Passing Through?

The Illegal Ivory Trade in Uganda

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• 144,000 elephants were killed between 2007-2014 in 15 African countries, the species is declining at a rate of 8% a year

• All African elephant populations are now at risk (CITES 2015)

• Uganda’s elephant population is smaller than that of neighbouring countries, and aerial surveys indicate that their numbers are rising (WCS 2015)

• Uganda is mainly portrayed as a transit country for illegal ivory
UNODC (2013) refer to the groups, routes and methodology used to move ivory within Africa - between the poaching sites and the ports of exit - as a major research gap.

Crimes may be complex and organized without being ‘organized crime’ (Hagan 2006; Finckenauer 2005) and organized crime may relate to both the organization of criminal activities, and to the organization of criminals (von Lampe 2016).

Transnational crime is characterized by criminals who perceive opportunities to commit unauthorized acts beyond national borders or by the cross-border transfer of illegal commodities (Albrecht 2011:59).
The role of transit countries

Traffickers resort to transit countries because they provide a relative advantage compared to direct origin-to-destination country routing (Perrin 2010).

Law enforcement and border control practices are significant in this context.

Understanding of the situation in Uganda could be beneficial to countries facing other forms of transnational illegal trade.
Research questions

By what means are illegal ivory transported across and within Ugandan borders?

To what extent could law enforcement practices and challenges indirectly generate opportunities for illegal trade?

Is the trade ‘organized crime’ or crime that is organized?
Smuggling and concealment

The truck can be loaded with 15 tons of legal, declared goods and 2-3 tons of ivory hidden amongst other goods, knowing that if they pack the truck full of ivory, they will be caught... [Inspectors] open the door to the cargo area and may take a closer look here and there but they don’t have the capacity to go through everything.

(Customs Supervisor)
Smuggling through unofficial routes

Enforcement is difficult as there are so many different routes to take and the border is long. The river is only half a meter in depth many places, making it easy to carry goods across, hiding it in the bush along the river (Customs officer)
‘Ant-trade’ constitutes a significant threat

Because of its frequency, small-scale trade can account for substantial quantities over time (UNODC 2013) and may collectively endanger whole species (Interpol 2009), without representing global syndicates of organized crime (Abraham and van Schendel 2005; Pires et al. 2016).
A need to re(de)fine the role of Uganda?

• Seizures along the western and southern border demonstrate **a small-scale trade in ivory**, concealed and transported in rudimentary ways.

• Large and mixed consignments seized during or after export suggest **a professional and co-ordinated activity**.

• Arguably, considerable **stockpiling, re-packaging and arranging of transportation and re-export** takes place locally.
Investigations compromised

Not once has the investigation led to the people organizing the smuggling being arrested. No witnesses come forward. None of the arrested handlers or agents has revealed names due to either threats or promises (Investigator Aviation Police)
The transit stage

People transport ivory a little at a time, stockpiling it somewhere in Uganda. Then it is loaded onto a truck and taken out of the country, either by land or air

(Investigator in the Special Investigation Unit)

The intercepted shipments are well-planned moves where the smugglers connive with the right people

(Customs Inspector)

The suspects’ silence is proof that powerful people are behind the trade

(Investigator Aviation Police)
Main Findings

• Efforts at local levels is little targeted and detections are often coincidental

• Ivory smuggling takes place through ‘parallel trafficking’

• The activities require varying levels of organization and point to a diverse group of actors being involved

• The characteristics of seizures implies that stockpiling and re-packaging takes place within Uganda

• The transit of ivory through Uganda is likely encouraged by geographical position, porous borders and the involvement of individuals with local knowledge

• Lack of resources discourages well-intended efforts
Conclusions

• The role of ‘transit countries’ and the responsibility of law enforcement agencies should be **reexamined**

• More emphasis should be placed on acknowledging a successful conclusion once offenders are **prosecuted and convicted**

• The categorization ‘organized crime’ has important implications for law enforcement authorities, as it attracts added resources and allows for **more intrusive methods** and increased penalties

• Could tough-sounding concepts such as ‘transnational organized crime’ **make the challenge seem irreproachable**, deterring national law enforcement agencies from effectively responding at local levels?
Confronting the ivory trade at local levels

What constitutes the accepted definition of TOC, and establishing that the illegal ivory trade is transnational, highly sophisticated and organized, is of limited interest or use if officers are not given the necessary tools and instructions for dealing with crime locally.
References


• CITES (2016) Consideration of Proposals for Amendment of Appendices I and II. 


• Interpol (2009), *Environmental Crime Programme: Strategic Action Plan*.


Thank you.