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Crimes at sea cripple sustainable development – UCT study

A surge in piracy off the coast of Somalia during the mid-2000s threatened global trade and other state interests to such an extent that an unprecedented global counter-response was mobilised. Navies formed coalitions while public–private partnerships combatted the more far-reaching effects.

Carina Bruwer, a PhD candidate with the Centre of Criminology at the University of Cape Town (UCT), is investigating why other maritime crimes have not resulted in a similar response and how this threatens the achievement of the 2030 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Bruwer's recent research unpacked the ways in which transnational organised crime at sea threatens a number of the UN SDGs and how, despite this, people do not seem driven to confront it with the same vigour they did piracy.

Despite various international legal instruments that try to regulate what happens at sea, the oceans remain something of a legal void.

"This research is of topical relevance for our understanding of the complex challenges confronting international responses to transnational organised crime," says Bruwer's supervisor and head of the Department of Public Law, Professor Elrena van der Spuy. "The thesis provides rich descriptive detail regarding international coalitions and the kinds of conditions under which [they] become possible."

Initially, Bruwer's PhD posed the question: Why does a crime like piracy receive such a quick and effective response while other maritime crimes seemingly slip under the radar?

"Firstly, and quite obviously, these pirate attacks were impacting major shipping nations," she explains. "Secondly, being part of an international task force against piracy arguably gave many nations an excuse to establish a naval presence well beyond their own waters."

As Bruwer's research continued, she shifted her focus to how the lessons learned from piracy could be used in combatting other maritime crimes.

In her recent article, published in [African Security Review](#), Bruwer uses heroin trafficking and the illegal ivory trade as examples of transnational organised crimes that use the Western Indian Ocean as a connecting node between Africa and Asia.

Despite having serious consequences on land – causing corruption, jeopardising human well-being in the case of heroin and annihilating vulnerable wildlife species in the case of ivory – these crimes tend to continue with minimal legal intervention because they happen at sea.

Referring to SDGs 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being), 8 (decent work and economic growth), 14 (life below water) and 16 (life on land), Bruwer's article highlights the numerous ways in which transnational organised crime at sea – and the lack of effective ways to stop it – has a negative impact on sustainable development on land.

Bruwer points out that security and development are two sides of the same coin: development can only happen under secure conditions, while lasting security depends on sustainable development. Therefore, it is important that other transnational organised crimes at sea are tackled with the same vigour as piracy has been.

Bruwer argues that SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (sustainable development through global partnerships) should form the basis for any future counter-response to maritime crime. She explains that a lack of peace, justice and strong institutions creates a breeding ground for corruption and – by extension – organised crime.

"Ideally, you would have strong institutions that aren't corruptible," she says. "I think that's by far the biggest challenge in combatting organised crime."

As for the importance of SDG 17, Bruwer says: "Partnerships are absolutely key. As much as the crime is transnational, the response must also be transnational."

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Read the full article: Bruwer C (2020) Transnational organised crime at sea as a threat to the sustainable development goals: Taking direction from piracy and counter-piracy in the Western Indian Ocean. *African Security Review*.
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