



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

HUMAN RIGHTS AND ORGANIZED CRIME WEEK

CONFERENCE REPORT

3-6 JULY 2023, VIENNA



**RESILIENCE
FUND**

Supporting community
responses to organized crime

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2019, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) launched the Resilience Fund (hereafter, 'the Fund') to support civil society actors working to counter the effects of organized crime in their local contexts. The Fund's priorities were defined by a multi-disciplinary international group of experts who met in Vienna for its launch. Beyond financial resources, the Fund provides the means for civil society actors to network, learn and build capacity while addressing their security concerns. The Fund is designed to bring together civil society actors and diverse responses to organized crime from around the world, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experience, and bringing grassroots efforts and local voices to the forefront of international policy discussions on organized crime.

The Resilience Fund Fellowship, which was launched in October 2019, is part of the Fund's programmatic approach. Each year, through an open call for applications, the Fund selects a cohort of 10 individuals to work on a pressing global issue related to organized crime. In 2023, the Fellowship's theme was organized crime and human rights. The Fellowship provides selected candidates with grants, spaces for collaboration and tailored capacity-building sessions on critical issues such as security and coalition building.

Run in English, Spanish and French, the Fellowship enables cross-sectoral, global and interdisciplinary collaboration between individuals who are unique in their initiatives and who have knowledge and experience that can benefit others working in similar contexts. Each Fellow is supported by the Fund's liaison system, which assigns liaisons to a Fellow to coordinate the programme.

The overall objective of the Fellowship is to support change agents, amplify their work and draw attention to themes shaped by organized crime dynamics in multilateral forums, while ensuring that community-led responses and perspectives contribute significantly to the discussion. Due to the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, previous fellowships have been conducted virtually.

In July 2023, the Fund organized its first in-person Fellowship meeting with a group of grantees and Fellows to discuss pressing human rights implications of organized crime. This report provides a summary of the meeting's outcomes. A longer report and multimedia material will also be produced in the framework of this project with the hope of initiating a broader conversation on the impact of organized crime on states' obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.

SHARING INSIGHTS ON ORGANIZED CRIME AND ITS IMPACT ON HUMAN RIGHTS

From 3 to 6 July 2023, the Resilience Fund Fellowship cohort met in Vienna to discuss how community and civil society responses can mitigate the negative impact of organized crime on human rights. The Fellows were joined by two Resilience Fund grantees, thematic experts and members of the multilateral community. The meeting provided a platform for the Fellows to share experiences and current challenges related to the human rights impact of organized crime in their communities; deepen their knowledge of legal and response frameworks, advocacy tools and policy responses to the issue; and increase their understanding of the multilateral system, while building capacity and networks for engagement and collaboration.

The Fellowship meeting was designed as a safe space for civil society, the Resilience Fund community, experts, government professionals and agencies to come together and discuss the latest evidence on the impact of organized crime on human rights. Fellows participated in a number of capacity-building training sessions, such as understanding the intersection of international human rights law and the legal regime on transnational organized crime; community responses to human rights violations; security; and multilateral engagement. They also had the opportunity to present their experiences and share their work with members of the international community. To facilitate this, the Fund organized a lunch with diplomats and a video presentation followed by a discussion to build their own networks of support and advocacy.

Workshop I: Issues and challenges

In the first workshop, participants delved deeper into human rights concepts and explored the links between crime and human rights violations. This workshop was a follow-up to the Fellowship's virtual meeting on human rights and organized crime held in February 2023. Participants presented the issues of most concern to them, which are listed below:

- Lack of resources to provide services and opportunities are the main enablers for exploitation by organized crime and the subsequent perpetuation of human rights violations.
- State-embedded actors were identified as the main obstacle to access to justice and redress mechanisms.
- The normalization of violence and criminal structures produces cultural products that glorify organized crime and undermine institutions and community-based efforts to disrupt it.
- The discrimination against minority populations, such as gender minorities belonging to widely underserved LGBTQIA+ communities and marginalized groups, who face compounded challenges as their criminalization exposes them to organized crime.



In the first workshop, Fellows discussed the human rights issues of most concern to them.

These issues were further unpacked during the discussions, particularly within the research framework of the GI-TOC. The main clusters of rights that need further attention, as emerging from the workshop, are detailed below.

Civil and political rights

The right to equal participation in political and public affairs

Organized crime restricts access to political participation. In many contexts, organized crime groups have influenced the political discourse and directly influenced political processes by providing their own candidates.

The right to life, security and liberty

Violence has become normalized within certain minority and marginalized groups. Structurally vulnerable groups such as youth, women, indigenous peoples and LGBTQIA+ communities are often targets of violence by organized crime.

The 'war on drugs' continues to provide opportunities for killings and targeted violence. Activists who are trying to help communities are often targeted, kidnapped and murdered by criminal groups. Citizens, especially members of marginalized communities, are victims of extrajudicial killings in the context of militarized operations.

The right to freedom of expression

The infiltration of government structures by organized crime has led to the silencing of civil society organizations. State infiltration leads to a plethora of visible and invisible restrictions that prevent individuals or groups from speaking out on sensitive issues, such as corruption. Civil society is denied access to information, negatively impacting their ability to expose human rights abuses (including violence and trafficking) in their communities.

Fear of criminalization and potential persecution without due process guarantees has silenced many communities and investigative journalists. In addition, state-imposed restrictions on access to technology and data have limited the right to access information in the context of criminal repression.

The right to freedom from discrimination

The LGBTQIA+ community is disproportionately affected. In addition to violence against this community by members of organized crime groups involved in a variety of illicit markets (particularly human trafficking), the climate of discrimination is perpetuated by stigmatization and wider state policies and laws.

The right to due process

In some contexts, particularly authoritarian regimes, the greatest fear expressed by participants was reprisals: repercussions for reporting on crime issues, challenging the authorities and holding them to account.

Economic and social rights

The right to an adequate standard of living

The lack of adequate access to social services, food, clothing and housing creates a huge social divide that allows organized crime to emerge and expand. The constant state of heightened competition for resources is exploited by organized crime groups, as they are able to provide economic opportunities to communities (especially youth) and meet their economic and social needs. Once established, organized crime disrupts social and economic structures in the community and deprives communities of sources of income. Lastly, organized crime fuels corruption and puts states in a position where they are unable to meet economic and social needs.

The right to work

High levels of unemployment enable organized crime to recruit individuals, particularly young people, to participate in illicit markets. Organized crime also limits opportunities for entrepreneurship at the local level. In some contexts, they regulate access to resources and property, and decide who can run businesses and what economic structures are allowed to exist, establishing protection economies. The lack of employment opportunities also plays a role in violence as a means of subsistence, as a commodity and as a justification for the lack of state security services.

The right to housing

The presence of organized crime, and in particular the violence associated with it, has led to many cases of forced displacement, especially of women and children.

Access to justice and the right to remedy

State embedded actors and corporate interests are the main obstacles to access to justice. The complicity of some politicians and state officials with organized crime groups and corrupt private actors has created a system of patronage, white-collar crime and power that makes the judicial system biased towards those in power.

Mechanisms for redress are rarely accessible to communities, and the situation is even worse when cross-border crime is involved. Justice becomes an exhausting and expensive activity. Mental health support is often lacking. The psychological burden and stress on survivors of participating in redress mechanisms are often overlooked. It is emotionally difficult to learn how to trust a system that has failed you.

Organized crime creates an environment where the individual is overwhelmed when confronted with the architecture of power and it is extremely difficult to seek accountability. The result is a widespread sense of impunity (sometimes due to a lack of reporting) and hopelessness.

Workshop II: Responses

This session aimed to facilitate a deeper understanding of participants' responses to human rights violations and the challenges they face in implementing them. The objectives were to articulate the challenges faced in responding to the human rights violations identified in the previous workshop, to learn about new challenges and innovative strategies from others in the group, and to identify potential areas of collaboration.

The session began with an introduction to the vision of the Resilience Fund, which recognizes the knowledge and responses that communities already have built. This was followed by a presentation on building trust by the GI-TOC's Colombia team, who presented their Somos Comunidad project, which is working with communities in the aftermath of the Colombian Peace Agreement to promote social cohesion, dialogue and participation.

HOW TO BUILD TRUST?

- Be consistent and adapt to emerging issues.
- Have a partner in the local government.
- Involve young people and minorities.
- Recognize the work that has already been done.
- Respect all the different actors at the table.
- Take into account context-specific needs.



Workshop on trust building for civil society organizations.

Participants were then encouraged to discuss the challenges they faced in implementing their projects. The main challenges identified were the lack of state intervention to address human rights violations, which is exploited by criminal groups; state repression and increased state-enabled threats against human rights defenders and journalists investigating human rights violations; corruption networks around the engagement between international actors and community initiatives (e.g., funds from international organizations have been misused by politicians or fallen in the hands of private actors who use the resources for profit); and how projects developed by international organizations do not necessarily reflect local needs.

Participants then worked in groups to identify solutions to these challenges. The final part of the activity encouraged them to come up with collaborative ideas that they could continue developing after the meeting. The key takeaways from this session were:

- **Train and engage young people.** As crime exploits the absence of the state and feeds on the vulnerability of young people, groups working on these issues should engage with the public and private sectors to train young people and involve them in decision-making processes.
- **Harness the use of technology,** for example by improving the use of information sharing between judicial authorities.
- **Support journalists.** Journalists are crucial to amplifying the voices of communities and disseminating local information. However, they are under threat and poorly funded. Fellows suggested creating a strong civil society network to counter the infiltration of organized crime.
- **Tackle structural corruption through trust-building.** Building trust between stakeholders is key to strengthening civil society. Civil society needs to be given a voice so that it can present its data as a form of accountability and work to change mindsets and narratives within public officials and the community.

Workshop III: Introduction to security risk management

This session was delivered through the Fund's partnership with Open Briefing, a UK-based organization that helps high-impact non-profits and foundations understand and meet their risk management and duty of care obligations. The workshop explored practical concepts and introduced analysis and decision-making tools for holistic safety and security.

Fellows highlighted the importance of personal safety, which they often overlook in the interest of getting their work done. The workshop enabled the Fellows to conceptualize their security environment by identifying adversaries and allies, engaging allies and conducting a risk analysis to think systemically about their threats, including mitigation strategies. The Fellows worked in groups to discuss threats they face in their work, such as extortion, surveillance and kidnapping.

The Fellows identified three types of threats:

- **Personal threats:** Threats to property, reputation and digital security.
- **Physical threats:** Serious threats to life such as kidnapping and murder, including by poison, and financial threats such as extortion.
- **Legal threats:** Criminalization of activists and journalists and lack of access to public services for victims.



In the third workshop, participants explored existing tools for holistic safety and security.

The following actors were identified as strong opponents:

- **Government bodies:** In many contexts, state actors are complicit in targeting activists who raise issues related to the illicit economy. Participants highlighted the adversarial role of law enforcement, particularly the military and the police, which is more pronounced in conflict zones.
- **Criminal groups:** Threats from criminal groups were particularly prevalent in Latin America and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).
- **Religious leaders:** Some Fellows highlighted how religious leaders can be either strong allies or strong opponents because of their influence on local communities.
- **Lobby groups:** Particularly in the DRC, these are pressure groups that act as protectors of the people and use violence to assert their power over territory and control the population.

The Fellows then assessed these threats based on their exposure to the them and how to mitigate them. The following threats were highlighted:

- **Extortion:** Communities and activists are highly vulnerable to this threat. People in rural areas are more likely to be extorted than those in urban areas. Fellows discussed the need to protect information stored on their devices and to be careful when discussing related issues, as it is common for family members and relatives to be part of criminal organizations.
- **Surveillance:** Fellows reported being under surveillance, which put additional psychological pressure on them to stop doing their work. They also said that criminal groups or the state may use community members for surveillance, either by force or by choice. Activists may need to distance themselves from relatives or community members to avoid surveillance.
- **Arrests:** Among civil society actors, journalists and activists are the most vulnerable to this type of threat.

Workshop IV: Policy responses and multilateral engagement



Workshop on multilateral engagement for civil society organizations.

Participants were invited to consider how to take action at the national and international levels to advocate for improved responses. This session enabled participants to articulate the policy responses needed and build their capacity to advocate for them in different settings, including through engagement with the multilateral system. The session included briefings from the GI-TOC's multilateral team and other international civil society experts, such as the UNCAC Coalition (Association for the Implementation of the UN Convention against Corruption) and the Human Rights Likeminded Office. The aim of this session was to enable the Fellows to confidently present their work and provide input at the international level.

Participants identified the challenges they face when thinking about engaging in the multilateral arena and the key points to focus on when deciding whether or not to engage. Challenges ranged from understanding whether it is worth investing limited resources in engagement activities, to which area of the multilateral system is participation most effective. The main reflections from the discussion are listed below:

- **Become international reality checkers.** When deciding on whether to engage, civil society organizations should be aware of the important role they can play in showing the truth behind technical definitions and legal discussions.
- **Persevere to overcome restrictive participation.** Difficulties can range from restricted participation of civil society organizations in multilateral processes to lack of resources to engage either in person or remotely.
- **Understand where to engage.** Organized crime is a complex phenomenon and civil society organizations working on these issues are diverse, typically involved in different aspects of criminal governance, crime and community resilience. There are several areas where organized crime intersects with different UN mandates. Civil society wishing to engage in these forums must understand the diversity of these processes in order to contribute meaningfully through statements, side events and other available formats.
- **Do not be afraid to stand your ground.** In some cases, civil society organizations may feel that they are being used by government authorities and international actors when they are invited to participate in events. They may feel that their participation is only to 'tick a box', but that their contributions are not valued and their voices are not heard. Participation is a good way to start a dialogue and find allies. Civil society should not refrain from standing their ground and presenting their issues and challenges in a professional manner. They should be guided by preparedness, credibility, transparency, independence, accountability, respect and follow-up.
- **Choose an issue and find a common denominator across UN mandates.** In general, there are fewer opportunities for organized crime engagement in New York and Geneva than in Vienna. However, the expertise is needed. Choose an issue and find a common language.

Diplomatic engagement

Fellows also attended a diplomatic lunch reception hosted by the Swiss deputy ambassador and the Norwegian deputy ambassador, where they were able to present their work and engage in informal discussions with diplomats. Another event was the screening of a video to disseminate the challenges and resilience-building efforts of the GIZ beneficiaries under the Resilience Fund. The video was produced by the GI-TOC with collective input from Fellows and grantees. After the screening, three Fellows presented their work in a panel session, which was followed by a dialogue with representatives of member states in Vienna.



Fellows engaged in informal discussions with the diplomatic community in Vienna.

CONCLUSION

Organized crime poses profound challenges to the protection, respect and fulfilment of human rights. From the right to life to the right to education, organized crime affects the well-being and the livelihoods of communities, threatens their physical integrity and infiltrates public institutions impeding the right to access justice and truth. It is in the interest of the international community to pay attention to this issue. Peace and sustainable development cannot be achieved without addressing the challenges posed by organized crime. Below are four priority needs that emerged from the Fellows' meeting in Vienna:

- **Improve the understanding of the relationship between organized crime and the obligations to respect, protect and fulfil human rights**, in particular how organized crime affects the economic, social and cultural rights of youth and the right to non-discrimination of minorities; the role of state-embedded actors as a main obstacle to justice; and ways to reverse the culture of normalization of violence and criminal structures.
- **Put prevention measures and victim-led responses at the forefront.** Personal safety and well-being are often overlooked by those on the front line of the response. Initiatives and efforts to promote their work should include incentives for risk assessment and management.
- **Promote safe spaces for civil society dialogue and the building of a relationship of trust between civil society and government institutions**, which is essential for combating corruption and promoting transparency in public institutions. Efforts to create these safe spaces should be encouraged.
- **Strengthen civil society participation in multilateral spaces.** Participation in multilateral forums is expensive and often places an additional burden on civil society. Efforts to facilitate and promote cost-effective opportunities are welcome.



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ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 600 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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