Rwanda is in a desirable situation with regard to organised crime, as the country enjoys low levels of criminality and comparably high levels of resilience to organised crime.

The country’s positive ranking of 51st in Africa for criminality reflects the absence of any criminal market with a significant influence. There are, however, certain criminal markets with a moderate influence in Rwanda, namely flora crimes, non-renewable-resource crimes and human trafficking. Similarly, although most criminal actor-types exert very little influence in Rwanda, state-embedded criminal actors are a concern.

Rwanda is the 7th most resilient state to organised crime in Africa, with 9 out of the 10 resilience indicator scores falling between 5 and 7.5. A robust legislative framework, an effective criminal-justice system and fairly strong social-protection measures contribute to the country’s high resilience score. However, the country’s repressive media environment, combined with a constrained space for civil-society organisations to operate in, are blemishes on an otherwise respectable showing from Rwanda.
Criminal Markets

Non-renewable-resource crime is the most prevalent form of organised crime in Rwanda, predominantly occurring in the gold, tin and tantalum trade. Since August 2018, Rwanda has amended its law on mining to improve governance in the extractives sector, as well as accountability, safety and environmental protection. The new law bans artisanal mining in the country. It is now mandatory for all licensed mining companies to file annual financial statements with the government and the Rwanda Revenue Authority. However, Rwanda continues to be a key player in the illegal exploitation of resources in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Illicit trade in non-renewable commodities is a major contributor to Rwanda’s economic success, through the laundering of the illicitly gained funds into the legal economy. This trade is so tied to the economic status of Rwanda’s growing middle class, as well as its political and business elites, that the government is reluctant to introduce a complete ban.
Furthermore, Rwanda plays a role in the illegal wildlife trade, acting as a transit country for ivory and rhino horns, among other trade in wildlife, and this activity is on the rise. Rwanda is also a source and transit country for birds sold into the illegal exotic pet trade. One example is the Grey Crowned Crane, which has had its population depleted to just 500 – a decrease of over 50% – in Rwanda. The country’s wildlife agencies have, however, been proactive in tackling this illegal activity, and remove thousands of snares every year from the country’s national parks.

Rwanda is a source and transit country for human trafficking, with victims subjected mainly to forced labour and sexual exploitation. Many victims are reported to be forced into sex trafficking and labour in domestic work, and the agriculture and industry sectors in destinations around the world, but primarily in East Africa, the Middle East and East Asia. Reportedly, refugees fleeing conflict and political violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi are vulnerable to trafficking in Rwanda, or in other countries after transiting Rwanda.

Criminal Actors

Experts assessed the primary criminal actor types in organised crime in Rwanda to be state-embedded actors, reflecting their role in the illegal wildlife and drug trades (albeit to a lesser degree than state-embedded actors in other countries across the continent). Foreign actors also play a limited role in organised crime in Rwanda, again most notably in the illegal wildlife trade. They are also involved in the exploitation of people, both of foreign nationals in Rwanda and Rwandan nationals abroad.
Rwanda ranks 7th in Africa for resilience, placing the country among the top ten most resilient states to organised crime on the continent. Rwanda is recognised as one of the safest countries in Africa and crime prevention has become an increasingly significant part of several national strategies on public safety and security. While petty corruption among police and government officials does remain a problem, corruption levels in Rwanda are far lower than in other African countries.

Rwanda’s international cooperation credentials are also laudable. It has been an active member of the East African Community, and President Kagame, as the former chair of the African Union, spearheaded much-needed institutional reforms. The country has passed laws and domesticated regional instruments to help meet its security challenges and threats. Furthermore, the government has strengthened the country’s legislative framework with regard to the drugs markets, increasing both fines and sentence lengths for perpetrators of drug trafficking. In 2018, the government passed a new law relating to the prevention, suppression and punishment of trafficking in persons and exploitation of others, which made trafficking in persons a criminal offence. As for the illegal wildlife trade, Rwanda’s Penal Code stipulates harsh fines and prison sentences for anyone who poaches, sells, injures or kills protected endangered animal species.

Prior to the introduction of reforms, the judicial system in Rwanda was extremely inefficient. However, following a thorough reform of conventional justice initiated by the Rwandan government and the establishment of mediation committees, as well as institutions such as the Public Procurement Authority, the Office of the Auditor General, the Ombudsman’s Office, the Maisons d’Accès à la Justice and commercial courts, the judicial system in Rwanda is now much better equipped to tackle organised crime.

Rwanda’s social-protection measures, namely victim and witness support and prevention measures, are markedly better than in the overwhelming majority of African nations. The government has demonstrated increasing efforts in providing treatment and victim support, including opening short-term care facilities and continuing to implement anti-trafficking awareness campaigns. Furthermore, significant resources are invested in the rehabilitation of drug abusers and awareness campaigns against drug use. The government has re-established an interagency anti-trafficking working group and similar projects also exist with the aim of curbing the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and combating illegal poaching. Nevertheless, the government does not appear to systematically or proactively identify trafficking victims, or provide sufficient long-term care facilities for all victims.

Where Rwanda falls considerably short in its resilience measures is in the treatment of non-state actors. The reach of civil-society organisations in Rwanda is restricted owing to constraints imposed by the government. When collaborating with the government, civil-society organisations are said to be able to act relatively freely, those that do not, however, face significant difficulties. Furthermore, Rwanda does not have a free media, and the right to free speech in general is not respected.