

Interpol's strategy in enhancing the regional network to combat human trafficking in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

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The main problem in this study is the human trafficking practices in West Africa. Trafficking in human beings is a serious transnational crime involving blackmail, exploitation, and forced labor. Victims of human trafficking are often forced to work in modern slave industries, such as prostitution, agriculture, and manufacturing. They can also experience physical and psychological violence. Human trafficking has many root causes, including poverty, gender inequality, and conflict. Research methods use qualitative descriptive approaches with data analysis techniques that focus on understanding a problem, context, complexity, and subjectivity to more detail about the data source. Results: Interpol's role and initiatives have saved hundreds of victims of human trafficking in West Africa. The organization has been a valuable partner for governments and law enforcement agencies in the region in combating human trafficking crimes and rescuing victims. Interpol's efforts to rescue victims of human trafficking in West Africa are critical to combating this crime. By raising awareness, identifying victims, disrupting trafficking networks, and providing support to victims. Interpol recognizes the urgent need to facilitate interstate police cooperation in addressing transnational crime, regional security and resilience.

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INTRODUCTION

Crime is increasingly transnational, stressing the need for coordination among all stakeholders to uphold the global security order. Interpol, as an international organization, provides a platform that allows police forces to work directly with their counterparts across national borders, even with countries that do not have diplomatic relations (Murphy, 2023; Tsai et al., 2022; Watson, 2023). Human slavery can be traced back hundreds of years. Even in today's era, where human rights are globally recognized as fundamental, modern slavery remains in the form of human trafficking. Human trafficking (THB) is an international organized crime worth billions of dollars, affecting every region worldwide. Victims are traded across countries and territories through fraud, threats, or coercion. Traffickers use sophisticated methods to target and exploit vulnerable populations for personal gain, disregarding human dignity and life. (Bossard, 2022; Bowersox, 2022; Goździak, 2021; Nordquist, 2022; Tsai et al., 2023; Watson, 2023;).

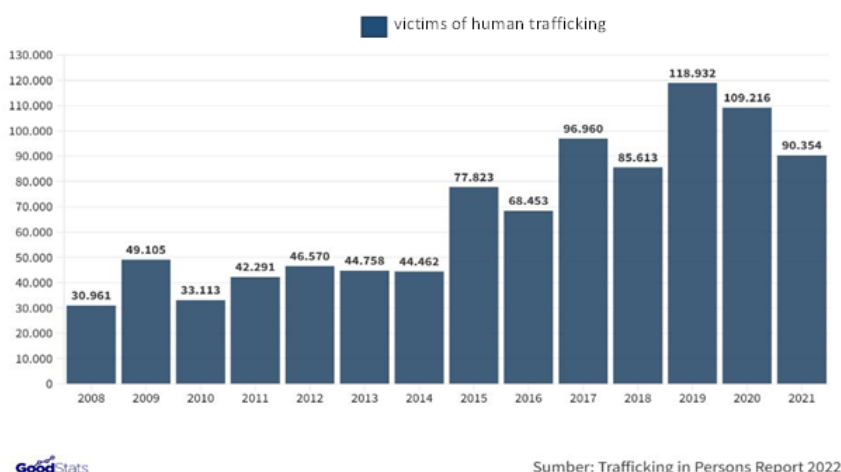


Figure 1. The Number of Human Trafficking in the World, 2008-2021

Source: *Trafficking in Persons Report, 2022*

Trafficking in human beings is a crime that occurs worldwide and affects millions of people every year. Trafficking in human beings is a form of modern slavery that involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, shelter, or acceptance of a person using the threat or use of violence, fraud, or abuse of power or vulnerable position for exploitation. Exploitation can be sexual exploitation, forced labor, or other forms of exploitation (Ara & Khan, 2022; Han et al., 2022; Kennedy, 2022; Recknor et al., 2022; Shah, 2021). The problem of human trafficking is not a new challenge facing countries worldwide. The victims of exploitation generally come from an unfortunate economic background, leaving them trapped in difficult economic conditions and eventually using various means, including illegal activities that violate human rights (Albanese et al., 2022; Bartilow, 2022; Dilmore, 2022; Lazzarino et al., 2022;). According to the Human Trafficking Report 2022 (see figure 1), there has been a significant decline in human trafficking figures from 2018 to 2021. In 2019, the number of recorded victims was 118,932, while in 2021, it reached 450,000 victims and 300,000 suspects, with perpetrators detected throughout the country. Over 23% of global human trafficking occurs in Africa (Sprang et al., 2022; Yansaneh, 2020).

According to the 2018 Global Slavery Index, an alarming 9.2 million people in Africa endure modern slavery, constituting nearly one-quarter of global human trafficking cases. This emphasizes the pressing and critical nature of the issue on the continent (Abioro & Akinyemi, 2022; Obokata, 2019; Pendery, 2022; Yansaneh, 2020). Africa acts as a significant source region for individuals trafficked to other areas, particularly Western Europe and the Middle East. However, internal and regional trafficking also prevails within the continent, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Women and children are disproportionately affected, forming a significant portion of Sub-Saharan Africa's victims. They face exploitation in various industries, including agriculture, domestic work, prostitution, and forced military service (e.g., child soldiers). Estimates indicate that 3.7 million people in Africa are enslaved or forced laborers, generating approximately \$13.1 billion annually for the Sub-Saharan region alone (ILO, 2014). Shockingly, perpetrators often include individuals known to the victims, such as close family members, relatives, or even friends.

The notion that human trafficking is a crime mostly committed by men is disproved by the fact that 50% of human trafficking criminals in Africa are women (UNODC, 2014). It has also been established that organized criminal gangs are involved, which makes people trafficking operations more complex and deadly. Various industries, including domestic employment, prostitution, labor in gold mines, organ transplantation, and the shipment of illicit narcotics, are involved in human trafficking crimes (Idowu, 2022; Motseki, 2022; Oggunniyi & Shoroye, 2021; Umukoro, 2021).



Figure 2. West Africa Map

Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/id/vektor/peta-afrika-barat-dengan-perbatasan-negara-negara-bagian-gm1469665528-500798213>

The West African region has long experienced high population migration rates, creating a market for human traffickers. However, human trafficking is described as a form of modern slavery. It is the result of a combination of factors, including gender inequality, economic instability, and political conflict, all common in West African countries. The role of states and law enforcement in West Africa is not optimal in providing technical tools, human resources, and references to deal with criminal groups operating as transnational syndicates (Abioro & Akinyemi, 2022; Judge & Doherty, 2022; Motseki, 2022). In addition, cultural factors, political instability, institutional inefficiency, and poor economic conditions in the West African region aggravate the situation. No African country fully meets the minimum standards of the Trade and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) for the eradication of human trafficking. This condition requires cooperation between African countries and Interpol as a more sophisticated and experienced law enforcement entity (Abodunrin et al., 2021; Bosard, 2022; Hackett, 2022; Jagoe et al., 2022; Shoroye, 2021).

Interpol cooperates with law enforcement agencies in Africa through several mechanisms. In addition to identifying human trafficking crimes in the African region, Interpol actively enhances the capacity of relevant stakeholders in Africa, including the security, governance and legal sectors. Interpol actively collaborates with African law enforcement agencies, significantly boosting their capacity in security, governance, and the legal sector. The West Africa THB Project, executed by Interpol from September 2020 to September 2023, involved impactful rescue operations like Operations Weka and Weka II, alongside Operation Priscas. Operation Weka, led by Interpol, successfully rescued nearly 500 trafficking victims and apprehended 195 suspects during its implementation from March 28 to April 2, 2021. Operation Priscas, directed by Interpol in targeted criminal organizations exploiting individuals, resulting in the rescue of 90 victims and the detention of 15 alleged traffickers, including 56 children forced into labor in homes, open marketplaces, and gold mines (Hounmenou & O'Grady, 2021; Mutasa, 2021; news.detik.com, 2022;).

This research delves into a crucial gap in existing knowledge: Interpol's specific strategies for strengthening regional networks to combat human trafficking in West Africa. While research often examines Interpol's overall role and initiatives in the region, it rarely dives deep into the network-building tactics employed. This is particularly important given the evolving nature of human trafficking in West Africa. As social, economic, and political conditions change, so too must the strategies employed to combat this complex and dynamic crime (Motseki, 2022; Nordquist, 2022). Therefore, this research seeks to answer the following key questions: (1) What specific strategies does Interpol employ to improve regional networks in its fight against human trafficking in West Africa? (2) Do these strategies effectively combat human trafficking in the region? If not, what factors hinder their effectiveness? In the end, the researchers hope that this study can contribute a significant insight to the issue of human trafficking and how related parties should handle it.

METHOD

The qualitative descriptive analysis method is an analytical technique that focuses on understanding a problem, context, complexity, subjectivity and group interaction. Thus, researchers should gradually seek to

understand social phenomena by comparing, imitating, cataloging and grouping objects of study (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018; Creswell, 2014; Helaluddin & Wijaya, 2019). In this study, journal analysis aims to pay attention to the main essence of research that has been published by scientific resources, then combine it with the ideas of the analyzer. The researchers then provide a brief and descriptive statement of the journal to make the content more effective, clear, and useful.

Qualitative research in the field of international relations involves in-depth analysis of one or several specific cases, such as regional conflicts, diplomatic negotiations, or foreign policy of a country and is carried out as a whole to the subject of research (Peterson & Peters, 2020; Rosyidin, 2019; Viskupič, 2021). Where there is an event that is used as a key instrument in research, such as reviewing international treaty documents, news, foreign policy and diplomatic reports, then the results of the approach are described in written words from empirical data to be obtained (McCourt, 2019; Viskupič, 2021; Rosyidin, 2019). In addition, qualitative data is described descriptively using research instruments, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018; Creswell, 2014; Rosyidin, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Importance of Interpol's Role in Tackling Transnational Crime

Founded in 1923 by 20 countries, Interpol aimed to enhance global police cooperation against transnational crime. Its origins trace back to the first International Congress of the Criminal Police in Monaco in 1914, discussing international crime collaboration and prevention techniques. Interpol uniquely shares legal and law enforcement information globally (Delpirou, 2022; Lacy, 2023; Milani, 2023; Yorke, 2023). Transnational crime in West Africa involves illicit networks operating across borders, exploiting weak governance and economic disparities. Crimes include drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms trafficking, and money laundering (Delpirou, 2022; Helpingstine, 2022;).

In 1923, Vienna hosted a pivotal moment in the fight against international crime as Dr. Johannes Schober, President of the Vienna Police, led the second International Congress of the Criminal Police. With delegates from 20 nations, this congress resulted in a landmark resolution on September 7th, giving birth to the International Criminal Police Commission (ICPC), later known as Interpol. Rooted in the shared goal of aiding police forces across borders, Interpol established core objectives, including direct information exchange, joint capture of criminals, combating counterfeiting, and fingerprint identification. This historic initiative laid the foundation for an influential organization, a beacon of international cooperation in the face of global crime (Delpirou, 2022; Dryjanska, 2022; Helpingstine, 2022; Kenny et al., 2022; Lacy, 2023; Yorke, 2023).

Interpol maintains political neutrality and operates within the legal framework of various countries. Its official name is the International Criminal Police Organization, an intergovernmental organization. Interpol has 195 member countries tasked with assisting police forces worldwide in collaborating to make the world safer. Interpol allows police officers from different countries to share and access crime and criminal data while offering a wide range of technical and operational support (Tsybulenko & Suarez, 2022; Williamson, 2022;). The Interpol General Secretariat carries out and coordinates day-to-day activities. Interpol's staff consists of police officers and civilians. Its headquarters are located in Lyon, France, with a global office complex for innovation based in Singapore and several satellite offices located in various regions around the world (Hough, 2020; Hufnagel, 2021; Kemp, 2021; Tsybulenko & Suarez, 2022).

In the Interpol network, each member country relies on staffed by national police officers, serving as a crucial link to the General Secretariat and other NCBs. Annually, the Interpol General Assembly convenes representatives to make pivotal decisions on pressing matters. Facilitating seamless communication, Interpol's I-24/7 system serves as a secure bridge between countries, offering real-time services and database access. Beyond communication, Interpol provides extensive investigative support, from forensics to global fugitive location. The organization also plays a vital role in training, conferences, and capacity-building initiatives, empowering law enforcement against evolving global threats like terrorism, cybercrime, and organized crime (Delpirou, 2022; Nordquist, 2022; Zhang, 2022).

Interpol's strategy to combating human trafficking in West Africa

The UNODC and NAPTIP collaborated on a report covering global trafficking incidents from 2016 to 2019, highlighting West Africa's prominence in identifying trafficking victims. Out of 4,799 victims in 26 Sub-Saharan African nations, 3,336 were found in West Africa, including 2,553 children. Forced labor, constituting 80% of victims, spans sectors like agriculture and mining, where victims endure hazardous conditions with minimal or no pay. Minors, easily manipulated and unaware of their victimization, often feel protected by their exploitative "employers". Globally, nearly 20% of trafficking victims are children, contributing to the ongoing challenge of labor exploitation and modern-day slavery, particularly in the African region (Clark, 2020; Ford, 2015; Gill & McKinnon, 2021; Handrahan, 2022; Hounmenou & O'Grady, 2021; Maluleke et al., 2022; Mutasa, 2021; Sprang et al., 2022; UNODC, 2022; Yingwana et al., 2019).

Interpol will continue to play an important role in combating human trafficking in West Africa and worldwide. In other words, it has supported law enforcement agencies in West Africa, both from resource and technical, financial aspect. Sharing expertise, funding, legal knowledge, psychology, technology, and field operations through alliances with Interpol and other countries help strengthen responses to transnational trafficking in persons. Through joint efforts and shared goals, countries in West Africa seek to address the external threats posed by human trafficking and protect the rights and well-being of victims (Bowersox, 2022; Cunha et al., 2022; Koegler et al., 2023; Kvartalnov, 2021; McCourt, 2019; Murphy, 2023; Tsai et al., 2022; Umukoro, 2021; Watson, 2023).

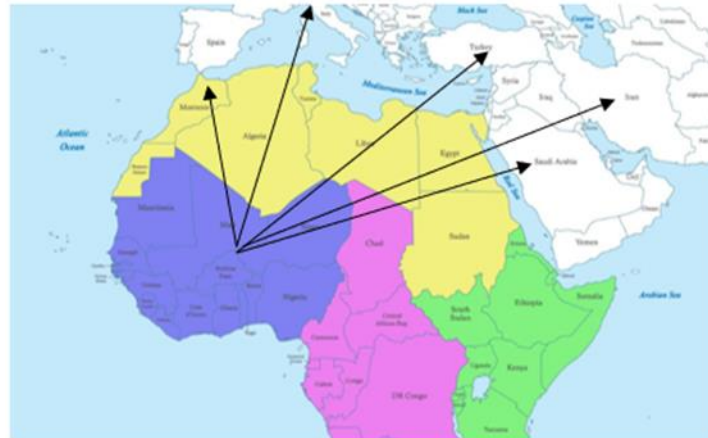


Figure 3. Regional and International Human Trafficking Routes (Interpol, 2018)

Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/id/vektor/peta-afrika-dengan-perbatasan-negara-negara-bagian-gm1469665502-500798197>

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) presents a troubling scenario of human trafficking in a recent report covering 148 countries and over 95% of the global population. Developed in collaboration with the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), the report draws on official data from 2016 to 2019, highlighting West Africa's alarming trend of identifying more trafficking victims than other Sub-Saharan regions. Shockingly, of the 4,799 victims identified in 26 Sub-Saharan African nations, 3,336 were in West Africa, including a heartbreaking 2,553 children. UNODC's findings underscore the pervasive issue of forced labor, affecting approximately 80% of victims in West Africa (Gill & McKinnon, 2021).

Labor trafficking casts a long shadow across industries like agriculture, mining, and fishing. Victims are trapped in a web of exploitation, forced to endure grueling hours and hazardous conditions for scant or no pay (Clark, 2020; Ford, 2015). Minors are especially vulnerable. Their innocence makes them easy targets, often unaware they're caught in a web of crime. Deceptive "employers" offering food and lodging can mask the reality of exploitation, leaving children believing they're protected (Handrahan, 2022; Gill & McKinnon, 2021; Maluleke et al., 2022; Mutasa, 2021;). Tragically, children comprise roughly 20% of all global victims. The African continent, according to ILO data from 2022, bears the highest burden of labor exploitation, feeding into the persistent specter of modern slavery. This grim reality underscores the urgency of combating this heinous crime (Hounmenou & O'Grady, 2021; UNODC, 2022).

Understanding the dynamics of exploitation varies among African countries is often solely with prostitution or sexual exploitation, while other nations encompass diverse forced marriage and involvement in armed conflict. These perceptions stem from social, cultural, political, and legal traditions, impacting fragmented approaches to combating human trafficking and hindering regional law enforcement cooperation. Countries lacking legislative frameworks are more vulnerable, as criminals exploit weak law enforcement. In Africa, over half of trafficking victims face forced unions, with about 63% coerced into marriage without consent, leading to domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, and abuse. Conflict-affected countries with limited security access become hotspots for human trafficking, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 73% of cases were reported in 2020 (borgenproject.org, 2020; Botha & Warria, 2021; Handrahan, 2022; ILO, 2021; Motseki, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022; Obokata, 2019; UNICEF, 2020; UNODC, 2022).

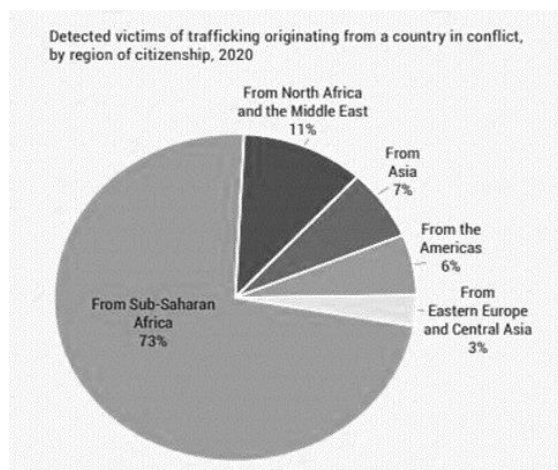


Figure 4. Global Report of Trafficking in Person 2022
Source: UNODC, 2022

Human trafficking remains shrouded in uncertainty in certain nations, notably Libya and Somalia, as indicated by the 2018 Trafficking in Persons report. Ongoing conflicts in these regions hinder accurate assessments of trafficking levels, making detection and combat challenging amidst the absence of authority and law enforcement. Somalia, facing persistent humanitarian crises and security issues for 17 years, struggles to address trafficking due to ongoing conflicts. The U.S. State Department's Watch List includes 19 countries, recognizing their efforts, though imperfect, to align with the Act's criteria, emphasizing the crucial role of state authorities and the need for international cooperation, particularly with organizations like Interpol, to combat human trafficking (Bartilow, 2022; borgenproject.org, 2020; Dilmore, 2022; Neikirk & Nickson, 2023; Nordquist, 2022; Yansaneh, 2020).

Interpol Actively Bolsters the Capabilities of West African Law Enforcement in Their Fight Against Human Trafficking

In certain regions of Africa, traffickers exploit the lack of security and law enforcement capacity, contributing to high rates of trafficking crimes. Interpol addresses this issue by offering training, databases, and operational support to enhance global law enforcement agencies' capabilities in detecting and investigating these crimes. Recognizing the challenges faced by African law enforcement and government stakeholders, Interpol aims to develop their capacity, fostering organization and unity in combating traffickers. The ongoing Trafficking Human Being (THB) in West Africa Project, running from September 2020 to September 2023, focuses on training activities in Benin, with the goal of equipping Interpol's law enforcement and judicial actors with enhanced capabilities to investigate and prosecute human trafficking cases (Cuhna et al., 2022; Delpirou, 2022; Jespersen & Henriksen, 2022; Obokata, 2019; Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022; Tsybulenko & Suarez, 2022; Yansaneh, 2020).

In 2022, Interpol collaborated with West African police forces in various Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) crime investigations. In March, Togolese police and Interpol rescued victim from erotic abuse, reuniting her family. Identified during Operation WEKA II in February, she had disappeared from Ouagadougou in January. In November, law enforcement agents, with Interpol's assistance, freed an eight-year-old boy held for ransom by other migrants for a year. Coordinated efforts in Algeria led to the capture of the kidnapper. Operation Priscas in December targeted criminal organizations involved in human trafficking and child abuse, resulting in the rescue of 90 individuals and the apprehension of 15 suspected traffickers, including 56 victims exposed to sexual exploitation and forced labor in open markets, families, and gold mines (Lockyer, 2020; Hołdyńska, 2021; Murphy, 2023; Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022; Yansaneh, 2020).

A continuous communication among stakeholders in the African region is essential. Interpol is working to facilitate this coordination center with support from EU donors through the West African Police Information System program (Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022; Yansaneh, 2020). The program's goal is to improve communication and cooperation amongst law enforcement agencies in the West African region by doing the following: First, give West African police officials access to crucial law enforcement data from regional national criminal databases, boosting criminal identification and assisting with existing investigations. Improve analysis of regional transnational organized crime and terrorism, as well as knowledge of crime coming from and passing through West Africa. Third, promote judicial and law enforcement authorities' cooperation on criminal cases in the area, the European Union, and globally (Udezi, 2023; Nordquist, 2023; Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022; Yansaneh, 2020).

Interpol, in collaboration with regional police forces, has conducted numerous operations to combat human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Operation Priscas, among others, has been notable, with recent initiatives like Operation Weka and Weka II between 2021 and 2022. Operation Weka, occurring from March 28 to April 2, 2021, led to the successful rescue of nearly 500 trafficking victims, including children, and the identification of about 760 undocumented migrants. Authorities from 24 participating countries exchanged intelligence to dismantle criminal networks, with Spain, Sudan, Benin, Morocco, Algeria, Portugal, and Congo being key contributors (Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022; Yansaneh, 2020). This operation vividly demonstrates the close link between migrant smuggling and human trafficking, especially during a global health crisis, where vulnerable groups seek to avoid hardship while criminal networks prioritize profit. The arrests made during Operation Weka also involved charges related to other crimes, including document falsification, theft, drug offenses, and environmental pollution (www.interpol.int, 2021).

Interpol's I-24/7 communication network plays a vital role in enhancing global law enforcement cooperation. Each national police data system, linked to Interpol through their national central offices, facilitates officers in examining and sharing official national data worldwide. This interconnectedness allows for efficient identification of connections between criminal behavior and suspects, contributing to more effective transnational crime and terrorism combat in West Africa and globally. Interpol's involvement in THB crime investigations includes examples from 2022, such as the rescue of an adolescent girl from sexual exploitation and the successful apprehension of a kidnapper, highlighting the organization's commitment to operational support and technical resources (Albanese et al., 2022; Lazzarino et al., 2022; Ogunniyi & Idowu, 2022; Yansaneh, 2020).

Table 1. Matrix Interpol Operations-Concolidate

INTERPOL operation	Cooperating Region(s)	Purpose
Operation Turquesa	West Africa	To combat human trafficking in West Africa. Resulted in the rescue of over 100 victims and the arrest of over 50 traffickers.
Operation Sahara	North Africa and Sahel	To combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking in North Africa and the Sahel. Resulted in the rescue of over 2,000 migrants and the arrest of over 100 smugglers.
Operation Weka	East and Central Africa	To combat human trafficking and migrant smuggling in East and Central Africa. Resulted in the rescue of over 500 victims and the arrest of over 50 traffickers.
Operation Storm	South and Southeast Asia	To combat human trafficking and migrant smuggling in South and Southeast Asia. Resulted in the rescue of over 1,000 victims and the arrest of over 100 traffickers.
Operation Mekong River	Southeast Asia	To combat human trafficking in Southeast Asia. Resulted in the rescue of over 1,500 victims and the arrest of over 200 traffickers.
Operation Libertador	Latin America	To combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking in Latin America. Resulted in the rescue of over 3,000 migrants and the arrest of over 200 smugglers.
Operation Mare Nostrum	Mediterranean Sea	To rescue migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea in unseaworthy vessels. Resulted in the rescue of over 150,000 people.

Source: Results of researcher data analysis, 2023

In the presented Table 1, Interpol's collaboration in Africa involves multiple stakeholders, including state actors like the United States (through the Bureau of Narcotics Affairs and International Law Enforcement) and international organizations such as the United Nations, Europol, the International Organization for Migration, Frontex, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT). This collaborative effort, acting as a "gap-filler," addresses the inadequacies in West Africa's security and law enforcement. The involvement of various

stakeholders becomes crucial as state and law enforcement agencies in the region face challenges in providing the necessary technical tools, human resources, and references to combat transnational criminal syndicates operating with multi-billion-dollar criminal activities, often due to the region's low social, cultural, and economic conditions (Abioro & Akinyemi, 2022; Delpirou, 2022; Neikirk & Nickson, 2023; Yansaneh, 2020).

The alliance's purpose is to enhance the security of its members or promote shared interests globally (Bowersox, 2022; Nosenko, 2022;). Faced with complex political, economic, social, and cultural conditions, West African nations, alongside Interpol, find eradicating national and transnational crime challenging. Special attention and adapted strategies are crucial. In social and cultural aspects, promoting gender equality and women's rights remain priorities (Lacy, 2023; Yorke, 2023). In politics and security, the West Africa THB Project aids surveillance, especially at trafficking-vulnerable border points. Strengthening security through programs like WAPIS is vital, fostering quick responses. West African nations form alliances with Interpol and others to combat human trafficking, sharing insights, experiences, and resources (Ferreira, 2022; Helpingstine et al., 2022; Hough, 2020; Judge & Doherty, 2022; Kyatalnov, 2021; Orsini, 2022; Perdery, 2022; Poku & Therkelsen, 2022; Umukoro, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Interpol's strategy for combating human trafficking in West Africa focuses on prevention, investigation, prosecution, protection, and international cooperation. The organization empowers law enforcement agencies through training, operational support, and victim and witness protection. Awareness-raising initiatives contribute to a collective understanding of these crimes. However, the research has limitations, such as focusing only on INTERPOL's role and not addressing other actors like the government, civil society organizations, and victims. Future research should focus on qualitative and quantitative methods to better understand the situation and conditions of human trafficking in West Africa.

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