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How do illegal ivory traders operate? Field research among illegal ivory traders aims to give an answer.

Much has been written about illegal ivory trade, from a variety of perspectives, ranging from [DNA forensics](#) to fascinating insights into how the [ivory](#) trade evolved or the impact [of ivory trade bans](#). An actor which is largely missing from these analyses is the ivory trader himself, which my work aims to address.

While research on illegal activities – on [illegal trade in particular](#) – has a long tradition, this is less the case for illegal wildlife trade. Between 2012 and 2017, I followed up eleven ivory traders in their activities in two specific locations, both of which are key nodes in this trade: the Ugandan–DRC borderlands (more specifically the border towns Arua in Uganda and Aru in the DRC) and the Ugandan capital Kampala. Since 2007, Uganda has increasingly established itself as a major transit point for ivory. [CITES calls Uganda a country of 'primary concern'](#) in the illicit ivory trade: it is listed as one of the ten countries worldwide 'linked to the greatest illegal ivory trade flows since 2012'.

The main interest in my work is how these traders are navigating structural circumstances within a criminalized informal economy. In other words: what happens when circumstances such as supply/demand, or government policies, are changing? The results were published in [International Affairs](#) and the [British Journal of Criminology](#), and are summarized in this analysis brief.

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Structural circumstances facilitating illegal ivory trade

1. Firstly, the nature of the Ugandan state, and more particularly the institutional context of bureaucratic corruption, is an important enabling factor. Although ivory trade is illegal, sentences are low and prosecution measures weak. For traders, ivory was an interesting business opportunity with high rewards and little risks —particularly for those who were already active in historical illegal trade networks. Most of the traders followed for this research were also trading in commodities such as cigarettes, minerals, and so on. For all traders, personal relationships with government officials are at the heart of the trade: it is these relationships which allow ivory (as well as other commodities) to be imported and exported, provide protection on internal transport, and so on. These circumstances also attracted many foreign actors, making Uganda a regional node for ivory trading.
2. Secondly, wars are central: it has been widely shown how [wars offer important economic transformations](#), particularly for military actors. In my research, individual soldiers kept emerging as key-actors in interviews with ivory traders - as a source of ivory and/or as a source of protection, facilitating the import and export of ivory. The presence of these soldiers in neighbouring countries played an important role in the trade: in these areas, soldiers, and the transport companies working for them, had easy access to ivory. Concretely, through the fight against the Lord's Resistance Army, the Ugandan army was present in Congo's [Garamba National Park](#) and the Central African Republic, where ivory was plentiful. In contrast to the [previous incursion in Congo](#), this was not an institutionalised engagement of the army as a whole, but led to engagement of individual soldiers or civilian suppliers, who were smuggling back ivory. As a result, historical nodes in the regional illegal trade – such as the DRC-Ugandan borderlands – suddenly had a major influx of ivory.
3. A third central issue is globalisation: from 2007 onwards, illegal ivory trade became a [global and urgent problem](#), largely fuelled by increasing demand and consumption in East and South East Asia (particularly China and Thailand). This demand in Asia was translated into an expanding market in Uganda, particularly through the increased presence of interested buyers. Chinese actors (both private- and state-owned companies) started [arriving in Uganda between 2000 and 2005](#) - largely as a result of China's 'Go Out' policy. Traders also mentioned the increased involvement of west Africans (particularly from Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire) in the ivory business. West African traders have historically been active in illegal trading in Uganda, particularly in the drug trade, but since 2006–2007 a shift has been observed towards the inclusion of ivory in their portfolio.

Important power differences among ivory traders.

All of these elements together indicate a rapidly growing ivory market in Uganda: a growing demand (globally – in East Asia, combined with an increased local presence of foreign buyers), a growing supply (in which the presence of the Ugandan army in the DRC and CAR played an important role), and a favourable institutional context (characterised by a high degree of corruption).

Yet, this does not mean that there is a homogenous market for ivory. A key finding of this research are the strong power differences between the various ivory traders, as they have unequal connections and entry points into these various spheres (i.e. with the state, army officials and foreign traders). As mentioned above, particularly connections with government

officials are crucial: these relationships are crucial in allowing ivory to be imported and exported, providing protection on internal transport, and so on. For example, traders in the Uganda-DRC border region mostly rely on connections with lower-level government officials based in the region (such as customs officials). Other traders have connections with higher-level government officials, and in particular security officials. These connections give an increased level of security at various points of the trading chain: when crossing the border, when transporting throughout the country, on exit points, and so on.



Sir Apolo Kagawa, Katikiro of Buganda. undated lanternslide. Part of a set of educational, handcolored slides on Ugandan history, collection of Gayaza high school, Uganda, digitized by HIPUGanda'

Because of these differing links, various ivory traders operate on different scales and with varying degrees of success: some the traders followed for this research operated on a fairly local scale, in 'their' borderlands, while better-connected traders operate on a larger geographical scale, sourcing ivory in the wider region. The latter category is able to work directly with foreign exporters and charge higher prices – largely through their more powerful connections with state operatives. They can also transport larger quantities (as they, e.g., may be in a position to rely on army trucks).

In these circumstances, ivory traders do not operate in a group structure, but instead form flexible coalitions in order to buy, sell or transport the ivory. A crucial explanation for this are the market conditions of ivory, which are dynamic and fragmented: supply and demand are unpredictable, and a variety of dangers loom, such as confiscation, lack of market and being cheated by other traders. In these conditions, the

traders' personality and connections are central throughout the trade: personal ties with customs officials in order to cross the border, personal ties with army officials for supply, protection and sale, personal connections with other traders in order to avoid cheating, and so on.

What happens when structural circumstances become more difficult?

What happens when these structural circumstances change? How do illegal ivory traders navigate these circumstances?

Concretely, from 2010 onwards, a range of measures were taken by the Ugandan government to address the illegal ivory trade, making the traders' activities more difficult: there was an increasing awareness (and training) among the relevant law enforcement officers about the importance of illegal trade in wildlife products, particularly ivory. Reflecting this trend, there has been an increasing [number of confiscations](#) from around 2013 onwards, and a range of formal measures were taken, such as a review of the Wildlife Act, or the establishment of a [court specifically dedicated to wildlife crimes](#) in 2016.

These measures have had some effect on the traders' activities, who felt their activities became much more restrained - traders were for example referring to spies as a constant danger. Transport became more risky as well. Following a number of high-profile confiscations, much of the ivory which

was being sold in the Uganda-DRC border region remained there, as most traders considered the transport of ivory to Kampala too risky. As a result of these changing conditions, many traders shifted their activities to other commodities.

Most of the traders followed for this research have a broad portfolio of commodities, of which ivory is only one. Some also trade in highly illegal goods such as drugs or minerals (gold); others deal in more mundane goods such as cigarettes or fuel. The reason for this is straightforward: it is the (social) infrastructure, rather than the commodity itself, which guides the ivory trade. In other words, it are their connections with a variety of actors, rather than the commodity, which is central to this trade. This also means that traders are continuously looking for new commodities and opportunities, and once a particular market becomes unattractive, that commodity is abandoned, temporarily or permanently. In the words of one trader: 'When business is slow in one side, I shift to another side.' Gradually, with the crackdown on the ivory trade, this commodity became too risky, and many traders moved on to other goods.

Crucially, the more ivory became criminalized (i.e. the more the Ugandan state was acting on illegal ivory trade), the more criminal linkages were needed to remain active in the trade, and the more significant power differences became between the various traders - eventually pushing out most of the traders followed for the research. Lower-level connections with security officials were no longer sufficient to operate in the trade. The result was a concentration of power among actors with high-level linkages with security officials. A number of events are indicative of these trends, such as recent confiscations implicating high-level security officers, for example the seizure of [ivory at the farm of the army's commander of land forces](#), of other illegal wildlife goods in the possession of [a presidential adviser](#), or of [ivory with the luggage-handling company](#) at Uganda's biggest airport, controlled by politico-military elites.

Conclusion

In sum, this research shows the importance of looking at the interplay between structural circumstances facilitating and/or hindering illegal ivory trade, and the ways in which ivory traders navigate these. Most existing research focuses on the first part of this interplay, the institutional context. Yet, by looking at the ways in which these circumstances interact with traders, it is shown how there are **severe power differences** among the various traders. These **differences are not static**, but have led to an **increasing concentration of power**, with a '[military-commercial](#)' **nexus** at the heart of it. The **state is not a unitary actor** in this process: whereas one section of the state might have an interest in declaring a particular commodity or sector illegal, other actors increasingly profit from this.

References

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