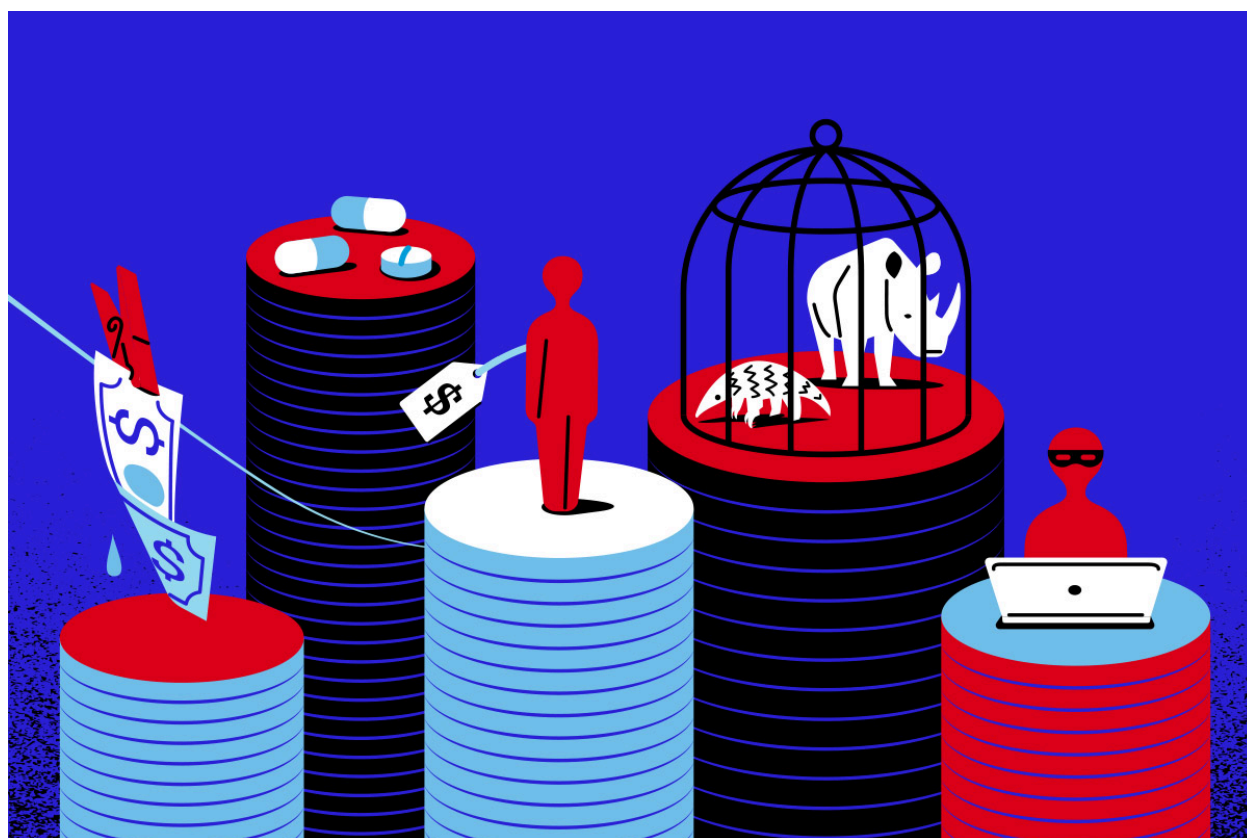


Forum: United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

Issue #2: Addressing the disruption of legitimate trade by illicit markets

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Position: Chair of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development



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Introduction

Illicit markets have disrupted legitimate trade for centuries, all the way from the colonial trade routes to the modern trafficking of counterfeit goods, weapons, drugs, and even wildlife. Nowadays, globalization and technological advancements have made the scale of this illegal trade larger than ever before, and it now generates hundreds of

billions of dollars annually, undermining legal economies, reducing tax revenues for governments, and threatening international security (OECD). With the current situation, criminal organizations exploit weak regulations, corruption, and even digital marketplaces to move illegitimate products across borders, disguising this trade as legitimate. As international trade has continued to grow, illicit markets have become increasingly difficult to regulate.

The issue remains controversial because governments need to balance proper regulation and enforcement with the protection of free trade and national sovereignty, showing the need for a coherent solution. While stricter border control may mitigate the issue, some countries argue that the measures may slow commerce and affect developing countries that depend on global exports (UNCTAD). Disagreements also persist when discussing responsibility, since developed countries argue for tougher enforcement and developing countries believe that poverty, weak institutions, and inequality contribute to the rise of illegal trade (UNODC). A controversial aspect is around the topic of cryptocurrencies and digital markets because governments strive to regulate them without violating innovation.

Addressing the disruption to markets is crucial to ensure economic stability and fairness, and sustainable development. Illicit trade weakens trust in international markets, harms legitimate businesses, and deprives governments of tax revenue that could be used for infrastructure and education. (UNCTAD). Beyond economic impact, the issue is also humanitarian, since often the illicit markets are connected to organized crime, corruption, and forced labor. By cooperating, the international community can reduce the influence of illicit markets and protect the integrity of global trade systems.

Definition of Key Terms

Illicit: Activity, practice, object, etc. that is not allowed because of a law or widely disapproved by society (Cambridge).

Contraband: Goods that are illegal to possess, trade, produce, and transport by law or policy (Webster).

Smuggling: Illegal secret transportation of a good, substance, information, or people across countries, violating laws and regulations (Webster).

Trafficking: Illegal trade, transportation, harboring, or sale of goods or people, characterized by exploitation for profit and involving force, fraud, and coercion for manipulation (Homeland Security).

Illicit financial flows: Cross-border movement of money or capital that is illegally earned, transferred, and used. Often stemming from criminal activity and utilized for illicit purposes (Global Financial Integrity (GFI)).

Poaching: Illegal hunting, taking, or capture of wildlife and plants, violating local, national, or international laws (International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)).

Range state: Nation or state that has jurisdiction over any part of the geopolitical area where specific species, usually endangered or threatened, migrate, reproduce, or live (Law Insider).

Laundering: Disguising illegally obtained funds to make them seem legal, involving filtering money through businesses or foreign banks to hide their origin (Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN)).

Front company: A legal-looking business created or used to hide the true purpose of another organization, masking illicit financial activities (Financial Crime Academy).

Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs): Self-perpetuating groups that work across national borders to gain material or power-based benefits through illegal means. Usually, utilizing violence, corruption, and a complex network to traffic goods (United Nations (UN))

Sanctions: Penalties or punitive measures used to enforce obedience to rules, laws, or court orders. Serving as a way to deter illegal activities and an incentive for compliance

(The Law Dictionary)

General Overview

Exploitation of global trade systems by illicit markets

Black market trade and transportation rely on the same systems used in legal commerce. Using common shipping routes, ports, banking systems, etc., to distribute the illicit goods makes them harder to detect (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)). Modern trade is interconnected, so a weakness in one country's enforcement of laws and sanctions will affect many other countries that carry out business with it directly or even indirectly (International Monetary Fund (IMF)).

The effect of technology on illicit trade

The current evolution of technology has transformed illicit markets into harder ones to catch and detect than before. It has given producers an alternative and safer way to distribute products, commit crimes, and encouraged customers by lowering the danger and detection risks. Darknet marketplaces, cryptocurrency, and encrypted messaging apps have made illicit markets grow, allowing sellers to operate internationally with greater anonymity and speed. Governments also struggle to regulate online trade without restricting privacy, making it difficult for them to take action (United States Sentencing Commission: Cyber Technology in Federal Crime).

Corruption and weak governance

Illicit markets are able to grow stronger and faster where institutions and government reach are weaker. Right now, in many countries, governments are busy paying off debts, protecting themselves internationally, and just not having enough funds to be able to maintain strong control and enforcement over the laws and border security. In addition, some political officials aid the markets; there have been multiple cases found of corrupt officials who have been supporting black markets and providing information (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)). These weak governments make illegal businesses easier to grow, not having to worry about detection as much as in

well-developed countries. This issue affects countries' economies and can cause the market to grow and be able to reach other countries (OECD).

International cooperation

No single country is able to fully address and affect criminal networks alone. Criminal networks extend internationally, bases being all over the world. To be able to make a meaningful impact on it, countries have to work together to be able to coordinate a global enforcement effort. The requirement for global efforts makes finding a middle ground difficult because of each country's point of view on the issue. Disagreements arise on strictness, the true cause of the disruption, with developing countries claiming they need financial and technological aid to be able to enforce the law before it is enforced, and some disagree with the claim entirely (UNODC). Although it has been difficult, some organizations like INTERPOL have been created for this use and have stopped many crime rings all over the world. (INTERPOL)

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States

The United States has constantly pushed for stronger international cooperation against illicit trade and criminal markets. The country prefers protecting intellectual property rights, reducing counterfeit imports, and mitigating drug trafficking flows through agencies like the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (U.S. Department of State). The United States also enforces stricter customs, sanctions towards criminal organizations, and information sharing to protect legitimacy and supply chains. (Office of the United States Trade Representative).

Mexico

Mexico has been heavily affected by the illicit markets due to the influence of international criminal organizations involved in drug, human, and weapons trafficking. Illicit trade routes cross through Mexico and have disrupted legal commerce and created concerns with trade corridors as close as the United States (UNODC). Mexico supports stronger international cooperation on the matter, border security, and

economic development programs that will reduce the presence and emergence of organized crime, specifically in trade.

China

China plays a complex role in the issue of illicit trade. As the largest manufacturer and one of the largest exporting countries, China has faced constant criticism for being an immense source of counterfeit goods distributed worldwide (OECD). At the same time, the Chinese government has increasingly strengthened its intellectual property laws and cracked down with inspections and smuggling campaigns to tackle the root of the issue, and hence protect legitimate trade and improve Chinese confidence in Chinese exports (China Daily)

Italy

Italy has long struggled with illicit trade linked to organized crime groups operating through Mediterranean routes and major ports like Naples and Genoa. Counterfeit goods, smuggling, and illegal trafficking have significantly vulnerable legitimate businesses and government taxes (INTERPOL). Italy advocates for stronger international policing, anti-mafia enforcement measures worldwide, and customs monitoring to combat corruption interfering with global trade.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime plays a major role in fighting illicit markets by supporting international cooperation against drug trafficking, organized crime, corruption, and illicit financial flows under the umbrella of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. UNODC provides research, legal frameworks, and technical assistance to help countries improve their border control and law enforcement while protecting legitimate trade.

Timeline of Events, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

Date	Description of Event
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- 1919 The League of Nations began anti-trafficking efforts after WW1, introducing some of the first international agreements to reduce illegal narcotics trade and cross-border smuggling (UNODC).
- 1947 The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was signed, expanding global trade and lowering tariffs between countries, increasing integration, while creating ways for illicit goods to move across borders (WTO).
- 1952 The Customs Co-operation Council was founded, later becoming the World Customs Organization (WCO), aimed at improving international customs enforcement and reducing or mitigating smuggling (Britannica).
- 1973 The United States of America formed the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to combat growing international drug trafficking and organized criminal networks. (DEA)
- 1988 The United Nations created the UN Convention against Illicit Drug Trafficking to introduce stronger measures against drug trafficking, money laundering, and criminal organizations profiting from illicit trade (UNODC).
- 1994 The World Trade Organization was established to expand global free trade, increasing economic integration, but making illicit trade networks more connected (WTO).
- 2000 The UN adopted the Palermo Convention against Organized Crime to strengthen cooperation against trafficking, smuggling, and transnational organized crime (UNODC).
- 2001 After the attacks of the 11th of September, governments increased financial monitoring dramatically to prevent, punish, and combat money laundering and illegal funding tied to illicit markets (OVID).

2020	The COVID-19 pandemic caused a surge in illegal trade, with global supply chain disruptions leading to increased counterfeiting of medical supplies, pharmaceuticals, and online black-market goods (OECD).
2024-Present	Governments and international organizations have increased cooperation to combat illicit trade conducted through e-commerce, cryptocurrency transactions, and online black markets. Efforts are now on improving digital monitoring, customs technology, and international information interchange to protect legitimacy (INTERPOL).

United Nations Involvement

The United Nations has held a significant role in the trade of illicit goods over the years. By working with countries and making projects to assist in the enforcement of laws, the UN has had a global impact on the prevention of illicit trade and markets.

Creation of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 1997

In 1997, the United Nations created the UNODC to create a coordinated response to the issue of drug trafficking, transnational organized crime, terrorism, and corruption. It actively works as a global leader in the fight against these crimes and helps member states of the UN to enforce laws related to these issues. The UNODC aims to make the world safer by removing such crimes and achieving peace by promoting the rule of law (UNODC). It has been regarded as one of the most effective organizations against illegal trade worldwide in state-level policy and enforcement.

United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)

The Convention against Transnational Organized Crime was adopted by the UN in 2000 and began working effectively in 2003. It unites 193 parties to facilitate international law enforcement and unite nations in national anti-crime laws. The UNTOC requires member states to make specific conduct criminal. Acts like money laundering, corruption, obstruction of justice, and so on have been made illegal in many states by the UNTOC. This convention serves as a framework and unifier between countries for the containment and removal of illegal activities (UNODC).

Conference of the Parties (CoP)

The Conference of the Parties was a supreme decision-making body of the treaty. Every two to three years, the CoP carries out a conference with 185 member countries to evaluate wildlife conservation progress, edit the list of protected species in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) appendices, and negotiate international trade policies (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). The recent meeting in 2025 reviewed all the past actions and adjusted the CITES to fit the current global regulations (European Parliament).

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The World Trade Organization's Anti-Counterfeiting Rules (Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS))

The TRIPS agreement is an international legal agreement among all World Trade Organization (WTO) members. It creates a minimum global standard to regulate and enforce intellectual property rights, like trademarks and copyrights, to ensure fair and predictable international trade (WTO). Within this agreement, one of its mandates ensures that all member nations enforce intellectual property laws, specifically targeting counterfeit trademark goods and pirated copyright goods (Global Affairs Canada).

Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Anti-Money Laundering System

The Financial Action Task Force is the global intergovernmental policymaking body that sets international standards to prevent money laundering, terrorist financing, and the financing of weapon proliferation. It requires countries to implement rigorous legal, regulatory, and operational frameworks to detect and deter financial crime (FATF). The

FATF framework operates through a set of 'recommendations' that dictate how nations and financial institutions must behave. This framework covers risk-based approaches to identify, understand, and assess money laundering and terrorist financing risks, customer due diligence (CDD) for businesses to identify their customers and the nature of their business, and identify the ultimate beneficial owners, among many other requirements that allow countries to maintain stable and trustworthy policies. Ensuring policies are maintained by carrying out mutual evaluations and jurisdiction lists (Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN)).

Possible Solutions

Establishing Trade Transparency and Monitoring Frameworks

Through UNCTAD, member states could collaborate to create a standardized framework for monitoring trade activities that are vulnerable to infiltration of illicit markets. The framework would encourage countries to share information regarding suspicious activity, emerging trafficking routes and trends, and illicit financial flows connected to illegal trade networks. By improving transparency and communications between customs, ports, and governments, countries can better identify patterns of illicit trade before they disrupt legitimate markets significantly. Such a framework could also reduce enforcement gaps that organizations tend to exploit when working internationally.

Improving and Strengthening Customs Operations and Border Management

One of the main challenges in addressing illicit trade is the varying capacities of countries to monitor and regulate the movement of goods across their borders. The international community could support states, in particular the developing countries, through technical assistance and technological investments in customs. Improved surveillance, risk management, and border control can allow authorities to more effectively detect counterfeit goods, smuggled goods, and other illicit trade products with more effectiveness. Improving customs systems can not just reduce opportunities for criminal networks to operate in a country, but also improve the existing flow of legitimate trade.

Promoting Public-Private Partnerships to Secure Supply Chains

Governments can work alongside businesses, such as logistics companies and technology providers, to strengthen the security and transparency of global supply chains. Through the adoption of product verification systems, digital tracking, and improved standards for reporting, users can now trace the origin of their products before they reach the market. Public-Private collaborations also allow governments to benefit from industry expertise and resources while allowing businesses to improve their brands and market competitiveness. By making supply chains more transparent, resilient, and unglamorous, opportunities for illicit trade to enter them have been significantly reduced.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

SDG 9, Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure

Sustainable Development Goal 9 aims to build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization, and encourage innovation (UNDP). Strong industries and reliable infrastructure are crucial to maintaining global trade stability and economic growth. Still, illicit markets make the systems weaker by introducing unfair counterfeit and illegally traded goods into supply chains, violating legitimate businesses and reducing trust in international commerce. Smuggling networks also exploit weaknesses in the infrastructure currently in place, and also electronic systems to move illegal products across borders conveniently. By resolving illicit trade, countries can attain stronger supply chains, protect innovation and industries, improving the reliability and efficiency of current infrastructure. Solving the issue will support SDG 9 by creating a safer and more sustainable network that encourages long-term economic and industrial growth.

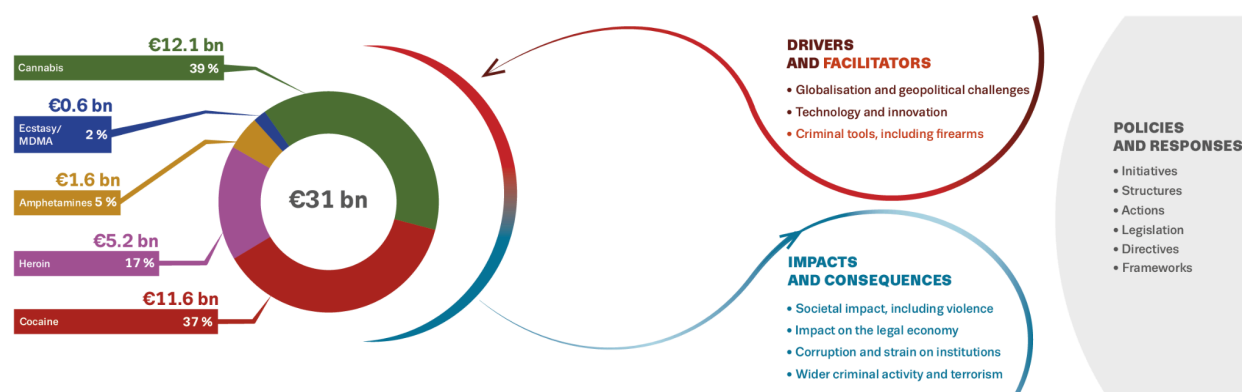
SDG 16, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

Sustainable Development Goal 16 is focused on promoting peaceful societies, ensuring access to justice, and building strong, accountable institutions. Illicit trade directly threatens the goal because it is often closely tied to organized crime, corruption, trafficking, and money laundering. Criminal networks often rely on the weak governance and widespread corruption of developing nations to operate across borders, reducing public trust in institutions and damaging systems. Furthermore, illicit

markets deprive governments of crucial revenues needed to fund services and law enforcement, so tackling the disruption of legitimate trade would help governments improve transparency, strengthen systems, and increase cooperation against organized crime. The solution contributes to SDG 16 by promoting accountability, reducing corruption, increasing trust, and reinforcing institutions needed to promote fairness and safety.

Appendix

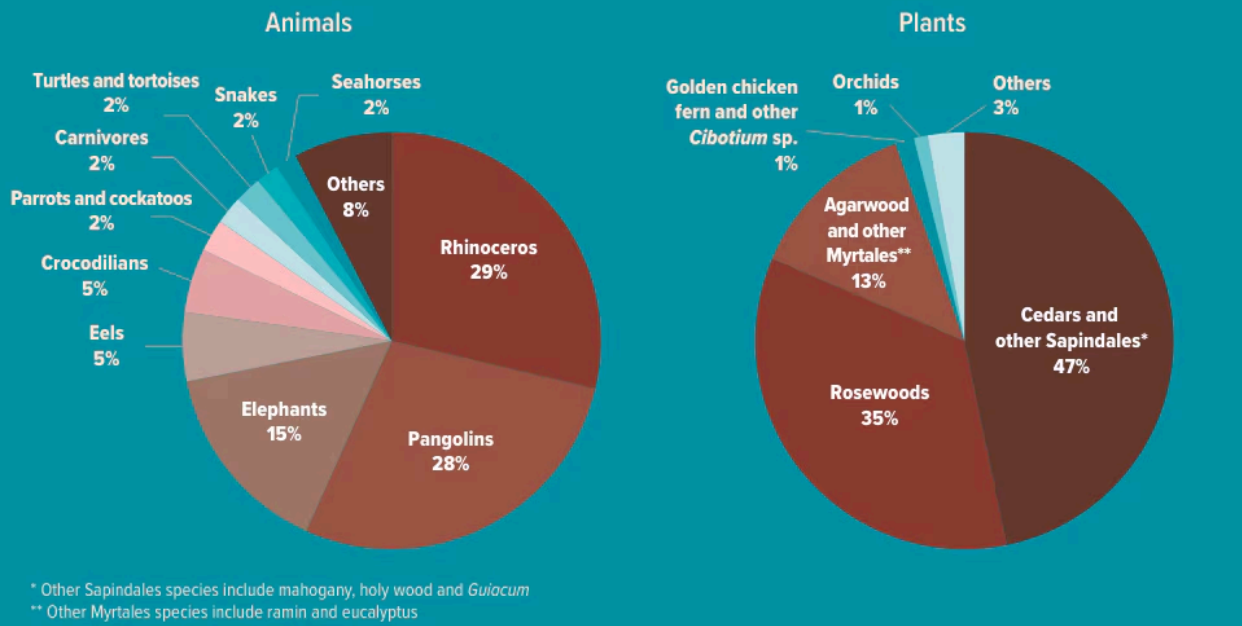
This section of the issue bulletin is dedicated to providing delegates with valuable sources to utilize during their research.



Pie chart showing the availability and facilitators of drugs worldwide. The source explains the effects and impacts the growth in availability has caused in more depth (European Union Drug Agency (EUDA)).

Species most affected

Just 15 broad markets comprised the bulk of the observed illegal wildlife trade during 2015–2021 based on standardized seizure index



How organized crime and wildlife trade have affected species populations and ecosystem growth (World Economic Forum).

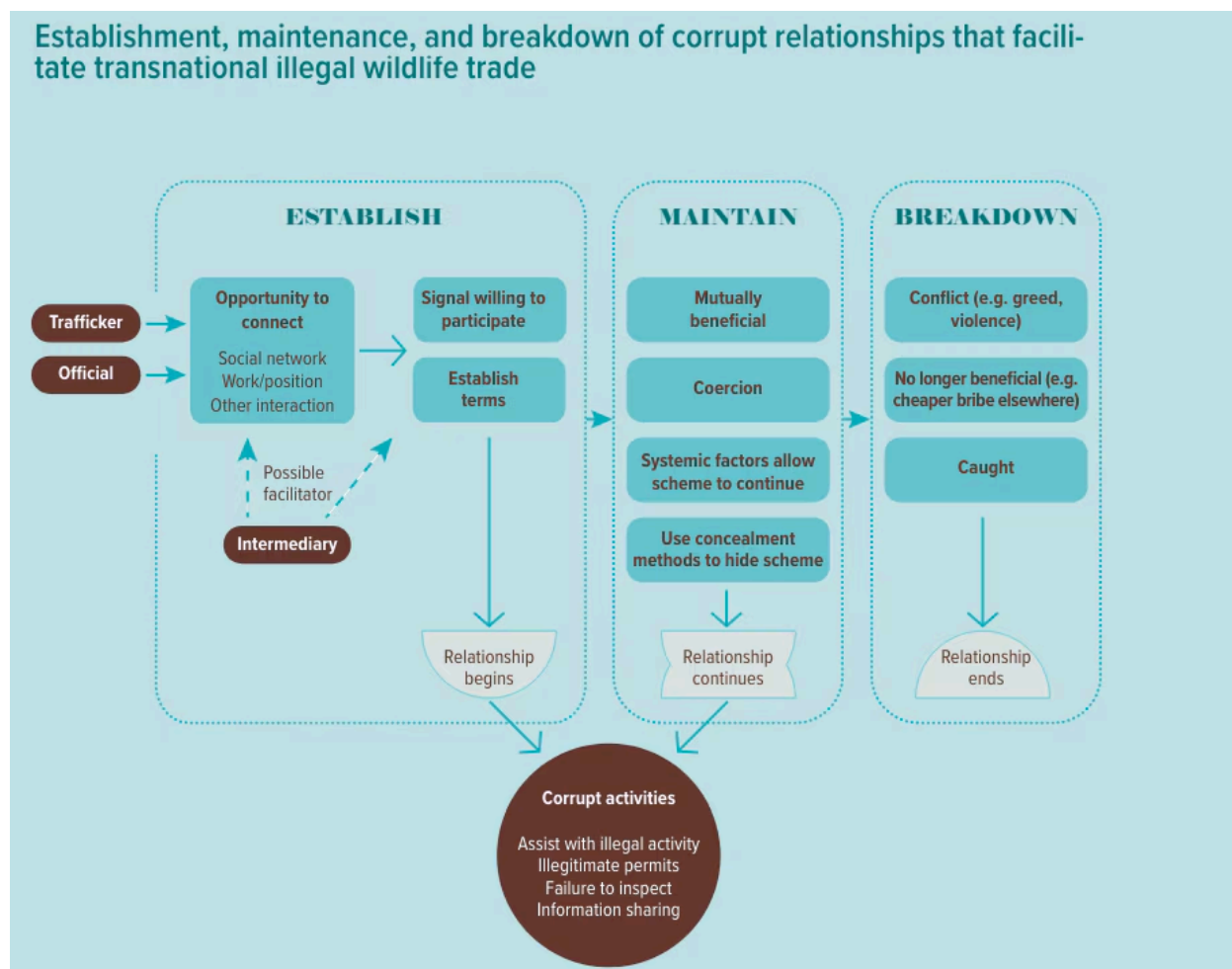


Image showing the process that illegal wildlife trade facilities go through (World Economic Forum).

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