INTERPOL: The Past, Present and Future of International Police Cooperation

Jürgen Stock
Secretary General
INTERPOL
interpol@interpol.int

Abstract

Aim: The study aims to show that INTERPOL, established a century ago, remains committed to fostering international law enforcement cooperation and secure intelligence sharing among 195 member countries.

Methodology: In his study, the author draws on official INTERPOL documents and the organisation's activities in relation to specific criminal organisations to illustrate the challenges facing the organisation in the modern era, the responses to these challenges and the possible directions for future developments.

Findings: Its National Central Bureaus (NCBs) enable global collaboration and swift responses to cross-border crimes. Evolving global threats, accentuated by the COVID–19 pandemic, make international cooperation essential. INTERPOL plays a pivotal role at the nexus of global threats and individual crimes. Terrorism, organised crime, cybercrime, and the rise of artificial intelligence present pressing challenges. Projects like I-CAN and I-GRIP illustrate successful global efforts. INTERPOL's mission, based on trust, neutrality, reciprocity, and operational security, has proven its effectiveness in addressing modern law enforcement challenges.

Value: The article gives an overview of the organisation's recent achievements, illustrated with some recent examples.

Keywords: INTERPOL centenary, international police cooperation, cybercrime, artificial intelligence

Introduction

100 years ago, INTERPOL was established to provide the world with a neutral and trusted platform for national law enforcement agencies to securely share intelligence, without ever losing control over the sensitive information they own. From its very beginnings, the mission of INTERPOL has been to foster law enforcement cooperation for a safer world.

As the Organisation has grown over the years, today counting 195 member countries, its mission remains fundamentally the same. Indeed, as we face an increasingly complex threat landscape, the role of INTERPOL as a global early warning system has never been so essential. The continuing success of this multilateral model rests on two fundamental and mutually reinforcing elements: trust – by our members; and neutrality – by the Organisation, no matter the environment around it.

INTERPOL occupies a unique space in law enforcement, as a police organisation, an international organisation, and a global player.

It is our National Central Bureaus (NCBs) in our 195 member countries, each embedded in national law enforcement, which are the backbone of our model of international law enforcement cooperation through a single, secure global operational communication network. Through this network, INTERPOL is also able to reach specialised units and frontline officers deployed in the field.

Today, our 19 global databases contain more than 133 million records shared by foreign law enforcement. In the first nine months of 2023 alone, nearly 5 billion checks were made against INTERPOL's databases, generating some 960,000 hits. Law enforcement information running through this network has a purpose: bringing criminals to justice. All information exchange is enshrined by the principles of INTERPOL's Constitution: a neutral platform, uniting law enforcement to combat transnational crime, irrespective of political, racial or religious differences and armed conflict.

Today, we face a profound evolution of the global threat landscape which has been accelerated by the COVID–19 pandemic. The crime encountered in the streets is connected to the world in ways never seen before. As police we face the challenge of being limited by our national jurisdiction, while crime is borderless. In today's landscape, there is no guarantee the answers will lie within our borders. We cannot predict from where the next threat will come, or who holds the key piece of information that will prevent it.

The following two examples perfectly highlight this point:
- A piece of a Syrian passport, without other identification details except its number was found at the crime scene after the suicide attacks at Stade de

France in 2015. NCB Damascus had reported that passport as one of a large batch that had been stolen. We secured the assistance of NCB Damascus within hours, despite Syria being in the midst of a civil war.

- An Afghan national attempting to illegally enter the Schengen area was detected by border officers. After cross checking his information with INTERPOL databases, his fingerprints were found to match those recovered from an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan almost a decade earlier.

Our global reach means we monitor and analyse criminal trends worldwide; while as police we provide assistance in individual criminal investigations, placing us at the intersection of global threats and individual crimes.

Changing Face of Terrorism

Nearly four decades ago, INTERPOL's General Assembly recognised the need to support global efforts to combat terrorism. Since then, law enforcement worldwide has worked together to design appropriate preparedness and response to the ever-changing flows of terrorism.

As the threats have evolved, so too has INTERPOL's Counter Terrorism outlook, strategy and operational capabilities. A global strategy is underpinned by five Action Streams implemented through a hybrid, region-focused decentralisation model. This reflects the terrorist landscape we face, where global ideologies and mobility combine with pledges by local affiliates, and the unique features of each theatre. The response must therefore be global in breadth, but also tailored to each frontline.

Terrorist groups, regardless of their motivation, continue to integrate digital and technological advances to expand their communities online and refine their modi operandi. For example, together with traditional social media applications, gaming platforms continue to be a channel for recruitment and sharing extremist ideologies, particularly among younger targets.

Through INTERPOL, police can share intelligence and alerts on individuals and networks, to better understand their methods, motives and financing and – ultimately – to identify and arrest suspects.

Indeed, INTERPOL's unique platform and role has been enshrined in nearly 50 United Nations General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, the majority focused on combating terrorism.

Organised Crime – A National Security Threat

While terrorism is a recognised danger to global security, it is clear that organised crime – in all its different forms – is becoming stronger and more powerful, its influence growing around the world. Today, it constitutes a national security threat. We are seeing increasing infiltration of the legal economy and politics combined with a rise of violence in the streets, both of which require a renewed commitment to increased international police cooperation.

If one group clearly represents the organised crime threat to international peace and security, it is the 'Ndrangheta. Involved in a wide range of organised criminal activities, from drug trafficking and money laundering to extortion and fixing public contracts, the 'Ndrangheta has infiltrated political and economic environments across more than 40 countries – generating an estimated 50 billion euros each year. This was why with the Italian authorities we launched the INTERPOL Cooperation Against 'Ndrangheta project (I-CAN). Since its creation in 2021, I-CAN has resulted in the arrest of nearly 50 'Ndrangheta members all over the world, including several high-level members. These include Rocco Morabito, who was considered one of the world's leading drug traffickers. He was the subject of a Red Notice issued by Italy in 1995. Arrested in Uruguay in 2017 he escaped from prison in 2019. He was apprehended again in Brazil on 24 May 2021 thanks to the support provided by the I-CAN project, and extradited to Italy in July 2022.

The complexity of this organised crime network, like other criminal groups cannot be addressed bilaterally. Without coordination facilitated by INTERPOL, these arrests – and many others – would not have happened.

Criminality Across the Globe

The pandemic; armed conflicts worldwide; climate change; energy issues and poverty are among the forces influencing criminality across the globe. Each crisis is an opportunity for criminals; together, they represent a perfect storm.

Adding to the complexity are the challenges posed by cybercrime, which by its very nature is borderless.

Cybercrime stands, without a doubt, as one of the most challenging and fastest growing criminal threats faced by the international community. The threat is severe and far-reaching. Indeed, the first-ever INTERPOL Global Crime Trend report showed the majority of our membership considered cybercrime, and financial crimes as the world's leading crime threats. And, since its publication

in October 2022, we have seen an increase in incidents relating to ransomware, malware attacks, phishing, hacking and data theft. Ransomware attacks in particular have continued to grow in sophistication, focus and stealth. The barriers to entry for cybercrime have lowered dramatically and we are now seeing cybercrime-as-a-service tools that can be purchased for the price of a takeaway meal.

One organised crime group which has almost become a by-word for online crime is Black Axe – a violent mafia-style gang renowned for cyber-enabled financial fraud.

In May 2023, INTERPOL coordinated Operation Jackal which mobilised police forces, financial crime units and cybercrime agencies across 21 countries around the world to deliver a targeted strike against Black Axe and similar West African organised crime groups.

The results from just two weeks of action coordinated by our Financial Crime and Anti-Corruption Centre (IFCACC) included the seizure or freezing of nearly EUR 2.2 million, more than 100 arrests and 208 bank accounts blocked.

It was through IFCACC that we developed our Global Rapid Intervention of Payments project, I-GRIP, which enables member countries to submit and handle time-critical requests to follow, intercept or provisionally freeze illicit proceeds of crime around the world. Within the first year of the project, the mechanism helped intercept more than USD 190 million believed to be the proceeds of online fraud.

Artificial Intelligence as a Driver

While we are developing solutions to current problems, we can expect developments in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to emerge as a driver of increased cyber and cyber-enabled crime activity. Large-scale extortion, the production of more sophisticated spam fishing mails and text, fake or cloned identities, or the development of the next generation of ransomware attacks are just a few examples. Technology is not good or bad, it is neutral. The outcome depends on by who and how it is being used.

AI technologies have huge potential to support the work of law enforcement.

With the massive increase of data in every police case – and with the growing technical complexity of many criminal activities – we in law enforcement need to leverage AI simply to try and keep up. Nevertheless, it is essential that this is done in a responsible way, in line with policing principles, human rights and ethical standards. This is why, with the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, we developed the *'Toolkit for Responsible AI*

Innovation in Law Enforcement' to support law enforcement agencies navigate the complex task of institutionalising responsible AI.

While national authorities retain full autonomy over their AI journey, the Toolkit is aimed at helping law enforcement policymakers navigate the debates and discussions that form an integral part of this process.

Technology For the Future

Police data systems have proliferated on a regional and sub-regional basis, opening new opportunities. But without a coherent global information-sharing architecture, the world will only see new layers for police data to push through.

These trends share a common thread: the sheer volume of information and international flows is making it increasingly difficult to identify what is important and what is just noise. Ensuring INTERPOL remains at the forefront of innovation both using and providing the technological tools necessary for effective international police cooperation, is essential. Criminals are already exploiting the Metaverse, presenting significant challenges to investigators, as not all acts that are criminalised in the physical world are considered crimes when committed in the virtual world.

However, in order for law enforcement to understand the Metaverse, they must experience it. This was why, at our 90th INTERPOL General Assembly in New Delhi, we unveiled the first ever Metaverse specifically designed for law enforcement worldwide.

The inconvenient truth is that many nations are ill-equipped to address these challenges. In a post-pandemic environment, where a global financial downturn is upon us, the scenario is hardly going to change.

This is the purpose of the INTERPOL *'Capabilities for Operational Relevance'* (I-CORE) programme. The I-CORE vision is about embracing the promise new technologies offer us today. And it is this very vision that INTERPOL's global membership supported in its unanimous endorsement of I-CORE at our General Assembly in 2019. Smart algorithms, biometrics and data mining are waiting to be placed at the service of police officers and the populations they protect, across the globe. Every year, checks made from National Central Bureaus, borders and in our streets yield more than a million hits against these databases. Investigations in one part of the world leading to the solving of crimes half a world away. I-CORE is about building on INTERPOL's solid foundations, and exponentially augmenting the value it returns to the frontlines. For developing nations and emerging markets, I-CORE promises to facilitate increased

participation in the global network of law enforcement cooperation. Data is the lifeblood of policing and an essential part of INTERPOL's mission is to make sure that information gets where it is needed, when it is needed.

Key Third Parties

Effective multilateral cooperation is the only way to tackle today's transnational threats. Duplicating information channels, contact points, and operational efforts risks information falling through the cracks. It risks criminals taking advantage of known gaps in coordination.

Over the years, INTERPOL has developed partnerships with regional bodies and their respective law enforcement arms – such as the African Union (Afripol), the League of Arab States (AIMC), the Police Community of the Americas (Ameripol), ASEAN (Aseanapol) the European Union (Europol and Frontex) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCCPol).

This cooperation is crucial to avoid duplication, close information gaps, and maximise resources while addressing the terrorist threat through a regional tailored approach. What is clear is that international action can bring concrete results in the field against crime and terrorism, when applied systematically and consistently.

The COVID–19 pandemic has been a source of profound disruption for law enforcement across the globe called to the frontlines of the public health crisis, addressing even more challenging tasks, and a new, unique operational landscape.

It is addressing current and emerging threats that INTERPOL will continue to act as the gateway for international police information to all regional law enforcement bodies and national agencies in our mission to make the world a safer place.

As we look ahead to 100 more years of police cooperation, it is important to focus on what have already achieved as global effective model.

A model based on sovereignty, neutrality and reciprocity.

A model based on operational security, and voluntary engagement.

A model that we have delivered results on.

A model that works.

Reference of the article according to APA regulation

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