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Operational Intelligence and the Spanish Guardia Civil's Carteia Plan: An Exploratory Thematic Analysis of Police Officer Perceptions and Experiences

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Abstract

Introduction: This exploratory study examines the effectiveness of intelligence services in combating drug trafficking in southern Spain, with a focus on the integrated efforts of the Spanish Guardia Civil's Carteia Plan and its Regional Analysis and Intelligence Center against Drug Trafficking (CRAIN). The purpose is to assess, through the police officers' experience, how these initiatives enhance operational information collection and intelligence to counteract the pervasive threat of drug trafficking in the Campo de Gibraltar region.
Methods: Building on previous research, a qualitative approach was employed to conduct this paper, incorporating a survey and interviews with both law enforcement and intelligence personnel. The study also involved a comprehensive review of policy documents and operational reports from the Guardia Civil and CRAIN to evaluate their integrated intelligence model.
Results: The findings highlight that the integrated intelligence and operational strategies conducted by CRAIN in close collaboration with the Guardia Civil's GAR special operation group significantly improve the efficacy of not only drug interdiction efforts, but also of any strategy against organized crime. The plan's coordinated initiatives have led to a notable increase in drug seizures and arrests, demonstrating the effectiveness of enhanced intelligence gathering and inter-agency cooperation.
Conclusions: The research concludes that an integrated intelligence framework is essential for effectively combating organized crime. The implementation of the Carteia Plan and CRAIN's functioning underscores the importance of comprehensive and adaptive approaches. Policy recommendations include fostering stronger inter-agency collaboration and promoting a transversal intelligence culture across different operational units, essential to address the dynamic and multifaceted nature of drug trafficking.

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Introduction

Operational intelligence has become an essential component in the formulation and execution of public security strategies in an increasingly dynamic and complex world (Kenney, 2003). Its ability to efficiently collect, process and apply information is not only crucial to anticipate emerging threats, but also to address criminal phenomena deeply rooted in specific local contexts.

Such is the case of the Campo de Gibraltar county in the province of Cádiz, in southern Spain. This location that connects the Mediterranean with the Atlantic has facilitated the establishment of commercial and transnational dynamics that not only involve legal commodities, but also various illicit trades (Ameripol, 2013; EMCDDA, 2022). For decades, this area has been one of the main entry points for drug trafficking into Europe, particularly hashish from Morocco (Aidi, 2020; Gómez-Céspedes, 2012; Sansó-Rubert, 2005). In that sense, according to the data summarized in the Spanish 2022 Annual Report of the Attorney General*,* Cádiz leads Spain in total drug seizures, capturing 78% of cocaine and 50% of hashish entering through Andalusia. Nevertheless, this report notes a reduction in the total quantity of seized hashish and a significant 78.4% upsurge in cocaine compared to the previous period, but hashish prevails as the main substance in illicit drug trafficking operations.[1]

The geographical and socioeconomic conditions of the Campo de Gibraltar have favored the development of criminal networks that have consolidated a sophisticated logistical infrastructure (Badine & Barona, 2019; Presidency of the Government, 2019, 39). These criminal organizations have been able to take advantage not only of the geographical proximity to North Africa, but also of the weaknesses derived from the existence of an underground economy in the region, which facilitates the flow of illegal goods and services (Rivera & Sansó-Rubert, 2021).

High rates of unemployment and early school dropouts in the region, together with a long history of smuggling due to region's border condition (Cepillo, 2023), both by land with British Gibraltar and by sea with Morocco, have led a considerable part of the population to rely on drug trafficking as their main livelihood (Aidi, 2020; Corral, 2019, López et al., 2016). This social tolerance of drug trafficking is further sustained by a form of narco-welfare state, where drug traffickers provide financial support and services to the community – the Robin Hood myth (Blume, 2021; Noguera, 2018; Sansó-Rubert, 2016) – , thereby gaining the loyalty and support of the local population

[1] 2022 Report of the Special Anti-drug prosecutor's Office of Spain, p. 563 https://pnsd.sanidad.gob.es/noticiasEventos/actualidad/2023_Actualidadnoticias/pdf/20230927_FEAD_Memoria2022_Digital.pdf

and complicating efforts to combat this illicit activity (Molina, 2006; Sansó-Rubert, 2005). The effects of this tolerance have transcended economic and social borders, even infiltrating state structures and leading to a systematic disregard for the legal order, which has resulted in the creation of spaces of impunity in the region (Aidi, 2020; Clemente, 2022; García Pinzón & Mantilla, 2021; Noguera, 2018). As a result, criminal structures have taken place, dynamically adapting to the consecutive repressive measures implemented by law enforcement agencies (Corral, 2019; Europol, 2021; Moscoso, 2003; Rivera & Sansó-Rubert, 2021).

The magnitude and impact of this criminal phenomenon in the region highlighted the limitations of conventional police strategies. In this regard, operational intelligence emerged as a fundamental component in the fight against drug trafficking in this area. Not only a swift response capacity is required, but also the deep understanding of criminal movements and operational structures. In this context, the Spanish Guardia Civil's Carteia Plan emerged as an innovative model, combining the efforts of different law enforcement units to meet the the objectives of restoring the principle of authority and improving both objective and subjective security in Campo de Gibraltar.[2] A key element of this plan is the role played by the CRAIN, the Regional Center for Analysis and Intelligence against Drug Trafficking, which is at the forefront of operational intelligence. Its direct and continuous linkage with Guardia Civil's operational units is key to translating strategic analysis into rapid and coordinated actions in the field, an interaction identified as critical to improving effectiveness in intricate security contexts.

As a criminal threats become more sophisticated, the ability of a system to generate useful and actionable intelligence becomes a determining factor for operational success. However, there are still gaps in the understanding of the flow of information between these contexts, and studying operational intelligence from officers' perceptions is crucial to understanding how decisions are made in complex contexts. In policing, decisions are not always based solely on objective data, but are influenced by officers' subjective perceptions of the situation. These factors can affect the prioritization of information, interpretation of data and actions taken based on intelligence. By focusing on these perceptions, a more accurate view of decision-making dynamics is obtained, something that a purely objective analysis could not capture.

While this article is part of a broader project whose general objective is to evaluate the applicability of Carteia's framework (see Figure 1) to different criminal scenarios, the specific objective of this paper is to explore and

[2] (August 14th, 2019). Departamento de Seguridad Nacional, *Lucha contra el Crimen Organizado: Plan Especial para la Seguridad para el Campo de Gibraltar* https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/lucha-contra-crimen-organizado-plan-especial-seguridad-para-campo-gibraltar

understand the internal mechanisms of the intelligence apparatus from the perspectives and experiences of key actors: the Guardia Civil officers serving in the plan. Thus, the article seeks to describe how data is managed, interpreted, and used within the systems, from the agent's perception, in order to illuminate the processes that contribute to the generation of actionable intelligence for operational success. To that end, the following research questions were established:

RQ-1: *How does the CRAIN generate actionable intelligence that enhances operational outcomes within the plan?* In addition to that, and to fully capture the intelligence cycle in the Carteia Plan, the following support questions were posed:

- *RQ-1.1: What are the key sources of information used by the CRAIN to generate this intelligence?*
- *RQ-1.2: What process does the information gathered follow to be transformed into useful intelligence?*

RQ-2: *What are the distinguishing characteristics that confer a leap towards operational intelligence in the Carteia Plan?*

The remainder of this text is organized into five sections. The first section reviews the existing literature on intelligence in law enforcement, the second section describes the methodological design used, the third one presents the research findings and discusses it with previous literature. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

Operational Intelligence Against Organized Crime

Intelligence has been the subject of extensive analysis in security literature, which stablishes its essential role in threat identification and neutralization (Beer, 2008; Dudley, 2018; Harding, 2014; Hughes, 2012; Lahneman, 2010; Matei & Halladay, 2019; Prunchuckun, 2011). From a theoretical perspective, intelligence may defined as the strategic knowledge about a real or potential adversary, with the purpose of supporting informed decision making in conflictual contexts, whether warlike, criminal or competitive (Ilardi, 2010). This conceptualization underlines the importance of intelligence, not only in the military field, but also in the management of threats of different nature. As a result, the expansion of the use and study of intelligence in recent decades has been remarkable.

In the context of this research - security, organized crime and law enforcement - the literature review reveals a consensus that drug trafficking constitutes a significant threat to state security (Bird & Tagziria, 2022; Fajemirokun, 2024; Griffith, 2024; Novak et al., 2011; Orlova & Moore, 2004; Patabendige, 2021; Serrano, 2007; Sung, 2004). In regions where state fragility is a structural problem, criminal groups exploit these weakness, occupying the

vacuum left by the state in controlling certain territories and providing security (Bird & Tagziria, 2022). These organizations not only tend to operate outside the law, but also possess the capacity to infiltrate state structures through corruption (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2018), which contributes to further weakening national stability. As Serrano (2007) points out, governance is also eroded when the parallel economies generated by organized crime supplant state functions, exacerbating the lack of opportunities and thus strengthening the power of criminal organizations.

In the economic sphere, drug trafficking has been identified by various studies as a factor that generates distortions in legal markets, affecting tax revenues destined to finance essential services (Sullivan, 1996). In turn, drug trafficking increases state security spending, creating a vicious cycle that further aggravates the living conditions of the affected population. The convergence between drug trafficking and other illicit trafficking, such as people or arms, amplifies the magnitude of the challenge and complicates police efforts in the fight against this phenomenon (Hughes et al., 2017; Koné, 202; Tan, 2023; Uhm & Wong, 2021; UNODC, 2013). This fusion between different illegal markets strengthens criminal networks by diversifying their sources of income and expanding their logistical networks (OECD, 2016) and the close relationship with money laundering, which facilitates the insertion of illicit capital into the formal economy, introduces, as Savona and Berlusconi (2015) point out, additional barriers to the authorities' ability to track and dismantle these networks. This process of money laundering also reinforces the ability of criminal organizations to operate under the guise of legality (AUSTRAC, 2014), increasing their impunity and consolidating their power in spaces where the reach of the State is already limited.

From a social point of view, research such as of Sergi and Storti's (2021) highlights that, in communities marked by structural unemployment and lack of opportunities, drug trafficking may not only be accepted, but also perceived as a legitimate source of income that substitutes for legal alternatives. This generates a dependency scheme that consolidates these groups as welfare providers, reinforcing their own structures, both operational and financial (Europol, 2021) and further complicating its control and the implementation of policies.

Studies agree on the fact that on many cases, exceed the state's capacity for control, thus posing a direct threat to them (Novak et al., 2011). This has led to a growing need to redefine security strategies, in which intelligence has gained terrain. Several factors have contributed to the increased interest in its application in law enforcement, but mostly, the limitations of reactive approaches that have characterized criminal analysis (Hammond, 2010; Ratcliffe, 2005; Weisburd & Eck, 2024). Renowned scholars in the field stress the need for a preventive approach, which meets the demands of the current international security scenario, and Intelligence-Led Policing (ILP) has emerged as a key approach.

This approach requires a deep understanding of the operational environment and the organization of work in security agencies and, in that sense, at the strategic level, intelligence offers a descriptive vision of the adversary, seeks to identify patterns, predict behaviors, and anticipate possible vulnerabilities in the enemy. Nevertheless, hurdles to this approach exist in the organizational architecture of agencies (Crous, 2015; Ratcliffe, 2008; Summers & Rossmo, 2019). Epistemic infrastructure, as defined by Lindsay (2017), refers to the network that enables and constrains the ability of organizations to understand its environment (Hutchins, 1995; Mindell, 2002; Orlikowski, 2000), and issues like «data friction» (Edwards, 2010; Lindsay, 2017) are problems to consider, as they limit the ability to generate useful intelligence. Even if all the information needed to foresee a threat has been collected, the lack of effective flow leads to signals warning of threats often being fragmented at different points, rendering the intelligence useless. As Hammond (2010, 708) argues, «information exists to be correlated, evaluated, and continually subjected to re-evaluation, based on the total context of what is available to the organization as a whole», so only when information is collected, organized and centralized at a single point it will possible to generate the right inferences for informed decision making. Compartmentalization of information leads to a lack of interagency collaboration, which affects the ability to analyze data from multiple perspectives and can result in the «cognitive bias» that arises from analyzing a situation through the lens of a single specialty (Martínez, 2016), so to actually optimize intelligence products, it is necessary to have both a variety of analysts, but also of sources (De León et al., 2023), as Lindsay (2017) notes that errors in data collection may not always be random, but may be systematically biased if the actors involved in their collection have some vested interest in what is collected and transmitted.

But intelligence is not limited to analyzing data and delivering intelligence products, it also involves response. Mastering information and rapidly generating strategic and actionable knowledge are crucial in the fight against organized crime. Here is where the Ops-Intel (Lindsay, 2017), strike and intelligence (Hardy, 2023; Mann et al., 1995) combination becomes relevant as, if supported by a strong intelligence infrastructure, it transforms data into concrete operational decisions creating an iterative cycle where intelligence feeds operations and operations feeds the intelligence pool guiding actions in real time (Martínez Viquera, 2016; Stout & Warner, 2018). In the words of Lindsay (2017, p. 12), intelligence to «improve raids» and raids to improve intelligence. This bi-directional flow ensures that each operation provides information that feeds back into analysis, while intelligence precisely directs interventions. The Ops-Intel synergy makes it possible to both detect patterns and respond quickly, strengthening coordination and agility in complex arenas like the fight against drugs.

Method

This study is part of a broader research project that evaluates the Carteia Plan. The main objective of the greater project is to evaluate and assess the Carteia Plan's structure (Figure 1) for its possible extension to other areas of organized crime, as well as to identify areas of improvements in its implementation. Methodically, the evaluation of Carteia – the objective of that wider project – was based on a categorization of different indicators in three dimensions of a public policy: strategic, operational and social impact based both on the EMMIE Framework for public policy evaluation (Johnson et al., 2015) and on the dimensions established by Chavarría (2016).

Like Figure 1, the table shown in Figure 2 serves as a bridge between the bigger project and this specific article. On the one hand, it illustrates the different dimensions of the plan – strategic, operational and social – which are common to every public policy. On the other, subcategories 1 to 7 illustrate the specific

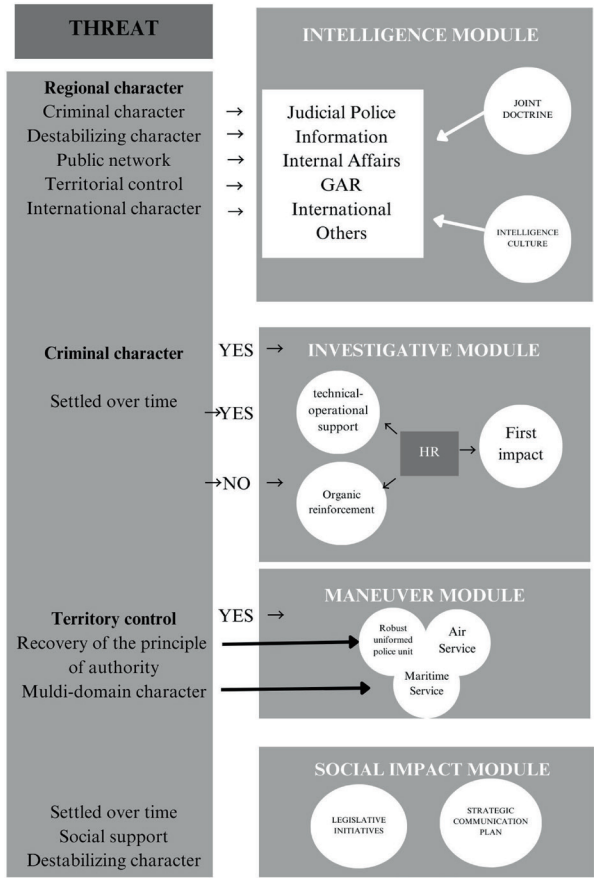

Figure 1. Plan Carteia structure. Elaborated by civilguardsman and Dr. Gaona and Clara Bañares

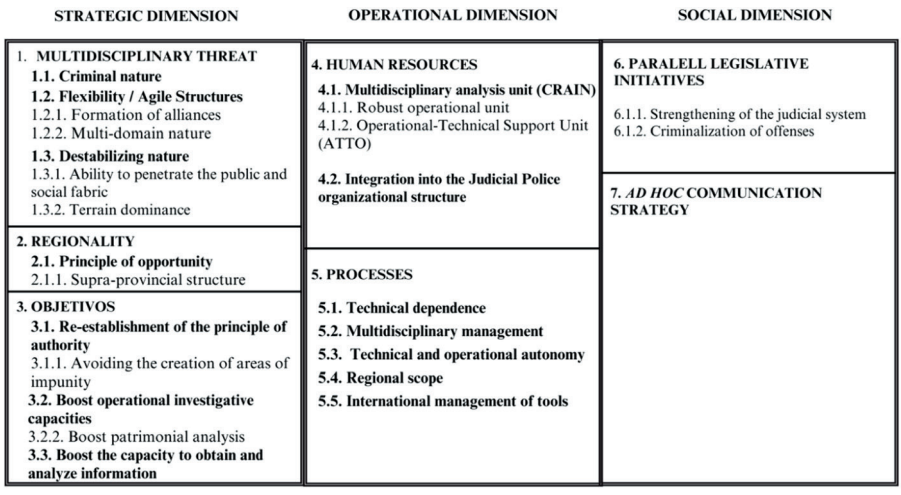

Figure 2. Category tree for the evaluation of the Plan Carteia. Elaborated by civilguardsman and Dr. Gaona and Clara Bañares

characteristics of the Carteia Plan, which were derived from the data obtained in the fieldwork and its analysis. In particular, subcategories in 4 and 5, focused on operational aspects, delimit the focus of this research.

This article focuses specifically on the operational dimension of the plan, analyzing how intelligence practices and the so-called "Ops-Intel fusion" (Lindsay, 2017, 16) are carried out in this context. Its methodological design follows a qualitative approach justified by the exploratory and the strategic nature of the research, which seeks to understand the internal dynamics of the Carteia Plan.

Participants

Participants consisted of 22 male police officers, all of whom belonged to the OCON, the *ad hoc* operational structure used for the initial impact phase of the operation (2018–2022). Although additional detailed demographic data on the participants is not available, it can be indicated that all have experience in this unit, ensuring that they have an in-depth knowledge and common familiarity with operational processes and intelligence dynamics within the context studied. Following Marshall (1996, p. 523), some participants are 'richer' than others, suggesting that "these people are more likely to provide insight and understanding". Thus, eligibility conditions were oriented towards their potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of the research questions.

Materials

This research was based on a combination of qualitative data sources, including two operational reports on the plan, specialized literature on the history of the

GAR unit, interviews and surveys, with the objective of gaining an in-depth understanding of the processes related to the operational intelligence cycle and its impact on operational results.

The survey was administered to the entire sample of participants (N = 22) and semi-structured interviews were conducted with three of them (n = 3). These instruments were carefully designed to ensure that the responses obtained were representative, relevant and aligned with the research objectives. The survey consisted of five open-ended questions, specifically formulated to explore the officers' perceptions and experiences of the operational intelligence cycle and information gathering, analysis and utilization within the Carteia Plan.

The content of the instruments was designed considering both previous academic literature and the operational reports. In addition, the questions were tailored to the key themes identified during the broader project in which this study is framed, ensuring internal consistency and alignment of the data collection instruments with the research objectives. This approach aims to reliably reflect participants' experiences and perceptions of the topic (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The questions were:

1) What does each of the units that integrate CRAIN contribute to it as an analysis center? Would you add/strengthen any other specialty?
2) Is the structure of the plan adequate?
3) What is the process that information follows from the time it enters the analysis center until it leaves?
4) How are information orders directed and how do they affect operations and investigations? (How does the CRAIN generate actionable intelligence that enhances operational outcomes within the plan?)
5) What are the distinguishing characteristics that confer a leap towards operational intelligence in the Carteia Plan?

Procedure

Contacts with the participants were established through the second author, who acts as a participant observer due to his previous experience in operations within the special operations unit studied. This direct link with the officers allowed for a privileged access to the field and to a specific sample of officers with knowledge and experience relevant to the study, ensuring the relevance of the participants to address the research objectives. The selection of this sample was not random, but purposive (Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011), ensuring that participants were chosen based on key criteria: being police officers (a) belonging to either intelligence or operational units of the plan and (b) with direct experience in the operational intelligence cycle, particularly in the collection and analysis of intelligence.

The design of the questionnaire was carried out in a stepwise manner to ensure its application. First, the instrument was preliminarily designed and

reviewed by two experts in the field of operational intelligence and in research methodology, which reinforced the validity of the instrument. Then, it was pilot-tested with a small group of participants. Once ethical authorization was obtained, ensuring that informed consent was obtained voluntarily and freely, with the guarantee that participants could withdraw from the study at any time, the full data collection continued. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, strict security measures were implemented in the storage, management and processing of data throughout the research process.

The survey's questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions that captured a broad view and a variety of general experiences and perceptions, offering a representative view of the group. On the other hand, the interviews were semi-structured, which contributed to an enrichment of the information obtained through the survey, providing nuanced details and examples that probably could not have been obtained through the questionnaire responses.

Given the operational context and time constraints, surveys were conducted online, which ensured the convenience and accessibility of the participants. Responses were automatically registered. In addition, in-person interviews (n = 1) and telephone interviews (n = 2) were conducted using audio recorded via WhatsApp, a tool widely accessible for agents. To safeguard the validity and integrity of the data obtained, all interview audios were thoroughly transcribed and reviewed to ensure that no relevant details were lost during the analysis process. Then, the datasets generated from the survey and interviews were combined into a single qualitative database for analysis. The decision to merge both datasets rests on the fact that both sources explored the same topics, yet interviews provided richer and more nuanced perspectives. In consequence, a single coding process was applied to the combined dataset. This integrated approach allowed to reflect both general patterns and operational particularities from the perspective of the officers, contributing to a richer subsequent analysis.

The time frame of data collection ranges from November 2023 to June 2024, ensuring that data reflect the most recent status of the operations.

Data Analysis

An exploratory thematic analysis (see Thomas & Harden, 2008) was conducted on the data collected. This approach is presented as a proven method that preserves an explicit link between the primary text and the conclusion, thus guaranteeing the transparency of results (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic analysis more broadly is an approach recognized for its ability to identify, organize and interpret meaningful patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012), for the understanding of the participants' shared experiences and perceptions on the topic under study.

To that end, the analytical process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2021) six phases: data familiarization, systematic analysis, topic search and review, topic definition and naming, and report writing. In this approach,

researchers not only present transcribed data, but process them to provide meaningful information with practical and theoretical implications (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse, 1994).

Almost inevitably, this sort of analysis involves 'judgments about coding, thematizing, and contextualizing the data' (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2), highlighting the active role of the researcher in generating themes (Thompson, 2022). This was our case: the previous knowledge of the authors, either by the participation in the operation and in the intelligence cycle, or by the time dedicated to the research on this plan, there was a risk of interference in the faithful generation of new knowledge with previous knowledge. For instance, prior to data collection, the second author was aware of the dual role of the GAR in information gathering and intelligence and in direct intervention, given his role as a participant observer. But researchers are responsible to recognize this and assure rigor in the process of data analysis (Nowell et al., 2017), and we acknowledged this issue and did not discard data or quickly jump into conclusions based on what we previously knew. Thus, this acknowledgement is important, noting that themes and theories represent primary data and not the team's initial assumptions. Far from introducing biases that could compromise validity, our knowledge allowed us to comprehensively place data in codes and generate themes in a more coherent manner, bringing an enriched and better contextualized perspective to the analytical process.

The process of thematic analysis is graphically presented as flowcharts in in Appendix A, which shows the first and second order codes we identified, as well as the themes we generated upon them. Additionally, it should be noted that reliability of data analysis was ensured through the strategy of observant participation, as a member of the operation was directly involved in the research.

With respect to the last step, the elaboration of the report, while some researchers prefer to separate the results section from the discussion, in the present paper these sections were merged as previous literature and collected data hold strong connections (Braun & Clarke, 2012), providing a more concise and complete presentation of results.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the research, voicing participant's responses with exemplary quotations, and discusses them with previous literature on the field. The analysis shows how the first-order codes are grouped under second-order categories, allowing an integrated understanding of the different elements contributing to the general themes: (I) Operational Capacity and Capability and (II) Intelligence Cycle (see Appendix A). The relationships and their contribution to the overall research are explained below.

I. Operational Capacity and Capability

Theme one highlights the importance of the dual operational-intelligence structure, which allows the organization to integrate strategic analysis with tactical capabilities, optimizing the planning and execution of operations.

The Northern Model, based on the experience against ETA, exemplifies how this operational-intelligence structure can be adapted to solve specific challenges, combining actions of police impact with an analytical approach. For its part, the GAR's dual role as a versatile unit in intelligence and operational operations reinforces this dual capability. According to participants, this unit acts as a bridge between the strategic and operational dimensions. Interviewees emphasize that this unit, because of its "dual role of intelligence gathering and direct intervention," operates as a "glue", stated participant 20, facilitating interoperability and feeding the intelligence cycle. This dual approach allows for efficient response to threats and feeds the intelligence cycle of the plan.

Academic literature supports these perceptions, as De Castro et al. (2024, p. 4) highlight that the experience of the GAR in the fight against ETA and jihadist terrorism developed "serious intelligence skills". This operational model, known as the Northern model (Sánchez Corbí, 2016), integrates intelligence and tactical capabilities, overcoming the historical separation between action and intelligence (Hardy, 2023) and a combination whose usefulness has been noted in the Academia (Burcher & Whelan, 2019; Carter & Carter, 2009; Hammond, 2010; Hardy, 2024, Lindsay, 2017; McGarrell, Freilich & Chermak, 2007). As a contribution to the study, these insights demonstrate that organizational responsiveness is a key pillar for the operational effectiveness and adaptive capacity of the organization in the face of various threats.

Human resources constituted a fundamental axis for the theme, since the capabilities and competencies of people within the organization are the driving force behind its operational effectiveness. Participants were asked about the contributions to Carteia of the units that make up the CRAIN, as well as the possibility of including other units not initially contemplated. The responses indicated that specialized units from the Information Service, Judicial Police, Internal Affairs, Maritime Service and the GAR collaborate in the fight against drug trafficking, "without prejudice to the possibility that other units may be incorporated at the request of the operation command" (participant 20). Participant 8 expanded on this idea by pointing out that many of these units have "remarkable capabilities in intelligence gathering that reflect the threat", for example, the GAR is essential for obtaining information on potentially destabilizing threats, or the Internal Affairs Service for corruption cases, an idea participants 7, 10 and 11 also mentioned. In the specific case of the social dimension of drug trafficking in the Campo de Gibraltar, the Judicial Police was identified as the unit that could contribute the most to the operation. An agent from that unit (participant 22) stressed that the key is that judicial police

officers are local, since "you don't know what is going on if you are not from here, if you don't know the local people and their dynamics". In words of participant 3, "HUMINT remains irreplaceable for understanding local contexts and accessing information that cannot be obtained by technical means".

Responses highlighted that this multidisciplinary structure makes it possible to generate intelligence from an integral vision, encompassing destabilizing threats, criminal investigation, corruption, the maritime domain and territorial control in the same hub. "Intelligence analysis is not just about processing data; it's about connecting dots, interpreting patterns, and understanding the broader context" said the first of the interviewees (participant 20), meaning that their job as analysts was not to deliver information but meaning, in his words, "to turn raw data into something actually actionable". This epistemic infrastructure, as defined by Lindsay (2017), enables to have a deep and whole understanding of the operational environment, which is a key issue in law enforcement environments (De León et al., 2023; Hutchins, 1995; Mindell, 2002; Orlikowski, 2000). In particular, Hammond's (2010) point states that intelligence should be placed in the whole context so that decision making is informed. This approach also overcomes the potential cognitive bias (Martínez, 2016) arising from an analysis limited to a single perspective.

The combination of these capabilities generates synergies that bring significant expertise to the fight against drug trafficking, allowing to see things as a whole and acting in consequence. "Diversity in analysis is not just an advantage, it is essential to ensure that our conclusions reflect the complex reality we face", added participant 9. Thus, having analysts from different specialties with access to fragments of different types of information, if properly integrated, can reveal patterns or red flags that could be missed otherwise. In this sense, CRAIN's ability to generate actionable intelligence from diverse data sets enables more informed decision making by identifying early signals that might otherwise go unnoticed, which supports previous academic literature such as Hammond (2010) and Lindsay (2017).

Participants also highlighted the importance of a cross-cutting intelligence culture as a key factor with interventions like "by developing concrete, transversal intelligence skills we not only understand the criminal landscape from the different units, either technical or analytical, but we are also able to deliver more effective responses" (participant 16). The importance placed by police officers on interoperability among units and efficiency in information collection and sharing is evident, as it helps to holistically understand and respond to the criminal landscape. Closely linked with the generation and seizing of synergies, this transversal intelligence culture is an essential aspect of cooperation, ensuring that the various units and actors work in an integrated manner towards common objectives. As Arcos and Palacios (2019) state, intelligence organizations may have a set of assumptions about how intelligence analysis should be conducted, or value certain skills over others. In this case,

GAR's dual capabilities in information, intelligence and impact functions, not only guides the rest of the plan's operational specialties, but also coheres the units inspiring a cross-cutting intelligence culture and doctrine, fundamental for a seamless leap in operational intelligence (Mendosa, 2016).

A further discussion point was the competence and experience of the staff within the organization, and how accumulated knowledge strengthens the organization's operational capacity: "The combination of the maneuver and intelligence function, together with the international cooperation established over the years with France, and the professionalization of specialized units (GAR), laid the foundations for effective networks against drug trafficking. These capabilities, developed in the context of the fight against ETA, have been key to adapting operational and intelligence strategies to combat contemporary organized crime" (participant 20).

The experience gained with ETA highlights deep institutional learning that not only enhances tactical capability but also reinforces overall strategies for dealing with similar situations in the future, like the case of drug trafficking in southern Spain (González, 2015; Hernández, 2014). This thematic axis contributes by showing that organizations can effectively address complex threats based on practical experience and accumulated technical competence.

The Carteia Plan is a total restructuring of the Civil Guard's police organization. In this regard, participants were asked *Do you consider the structure of the plan adequate*? 95.45% of participants agreed that this structure improves the quality of operations, as 'combining intelligence and operations into a single structure allows to work in sync, reduce response times and increase accuracy' (participant 20), allowing that 'intelligence is not only gathered, but translated into effective actions immediately' (participant 1). Though this combination, the plan overcomes architectural limitations typical of intelligence organizations (Crous, 2015; Ratcliff, 2008; Summers & Rossmo, 2019) by integrating operations and intelligence (Lindsay, 2017). Only a participant noted the lack of effective control across multiple domains as a limitation in the structure, by stating that "air and maritime control would benefit from greater specialization".

This two-fold design allows "coordinating police operations against this threat, giving top priority to economic and laundering investigations to reach the highest levels of criminal organizations" (Clemente, 2022, p. 70). This approach aligns with Carter (1990) and Stout and Warner (2018), who argue the intelligence function goes beyond investigative support.

In that sense, overall operational capability is enhanced by full operational autonomy, which gives units the flexibility to execute missions without relying on constant approvals or lengthy bureaucratic chains. This autonomy, combined with overall logistical and tactical capabilities, ensures high effectiveness in changing scenarios. This axis underscores operational self-sufficiency, enabling units to act decisively and efficiently in accomplishing their objectives. This finds academic support in Bar-Joseph and Youssef's work (2014, p. 1),

who state that, in complex conflicts, "the quality of the decision-making process and of the available intelligence information is critical and can determine the outcome".

II. Intelligence Cycle

The effectiveness of intelligence tasks lies in a well-structured cycle. In that sense, participants were asked *What is the process that information follows from the time it enters the analysis center until it leaves?*

The request for information emerged as a key theme in the survey. As participant 2 mentioned, "we will not collect information efficiently if it is not clear what we are looking for and why". This participant (2) also declared that the initial orientation phase "defines the whole process, guiding the information gathering process", emphasizing how this initial phase was a key one in the intelligence cycle, as it allowed to focus intelligence resources on specific threats. In the same vein, the importance of maintaining accurate and up-to-date situational awareness and operational risks was noted in the responses from participants, who stated that "If you don't have accurate and up-to-date information, any decision you make will be based on assumptions and not facts; that can be disastrous in an operation" (participant 12) and that "the key to mitigating risks is to fully understand them before you act" (participant 6). As Bierdmann et al. (2004, p. 3–3) note, "accurate situational awareness of the battlespace is essential prior to all intelligence decisions and activities".

Another topic that was identified with respect to the intelligence cycle were the use of different sources for intelligence (HUMINT, IMINT), though interventions like "IMINT provides a clear and detailed view of critical operational areas, especially in when searching for *narcoboats*" (participant 5) or "HUMINT remains irreplaceable for understanding local contexts and accessing information that cannot be obtained by technical means" (participant 3). A support for these is found in the literature, as Lesidrenska and Bancheva (2013, p. 160) highlight that the requirements for quality intelligence are increasing, which implies a combined use of HUMINT, SIGINT, IMINT and OSINT.

Data showed that the assessment by the Chief Commander sets the tone and priorities for the intelligence cycle. In this sense, clauses like *establishing priorities*, *processing data* and *information prioritization* define the course of action in this phase. The definition of priorities ensures that resources are properly allocated, optimizing the time and matching it with the analytical capacity of the units integrating CRAIN. Additionally, in this stage, analysts should "contextualize the information request to determine which information to collect" (Roth et al., 2006), a critical step to ensure relevance and accuracy in the information obtained. As Roth et al. (2006) point out, this phase is key because it allows analysts to structure their search based on a clear understanding of operational needs.

The participants' responses reflected the intelligence cycle in Carteia (see Figure 3). A preliminary screening phase occurs – "the process of filtering information ensures that only what is relevant makes it to the next stages; it is the first step in avoiding noise" (participant 19) – were information is evaluated in terms of quality and relevance to the objectives, similarly found in Bar-Joseph and Yossef's (2014) work and Biermann's et al. (2004, p. 3–6), who note that "an intelligence officer will never get all the relevant information that he seeks, but will be bombarded by partial, false, unreliable, and redundant pieces of information which he will have to filter". After those relevance and adequateness checks, "needs, objectives and timelines are negotiated and established with the analyst" stated the second interviewee (participant 21). Findings reflect that the processing of collected data and establishment of links with an analyst ensures that key information flows without delay, an aspect that Ziback et al. (2022, p. 15) highlight as essential for decision making: "although the value of intelligence does not drop to zero if it is late, it could diminish significantly". After this, information enters the multidisciplinary analysis team.

When the analysis is complete and reports are finished, participants pointed out that intelligence products may follow different destinations, enabled by the "dispatch process through CRAIN" (participant 4), which "facilitates the dissemination of intelligence reports to different operational units" (participant 21). This process ensures that each unit either benefits generally from the intelligence generated or receives input for new operations. This distribution implies that information products are tailored to the customers or units, as discussed by Biermann et al. (2010, 3–6): "A scenario required to conduct a

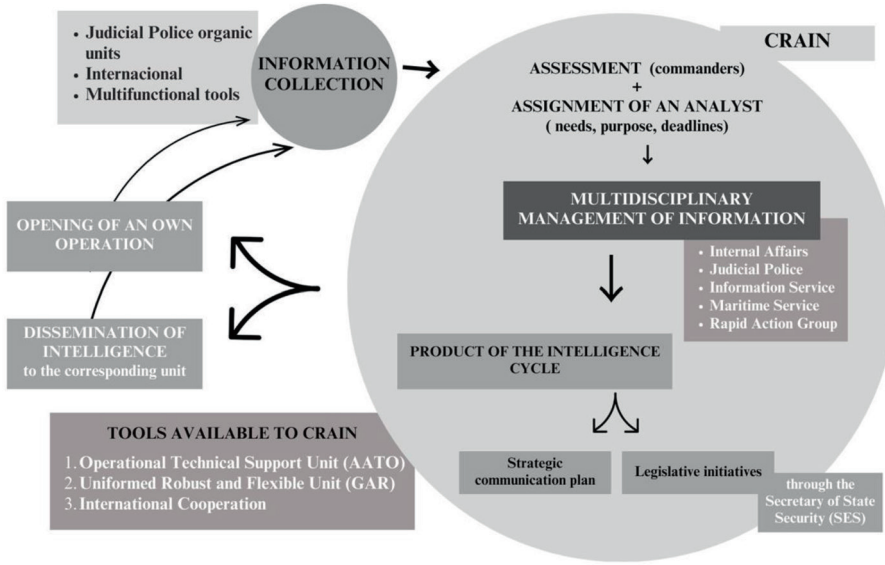

Figure 3. Carteia's Intelligence Cycle. Elaborated by civilguardsman Dr. Gaona and Clara Bañares

maneuver is different from a scenario for elaborating a process. In the first case, the deliverable is a set of operational facts. In the second case, it is a set of information aiming at setting up an understandable background, in addition to the factual part of a pure maneuver scenario". Following the answers of the officers, the third and fourth paths intelligence products follow within the plan are the judiciary system, to possibly feed new legislative reforms, "either the creation of new punitive figures or to put pressure to improve criminal procedural reforms" (participant 20), what "ensures a holistic response to criminal threats" (participant 21) say the police officers. The participants reinforce the point that the close relationship between the CRAIN and the GAR is key.

General Discussion

This exploratory study focuses on the functioning of operational intelligence from the perspective of Guardia Civil agents, exploring information flows and how it is transformed into actionable intelligence in high-pressure environments like southern Spain. The findings highlight the importance of the operational context and gathering capabilities of the units, as well as organizational dynamics in the effectiveness of intelligence processes. In particular, it has become evident how agents face the need to integrate real-time data with a structured process, balancing immediate operational demands with coordination constraints.

The findings of the Carteia Plan analysis highlight the effectiveness of a multidisciplinary structure in the fight against drug trafficking, especially in a complex context such as the Campo de Gibraltar. The combination of various specialties, such as the GAR, the Judicial Police, the Maritime Service and the Information Service, generates a synergy that makes it possible to address different dimensions of the threat, from criminal investigation to territorial control and the fight against corruption. This multidisciplinary approach supports the conclusions of authors such as Crous (2015) and Ratcliffe (2008), who emphasize the importance of overcoming structural barriers between the different branches of police intelligence, in order to achieve greater effectiveness in data integration.

In addition, the combined use of IMINT and HUMINT, supported by international cooperation, especially with Portugal, reinforces the capacity of the Carteia Plan to generate updated and actionable intelligence. This approach is aligned with the recommendations of Lesidrenska and Bancheva (2013) and Lindsay (2017), who highlight that quality intelligence requires a combined use of different sources (HUMINT, SIGINT, IMINT and OSINT) to identify patterns and early warning signals. Through this integration, the Carteia Plan overcomes the cognitive and structural limitations that could arise from a unilateral analysis, as Martínez (2016) warns.

Flexibility and adaptability also emerge as essential factors for operational effectiveness. Results confirmed that speed in adapting strategies to emerging information is crucial in the fight against drug trafficking. Ștefan and Dumitru (2013) argue that adaptability and flexibility in intelligence organizations are

key to remaining competitive in a changing international environment. This finding is relevant in practical terms, as the Carteia Plan demonstrates how the ability to adapt to circumstances allows for a more agile and efficient response to emerging threats.

The concept of *reflecting the threat* in the operational structure of Plan Carteia aligns with the notion of proactive intelligence advocated by Bierdmann et al. (2004), who stresses the importance of accurate threat characterization for successful operations. This principle reinforces the importance of operational intelligence, understood as a dynamic process of data and operations integration, as postulated by the Ops-Intel fusion theory (Lindsay, 2017). Effective integration of intelligence and operations not only facilitates early threat identification, but also optimizes decision making, a fundamental principle in the EMMIE (Evidence, Measurement, Monitoring, Impact, and Evaluation) model applied in security policy improvement (Carter, 1990).

Conclusions

This research on the Carteia Plan has provided valuable theoretical and practical insights into the integration of operational intelligence in the fight against drug trafficking. The study consisted of semi-structured interviews and surveys with a sample of 22 Guardia Civil officers involved in the plan, which were enriched by a revision of literature in the field, and the involvement of a participant observer in the research, thus reinforcing the application of findings.

Through the analysis of the perceptions of the agents involved, it has highlighted how the combination of different specialized units and tools like international cooperation, are crucial elements for a comprehensive approach to intelligence generation. Theoretically, the study reaffirms the importance of Ops-Intel fusion (Lindsay, 2017) and proactive intelligence, fundamental concepts in modern operational intelligence. By integrating multidisciplinary intelligence analysis, the Carteia Plan has mitigated the limitations often present in traditional intelligence systems, such as fragmentation and cognitive biases (Martínez, 2016). The intelligence process, examined through the perceptions of the agents, has revealed how collaboration among various units and the cross-cutting intelligence culture have optimized the process. Participants stress the importance of having a thorough knowledge of the local context, which highlights the relevance of experience and territorial connection in intelligence operations. In terms of operational intelligence, these findings provide a new perspective on how the integration of local actors and interagency cooperation contribute to more effective and accurate intelligence.

Likewise, the structure of the this plan allows for a straightforward jump from information gathering and strategic intelligence dimension to the operational and tactical ones. This cycle ensures that the information gathered is systematized and transformed into operational knowledge, thus optimizing results in operations and investigations.

However, according to interviewees, the plan could benefit from more comprehensive training and coaching for the sea and air domains to truly enable multi-domain control. This has favored a greater capacity to identify early warning signs and respond adaptively to threats, something essential in contexts of constant change such as drug trafficking. However, according to interviewees, the plan could benefit from more comprehensive training and coaching for the sea and air domains to truly enable multi-domain control.

Theoretically, this work contributes to the expansion of the EMMIE framework, demonstrating its usefulness in assessing aspects of police intelligence that go beyond traditional quantifiable outcomes. It offers some practical guidance to optimize intelligence management in police operations, contributing to the design of more coherent public policies. The insights gained from this analysis highlighting the importance of embracing operational intelligence into law enforcement operations, especially on those tackling drug trafficking.

Declarations

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and standards, ensuring the protection and confidentiality of all participants involved. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the results or analyses presented in this paper are available upon request. Interested parties may contact the corresponding author to obtain access to the data set.

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Conflicts of Interest Statement

No conflict of interest.

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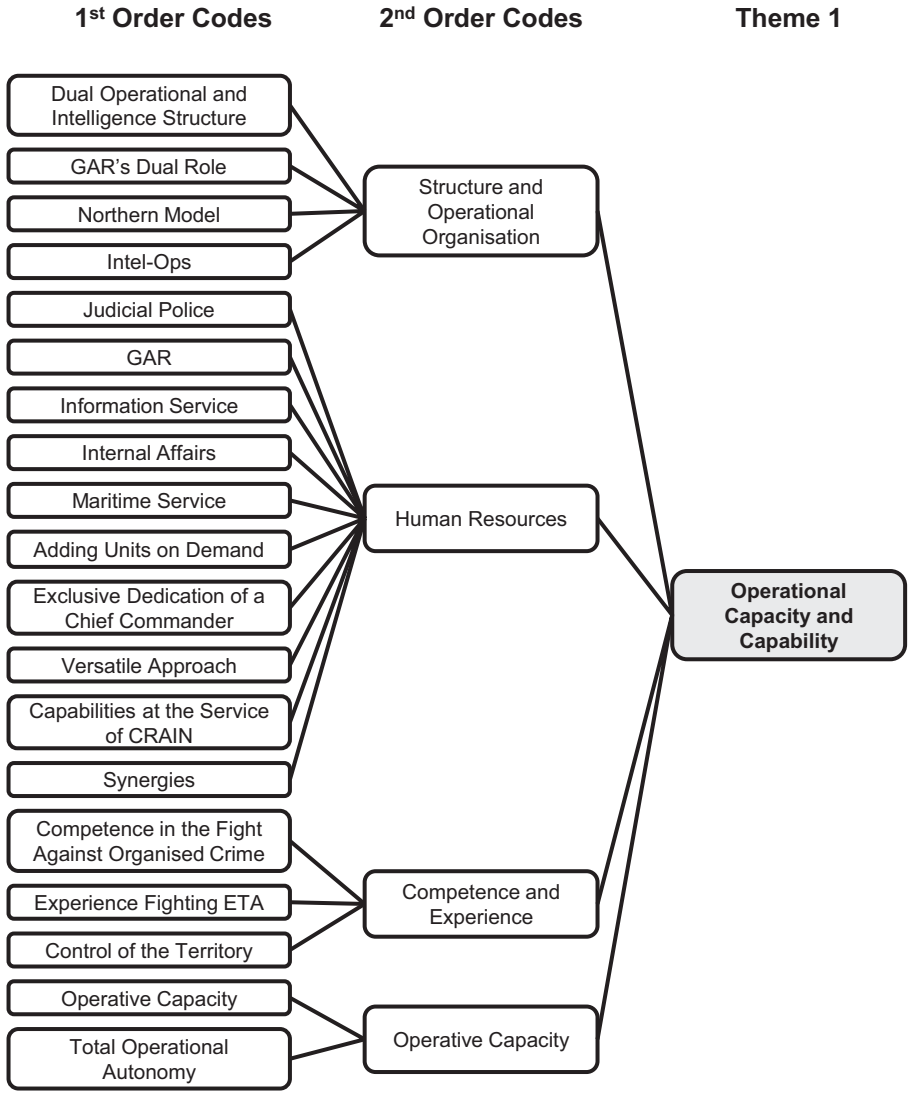
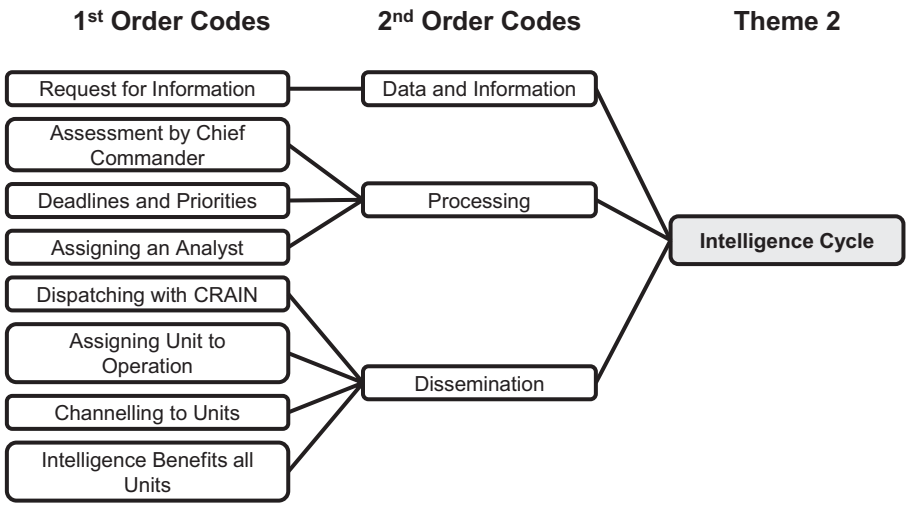
Appendix



Appendix A. Thematic Analysis

Source: Own elaboration



Appendix B. Thematic Analysis

Source: Own elaboration