

The Maritime Smuggling Project: Challenges Within Collaborative Maritime Policing in The Netherlands

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Abstract

The Netherlands hosts a significant drug industry involving global crime groups targeting local professionals, such as fishers for drug smuggling, real estate agents for money laundering, and harbor masters for marina access. To raise awareness of potential criminal involvement, various government organizations collaborate within an Organized Crime Field Lab. This approach shifts the focus from repressively apprehending criminals to protecting legal businesses and professionals by enabling the public to inform, detect, and report smuggling activities, and by helping relevant sectors identify and regulate activities that facilitate organized crime. This article examines how maritime policing professionals experience the process, outcomes, and challenges within the Maritime Smuggling Project (MSP) and its contribution to building a more resilient society against criminal involvement. Based on 34 interviews, hybrid observations, and an online questionnaire with MSP participants, the study suggests that maritime criminal justice relies on the idea that a resilient community is less likely to engage in or facilitate criminal maritime activities. However, it also indicates that collaboration in itself is not enough to create an impact on policing. Findings reveal that innovations in criminal justice need open-ended, long-term, impact-focused responses from projects like the MSP, along with maritime professionals willing to adopt new policing methods. Yet, traditional, path-dependent criminal justice institutions often undermine these innovations by prioritizing immediate, measurable, short-term results that benefit their organization instead of the overarching goal of preventing maritime crime and societal involvement in it. As a result, even those tasked with developing innovative approaches are limited by institutional constraints and ingrained habits.

Keywords

criminal justice; maritime drug smuggling; maritime policing; organized crime

1. Introduction

The Netherlands hosts a large-scale drug industry involving global crime groups with international trade connections. Europol classifies the Netherlands as one of the two largest cocaine-importing nations for the European market, contributing to an increase in violent crimes in European ports (Europol, 2020). Recent figures show that in 2023, the Netherlands confiscated 60,000 kilograms of cocaine (Rijksoverheid, 2024), representing a significant increase (Driessen, 2024). Despite various efforts, the illegal drug trade appears to be more lucrative and growing rather than diminishing; drug seizures break new records almost every year, and existing measures have not caused the structural disruption of illegal drug markets sought after (De Koning, 2016, 2023). Paradoxically, seizing illegal goods has been considered to increase smugglers' profits, and higher profits fuel violence (Castillo & Kronick, 2020). Meanwhile, the street value of cocaine has remained stable for several years, its quality is increasing, user numbers are not decreasing, and drug-related crime is becoming increasingly more violent (Ester & Driessen, 2009; European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2023; Politie Nederland, 2022). Consequently, a sense of pessimism, and at times even defeatism (Nelen et al., 2023) emerges in policing organized crime, where the current approach proves ineffective and falls short in disrupting this illicit market (Boutellier, Boelens, & Hermens, 2019; Boutellier, Hermans, & van de Plas, 2019; Cels et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2018; van Wingerde, 2012).

Due to the enormous profits involved, the drug industry becomes entangled with legal structures in society (Boutellier et al., 2020). By using societal actors, organized crime is no longer seen solely as a criminal issue but also as a socio-economic problem (Boutellier et al., 2020; Tops & Tromp, 2017). Consequently, there is growing attention in the Netherlands to safeguarding high-risk locations and professions against organized crime (Nelen et al., 2023). Examples include using the logistics sector for drug distribution abroad (Bervoets et al., 2021), farmers' barns in rural areas for drug production (Boelens & Groothuis, 2020), concealing cocaine among bananas imported by legitimate fruit importers (Tieleman, 2023), involving port companies and personnel in harbor areas in criminal activities (Eski et al., 2020), retrieving drug packages from the North Sea through the fishing industry (Mehlbaum et al., 2021), and laundering money through real estate agents and notaries (Hoogenboom, 2023). These examples illustrate the impact of organized crime and underscore the need to not only target criminal networks repressively but also to protect high-risk locations and professions from criminal influences.

In this article, the concept of maritime justice is conceived as the community's capacity to resist influences from organized maritime-related crime, based on the argument that a secure and resilient community is less likely to engage in criminal (smuggling) activities (Bervoets et al., 2021; Boelens & Groothuis, 2020; Boutellier et al., 2020; Nelen et al., 2023; Steketee et al., 2006; Staring et al., 2019; Struiksma et al., 2020). This conceptualization of maritime justice goes beyond crime control (Anderson & Newman, 1998; Duff, 1998; E. Moore, 2022). In this context, resilience refers to the community's ability to activate social relationships and norms to achieve common societal goals such as enhancing public safety and combating crime (Mehlbaum et al., 2021) by establishing norms that deter them from engaging in criminal behavior (Verwer & Walberg, 2012).

This concept of maritime justice, which includes protecting high-risk locations and professionals from organized crime, aligns with restorative justice theory—a theory that emphasizes the restoration of harm caused by crime and addresses what should happen when a crime is committed (Braithwaite, 1998, 2004;

Claessen, 2022; Menkel-Meadow, 2007). According to Alexander et al. (2024), restorative justice provides an interdisciplinary framework for fostering communities that prioritize the well-being of everyone involved. As such, we would like to highlight and introduce the idea of maritime restorative justice here to guide the study of maritime drug smuggling. Such a conceptual approach supports the idea that justice and restoration—also in the maritime domain—can be achieved through inclusive and cooperative processes (Van Ness, 2004), and both the suspect and the victim are willing to cooperate (Claessen, 2022).

However, in this context, collaborating with suspects is challenging because the impact of organized crime is often conceptualized as a “hidden impact crime” due to its largely invisible consequences (Boutellier et al., 2020). For example, money laundering does not typically produce direct victims, so the public perceives little harm. Nevertheless, restorative justice can still serve as a tool for communities to collectively stand against such forms of crime. This was evident in the 1990s against the Cosa Nostra (Boutellier et al., 2020; Dickie, 2007; Orlando, 2003) and more recently in the Netherlands, where the Dutch minister of justice and security called on society to form a united front against organized crime, following the Italian example (“Dilan Yeşilgöz: ‘Met,’” 2023).

Furthermore, numerous initiatives and projects have been established to collaborate with local communities and target groups in achieving criminal justice. Various programs have been set up for airports, major port areas such as Rotterdam and Amsterdam, and the Dutch flower industry. Additionally, there are other projects in the Netherlands, such as the Organized Crime Field Lab (Cels et al., 2017), aimed at addressing the complex issues of organized crime in more innovative and alternative ways. As the name suggests, the field lab is intended as a learning and experimenting environment, where a small team tackles one specific problem (Cels et al., 2017; Groenleer et al., 2020). In this field lab, teams experiment with new and different methods to disrupt and prevent criminal processes.

One such collaborative initiative is the Maritime Smuggling Project (MSP), which aims to adopt an alternative approach to disrupt and prevent criminal processes related to maritime smuggling in the province of North Holland, the Netherlands. The focus within MSP is on safeguarding three distinct maritime-related groups from criminal involvement: (a) local fishers who may be targeted for smuggling activities, (b) real estate professionals who can facilitate and oversee the laundering of illegally obtained money from maritime smuggling, and (c) local harbor masters who can promptly identify criminal activities if equipped with the knowledge of what signs to look for and where to report them.

This article offers insights into how maritime professionals in the Netherlands respond in inter/transdisciplinary and practical terms to the effects of maritime smuggling on the community. The challenges, opportunities, and perspectives of maritime professionals examined in this study contribute to the conceptualization of maritime justice, more specifically maritime restorative justice. The central research question guiding this article is: How do various maritime (restorative) justice and policing actors collaborate as a learning organization within the MSP in the province of North Holland? And what factors facilitate or impede this collaboration? The article is structured as follows: It begins with an overview of the context, explaining the project’s inception, its objectives, the teams involved, and the methodology employed. Following this, the subsequent section details the research methods. Section 4 presents the findings, which are categorized into the willingness to collaborate, encountered obstacles during collaboration, and perceived outcomes from this collaborative effort. The article concludes with a summary and discussion.

2. The MSP: A Background

In 2018, the North Holland police unit and the Public Prosecution Service analyzed the involvement of fishers, both domestically and internationally, in drug smuggling (Mehlbaum et al., 2021). During an 18-month span (2017–2018), authorities intercepted 18 vessels with Dutch individuals on board in Spain and the Mediterranean Sea (Meeus & Rosenberg, 2020; Mehlbaum et al., 2021). These vessels were found to be transporting a total of 8,500 kilograms of cocaine and 55,000 kilograms of hashish. The outcome of this research led to great concern and, therefore, the start of the MSP. This project is a collaborative effort involving various Dutch governmental bodies in the province of North Holland, including the police, the Public Prosecution Service, the municipalities of Den Helder, Enkhuizen, Haarlem, Hollands Kroon, Velsen, the Fiscal Information and Investigation Service, the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority, customs, and the coast guard (Mehlbaum et al., 2021; Nelen et al., 2023).

The idea of the MSP revolves around collaborative experimentation, aiming to generate innovative ideas. This is reflected in the utilization of the Organized Crime Field Lab methodology, which was collaboratively developed by Harvard, Oxford, and Tilburg University (Cels et al., 2012, 2017; Groenleer et al., 2020; Waardenburg et al., 2020). The aim of using this methodology is twofold: (a) to assist practitioners in developing innovative solutions to complex crime issues, such as maritime smuggling, and (b) to enhance understanding of the design elements that facilitate or impede effective collaboration (Waardenburg et al., 2020). This involves dedicating time to contemplate strategic themes and questions that challenge the current approach to combating drug smuggling. For example, how to address the hidden impact of organized crime, and how to establish common objectives when involved multiple parties possess diverse backgrounds, interests, and priorities (Cels et al., 2012).

This method involves carrying out targeted actions to test hypotheses on a small scale and to gather more data and information necessary for progress (Silberman, 2007). Because, as Cels et al. (2017, p. 162) state, “only by intervening do you learn more.” Experimentation and the potential for failure are crucial aspects of a learning environment (Groenleer et al., 2020). Within organizational literature, this concept is also referred to as triple-loop learning. This level goes beyond developing new insights and understanding patterns; it focuses on the entire context (of maritime policing) and explores deeper causes (of maritime smuggling; Romme & van Witteloostuijn, 1999; Snell & Chak, 1998). At this level of learning, it is about the ability to adjust the perspective of motives, identity, culture, and values within the current composition of actors and the approach to combatting maritime smuggling. The MSP directed its efforts towards combating maritime smuggling, necessitating a learning-oriented and pragmatic framework, namely an experimental and exploratory one: learning by doing (Cels et al., 2017, p. 62; M. H. Moore, 1995).

The use of the Organized Crime Field Lab approach by the MSP is not unique. Over the past years, numerous projects have been initiated in the Netherlands that adopt this learning and experimental design to address problems differently and transcend them. Examples include projects focusing on themes such as illegal import and export at smaller airports, criminal investments in commercial real estate, money laundering through virtual currencies, and abuse of carriers to and from medium-sized seaports. While these initiatives often originated from the grassroots, a new collaborative partnership Nationale Samenwerking tegen Ondermijnende Criminaliteit (in English, National Cooperation Against Undermining Crime) was established in 2022 to augment existing methods of government agencies to facilitate innovative and

complementary interventions. Additionally, it initiates new field labs to address complex societal problems. An evaluation study of 30 similar field labs revealed ample room for improvement and identified best practices in both the organization and culture of collaboration, as well as the effectiveness of interventions (Hiemstra & De Vries, n.d.). These findings seem to be inherent to the learning and experimenting nature of this design. Gaining insight into how maritime professionals in the MSP respond to the interdisciplinary and practical effects of maritime smuggling on the community, and how they perceive the effectiveness of their interventions, matters significantly because comprehending the more complex and deeper (often sociocultural) dimensions that are reflected in their perceptions and narratives reveals:

The way different actors define and characterize a concept, which is relevant for [scientific] research [on undermining]. The interpretation they give to it is connected to the way they think about its causes. This, in turn, impacts the choices made in crime prevention and control. (Staring et al., 2019, p. 15)

As such, exploring the respondents' perceptions and stories on maritime restorative justice from such a vantage point allowed us to gain a thick description, as the following section on our methodological research activities details.

3. Methodology

This study builds on previous research into collaborative processes in (maritime) policing in the Netherlands and draws upon insights from other field labs (Boutellier & Broekhuizen, 2016; Cels et al., 2017; Eski et al., 2020; Mehlbaum et al., 2021; Nelen et al., 2023; Staring et al., 2019; Struiksmā et al., 2020; van de Plas & Tanke, 2021). These studies emphasize the urgent need to address the hidden impact of organized crime on society and the involvement of societal actors in criminal activities (Boutellier et al., 2020). Additionally, Nelen et al. (2023) and van de Plas and Tanke (2021) show the need to understand genuine collaboration among various government bodies, assess its effectiveness, and critically, extract lessons from this collaboration. The study at the center of this article aims to delve into the perspectives of respondents involved in such collaborative processes providing valuable insights into their viewpoints, beliefs, and attitudes towards unified efforts (Tracy, 2019). Furthermore, this study builds on previous research by Boelens et al. (2023) on collaborative processes aimed at combating organized crime in the Netherlands, conducted between September 2021 and October 2022.

For this study, interviews were conducted with 28 respondents who were selected based on their expertise and involvement in the MSP, either as team members or as experts guiding the teams. The respondents constituted a diverse group representing various governmental bodies, including representatives from The Public Prosecutor's Office, the police, the municipalities of Den Helder, Enkhuizen, Haarlem, Hollands Kroon, and Velsen, the Regional Information and Expertise Centre, the Royal Marechaussee, the Tax Administration, the Fiscal Intelligence and Investigation Service, customs, the coast guard, and the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority. Additionally, an individual involved in conceiving the idea of the Organized Crime Field Lab, working at Tilburg University, participated in the interviews.

Throughout the study, participatory (both physical and digital) observations were conducted, involving the observation of activities during weekly meetings, arranged events, and brainstorming sessions (Seim, 2021). These observations provide valuable insights, particularly into the nonverbal communication among

participants (Eski et al., 2021). This approach enables immersion in the challenges and dynamics of the work environment, providing participants with an opportunity to reflect on their social and work methodologies (Petintseva & Zaitch, 2019). In addition to observations and interviews, a survey was distributed among members of the MSP ($n = 19$), containing qualitative questions to assess satisfaction levels regarding the collaborative process and the perceived outcomes of working together.

4. Findings

This section will examine the results of the data analyses concerning the collaborative processes within the MSP and the perceived outcomes. It begins with an overview of the project itself, followed by an exploration of the collaborative process within the project. The article concludes with an examination of how team members experienced the outcome of this collaboration.

4.1. The MSP

At the start of the project, significant efforts were dedicated to discussing the complexities of maritime smuggling in North Holland. Participants addressed questions such as why maritime smuggling is a problem and how the community is affected by its causes and consequences. The primary goal was to focus on cross-organizational objectives to form a multidisciplinary working group. Cels et al. (2012, 2017) describe this exercise as an essential initial step to collectively identify the common problem and devise relevant interventions. Participating professionals were encouraged to step beyond their organization, tasks, and norms to act collectively against multifaceted issues, such as the effects of maritime smuggling on the community and the involvement of societal actors in this form of crime. This process was facilitated by experts and coaches specializing in change management and social innovation within policing and the public sector (Kegan & Lahey, 2001; M. H. Moore, 1995) with experience in experimental design (Cels et al., 2012, 2017; Groenleer et al., 2020; Waardenburg et al., 2020), primarily from the Dutch police organization and the Public Prosecution Service.

Designing environments for experimentation, learning, and innovation in public policy and governance (Waardenburg et al., 2020) forms the foundation of the framework in which these new professionals must operate. This new way of working was generally well-received by maritime professionals who do not typically engage with such approaches in their daily activities. According to the questionnaire responses and interview outcomes, MSP participants highly prioritize cross-governmental collaboration, emphasizing the exchange of knowledge and experiences among various governmental bodies as crucial. They stress the need for unconventional strategies to disrupt the current nature and scale of maritime smuggling, highlighting that focusing solely on apprehending individuals or isolated cases is neither sustainable nor effective against organized maritime crime. Both the interviews and the questionnaire reveal that merely “catching criminals” is inadequate to effectively resolve the issue of maritime smuggling. This aligns with what Cels et al. (2017), Boutellier et al. (2019), Lam et al. (2018), and van Wingerde (2012) have noted about innovation and change in criminal justice. A respondent from customs mentioned the following in an interview:

We could try 10 more investigations on cocaine, but it won't make the problem smaller. We need different ways....We've been trying to catch that criminal since 1974, and it hasn't worked well.

Now, we see cocaine prices are lower, purity is higher, and smuggling happens in many ways. (R3, customs, interview)

According to respondents, maritime justice can be described as ensuring that societal groups such as youth and workers in certain sectors are not being used by organized crime and do not suffer harm as a group from criminal activities—whereas it is exactly these kinds of actors that contribute to prevention as well as restoration, as seen elsewhere in restorative practices (cf. Lohmeyer, 2017; Rosenblatt, 2014). In the example of the fishing industry, some fishers grow up in environments where they become implicitly involved in criminal activities. According to the respondents, justice entails ensuring that these fishers are well-informed about the risks and dangers so that they can make the right choices when confronted with criminal influences. In this sense, respondents' perspectives align with the concept of restorative justice, which aims to repair the damage caused by organized crime to society.

According to the project management, focusing on the fishing industry was a logical step, given the police and Public Prosecution Service research indicating that many Dutch fishers had been arrested in European waters on suspicion of maritime smuggling. Team Volans aimed to inform fishing communities of possible criminal involvement in their sector, enabling them to detect and report smuggling activities and prevent bona fide fishers from drifting into the criminal circuit or being tempted to perform tasks for criminals. Subsequently, attention turned to other maritime themes, particularly the role of the numerous marinas in the water-rich province of North Holland. The prevailing idea, based on factual knowledge from criminal investigations in smaller harbors, was that boats retrieving drugs from the North Sea were more likely to head to smaller marinas rather than larger ports. These locations are attractive to criminals because, overall, marinas are relatively anonymous, allowing them to move freely. Thus, focusing on marinas would mean identifying suspicious behavior by smaller boats or individuals in these areas. Team Kohthai focused on reducing the anonymity of marinas, aiming to discourage criminals from settling there and providing knowledge to harbor masters on recognizing suspicious behavior through training.

A third theme was that the proceeds and illicit money earned from maritime smuggling activities must find their way into the legitimate economy through money laundering. This means that criminals successfully bringing drugs ashore often invest their earnings in local real estate and launder the money. This could involve purchasing local houses or renovating properties off the books. Emphasizing the role of gatekeepers in the local real estate market would help detect signs of criminal behavior and money laundering earlier. Team Estrella focused on raising awareness among real estate professionals about recognizing and reporting money laundering activities. In total, about 35 maritime and financial professionals from various government organizations are involved in this project, consisting of three teams.

The desired outcome that individuals in the MSP strive for, as heard in the interviews and questionnaires, regarding maritime (restorative) justice is to raise awareness of potential criminal involvement in those three teams with the argument that a resilient community and societal actors are less likely to engage in criminal activities. Another ideal outcome of the project, according to respondents, is for the societal sectors the teams focused on to develop a sort of self-cleansing ability, whereby the sector itself attempts to rectify or even prevent vulnerable groups from encountering criminals within their work and living environments. To achieve this, various interventions were devised and implemented. Firstly, the teams primarily used a communication strategy aimed at informing the public to raise awareness of the risks and dangers of

criminal influences. Specifically, they organized webinars and established educational programs, such as those in schools where students are trained to become fishers, or notaries who are legally required to receive annual professional training on relevant topics. Additionally, several animations and films were produced to provide a visual representation of how criminal influence affects the target audience, and extensive social media campaigns were conducted.

Secondly, the teams focused on promoting public–private collaboration. Specifically, this involved the real estate sector organizing its training initiatives on potential involvement in organized crime and associating them with mandatory educational credits. Furthermore, organizations within the fishing sector took it upon themselves to educate their members about the hazards and perils associated with maritime smuggling. Additionally, harbor masters were empowered to take a more proactive stance in addressing anonymity within marinas and acquiring a deeper understanding of criminal opportunities within their harbors. Thirdly, the teams strived to encourage the reporting of suspicious incidents associated with maritime smuggling. Lastly, the teams focused on eradicating criminal opportunities within the fishing sector, marinas, and the real estate domain. As an example, the teams suggested implementing a digital night register to record all boats in marinas, similar to the registration system utilized in hotels. Currently, such a system is absent, and the objective is to diminish the anonymity of marinas. Within the real estate sector, the team noted the involvement of numerous actors with limited insight into each other’s activities. Thus, enhancing transparency and comprehension across the entire real estate chain, spanning from real estate agents to notaries, bankers, and financial advisors, serves, according to respondents, as a barrier to criminal opportunities.

MSP members were driven by more than the goal of making significant strides in combating maritime smuggling; they actively sought learning opportunities through partnerships with other organizations and making a change in disrupting the illegal drug smuggling market. The project’s team members can be viewed as pioneers striving for change and genuinely seeking innovative approaches to address maritime smuggling. However, this pioneering spirit also led them to face substantial resistance, as detailed in the following section.

4.2. Facing an Uphill Battle: Collaborative Processes Within Maritime Policing

For most team members, the key objective was minimizing the impact of maritime smuggling by involving community actors, as indicated in the interviews and the questionnaire. A successful outcome would be when target communities and industries can protect their members from the risks and involvement in criminal activities without government assistance. In the interviews, respondents referred to this as the sector’s “self-cleaning ability to resist criminal interference.” These efforts included various initiatives such as awareness campaigns or events to highlight the risks associated with maritime smuggling. However, devising and implementing the interventions conceived in the experimental setting was not straightforward and faced many obstacles and challenges, as revealed in conversations with professionals. The first challenge was very practical: many representatives of government organizations in the project simply did not receive the necessary time off to work on the MSP or poor agreements were made, resulting in individuals having to work their regular shifts within their organizations, such as participating in the police duty roster. The absence of formal agreements between their organizations and the MSP regarding commitment and time allocation forced some team members to balance project tasks alongside their regular responsibilities.

Another challenge revolved around project governance, particularly in finding a delicate balance between encouraging team members' autonomy in generating innovative ideas and maintaining control over the direction of the process as management. The MSP aimed to achieve a "one-government" approach, coupled with a "just do it" mentality. However, this required a shift in mindset and skill set among team members; suddenly, they had to assume new responsibilities and activities that extended beyond their traditional roles. Socio-legal theory suggests a distinction between team members' professional norms—their requirements and goals—and what they perceive as innovative to carry out their duties—their practical norms (De Herdt & de Sardan, 2015). Many team members found it challenging to initiate new ideas and take autonomous action, especially if they lacked previous experience in doing so. Granting these individuals freedom felt excessively unrestricted, leading to occasional uncertainty about whether they were proceeding in the correct direction. While the ideal outcomes for the respondents are not necessarily concrete or well-defined, their primary focus is on effecting change concerning the current impasse in addressing maritime organized crime and its societal effects. A respondent from the Public Prosecution Service articulates the challenge of lacking clear goals or direction:

Are our desired outcomes defined? Not just for the project team, but also for the overarching organizations. What do we want? We, as team Estrella, had to figure out what we wanted to do, and so did the other groups. I believe that is the essence. Do you truly know what you are assembling these teams for? What do you aim to achieve with them? These are all general terms, and it's easy to get lost in vagueness. Have we genuinely made a meaningful impact? That's my question. (R17, Public Prosecution Service, interview)

Another challenge, aligning with Waardenburg et al. (2020), involves the concerns of respondents about the ability of government personnel and organizations to genuinely innovate in criminal policing. According to respondents, change requires creative individuals who can think beyond established norms and pathways. As said by a respondent in an interview:

To truly generate innovative, out-of-the-box ideas, you need individuals who think differently, not those solely from municipal, police, or Public Prosecution Service backgrounds. (R8, Municipality of Haarlem, interview)

In the interviews, respondents expressed a preference for the project to also focus on a more repressive approach since 100 individuals were already identified as potentially involved in maritime smuggling in North Holland at the start of the project. Particularly, the financial specialists on the team dealing with money laundering would have preferred to target this group through various interventions, such as criminal investigations and arrests, while also informing the community about these investigations, which is currently uncommon. However, this aspect was not pursued. Additionally, respondents expressed a desire for more meaningful engagement with target communities and end users, such as real estate agents, fishing communities, and harbor masters, to have input in the project design. Many respondents felt this was a major reason for their doubts about the project's impact on these groups, perceiving it as a top-down initiative with many advisors but lacking real contact with local and grassroots implementers. Despite this, such engagement faced considerable resistance from the parent organizations, particularly regarding information sharing with these parties. This argument is countered by the respondents, who highlighted that the focus on preventive actions required little confidential information, thus allowing for more

information to be shared. Moreover, certain team members may have overlooked the potential to involve other organizations.

In line with Groenleer et al. (2020), working with an experimental design to shift towards a more preventive approach in maritime policing poses another challenge for the teams. Many respondents indicated in the interviews that prioritizing preventive interventions like education programs and communication sparks significant skepticism and resistance among direct management from the parent organizations. This resistance stems from the perception that these interventions do not contribute to their objectives and authority. For instance, the goal of the Public Prosecution Service is to prosecute and convict criminals, while the police aim to maintain public order and safety. However, individuals involved in the collaboration focus on broader objectives, leading direct management to question how their employees' efforts align with their organization's specific goals, even if they contribute to a broader goal of reducing criminal involvement in the community. Specifically, a police professional received critical questions when he mentioned working on a webinar, with management questioning how this activity contributed to their policing duties. Management often prefers traditional modes of operation, showing reluctance to embrace change. They adhere to familiar methods, such as relying on checklists, regular policing activities, and "filling the rosters," according to respondents in both the questionnaire and interviews. This resistance to innovative, unconventional thinking hinders social innovation within maritime policing and illustrates the current difficulty of fostering innovation in this field.

4.3. Experienced Outcome of Collaboration: A Drop in the Bucket of Maritime Restorative Justice

In the interviews, respondents perceived that they accomplished their objectives in four primary areas: (a) effectively using communication; (b) fostering collaboration among public and private sectors (such as real estate, fishing, and among harbor masters); (c) encouraging the reporting of suspicious incidents; and (d) diminishing criminal opportunities associated with maritime smuggling. Respondents shared in the interviews their experiences, shedding light on several areas of acquired knowledge. Understanding each other's organizations, including their strengths and limitations, was a significant aspect into which they gained insight. They adjusted their approach to prioritize preventive interventions, departing from their usual practices. For instance, one respondent articulated this shift:

We're approaching things from a new angle. I come from a police background, but in this setting, it's somewhat unique. I'm part of a team working towards improving and safeguarding the industry...Our aim is to bring about changes in the real estate sector. How do we achieve that? It's not only the goal of the police, the Fiscal Information and Investigation Service, or the Tax Authority individually, but a collective aim as a government entity. (R22, police, interview)

While teams have undertaken numerous preventive interventions and measures, these prove to be scarcely measurable or challenging to define. For instance, how can one ascertain if engaging in numerous conversations with fishers indeed results in fewer fishers being involved in maritime smuggling? Or if better coordination across the entire real estate chain genuinely prevents criminals from exploiting gaps within that chain? Or whether increasing resilience and vigilance in marinas through awareness campaigns effectively reduces criminal activities? These are the questions that respondents are contemplating and expressing in the interviews. According to them, this necessitates a different perspective on defining success and outcomes:

The problem is, if we don't catch criminals, we're not ticking the box, even though we're preventing some incidents. Organizations might need to reconsider if the current checkbox truly reflects our objectives. (R3, customs, interview)

Reflecting on the project's outcomes, respondents perceive it as merely a drop in the bucket in the fight against organized crime. This resonates with Nelen et al.'s (2023) findings, suggesting a "certain pessimism" concerning the effectiveness of the current approach:

On one hand, there's a sense of accomplishment and optimism in our extensive collaboration among various government bodies, each with its own priorities. Overall, it is progressing fairly well and yielding success. However, on the other hand, there's this lingering sense that we've been in this phase for years, and there's ample room to enhance our effectiveness and efficiency. Especially in policing criminal activities, I'm skeptical of our progress. Sometimes it feels like we're magnifying minor issues. The big question remains: When will we collectively take that significant leap forward? (R7, Municipality of Haarlem, interview)

Collectively taking that significant leap forward is a common thread felt by virtually all respondents. A respondent expressed in an interview that they have not made considerable progress, but also have not faced major setbacks. This sentiment resonates with the shared feelings among many team members regarding the lasting impact of the four-year collaboration in the MSP. Additionally, another respondent emphasized in an interview that the extensive collaboration has room for improvement—they believe they should aim higher. The ongoing discussion revolves around "when" the next step will occur, reflecting on the effectiveness and efficiency of the current approach to combating maritime smuggling, particularly within the MSP. While earlier findings highlight sporadic outcomes, team members also contemplate the potential for sustainable, long-term results. They emphasize that the enduring impact of collaboration can only materialize when interventions lead to the establishment of new procedures, workflows, and collaborative structures within participating organizations. They believe it is needed for their respective organizations to integrate the lessons learned, products developed, and established networks to ensure continuity and sustained efforts on specific issues.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The MSP aimed to raise awareness of potential criminal involvement and prevent maritime smuggling by implementing preventive interventions through an experimental design. This approach shifts the focus from repressively apprehending criminals to protecting legal businesses and professionals. It encourages the public to inform, detect, and report smuggling activities and helps relevant sectors identify and regulate activities that facilitate organized crime. This study highlights the shift from conceptions of justice as restricted crime control to a more proactive reduction of negative impact on society but also presents significant challenges.

While the concept of innovative and preventative maritime justice, in particular maritime restorative justice, may seem promising, to see collaboration as a result and as innovation is not a step forward or disrupting criminal involvement in society. If innovation and integrated policing projects fail to demonstrate lasting impact, there is a risk of succumbing to "toxic positivity" in collaborative policing—the belief that success

results solely from extensive collaboration without substantial outcomes (Colley, 2004; Foucault, 1980; Goodman, 2022; Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022; Scott, 2010). Effective innovations in criminal maritime restorative justice demand sustained, impact-oriented responses, as exemplified by initiatives like the MSP. Maritime professionals must be prepared to adopt new policing methods beyond those to which they are accustomed (Cels et al., 2012, 2017; Groenleer et al., 2020; Waardenburg et al., 2020). This approach encourages a consultative, bottom-up, emergent practice and policy response in criminal justice.

However, focusing on and adapting a single approach is insufficient. The concept of maritime restorative justice involves multiple simultaneous interventions, such as outreach, victim support, and training for societal and municipal staff, similar to restorative justice, while including social and youth workers (Alexander et al., 2024; Braithwaite, 1998, 2004; Claessen, 2022; Lohmeyer, 2017; Menkel-Meadow, 2007; Rosenblatt, 2014; Van Ness, 2004). It also requires collaboration with (maritime) organizations like the International Maritime Organization and European counterparts like Europol and within the concept of maritime domain awareness. Addressing issues such as maritime smuggling and criminal infiltration necessitates long-term, interdisciplinary processes involving various stakeholders (Van Arkel & Tromp, 2023). Literature on maritime security governance also underscores the importance of engaging all stakeholders, from political authorities to all maritime actors (Bateman, 2005; Bueger, 2019; Bueger et al., 2020). Regarding MSP, respondents noted that the project's limited impact stemmed from insufficient involvement by these stakeholders concerning the target real estate agents, fishing communities, and harbor masters in its design. They argued that incorporating these stakeholders would have significantly strengthened the project's effectiveness and could contribute to maritime restorative justice.

Based on this research, it appears that solely focusing on preventative interventions is also questionable. It remains uncertain whether a well-informed community can better resist criminal influences and contribute to maritime (restorative) justice, or if MSP interventions effectively reduce community involvement in criminal activities. Serious concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of such interventions, suggesting they may even have counterproductive effects (Albarracín et al., 2024; Boertien et al., 2024; Hendrik & Stams, 2024; Nelen et al., 2023; van der Put et al., 2021; Van Petrosino et al., 2013).

Additionally, respondents, in line with the restorative justice principles, highlighted the project's shortcomings in understanding the root causes of maritime smuggling and the motivations driving societal actors' involvement. These insights underscore that effective maritime (restorative) justice and policing require more than acquiring new insights and recognizing patterns, it necessitates understanding the broader context and motivations behind maritime smuggling activities (Romme & van Witteloostuijn, 1999; Snell & Chak, 1998). Therefore, maritime policing must also allow for prudent innovation, which includes developing new interventions or recalibrating existing ones, complemented by the practical wisdom of the targeted communities.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

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Supplementary File

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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