



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE MEKONG

BRIEFING SERIES

AUGUST 2023

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# EDITORS' NOTE

The Mekong region, formed by Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, is host to a large number of illicit markets. The trafficking of drugs, timber, illegal wildlife and counterfeit goods is reported to be common; human smuggling and human trafficking are widespread; and increased digitalization has catalyzed the proliferation of financial and cybercrimes. The region faces a unique set of challenges exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 coup in Myanmar and a general decline in democratic processes.

Despite the pervasiveness of illicit markets in the region, data and knowledge on organized crime and its harms are scarce. Although this is true globally, the Mekong region stands out, as data collected by governments is often inaccessible and, when available, it is not comparable across countries. In addition, there is little independent media reporting and the space for civil society to raise awareness of new trends and the impact of organized crime on communities is restricted.

The Mekong Australia Partnership on Transnational Crime (MAP-TNC) was launched to provide better policy analysis and evidence; build a more robust information base to assess transnational crime challenges; strengthen national operational capacities to prevent, detect and address transnational crime, and support enhanced regional coordination. As part of its implementation, MAP-TNC partnered with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), which works to provide strategic insights into illicit markets globally and design responses that are holistic, account for local and regional dynamics, and support key agendas such as the rule of law, good governance, development and community security.

From July 2021 to June 2023, MAP-TNC and the GI-TOC organized an expert briefing series to enhance debate and collaboration on issues related to organized crime in the Mekong. With the support of a dynamic set of stakeholders, the series explored some of the region's most pertinent and pressing issues and their intersections globally.

The series began by examining China's continued investment and interest in the Mekong, and investigated topics related to the region's criminal ecosystem. Sessions discussed the role of casinos and special economic zones as hubs of criminality, and the influence of foreign and state-embedded criminal actors in these areas, a theme further examined through a deep dive into the GI-TOC's 2021 Organized Crime Index. The series also looked at the impact of organized crime in the region on gender, development and urbanization, as well as its drivers and enablers. It explored the convergence of licit and illicit trade and transactions, and the rising criminal use of social media by individuals and governments.

The sessions covered the challenges that underline the diversity and pervasiveness of organized crime in the Mekong, which is quick to adapt to new circumstances and able to capitalize on novel opportunities. Sessions also emphasized the need for a whole-of-government response to mitigate the threats of organized crime and provided a platform for experienced front-line responders from local governments and civil society to share good practices and lessons learned from across the region.

Several sessions focused on exploring the current responses to organized crime – for example, from a gender perspective or by looking at the role of civil society – and how these could be strengthened. The last session confirmed that progress is being made in cross-border and multi-agency contexts, despite the region's many linguistic, conceptual and resource challenges.



The outcome of the two-year briefing series was the creation of opportunities for discussion, collaboration and learning. It brought together a committed set of stakeholders working at the local, regional and international levels to reduce the harms of organized crime and helped build new partnerships while strengthening existing ones. The series enhanced the knowledge base on organized crime in the Mekong and helped bridge the gap between research and policy.

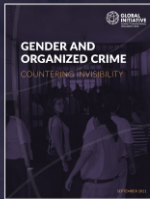
This journal is a compendium of the briefs prepared before each session. It is intended as a reference tool for civil society, the private sector and government officials working on issues related to the political economy of organized crime in the Mekong. It provides stakeholders with an information base on organized crime trends and challenges in the hope it will guide future policy and programming.





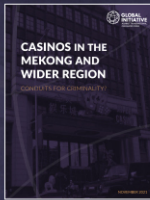
**29 July 2021**

The briefing series started with a discussion on China's Belt and Road Initiative, and its infrastructure's vulnerability to criminal exploitation in South East Asia. The session looked at the role of special economic zones as enablers of criminality, and explored how increased overland and maritime connectivity, larger volumes of trade and financial flows facilitate the trade in illicit narcotics, people and environmental commodities.



**28 September 2021**

This briefing explored the role of gender in building resilience to organized crime and provided insights into the informal rules that shape women's roles in response approaches. The discussion underlined the need to understand the factors and institutions that have shaped these dynamics to encourage and enhance the support provided to community organizations.



**1 December 2021**

There has been an extraordinary increase in the number of casinos in the Mekong since 2014. The activities of these establishments are often linked to criminality, such as money laundering, illegal trade in wildlife, human and drug trafficking, and child sexual abuse. This briefing focused on the role of casinos in the region, some of which are based within special economic zones.



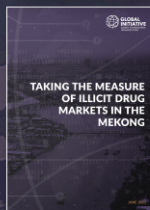
**1 February 2022**

The GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index is an expert-led assessment of the scope and scale of organized crime worldwide and the efficacy of resilience efforts. This briefing discussed the findings of the 2021 Index in the region. It explored the tool's potential to enable comparative analysis and provide metrics-based information on criminality and resilience to stimulate global discourse on organized crime and assist in developing innovative responses among policymakers, practitioners and other stakeholders in the Mekong.



**5 April 2022**

This briefing looked at the nexus of organized crime and development, and discussed the importance of tackling organized crime from a development perspective, focusing on the impact of migration, drug markets and urbanization on development.



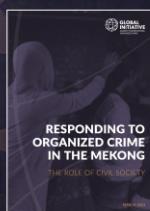
**23 June 2022**

The trade in heroin and synthetic drugs are two of the most prevalent and pervasive criminal markets in the Mekong. This briefing looked at the research and analytical approaches that can be used to better understand and track these complex markets, the challenges they pose and the role of civil society in enhancing knowledge across the Mekong region.



**31 January 2023**

This briefing focused on the role of social media in organized crime dynamics and its impacts on illicit markets in the region. It examined how illicit economies linked to the illegal wildlife trade and sexual exploitation of children are growing online and how perpetrators can conduct their operations overtly without concealing their activities in the dark web.



**5 April 2023**

This briefing looked at the role civil society actors can play in building resilience to organized crime in the region. It offered insights into current activities undertaken by civil society actors, their challenges and their relationship with local authorities. The session also explored how civil society networks can be strengthened across the region.



**13 June 2023**

The final briefing explored country-level perspectives and preparedness to respond to the illicit wildlife trade in the region and its link to biological threats. It discussed countries' current biosecurity approach – the measures put in place to prevent the introduction and spread of harmful organisms such as viruses and bacteria.



## CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

**T**he enormous scale of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) sets it apart from any other development project on the planet. As such, its evolution and impact are being closely monitored by national and multinational players.

There is an underlying concern that behind the stated objective of furthering economic opportunities, prosperity and, as a result, stability, the BRI is buying China ever-greater influence over partner countries, especially in less developed regions, and could be seen as gaining China a strategic advantage over other key players. In the Asian context, this is particularly pertinent to the interests of Australia, the United States and European nations.

At the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), we are concerned with one of the lesser-studied aspects of the BRI: its vulnerability to criminal exploitation. The experience of other development projects indicates that programmes with a large infrastructure-development component – like the BRI – attract the attention of criminal actors and are susceptible to criminal infiltration. In addition, the building and expansion of ports, roads and railway networks facilitate the movement of larger volumes of both licit and illicit commodities, generating more revenue for criminal groups. There have even been claims that China is actively 'exporting' criminality via the BRI. This briefing aims to explore whether any of these hypotheses are true.



1.

# CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

29 JULY 2021

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## THE BRI IN A NUTSHELL

- Launched in 2013.
- Beijing's flagship programme for expanding international trade opportunities and promoting infrastructure development.
- 140 countries have signed cooperation agreements; 50% are already actively participating.
- Cornerstones: the Silk Road Economic Belt, the Maritime Silk Road and six Economic Corridors.
- Project types: Infrastructure development in transportation (such as roads, railways, airports and seaports); energy development (such as oil and natural gas pipelines and utility grids); and mining, telecommunications, digital networks (as part of the Digital Silk Road), industrial parks, tourism, urban development and Special Economic Zones (SEZs).
- Unofficial estimated budget: US\$900 billion.





## THE BENEFITS OF THE BRI

- BRI-related projects boost (or will do so once completed) investments, services, employment and prosperity.
- The building or expansion of railroads, highways and ports increases connectivity and supply-chain efficiency, and promotes inter-regional economic integration.
- Transport projects could 'increase trade between 2.7% and 9.7%, increase income by up to 3.4% and lift 7.6 million people from extreme poverty', according to the World Bank.
- Greater economic prosperity can foster stability.

## THE NEGATIVE IMPACT AND POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE BRI

- The influx of investments is likely to fuel corruption and patronage structures in fragile nations and, as a result, impact governance.
  - ◆ Of the South East Asian countries that form part of the BRI, only Singapore features among the 30 least corrupt in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.
- China's so-called 'debt-trap diplomacy' puts countries at risk of losing strategic assets, e.g. Sri Lanka's port of Hambantota, but it might also force indebted nations to divert funding from national development priorities, e.g. education or service delivery, hence exacerbating the enabling environment of illicit economies.
- Massive acquisition of land for infrastructural development benefits large business conglomerates and military- controlled enterprises while having adverse effects on nearby communities.
  - ◆ This is already evident along BRI's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).




## WHAT ARE THE BRI'S CRIMINAL VULNERABILITIES?

- BRI hubs and trade corridors correspond to and elongate transnational trafficking routes for drugs, environmental commodities and people.
  - ◆ This can be observed along the BRI's China-Indochina Corridor connecting China's Yunnan Province with Myanmar, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand.



- The promotion of licit trade increases overall shipping volumes and lowers the chances of detecting illicit goods.
- Increased connectivity across regions could strengthen Chinese criminal networks.
  - ◆ E.g. Stronger links to Africa – a key source region for illicit wildlife products destined for Asian markets – are expected to exacerbate the illegal wildlife trade.
- SEZs – 50 of which are planned under the BRI – undermine the fight against illicit trade.
  - ◆ E.g. Cambodia's Sihanoukville SEZ, from where many foreign, especially Chinese, companies operate and are suspected of falsifying the origin of their goods to evade duties.

## What next?

- Is the BRI slowing down?
    - ◆ COVID-19 has slowed and/or temporarily halted the implementation of some BRI projects, but Chinese banks have put in place programmes to support projects that had suffered as a result of the pandemic.
  - Changing attitude towards lending:
    - ◆ Chinese lending through multilateral institutions might become a preferred alternative to bilateral relationships.
  - The observed vulnerabilities and instances of criminal exploitation reinforce the need to crime-proof the BRI's development projects.
  - The GI-TOC's Asia Pacific Observatory is gearing up to explore these risks and challenges in greater depth. To do so, we have developed an interactive [tool](#) mapping the BRI's vulnerability to criminal exploitation.
  - One of the areas we intend to investigate involves how the promotion of Traditional Chinese Medicine in BRI countries encourages wildlife poaching.
- 



## **GENDER AND ORGANIZED CRIME**

COUNTERING INVISIBILITY

SEPTEMBER 2021

2.

# **GENDER AND ORGANIZED CRIME: COUNTERING INVISIBILITY**

28 SEPTEMBER 2021



In most countries, nearly 95% of crime is attributed to men; meanwhile, the role of women has been under-explored and under-theorized – to some extent ‘invisibilized’ – and the narrative has been dominated by a focus on men as the primary agents in criminal behaviour. Calls to apply a gender-based lens to development and security programming have mounted considerably over the past decade. In the area of organized crime, however, the evidence, thinking and debate around this approach are still very limited.

Examinations of the role of women in organized crime have concluded that women almost always play an auxiliary role to men – ‘lovers and victims’, as one researcher described it<sup>1</sup> But to delimit the role of women in this way is both wrong and misleading, and significantly undermines the agency that women have both within criminal networks as perpetrators, and as part of communities where criminal governance and criminal violence are present, where their agency can be a positive force for change and resilience. This overly narrow focus has led to a significant gap in understanding the role women play as criminal and violent actors, the long-term impacts this has on organized crime dynamics and the implications for responses. It also diminishes how women can be sources of resilience to help society combat organized crime.

In South East Asia in particular, one can see reflections of a global trend of discrimination seen in law enforcement, criminal justice and penal systems that deal with organized crime and adverse impacts on women, especially (but not exclusively) in the field of drug trafficking. The ‘war on drugs’, both in the region and globally, only exacerbates existing structural inequalities, further marginalizing vulnerable groups, including women.

At the same time, contemporary analysis on violence, conflict and ameliorating crime suggests that it is women and children who hold the key to addressing the inter-generational effects of the same chronic violence that they witness or perpetrate. Therefore, if, as the OECD concludes,<sup>2</sup> we are to be well positioned to mitigate the detrimental impact of organized crime and reduce the epidemic of acute violence and homicide, then complex risk factors such as gender and interpersonal dynamics of women’s role in crime must be better understood.

The GI-TOC has focused on understanding the complex and varied gender dynamics in a number of settings across the globe and has worked to synthesise the knowledge gained through the GI-TOC’s civil society Resilience Fund, which supports a number of female change agents and civil society groups that work in communities most affected by crime. This brief explores the three key themes that emerged from that, and other, research: the role of women in the criminal hierarchy; the impact of organized crime on women; and women as sources of resilience.



# WOMEN IN THE CRIMINAL HIERARCHY

## Spectrum of participation

There are numerous examples around the world of women holding different roles in organized crime groups – from mules at the lower rungs of the hierarchy to ‘queen pins’ at the apex. There is also increasing recognition that women can contribute to criminal activity to the same degree as men, and in some ways even more so. And there is evidence that, increasingly, organized crime groups may actively seek to involve female partners and family members because of the particular characteristics women possess.

For example, in Mexico, females are hired as killers by drug cartels because their appearance does not raise suspicions among targeted victims.<sup>3</sup> In South Africa, research has also found gender to be used as a ‘mask’ and women play specific criminal roles because they attract less attention, such as moving contraband.<sup>4</sup> Women are also often sent out as spies to gather information and to plan for the next attack.<sup>5</sup> Research into the role of woman in organized crime groups in China<sup>6</sup> outlined a spectrum of participation – from leaders, business partners, and high-level organizational and planning roles all the way down to ‘mules’. Other roles include serving as foot soldiers and co-conspirators, assisting with drug transactions, acting as decoys and ‘temping’ as leaders while their significant other is incarcerated.<sup>7</sup>

As in the legal economy, there are some inherent gender biases within these criminal roles, as can be evidenced in the case of low-level female mules playing a key part in a smuggling supply chain strategy, but receiving less economic benefit and less power (though in some cases some independence from male domestic control).<sup>8</sup> The gender gap plays into this, with women being tasked with much of the low-level, ‘grunt’ work.

## Drivers of female involvement in crime

The reasons for female involvement are as multifaceted and complex as those that drive men to engage in organized crime. Nevertheless, a discernible set of major factors have been cited as key drivers of female participation in organized crime – namely, economic motivation, a desire for social inclusion, victimization, and romantic or family relationships. In particular, romantic or family relationships are largely unique to women as a motivation for engaging in organized crime.

From an economic and societal perspective, the trend can be characterized as the ‘dark side of emancipation’ – in other words, the drive for equal opportunity in the legitimate sphere of the ‘upperworld’ is mirrored by a growing female involvement in serious crime.<sup>9</sup> For example, in West Africa, female criminal leadership arguably reflects the high levels of female leadership seen in the economic and political spheres, which has a long-standing historical background.<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, however, economic drivers can overcome societal gender structures by necessity. One of the main reasons given to explain the rise of women in criminal activities is economic marginalization. One study observed that the diminishing crime gender gap can be linked to women’s financial instability, in particular when women’s economic well-being does not keep pace with that of their male counterparts: ‘When women become more economically disadvantaged [than] men, women’s rates of crime as compared with men’s rates will increase.’<sup>11</sup>

Another driver of female participation in organized crime is the desire to be accepted as part of a social group – the search for a sense of belonging, which is an impulse that has also been strongly attributed to male gang



members. Family breakdown and culture have a very strong impact on girls' lives, as rejection by family may lead them to the streets where some will find protection and a sense of belonging in street gangs.

Women also attain leadership roles in criminal hierarchies as a result of romantic and/or family relationships. Women are especially well positioned to step into high-ranking roles in organized crime groups in cases where a partner or family member in the group is killed or incarcerated. In many instances, wives, daughters, girlfriends or sisters of incarcerated gang members assume leadership positions when a gang leader is imprisoned.<sup>12</sup>

Within the profile of the 'average woman offender', a cluster of socio-economic factors (e.g. lack of education, poverty and unemployment) combines with being a victim of sexual or other abuse at home. Overall, it seems that the more victimized and traumatized such women are, the more likely they are to take refuge in criminality.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, women recruit other women. In the US, this includes recruiting other females for group membership and prostitution.

The type of organized crime most strongly linked with women is human trafficking, in particular sex and child trafficking, where women are involved to a high degree both as perpetrators and victims. The phenomenon of victims becoming perpetrators is a unique attribute of sex trafficking, where women who have been trafficked tend to replicate what they have endured themselves by becoming traffickers.<sup>14</sup> Other trafficking networks also reflect this trend and the higher rate of female involvement can increase the already detrimental impacts of the crime. Countries with high rates of female offenders were generally those where many underage females (i.e. minors) were also found.<sup>15</sup>



Chinese national Yang Feng Glan, known as the 'Ivory Queen', is led to court on charges of trafficking elephant tusks, February 2019, Tanzania. © AFP/via Getty Images



# THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZED CRIME ON WOMEN

There is considerable evidence that women may be victimized by organized crime at an equal or greater rate than men. There are a number of direct and indirect ways in which women are victimized by organized crime. Direct acts include, for example, being victims of human trafficking and the increase in femicide incidents linked to organized crime. Indirect victimization includes cultures of violence and vulnerability, and general gender-based violence. As previously noted, this cycle of violence not only has a tendency to translate from victimization into offending and criminality, but is also perpetuated by being passed on to the next generation.

Gender stereotypes and discrimination also influence the repercussions women face for engaging in criminal activity. While an increasing number of women are engaging in organized crime, they are also more likely to be more harshly punished for their transgressions – both by the legal system and society more broadly. When it comes to criminal justice, women seem to be facing yet another dimension of inequality and stereotyping as a result of the ‘evil woman’ phenomenon: women are perceived as ‘evil’ when they engage in ‘immoral’ behaviours that lie outside of relatively well-defined and expected female societal roles.<sup>16</sup>

Within the judicial system, we also see women receiving harsher sentences than those handed down to men. And the increasing number of women engaged in organized crime, paired with harsh sentencing practices, is resulting in a significant increase in the number of women in prison. The International Center for Prison Studies showed that the number of women in prison increased by over 40% from 2000 to 2013, compared to a 16% increase in the world population in the same period.<sup>17</sup> Worldwide statistics show that imprisonment for drug-related offences is particularly high among women. In South East Asia, a considerable proportion of imprisoned women are sentenced for drug offences: in Thailand, for example, 86% of convicted women were imprisoned for drug related offences, while in the Philippines the proportion was 60%.<sup>18</sup>

While imprisonment can have very negative consequences for both men and women, the impacts felt by women and their families are more acute, severe and long-lasting. More broadly, in a cultural context, women struggle with reintegration back into communities – far more so than their male peers. The main consequences of imprisonment for women are loss of employment and housing, stigma and family breakdown, reflecting the reality that many women are not welcomed back by their families after release in the way that men tend to be.<sup>19</sup>



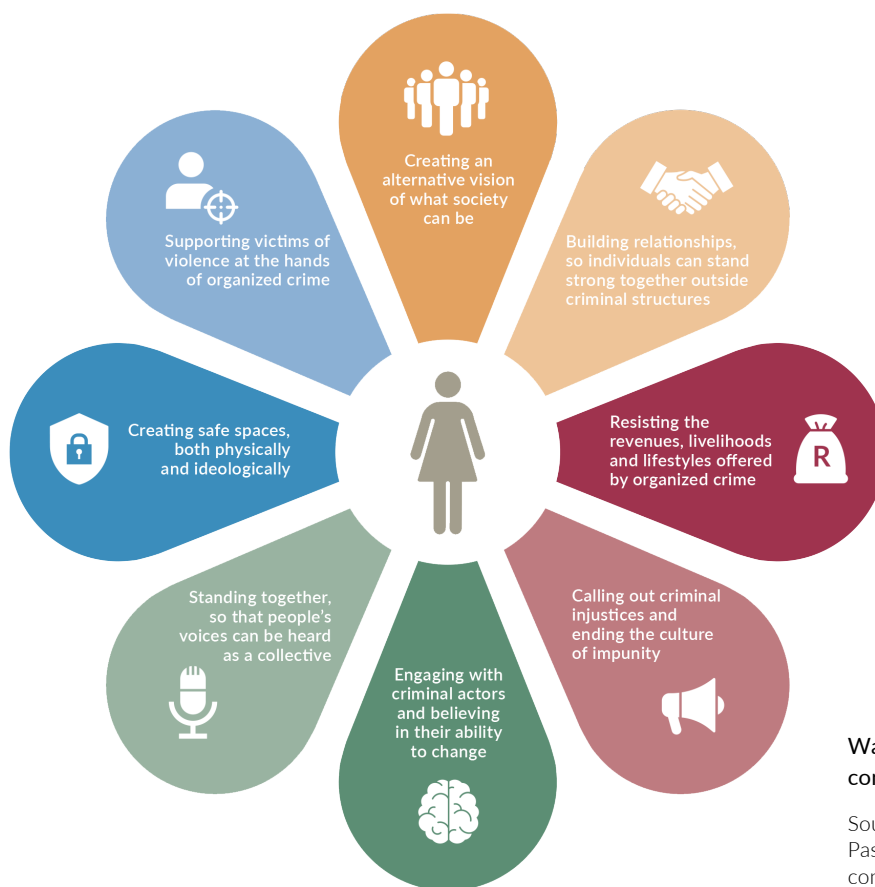


# WOMEN AS SOURCES OF RESILIENCE

Gender discrimination and organized crime have tended to yield particularly negative outcomes for women, but at the same time this differentiation can be used a weapon, or a strength in combating organized crime. Women and women's organizations play a key role not only in fighting organized crime<sup>20</sup> but also in conflict prevention and post-conflict settings.<sup>21</sup>

It has become increasingly clear, in different jurisdictions and cultures, that women are repeatedly at the forefront of building community resilience to organized crime.<sup>22</sup> Recognizing this pivotal role played by women in community resilience responses to organized crime, GI-TOC research through the Resilience Fund explored the informal and formal rules of society that shape women's roles, including their position within family configurations, and the repeated marginalization of female voices in traditional power structures.

Women have the potential to be powerful stakeholders in mobilizing community resilience to organized crime, and often serve as familial or societal matriarchs, which imparts them with a unique and unparalleled ability to shape norms of behaviour. Women have prompted initiatives, including approaches based on reclaiming space, either physical or discursive, from criminal governance or for dissenting voices that have been repressed. Together with initiatives that position women as interrupters of entrenched cycles of violence, they have created measures for alternative conflict mediation techniques.



**Ways resilience can be expressed in a context of criminality.**

Source: Kim Thomas and Roegchanda Pascoe, *Being resilient: Learning from community responses to gangs in Cape Town*, GI-TOC, 2018.

Responses to organized crime have largely focused on state or interstate cooperation to address the dynamics of illicit economies. There is recognized value to state-centric approaches in addressing transnational organized crime, but when pursued in isolation they can deprioritize local contexts, disenfranchise communities and ignore the role communities can and must play in countering organized crime.

In such contexts, the under-representation of women in positions of power or leadership within formal state systems means they are repeatedly overlooked as change agents or figureheads in the dialogue – even where their efforts are manifest at the community level. This perpetuates systems of female invisibility. Our research shows that a better understanding of the role played by women in building resilience to organized crime helps inform successful interventions without merely placing additional burdens on women in contexts where the state has failed to provide protection and basic services. As a result, we have synthesized a number of tailored recommendations for gender-sensitive interventions in the resilience space. These include empowering women's community resilience organizations to negotiate and partner with government and local authorities as a crucial component of genuinely sustainable initiatives to combat organized crime.



## CASINOS IN THE MEKONG AND WIDER REGION

CONDUITS FOR CRIMINALITY?

NOVEMBER 2021

3.

# CASINOS IN THE MEKONG AND WIDER REGION: CONDUITS FOR CRIMINALITY?

1 DECEMBER 2021

Illicit financial flows (IFFs) are the lifeblood of crime and corruption. And casinos seem almost perfectly designed to enable the discreet and undetectable movement of such flows. Given the explosion of the gambling industry in the Asia-Pacific region over the past few years, casinos are an area of particular risk and concern – not just to domestic and international law enforcement agencies, but also to the domiciled and migrant populations of the countries affected.

This brief identifies ways in which casinos can facilitate illicit financial flows, as well as illicit trade, and assesses the threat of the casino phenomenon in the Mekong region, which displays particular enabling factors that make casinos susceptible to organized criminal activity.

## Soft targets: why illicit financial flows love the casino sector

Government inquiries recently opened in Canada, the Philippines and Australia point to a common theme linking underground banking, Chinese money movements and organized crime to casino operators. These underground financial flows are often linked to predicate transnational crimes, including drug trafficking and human trafficking, and other modes of criminal activity.

GI-TOC analytical research identifies the casino sector as vulnerable to exploitation by money launderers and illicit actors because – and this is especially the case in the Asia-Pacific region – it is a cash-intensive industry vulnerable to money laundering, owing to gaps in the regulatory and law enforcement space.<sup>23</sup>

Vulnerabilities arise from the fact that casinos provide a number of financial services available at the ‘cash cage’. These services include facilities for patrons to transact with cash and cheques; make foreign exchange transfers, and in some cases use stored value and loyalty cards. Some also accept security storage boxes. Most of these services are available after business hours, when financial institutions have long closed their doors. Although not all such transactions are illegal, the facilities provide significant opportunity for criminal exploitation and, as such, casinos offer an attractive and convenient means for laundering ill-gotten cash. Special economic zones<sup>24</sup> are also a common feature of how casinos are able to operate in South East Asia, and other crimes that often go unchecked converge in these zones.

Restriction measures around accessing public places put in place as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic have had two main impacts on the casino sector. Firstly, there has been an increase in the use of online casino platforms, and, secondly, a surge in the number of illegal gambling houses in the region. Both Vietnamese and Thai authorities have had some success in disrupting these illegal operators. A recent Thai case has uncovered online illegal gambling operations linked to illicit funds deposited into Chinese banks. In Vietnam, illegal gambling outfits have in some cases been linked to certain Vietnamese public officials, who appear to run, and benefit from, these operations.

“ *A much greater focus needs to be placed on the regulation of casinos and casino projects.* ”





## The case of Sihanoukville, Cambodia

Sihanoukville is a good example of the kinds of risk posed by the casino sector in the region. Over the past five years, this once sleepy Cambodian seaside town has been transformed into a sprawling casino hub. It has also become a hub of organized criminal activity, ranging from prostitution rings to kidnapping and extortion. Different forms of criminal activity emerged, and converged, at every stage of the city's development.

In the years leading up to the casino boom, the area saw numerous violent land grabs and armed disputes, which left many Cambodian families homeless.<sup>25</sup> Tracts of formerly protected land were illegally logged and cleared to make way for casinos.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, construction workers, especially Chinese migrants, were subjected to exploitative working conditions.<sup>27</sup>

Once the casinos began to open, there was a surge in drug trafficking.<sup>28</sup> Demand from the Chinese tourist market drove up poaching and wildlife trafficking.<sup>29</sup> Imports of ivory and rhino horn were seized at Sihanoukville port.<sup>30</sup> Chinese-run prostitution and sex trafficking rings proliferated.<sup>31</sup> The city became notorious for kidnappings, theft and murder.<sup>32</sup>

Within the casinos, child labour is commonplace.<sup>33</sup> The relative lawlessness of Cambodia makes Chinese migrants easy targets for violent crime and extortion by Chinese organized crime groups.<sup>34</sup>

The scam-plagued online gambling industry ballooned in Cambodia, dwarfing the value of bricks-and-mortar casinos.<sup>35</sup> Furious that citizens back home were being defrauded, China insisted Cambodia shut down its online gaming industry.<sup>36</sup> Thousands of Chinese operators abandoned Sihanoukville, leaving construction workers stranded and in wage arrears.<sup>37</sup>

When COVID-19 struck the region, it decimated the tourism industry and forced some legal casinos to close.<sup>38</sup> Many migrant workers ended up in debt bondage, trafficked into illegal gambling and scam operations,<sup>39</sup> or forced into sex work. In the so-called China Project, a complex on the city's Otres Beach, initially built as an apartment block for the Chinese market, hundreds of people are reportedly held captive in modern slavery conditions.<sup>40</sup>



Las Vegas Casino and construction in Sihanoukville.

## ILLICIT FINANCIAL FLOWS: THE LIFEBLOOD OF ORGANIZED CRIME

Illicit financial flows facilitate the dominance of corrupt elites that maintain power structures around the world, which has been referred to as the phenomenon of 'organized corruption'. They are perhaps the most significant obstacle to equality, fairness and opportunity in transitioning economies, including countries in South East Asia. Criminal gangs from the region fund the illicit wildlife trade, illegal logging and other transnational crimes.

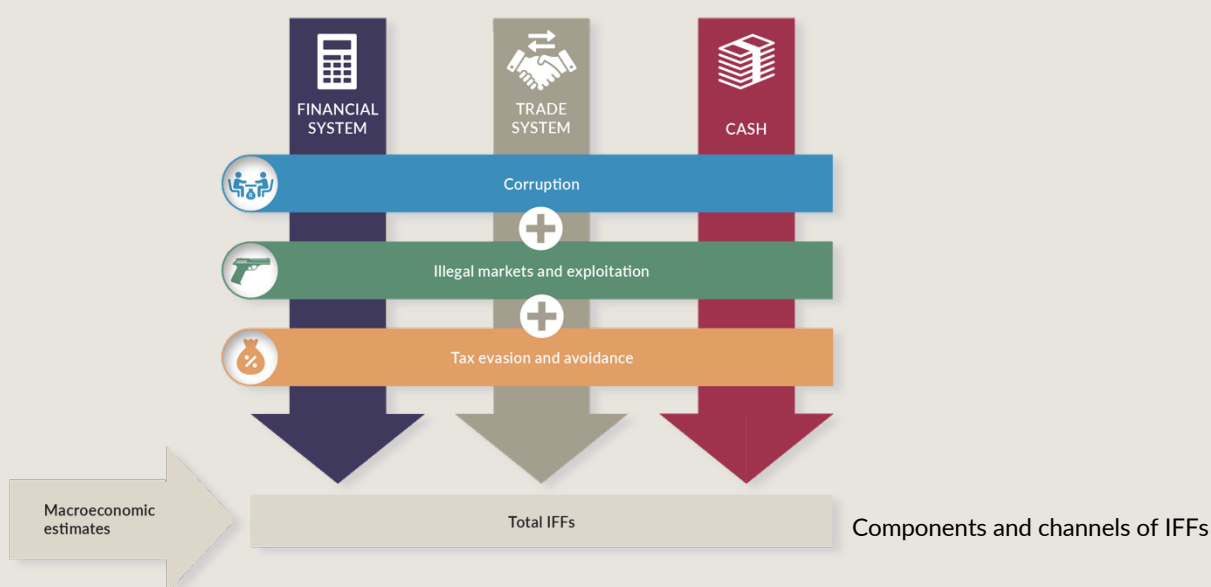
Recent UN work has defined IFFs as financial movements that are:

- illicit in origin, transfer or use;
- represent an exchange of value, including non-financial transfers;
- cover a flow of value over time; and
- cross an international border.

Studying, and addressing, IFFs requires an assessment of criminal activity by scrutinizing financial transfers and movements in the underlying (or predicate) crimes. A 'follow the money' approach is taken to assess organized criminal activity and ultimately help curb the activities of criminal enterprises that profit from illegal trade, trafficking and exploitation. Of particular interest therefore are monetary flows, which encompass a spectrum of liquidity from more liquid – hard cash and money invested in bank accounts – to time deposits and unmovable assets, such as land and property (least liquid).<sup>41</sup>

IFFs emerge at two different stages. The first is illicit income generation, which means cross-border transactions are generally made in the process of producing or trafficking illicit goods or providing illegal services. The second stage is illicit income management, which covers cross-border transactions that use illicitly derived money for investment.

The GI-TOC has pioneered research that adds rigour to existing models by using channel (the modes of transactions across the financial and trade systems, and cash-based transactions) and underlying crime analysis, and by selectively taking into account macro-economic data. We aggregate the estimates of predicate crimes, assess the proportion of cross border IFFs that result, and use channel analysis to establish the modes of IFF transactions (see the figure below).



## Conclusion: casinos as a gateway for crime

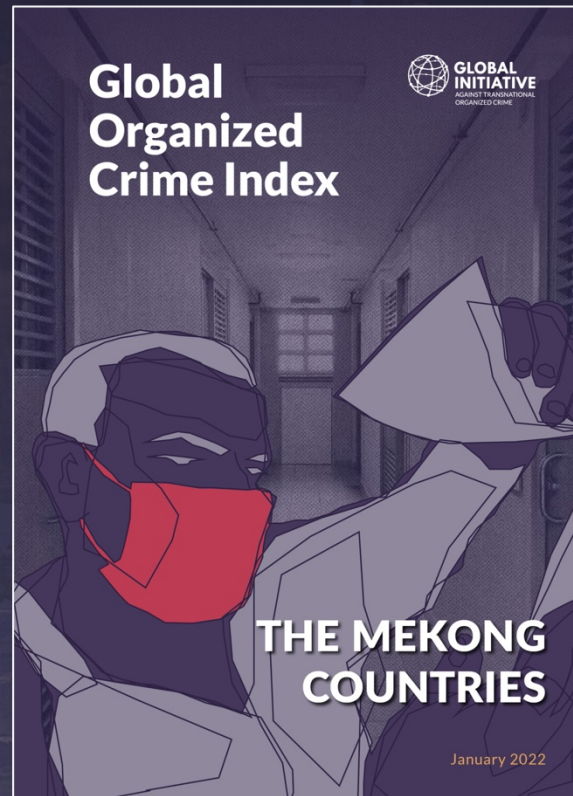
Casinos not only facilitate illicit financial flows but may also play a direct role in facilitating other illegal activities. For example, the 14K Triad leader Wan Kuok Koi (a.k.a. Broken Tooth) is reportedly deeply involved in Cambodia's casino industry, despite (or perhaps because of) his years of involvement in transnational organized crime. The 14Ks are implicated in murder, drug and human trafficking, as well as, reportedly, the 'extraction of state resources'.<sup>42</sup>

The GI-TOC has identified three key ways in which casinos play a pivotal role in illicit economies:

- Casino hubs situated near porous international borders are ideally placed to store or manage goods before they are smuggled to markets in neighbouring countries.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, high volumes of tourist traffic and trade through official border crossings in the area also make it harder to detect and intercept smuggling activity.
- In South East Asia, casinos are typically located in the no-man's-land between national customs checkpoints or in special economic zones close to international borders.<sup>44</sup> As such, they may operate outside normal regulatory norms or legal jurisdiction of their host country.<sup>45</sup> Many casino developments and SEZs manage their own security on-site, often using foreign security actors who may be unfamiliar with local laws. This creates layers of secrecy and frustrates attempts to externally monitor or police the trade through these establishments.<sup>46</sup>
- Casinos drive demand for illicit commodities or sexual services.<sup>47</sup> For example, tourist-driven demand for illicit environmental products is well documented.<sup>48</sup> The scramble to meet this demand leads to increased local sourcing, ranging from poachers trapping and selling bushmeat to the sale of exotic pets to outlets that sell wildlife parts.<sup>49</sup> Workers who come into direct contact with tourists, often those staying in casino-hotels, may well be tempted to capitalize on this demand for illicit goods.<sup>50</sup>

Understanding the integral role that casinos play in the laundering of illicit financial flows, as well as taking into perspective the wider range of impacts associated with convergent criminal activity, would therefore suggest that a much greater focus needs to be placed on the regulation of casinos and casino projects. International cooperation has so far played a useful part in the enforcement of post-construction activities, but there are seemingly other points within the development phase – both pre- and post-establishment – that warrant further attention.





4.

# THE GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX: DISCUSSING THE RESULTS IN THE MEKONG

1 FEBRUARY 2022

The Global Organized Crime Index, published in September 2021 by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), is an expert-led assessment of the scope and scale of organized crime worldwide and the efficacy of resilience efforts in 2020.

By enabling comparative analysis and providing metrics-based information on criminality and resilience, it is hoped that the Index will help move the global discourse surrounding organized crime forward and assist in the development of innovative responses among policymakers, practitioners and other stakeholders in their countries and/or regions.

## OVERVIEW OF THE INDEX

The Global Organized Crime Index evaluates two components: criminality and resilience (defined as the ability of state and non-state actors to withstand and disrupt organized criminal activities through political, economic, legal and social measures).

'Criminality' is divided into two sub-components – criminal markets and criminal actors – and is measured on a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' indicates no criminality at all and '10' signifies an all-pervasive criminal market or criminal actor.

'Resilience' is calculated according to 12 indicators measured on a scale from 1 to 10, where '1' indicates a lack of appropriate mechanisms and measures to tackle organized crime, while '10' indicates that frameworks are highly effective and allow for addressing future crime trends.

### THE INDEX IN A NUTSHELL

- First-ever global measurement of organized crime
- Launched in September 2021
- Covers all UN member states – 193 countries
- 5 018 indicators scored
- 5 321 hours of initial research
- 24 narrative and score verification expert group meetings
- Over 350 expert scorers involved





# KEY INDEX FINDINGS: HOW DO THE MEKONG COUNTRIES COMPARE?

This paper assesses the Index scores of the six Mekong countries (Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam) and compares it with the three key global findings of the Index, namely, the significant proportion of the world population that is affected by organized crime; the scale of state-embedded actors and the impact they have on states' resilience; and the impact that good governance can have on states' resilience against organized crime.

## Vulnerability

One of the main findings of the Global Organized Crime Index is that nearly 80% of the world's population live in countries where criminality is pervasive and resilience is insufficient. Asia was identified as the continent with the highest levels of criminality, alongside low levels of resilience, with some intra-regional distinctions. South East Asia ranked second among the Asian sub-regions in terms of high criminality (Western Asia ranking first), and all the Mekong countries were assessed as exhibiting high levels of criminality and low resilience.

## State-embedded actors and their impact on resilience

Based on the Index's findings, 83% of the world's population lived in countries where there was a significant or severe impact of criminal actors embedded in, and acting from within, the state's apparatus. Statistical analysis suggests that there is a strong negative correlation between state-embedded actors and resilience: countries with higher state-embedded actor scores will tend to have lower levels of resilience and vice versa.

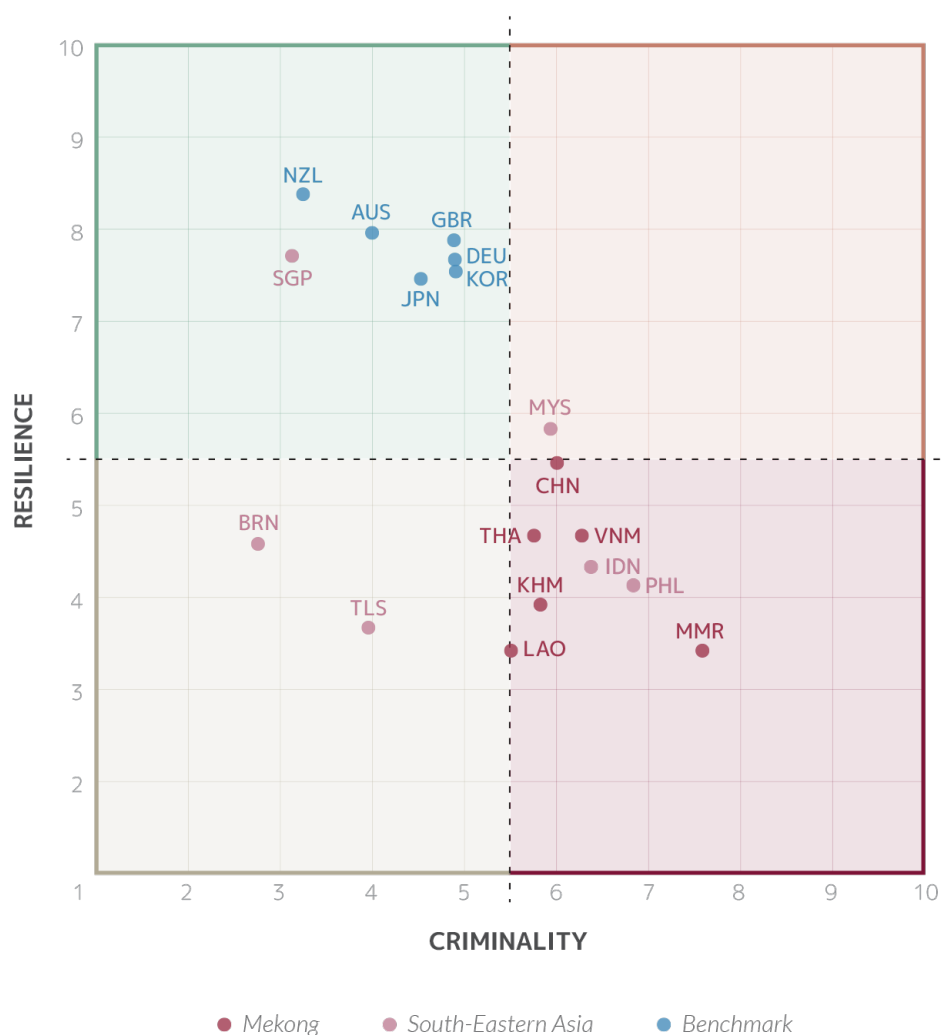
State-embedded actors are the most dominant actor type within the Mekong countries, with an average score of 7.30 out of 10. Foreign actors – defined as state and/or non-state criminal actors operating outside their home country, including not just foreign nationals, but also various diaspora groups that have created roots in the country over multiple generations – average 6.50, making them the second-most influential criminal actor type within the six countries, followed by criminal networks (6.20) and mafia-style groups (4.60).

## Resilience and governance

A third key point relates to the finding that countries categorized as full democracies on average exhibit higher levels of resilience than authoritarian states, with a strong correlation at 0.79 between the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2020 Democracy Index and the Global Organized Crime Index resilience scores.



Overall, all six Mekong countries exhibited low resilience to organized crime, with only China (5.46) coming close to the high resilience category (defined as 5.5 out of 10 or above). The others – especially Cambodia (3.92), Myanmar (3.42) and Laos (3.42) – were assessed as having largely ineffective frameworks to curb organized crime.



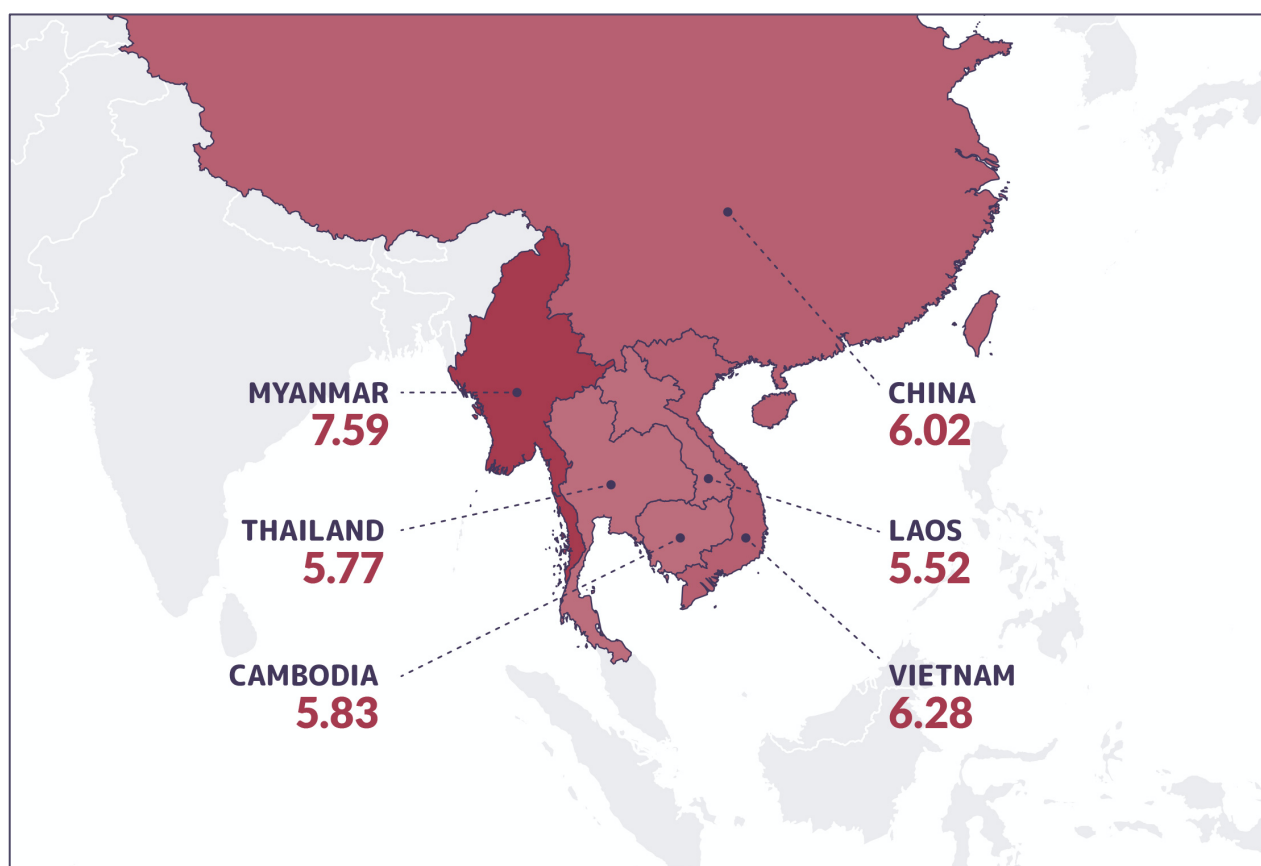
**FIGURE 1** Relationship between criminality and resilience, Mekong and comparative countries.

Good governance – exhibited by states that are participatory, accountable, effective and founded on the rule of law – has a crucial impact on countries’ ability to withstand and tackle organized crime. On average, the Mekong countries score low for government transparency and accountability (3.67), the judicial system (3.92) and prevention (3.75). On average, the Mekong countries score in line with global trends on international cooperation (5.17, vs global average of 5.68) and national policies and laws (5.17, vs global average of 5.42), but there seems to be a gap between these encouraging scores and the implementation and effectiveness of such mechanisms and measures. Where the Mekong countries differ starkly from the global average is on the score for non-state actors (including civil society actors, NGOs, academics and journalists). The combined average across the six Mekong countries stands at only 2.92 – well below the global average of 4.82.



# CRIMINAL MARKETS IN THE MEKONG COUNTRIES

Each of the six Mekong countries suffer from diverse and numerous criminal markets, and all score very highly on criminality. Myanmar, with a score of 7.59, ranks third overall in the world, but all six scored above 5.5, compared to a global criminality average of 4.88.



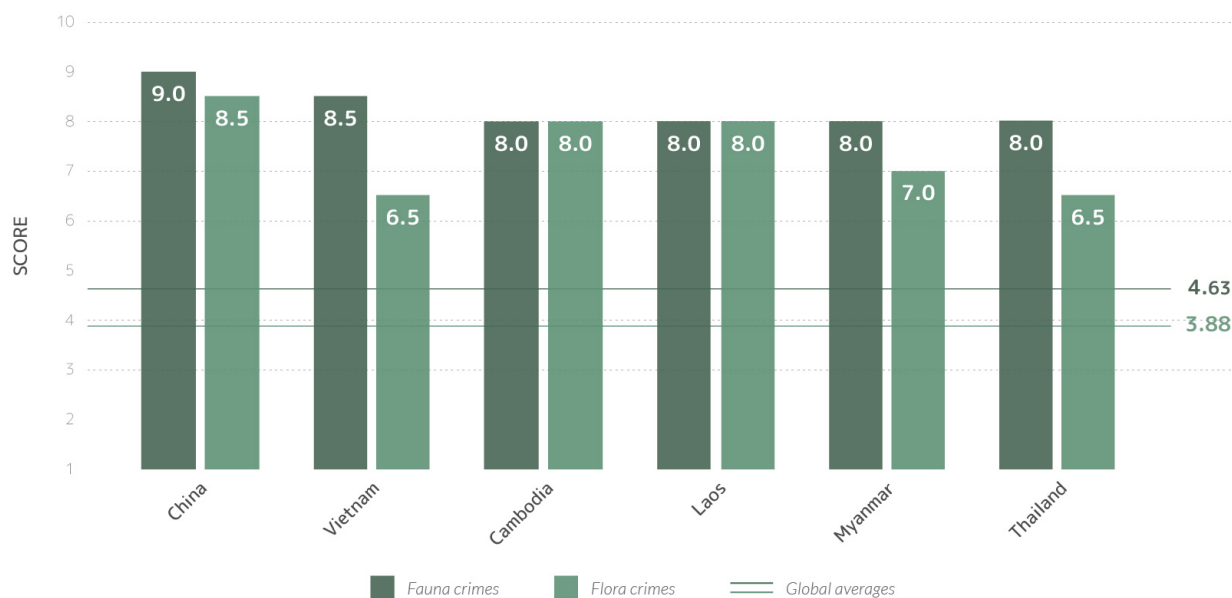
**FIGURE 2** Overall criminality scores for Mekong countries.

The generally high scores across the Mekong countries can be attributed in large part to four or five distinct criminal markets; fauna and flora crimes (with average scores of 8.25 and 7.42 respectively), synthetic drugs (average score of 7.92) and human trafficking and smuggling, which both score 6.67 and 6.75.



## Environmental crime

Environmental crimes are classified as three separate markets for the purposes of the Index: fauna crimes, flora crimes and non-renewable resources. The scores across both fauna and flora markets for the six countries are notably high, especially when compared against global averages, highlighting both the scale but also the impact of these markets in the Mekong region.



**FIGURE 3** Rankings for fauna and flora crimes in Mekong countries vs global averages.

## Drugs

The Index scores four separate drug markets for all countries: heroin, cocaine, cannabis and synthetic drugs. While the heroin market in the Mekong countries is notably pervasive and impactful, it is the scores for the synthetic drug market that are the most striking, with the six countries' scores ranking among the highest worldwide. The Mekong countries' average score for heroin is 6.92, almost three points higher than the global average, while the synthetic drugs score (7.92) is 3.30 points higher than the global average.





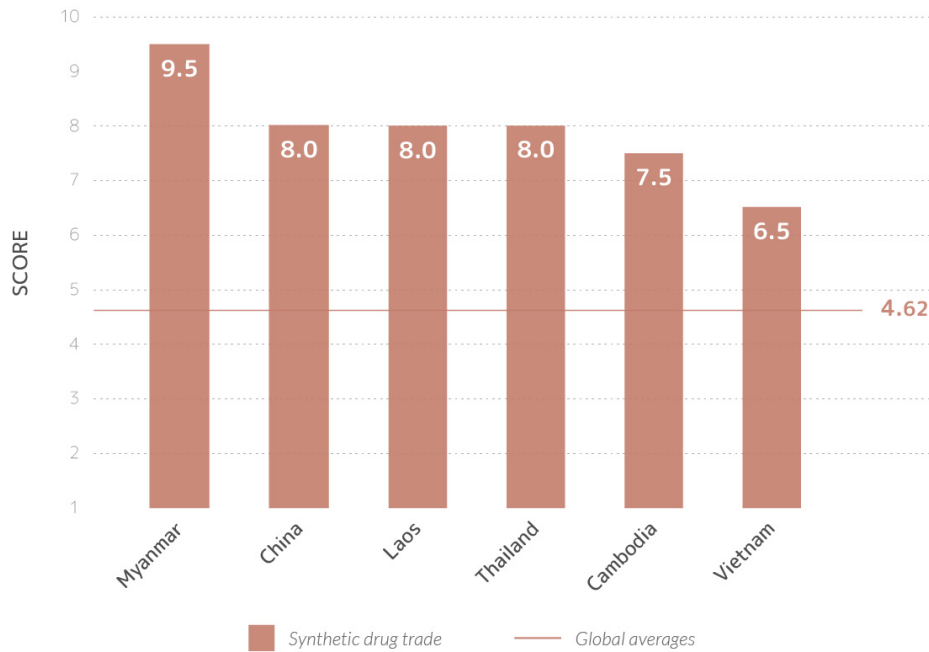


FIGURE 4 Rankings for synthetic drug trade in Mekong countries vs global averages.

## Human trafficking and smuggling

Finally, despite scoring lower in terms of impact, the criminal markets of human trafficking and human smuggling in the Mekong countries are still pronounced when compared to the global averages. The Mekong countries' average human trafficking score is more than one point higher than the global human trafficking average, while Index scores put the human smuggling market in the Mekong countries almost two points higher than the global average for the same criminal market.

	HUMAN TRAFFICKING	HUMAN SMUGGLING
Cambodia	7.5	6.5
China	6.5	6.0
Laos	6.5	6.5
Myanmar	6.5	7.5
Thailand	6.5	7.0
Vietnam	6.5	7.0
Mekong countries average	6.67	6.75
Global average	5.58	4.77
Difference with global average	+1.09	+1.98

FIGURE 5 Rankings for human trafficking and smuggling in Mekong countries vs global averages.

# INFORMING A RESPONSE

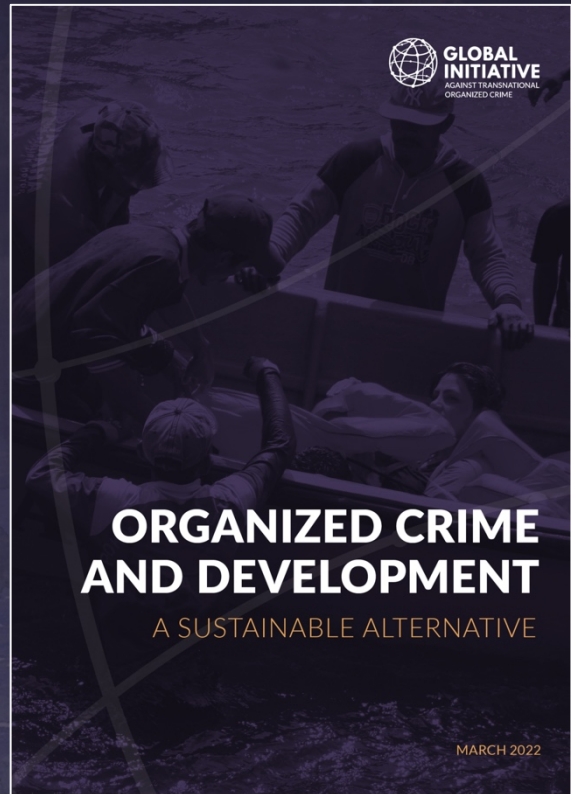
The Global Organized Crime Index helps assess the scale and scope of the problem of crime afflicting the Mekong countries, but fashioning a response requires a much broader and more holistic assessment of a country's needs, abilities and challenges. These scores are merely a starting point for discussion, highlighting areas where organized crime holds sway, and suggesting where resources and attention might be best directed to combat that challenge.

## GI-TOC AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

In May 2019, the GI-TOC launched the Resilience Fund as an innovative solution, driven by the need for a new approach to support communities that are unprotected from, or vulnerable to, the violence and damage perpetrated by organized crime, especially when the state is unable or unwilling to protect them.

The Fund is a grant-making mechanism, initially financed with a major, multi-year grant from the Government of Norway that is designed to finance, nurture and assist local initiatives that seek to combat organized crime. The Fund identifies and empowers key civil society actors and builds their operational capacity with the aim of creating resilience networks in communities impacted by organized crime and violence. The Fund is growing its activities and impact in Asia and has supported a number of specific [Resilience Fund Fellowships](#) in some of the Mekong countries.

Since the initial support grant from the Government of Norway, additional donors such as Germany, New Zealand and the Netherlands have joined as Fund partners, subsequently bolstering and expanding Fund activities into new thematic areas and geographic regions.



5.

# ORGANIZED CRIME AND DEVELOPMENT: A SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVE

5 APRIL 2022

Development is often seen as the panacea to criminality. It provides legitimate routes to financial inclusion and prosperity. At the same time, however, development initiatives and economic growth can, in certain contexts, open up new avenues for organized crime to flourish. Indeed, the harms wreaked by organized crime – increased violence, insecurity, corruption, diversion of public funds and loss of investment – may negate the gains of the original development intervention.

This brief discusses the importance of tackling organized crime from a development perspective and discusses in particular the role and impact of migration, drug markets and urbanization on development.

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) have been a milestone in recognizing the impact organized crime has on development as well as in providing an opportunity to development actors to participate in the fight against transnational organized crime. Tackling organized crime is an important component of the SDGs. The overall message is clear: transnational organized crime is a spoiler to development and ought to be taken seriously by law enforcement agencies and development actors alike.

A development lens opens up avenues to reformulate the tools needed to address organized crime, as it has a detrimental effect on development. It is a threat to human security and it influences the work of development actors by undoing their successes. There is a 'crime trap' created by criminal actors and the illicit economy they thrive on – from diverting funds to minimizing the space of the legitimate economy. In addition, organized crime captures social capital and criminalizes governance as criminal rent-seeking creates political power. This undermines the legitimacy of political power and state stability.

## MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Migration has become evocatively illustrative of why organized crime is increasingly an issue that influences development; it is also a phenomenon that has been at the forefront of international concerns.

The two main forms of organized crime associated with migration are trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants – two distinct crimes under international law, yet commonly conflated in political discourse. Responding to irregular migration, and associated crimes of smuggling and trafficking in persons, has become one of the key policy challenges of our time.

Human trafficking consists of three elements: an 'action', being recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons; secondly, a 'means' by which that action is achieved (threat or use of force, or other forms of coercion) and the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve consent; and, thirdly, a 'purpose' – namely, to exploit.

Human smuggling, by contrast, has as its basis a willing transaction between migrant and smuggler – in effect, a bilateral contract for services. Although in some cases smuggling arrangements may end in trafficking, the vast majority will not.

Although the role of smugglers in facilitating irregular movement has a long history, their centrality to modern migration dynamics is unprecedented. This is in part driven by increasingly restrictive migration policies, and growing forced displacement. A number of crises worldwide serve as push factors for migration. Where regular migration channels are limited, people are forced to use the services of smugglers to facilitate their movement across borders. Refugees, displaced by a range of factors, including conflict, economic marginalization and





environmental change, are increasingly dependent on smugglers to avail themselves of their rights under international law. The greater the need for smugglers becomes, the more professional and criminal they become.

Although most countries subscribe to an international legislative framework governing both crimes, the response remains fragmented and in many cases counter-productive, feeding into organized crime. The majority of responses have focused on investing in securitized border control, although there has also been a parallel focus by some destination states on addressing the developmental root causes of migration as a way of seeking to stem the flows of irregular emigration from source countries. However, growing evidence calls into question this relationship.<sup>51</sup>

The relationship between migration and development is increasingly understood to be non-linear, making the relationship between development aid and migration policy all the more complex. Conflicts and development disasters around the world mean that we are currently witnessing a period of unprecedented levels of forced displacement, which swells irregular migration, and compels vulnerable individuals to use smuggling services, which puts them at increased risk of trafficking. Meanwhile, the drivers for migration in the South and South East Asia regions have remained unchanged or been exacerbated by COVID-19. The pandemic has had a severe impact on populations. The travel restrictions have resulted in a situation of forced immobility – namely those who want to move but cannot – swelling the pools of would-be-migrants who are vulnerable to recruitment by people smugglers and human traffickers.<sup>52</sup>

## **SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVE LIVELIHOOD DEVELOPMENT FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY ILLICIT DRUG ACTIVITIES**

South East Asia has for a very long time been a production market for illicit drugs, particularly opium and, increasingly, methamphetamines. For decades, international drug control efforts focused on supply control based on repressive interventions and law enforcement. These approaches have been heavily criticized as broadly ineffective and often counter-productive.<sup>53</sup> When rural communities grow illicit crops they often do so out of economic necessity, and as an outcome of their marginalization from mainstream economic markets and political processes. Moreover, drug control has too often been treated as a highly securitized issue, outside the realms of more sustainable development focuses, such as public health, gender, human rights and sustainable economic livelihoods.<sup>54</sup>

Prominent research from 2012 onwards made a forceful case that stricter drug policies around enforcement did not necessarily translate into lower drug supply or demand.<sup>55</sup> Experts pointed to a range of development outcomes that were being undermined by repressive supply and demand interventions. With the UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs in 2016, there was a significant and indelible shift at the international level. The session's Outcome Document recognizes sustainable development as a key thematic focus and mechanism for tackling illicit drug economies around the world.<sup>56</sup>



South East Asia has in fact been ahead of the curve on this in many respects, with Thailand in particular adopting an approach in the 1960s recognizing that the appeal of growing prohibited crops increases when infrastructure, market access and economic opportunities are weak. Farmers grew illicit crops despite continual risk of government repression, monoculture-related loss of harvests, or exposure to organized crime and armed groups. Simply removing illicit opportunities in the absence of licit ones without any 'proper sequencing' was thereby recognized as a non-viable long-term development strategy. Instead they sought a holistic, problem-solving, development approach, recognizing the centrality of identifying and addressing root causes of communities' reliance on illicit drug economies.<sup>57</sup>

The success of these interventions in northern Thailand, once a key production centre of the Golden Triangle and now virtually opium production-free, has led to new efforts to apply the concepts of sustainable development and drug control to urban settings.<sup>58</sup> However, the success of these interventions in some regions should not be mistaken for a silver bullet. Alternative development has been tried in many other places around the world with more limited results. What is needed is whole-of-state responses that build state capacity at the same time as providing actors with routes out of a reliance on illicit economies. Such an approach removes the oxygen that fuels organized crime and its predation on vulnerable communities.

## THE ROLE OF URBANIZATION

South East Asia has some of the biggest and fastest-growing cities in the world. Between 1950 and 2014, the region's urban population increased 11-fold from 26 million to 294 million,<sup>59</sup> with national urbanization rates ranging from 20% in Cambodia to 53% in Indonesia and 100% in Singapore.

Urbanization trends since the second half of the 20th century have highlighted the relationship between urbanization and criminal violence, with cities often regarded as hubs of crime given the concentration of industries, service, wealth and people. Low-income urban areas, particularly slums, have become prominent bases for gangs.

Organized crime tends to have a particularly durable and damaging impact on cities, including on their socio-economic development, when it exploits urban areas with limited state presence. The fragmentation of certain cities in the Global South into areas of prosperous democratic governance on the one hand, and areas of limited state presence on the other has led to alternative providers of security and governance. For example, a recent study by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime has highlighted the role of criminal groups in providing governance during the COVID pandemic in Latin America and Africa.<sup>60</sup> Urbanization dynamics in South East Asia risk leading to a similar division of the urban space and associated governance challenges.

However, this relationship between urbanization and violence, criminal or otherwise, should not be interpreted as a simple or direct causal link. Neither urban population growth nor urban poverty cause violence or crime. Many rapidly growing cities in the Mekong area are growing much faster now than those in Latin America, yet register lower homicide rates and host fewer organized criminal groups. Instead, recent urbanization trends have sparked a prolific research agenda around political processes embedded in the social and spatial configuration of violent cities.



# THE QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE ASKED

The human costs in terms of lives lost that are either directly or indirectly caused by organized crime are unprecedented, both in conflict where arms trafficking and war economies fuel inter- and intra-state conflict, as well as in urban centres where violent governance by criminal groups creates impenetrable slums with high death tolls. Violence caused by organized crime undermines human security and, in turn, negatively affects development, economic growth and political stability.

In this (hopefully) post-COVID world, there have been shifts in geopolitics, both in established democracies and fragile states, and a massive global growth in human vulnerability. We have seen geographic blocs break down, borders harden, the rise of authoritarianism and massive, elite-centric inequality. Conflicts and insurgencies have waged on unresolved, with large-scale casualties and displacement, even while stabilization efforts withdraw in the face of proxy politics. Technology has undermined trust in institutions and expertise, with misinformation and fraud distorting everything from elections to public health, and platforms serving as a conduit for violent ideologies and criminal services. Failures in state service delivery and plentiful evidence of corruption during the pandemic have eroded state legitimacy and triggered rise in violent criminal governance.

There is much to grapple with simultaneously for development actors and policymakers seeking to understand the bigger picture and to consider how they respond. Human rights, transparency, protection of civil society space and other international norms have been side-lined, often with highly concerning implications for the rule of law and development, and to the benefit of deviant actors.

Some would say that states that have become criminalized arguably play a part in the problems outlined above. Here, an innovative approach is needed, so the international community should consider asking the following questions:

- How do we deal with criminalized states and transnational corruption? What is the impact on the coherence and efficacy of the multilateral system, and what are the implications for global policy setting?
- How can we do more to call out criminals as criminals? How do we protect those that have the courage to do so?
- How do we try new things within existing structures where there are systematic weaknesses? For example, following the money and seizing assets, or monitoring and countering illicit trade.
- How do we break down the social power that organized crime enjoys? What are effective counter-narratives? How has COVID-19 impacted our ability to be relevant to the most vulnerable communities and how do we build resilience in those communities?
- Should we engage in political dialogue with certain organized crime groups? How should we assess the risk-reward balance in doing so?
- How can we mobilize partners in the private sector to share information and be part of the solution going forwards?







**TAKING THE MEASURE  
OF ILLICIT DRUG  
MARKETS IN THE  
MEKONG**

JUNE 2022

6.

# TAKING THE MEASURE OF ILLICIT DRUG MARKETS IN THE MEKONG

23 JUNE 2022

Illicit drug markets are among the most significant and pervasive criminal markets in the Mekong region. According to the GI-TOC's Organized Crime Index 2021, which assigns criminality scores to the markets for heroin, cannabis, cocaine and synthetic drugs separately, the heroin and synthetic drug markets in particular are the most striking. Indeed, the Mekong countries' average score for heroin is 6.92, almost three points higher than the global average, while the synthetic drugs score (7.92) is 3.30 points higher than the global average.

This brief discusses the importance of understanding the illicit drug markets in the region and the challenges that come with them. It looks at different research and analytical approaches that can be utilized to better understand and track these complex markets, as well as the role of civil society in enhancing the knowledge of drug markets across the Mekong region.

## THE COMPLEXITY OF ILLICIT DRUG MARKETS

The expression 'illicit drug market' is shorthand for multiple markets, specializing or not in different kinds of drugs or different kinds of customers, and operating in different regions, countries or even parts of a city. It is the market that is designated as 'illicit', and not necessarily the drugs that happen to be traded in it: some of the drugs found in illicit drug markets can be produced and traded legally but have been diverted to the illicit market.<sup>61</sup> Illicit drug markets can be wholesale, retail or mixed. They rely on a supply chain, from production and trafficking to use, and sometimes on multiple and versatile supply chains. Some of the drugs involved may be illegal in some jurisdictions but not in others, and some of the new and novel synthetic drugs now traded and used in illicit drug markets are neither licit nor illicit.

Continual change in the flow of products and profits or other aspects of drug market activities (i.e. cultivation, production, transformation, storage, transportation, distribution and sale) is a feature of most illicit drug markets. They are very dynamic, fluid and complex structures that operate at various levels of sophistication and involve many different types of actors. Many span borders and, in recent years, have moved at least partially to cyberspace where they operate on social media or crypto markets.

In addition to the general law of supply and demand, illicit drug markets are subject to the influence of numerous internal and external factors that can affect the product supply or supply chain, the demand for a product, or the market's ability to connect the supply to the demand. External factors include the pressure exerted by law enforcement and other interdiction efforts, as well as the violence resulting from the fierce and unregulated competition between rival participants in the market.

Illicit drug markets are also affected by technological development, whether in agricultural, chemical, transportation or communication technologies. The internet,<sup>62</sup> e-commerce and e-transfer of currencies, crypto markets and cryptocurrencies, and mobile phones<sup>63</sup> have produced measurable changes in illicit drug markets. Just as drug markets have adapted and become resilient to new trends – such as COVID-19 – they also make good use of new technologies, finding ways to circumvent regulation, fake compliance and avoid or counter law enforcement efforts to disrupt them.<sup>64</sup> Although the capacity of illicit drug markets to adapt should not be exaggerated,<sup>65</sup> adaptability ultimately determines the resilience of any illicit market.



# DATA CHALLENGES ACROSS THE MEKONG

The structure, size and organization of illicit drug markets vary considerably across countries, regions, cities and communities in the Mekong. Given this inherent complexity, it is fair to note a dearth of relevant recent field-based research and analysis of domestic drug markets across the region. Most national governments have limited capacity to generate the data necessary for ongoing surveillance and comprehension of their domestic drug markets. For example, there are no basic surveillance systems that generate regular relevant data on the estimated number of people who use drugs, which drugs are used or how they are used, and the retail price and purity statistics for these substances. In their place, arrest figures, seizure data and treatment statistics are employed. As discussed below, these output metrics are inadequate proxies for the missing market-based analytics yet are often the main foundation for unfounded extrapolations on market production and supply.

This trend is not specific to the region, but it diminishes nations' ability to design and implement evidence-based responses to the structures and characteristics of their illicit drug markets. It also prejudices regional and international monitoring systems and tools that rely on such national data for wider collective analysis and threat projection.<sup>66</sup> There is also a continuing overdependence on fragmented (and unreliable) numbers for seizure, arrest and drug treatment that dominate official reporting.

Many regional countries suffer from a similar evidence gap in their national surveillance schemes when it comes to comprehending their own domestic drug markets. For example, little is known about the actual demand profile across drug markets. Even under the best of circumstances, most national estimates of people who use drugs rely on self-reported behaviour. It is only reasonable to expect that significant numbers will not report behaviour that is illegal and/or stigmatized. In addition, surveys tend to miss people with problematic drug use and exclude people in prisons and other detention settings, as well as those in residential drug treatment facilities.

Further, the accuracy of existing drug use figures (where available) varies strongly from country to country across the Mekong region. Definitions of drug use are not uniform, making comparison difficult. Protocols for surveys – including who is excluded and in what settings they are administered – also differ. For example, some may make use of respondent-driven sample methods in which a relatively small number of 'seed' people identified as, for example, people who inject drugs, are asked to identify others who inject drugs, who, in turn, identify others until an appropriate sample size is achieved. The 2021 UN World Drug Report also cites capture-recapture methods that estimate the completeness of usually more than one routine data source, such as a methadone patient registry, and extrapolate from there. None of these methods is ideal, all raise concerns about biases and miss what may be the population segment of greatest interest: the populations most fearful of being discovered.

In short, it appears that the 'vicious cycle of invisibility in which the absence of evidence is taken as evidence of absence'<sup>67</sup> is predominant in the understanding of drug markets in the Mekong. With this thinking, the erroneous extrapolation is that if seizures are not made in a particular place, then drugs are not flowing there; if particular substances are not seized, then they are not present or being used; or, if people who use drugs are not counted, then no drug users exist (and no programming or support is provided for them).





# APPROACHES TO ANALYZING ILLICIT DRUG MARKETS

Licit commodity markets are usually measured in terms of product availability, product price, product quality and volume of trade. The same measures can be applied to illicit drug markets, only with the added difficulties involved in measuring a clandestine market.

Examining drug markets through the lens of pricing and distribution systems is an important approach to understanding the availability and mobility characteristics of drugs within and across markets and countries,<sup>68</sup> how they move,<sup>69</sup> and how responsive markets and distribution systems are to the various measures designed to disrupt or eliminate them.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, in the context of monitoring the international response to these drugs, the United Nations views illegal drug prices, along with drug purity data, as a 'powerful indicator of market trends' and important enough to warrant core annual country-reporting criteria.<sup>71</sup>

Although no single dataset or metric can provide a comprehensive picture of illicit drug flows in the Mekong region, or of the many domestic illicit drug markets that constitute the regional market, each can contribute to overall comprehension. These are some of the most important metrics:

- The *volume of trade* in an illicit drug market is a core structural component and one that is generally nearly impossible to estimate. Most estimates rely on analytical extrapolations from output metrics such as drug seizures and arrest figures, both of which are very unsatisfactory proxies to measure changes in the volume of trade within a specific illicit drug market. While these numbers may provide a restricted glimpse into a dynamic and evolving networked mass of socio-environmental intricacies, other metrics can provide more insight.
- Monitoring *the price of drugs* available on illicit markets can reveal elements of the fundamental characteristics and structure of these markets.<sup>72</sup> Drug price data can provide insight into the patterns of variability and stability of a particular drug market.<sup>73</sup> Looking at pricing and distribution systems may shed some light on how responsive these markets and systems are to domestic measures designed to disrupt or eliminate them.<sup>74</sup> However, since the price of a product is influenced by its quality and availability, it makes sense to measure the quality (potency, purity, toxicity, safety) of the drugs traded within a market. As prices can be related to the demand for a product, it is also useful to consider the sensitivity of demand to changes in the price or quality of the drugs traded in a market. This is sometimes referred to as the *price elasticity of demand*.<sup>75</sup>
- Two proxies are frequently used to measure *product availability*: the ease with which an individual (e.g. a drug user, researcher, social dealer or undercover police officer) can procure a particular drug in a specific market, and the perceived availability of a particular drug among frequent drug users or low-level dealers who participate in that market.
- Since most forms of participation in the illicit drug market are criminalized, changes in the *number of reported arrests for drug offences* within an area are sometimes used to indicate changes in an illicit drug market, particularly an open market. However, like drug seizures, what is being measured is essentially the level of police activity (outputs) rather than actual changes (outcomes or impacts) in the market. For this reason, the number of arrests for drug offences and the frequency of drug seizures are in fact misleading ways to measure change in the illicit market.






While drug market surveillance data is usually collected and compiled by a large number of government actors, it is important to keep in mind that civil society organizations (CSOs) can also play an important role to supplement and close gaps in relevant and current information. For example, CSOs regularly gather data on the number of drug users they work with as well as on the quality and availability of drugs in a specific market. It is important to keep in mind that CSOs across the Mekong region are at the forefront of working with people who use drugs, providing important services, such as harm reduction and counselling to community members. They also play an important role in raising awareness about the harms of the illicit drug markets.

## THE COMBINATION OF DATA SOURCES

While CSO-generated data cannot replace data gathered on a national level by governments, it is important to recognize that each available data source has its benefits and limitations, and together can contribute to an improved comprehension of domestic and regional drug market characteristics. It is only through layering multiple data metrics across a variety of perspectives that we can enhance our understanding of supply and demand trends within and across the region's illicit drug markets. As such, improved surveillance systems across the Mekong drug markets are required to begin to understand better what is *really* happening in these markets today, rather than continuing to proceed on the basis of *what we think we know* about them based on a subset of simplistic output metrics.





## SOCIAL MEDIA- ENABLED CRIME IN THE MEKONG

January 2023

7.

# SOCIAL MEDIA-ENABLED CRIME IN THE MEKONG

31 JANUARY 2023

# INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Fourth Industrial Revolution has been building on the digital revolution at an exponential rate, reshaping the world with the rapid introduction and uptake of new communication tools; the digitalization of everything from the public square to shopping centres; and rapid advances in technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics and the internet of things. Research has shown that these new technologies, including social media and information communications technology, have supercharged illicit markets around the world by improving operations and covert communications, increasing the adaptability of criminal groups to enforcement measures and expanding the size and diversity of both groups and markets.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic showed how reliant we have become on technology – in particular, the internet, social media and other communication tools – and how quickly this reliance can be exploited by criminals.<sup>77</sup>

This brief discusses the role of social media in organized crime and its impacts on several specific illicit markets in the Mekong region. It offers a sense of how the regional illicit economies related to the illegal wildlife trade and sexual exploitation of children grow online and how perpetrators are able to conduct their operations openly, without the need to hide in the dark web. It also looks at the role of disinformation and misinformation in weakening civil society responses to organized crime and highlights the need for a global response.

## ILLICIT ECONOMIES GROW ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is extremely popular across the Mekong region, with all but two countries (Laos and Myanmar) having higher social media penetration rates than the global average.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, access to social media continues to grow rapidly. The most popular social media and communications platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Line, WhatsApp, WeChat, Telegram and Skype.

Previous research has shown that social media offers multiple and diverse opportunities to advertise and sell illegal products online, as well as to connect sellers and buyers from around the world. This is further facilitated by instant-messaging applications which provide key services to a wide range of illicit goods offered on social media: after a product or service is advertised online, sales negotiations are mostly conducted using private-messaging channels (e.g. Facebook Messenger) or by phone. Other private sector actors enabling these markets include payment services, escrow accounts and courier companies. This also presents a key challenge for law enforcement given their limited dedicated resources and capacity and the rapid pace with which illicit online markets are changing.



## Online illegal wildlife trade

The combination of the proliferation of social media online marketplaces and the Mekong region's role as a major hub for illegal wildlife trading makes for particularly virulent and active illicit online markets. These markets rely on supply chains that involve the participation of organized networks who buy wildlife illegally obtained from remote areas. They then use laundering techniques and corruption to move the commodities into poorly regulated urban consumer markets, nationally, regionally or even further afield.<sup>79</sup>

Using a combination of machine-learning-enabled automatic scraping, open-source-data collection and manual monitoring to gather information on online illicit markets for wildlife, the GI-TOC has monitored online markets for five key species in Vietnam<sup>80</sup> and five highly protected parrot species in Indonesia,<sup>81</sup> and mapped online markets for products containing pangolin parts.<sup>82</sup> The research provides an overview of the illicit supply chains for the online trade in wildlife products and underlines techniques used by traders to disguise their operations while highlighting possible enforcement strategies to increase the effectiveness of moderation by social media platforms, which are responsible for policing the content available on their servers.<sup>83</sup>

We found that the trade in illicit wildlife products happens on the surface or deep web, rather than the dark web. Furthermore, a large number of online advertisements appear on platforms owned by major multinational companies, such as Meta (Facebook and Instagram), or online pharmacies.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, even the tool scraping for pangolin-derived products, which are mostly consumed in China, picked up advertisements in other countries. It also flagged the absence of supply-chain vetting stamps, exposing a major loophole in the system that is supposed to keep supply chains for the Chinese medicine industry clear of illegally sourced pangolin scales (as well as other wildlife products).

In South East Asia, Facebook's private 'buy and sell' groups were repeatedly flagged as being a large part of the problem. Ostensibly, Facebook bans all trade in wildlife, but in practice, it relies heavily on automated word bans, and on NGOs or members of the public to flag groups involved in illicit trade. Additionally, its enforcement relies on rather unsophisticated 'flag, moderate and delete' tactics, which do not take account of the sophistication of these markets. Taking advantage of these apparent loopholes, many of these groups have become 'private', which means there is no obvious legal way for third parties to monitor them. In addition, 'group moderators' on Facebook also play a key role in hiding illicit activities, as there appears to be a concerted effort by moderators to protect sellers from automated surveillance by using evasion techniques, including emojis, hashtags and codewords.

## Human vulnerabilities and social media

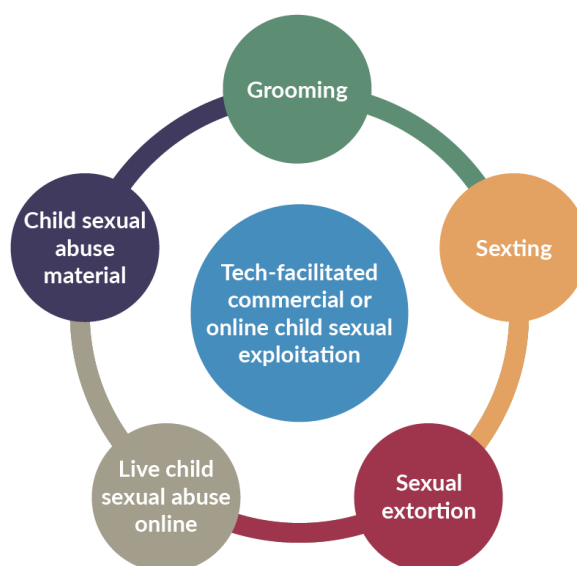
The use of private Facebook groups is also a distinguishing factor in types of human trafficking. For example, there has been a recent proliferation of Vietnamese Facebook groups, many of which are public and disguised variously as recruitment agencies,<sup>85</sup> marriage-broking services,<sup>86</sup> adoption services,<sup>87</sup> or even as organizations soliciting organ donation for humanitarian purposes.<sup>88</sup> Others are designed for the purposes of labour exploitation (this often involves workers being sent abroad through seemingly legitimate 'labour exportation' schemes), bride and child trafficking, or organ trafficking.

Digital technology and social media have enabled new pathways and avenues for human traffickers to operate.<sup>89</sup> They are no longer required to be in the same physical space as their victims but can use webcams, voice-chat systems and messaging apps to coerce, extort and exploit victims into making online sexual material that is livestreamed or recorded for distribution. Traffickers can market their victims on various





online platforms, both on the surface web and the dark web, while buyers use technologies to access, watch, record, disseminate and store information and materials on their victims. Social media and digital technologies have also lowered the entry barriers and costs for perpetrators by making it relatively cheap and straightforward to commit such a crime – one only needs to have a cell phone and internet access.



**FIGURE 1** Stages and elements of online commercial sexual exploitation of children.

An example of a typical tech-facilitated child sexual abuse process involves the perpetrators using social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok and Instagram<sup>90</sup> to profile, groom and recruit potential victims. Criminals use these platforms to study the potential victims' posts and online presence to know how to present themselves, whether as a potential boyfriend, a confidant, or a means of escape. After having established a relationship with a child, perpetrators will start to facilitate either online or offline sexual contact with that person, which may involve 'sexting' or the sharing of 'sexually suggestive' material.<sup>91</sup> Perpetrators then use these images, which are sometimes generated through force, to blackmail their child victim, extorting sexual favours, money or other benefits from them under the threat of sharing the material widely on social media without the victim's consent. Using 'sextortion' and threats, the child could then be sexually exploited either offline or online or both, while being transmitted live and/or recorded. The resulting child sexual abuse material (CSAM) can then be circulated endlessly on social media platforms and websites, causing constant, life-long psychological trauma to victims.

Across the Mekong region, the exponential increase of CSAM circulated on the internet can be observed. South East Asia, and especially the Philippines, was already a major source of CSAM before the pandemic, but the COVID-19 outbreak and the growth in social media usage in the region simply accelerated the problem. Children who had to switch to online schooling became more vulnerable to grooming for sexual exploitation, while those who consume CSAM, now working from home, had more opportunity to do so. These factors are likely to have contributed to a surge in demand, prompting criminals to coerce vulnerable adults and children into live or recorded sexual acts to meet a growing demand for content. Previous research has also found that societal attitudes in certain communities differ in the case of virtual and physical sexual exploitation, with the former perceived to be less harmful and somewhat destigmatized as a result. In certain cases in South East Asia (e.g. in the Philippines),<sup>92</sup> desperate families were found to



allow or force their children to perform on-demand sex acts for the camera because such acts do not involve physical interactions with an external person, and therefore are not perceived to be harmful to the children involved.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, another phenomenon which involves human trafficking into so-called cyber-slavery scam operations has been observed across the Mekong. Indeed, thousands of people under the age of 18, especially boys,<sup>93</sup> are reported to have been 'lured' by the promise of fraudulent job opportunities advertised on various social media and messaging platforms, a situation aggravated by the economic hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic. As widely reported in international media, there are thousands of cases of Vietnamese, Thai, Lao and Chinese boys and men trapped in Chinese-run casinos in Cambodia, held hostage with significant debt bondage while being forced to conduct scam operations in their native languages. From there, the operations have spread to casinos and special economic zones in Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines, with victims recruited from as far afield as Kenya.<sup>94</sup>

## Rising threats of disinformation

Social media also plays a key role in spreading misinformation and disinformation, especially among children, who are not always capable of properly distinguishing between reliable and unreliable information.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, illicit markets on social media benefit from or are even built on the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between true and false information, and to discern which advertisements are legitimate job and investment opportunities and which are scam operations. Disinformation campaigns launched by one state to interfere in another's politics or society are also becoming increasingly common, and this looks set to become a lucrative and growing opportunity space for criminal groups.<sup>96</sup>

Discussions around disinformation and misinformation in the Mekong region are often associated with China. China is reported to have engaged in various illicit practices, including hacking other Mekong governments – e.g. the Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>97</sup> – creating a censorship system (the 'Great Firewall') and using propaganda to discredit protests.

Disinformation is often conducted through a commercial proxy, such as a public relations firm. For example, one Chinese firm has been found to run at least 72 fake news websites and social media accounts designed to discredit the US.<sup>98</sup> Chinese social media sites such as Sina Weibo and WeChat also promote positive news about the Chinese Communist Party, and in 2018, Weibo changed its algorithm to ensure that articles with positive messages about the Chinese Communist Party now appear at the top of search results.<sup>99</sup>

While previously it was argued that Chinese Communist Party foreign propaganda was easy to identify, as it used predictable terms such as 'splittism', it appears that increasingly artificial intelligence is being used to put across messages to foreign audiences in a culturally appropriate manner that disguises the source. Facebook is reported to receive 5 billion annual ad-buys in Chinese, mostly from private entities (even though Facebook is banned in China), and ads, memes and videos that take advantage of the site's algorithm to reach users are also used to spread political messages.<sup>100</sup>

It is no surprise that Mekong governments are seriously concerned about the possible harms and threats of disinformation and have all passed cybercrime laws in response. However, it is also alleged that they may have taken on some of these activities to control discourse within their own countries,<sup>101</sup> with direct



consequences for civil society organizations working to raise awareness on the impact of illicit markets on communities across the Mekong region. Indeed, a number of activists and scholars have discovered that their mobile phones have been hacked,<sup>102</sup> and it appears that disinformation tools can be actively used to restrict or even attack civil society actors reporting on regional organized crime trends. This is particularly troubling given that the space for civil society in the Mekong region is already severely constrained.<sup>103</sup>

## RESPONSES: CONNECTING THE LOCAL WITH THE GLOBAL

There is a growing global realization of the significant and far-reaching harms associated with social media usage and, as a result, there is an emerging discussion around greater regulation of online content. Around the world, countries are experimenting with strategies to counter harmful online content and behaviour and have made countering cybercrime a political priority.<sup>104</sup> However, while there is agreement about the seriousness and impact of cybercrime, there is less consent regarding how to respond to it.

A spectrum of techniques is being trialled to combat cybercrime in the Mekong region. These vary from the self-regulatory (e.g. 'take downs' of instances of illegal wildlife trade) to the more regulatory legislative and platform control methods (e.g. online safety acts that deal with child sexual exploitation and abuse and CSAM).<sup>105</sup> Although the discussion around the effectiveness and desirability of the various measures is still nascent, issues are already emerging, such as the effectiveness of self-regulation and how far digital intermediaries should be held liable for content. More significant, however, is the question of the extent to which some regulatory measures impinge on human rights and social freedoms (an allegation often heard in the context of some of the Mekong countries' interventions).

At the multilateral level, negotiations on a UN convention on cybercrime are often stalled by polarization and differing politics around the convention's desired objectives and context. There are, however, several opportunities for progress in this respect and for encouraging international and regional cooperation, including through engagement at the multilateral level (e.g. through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] and at the UN). These include:

- Definitions: an accepted understanding of cyber-dependent or cyber-enabled criminal activities could provide states with tools to prevent and prosecute crimes more effectively.
- If negotiated successfully, a convention could build trust between practitioners to foster more effective and cooperative international law enforcement and apply criminal justice responses to cybercrime.
- Such a convention would not only enhance practical cooperation between law enforcement and the judiciary, but also between law enforcement, the private sector, academia and civil society.
- Capacity building and technical assistance: a new convention could provide new vehicles and partnerships to facilitate capacity building and technical assistance.



But there are major challenges to realizing these opportunities. Not only is there the complexity and politics of the multilateral system to take into account, but countries have substantively different views on how best to respond to the threat of cybercrime, including within the Mekong region, which explains why the process at the UN has taken so long. One of the main underlying disagreements has been around the need for a universal instrument through the UN and the role of multilateralism, but although there is still hesitancy, this process is now advancing. The other underlying concerns include regulating cyberspace, how to define cybercrime, regulating online content and access to data.<sup>106</sup>

Linked to issues such as accessing data for investigations, it will be a challenge to set out terms for international cooperation in an environment in which key global powers still do not effectively cooperate on cybercrime investigations, including in the Mekong. However, despite the challenges, CSAM is gaining momentum as an issue of consensus in the negotiations, where progress could be made on new understandings and frameworks for cooperation.

It is important to acknowledge that where there is good existing legislation, engaged law enforcement and political will, real gains have already been made on shifting illicit trade off e-commerce platforms; however, social media often remains outside the real grasp of the law. More needs to be done to improve international cooperation and effectively respond to the fast-paced developments in technology and thus cyber-dependent and cyber-enabled crime in the Mekong region.





**RESPONDING TO  
ORGANIZED CRIME  
IN THE MEKONG**

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

MARCH 2023

8.

**RESPONDING TO  
ORGANIZED CRIME IN  
THE MEKONG: THE ROLE  
OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

5 APRIL 2023

Transnational organized crime is a major concern in the Mekong, and its effects are felt beyond just the communities in the region, but also globally. It inflicts long-term and structural damage by drawing young people in the region to join criminal groups, entrenching corruption, diverting money from investments in education, healthcare and infrastructure, and pillaging the environment.

Tackling organized crime in the Mekong requires a holistic response involving both the state and civil society actors. Civil society actors become especially important in cases where state responses fail to work – or even enable the problem. Civil society can provide information, expertise and insights, push for greater institutional accountability, advocate for vulnerable groups, provide alternative visions for state building, strengthen the common good, and help build local and transborder resilience to organized crime. When civil society is included in joint anti-crime efforts, both at the national and multilateral level, it increases the likelihood of their success.

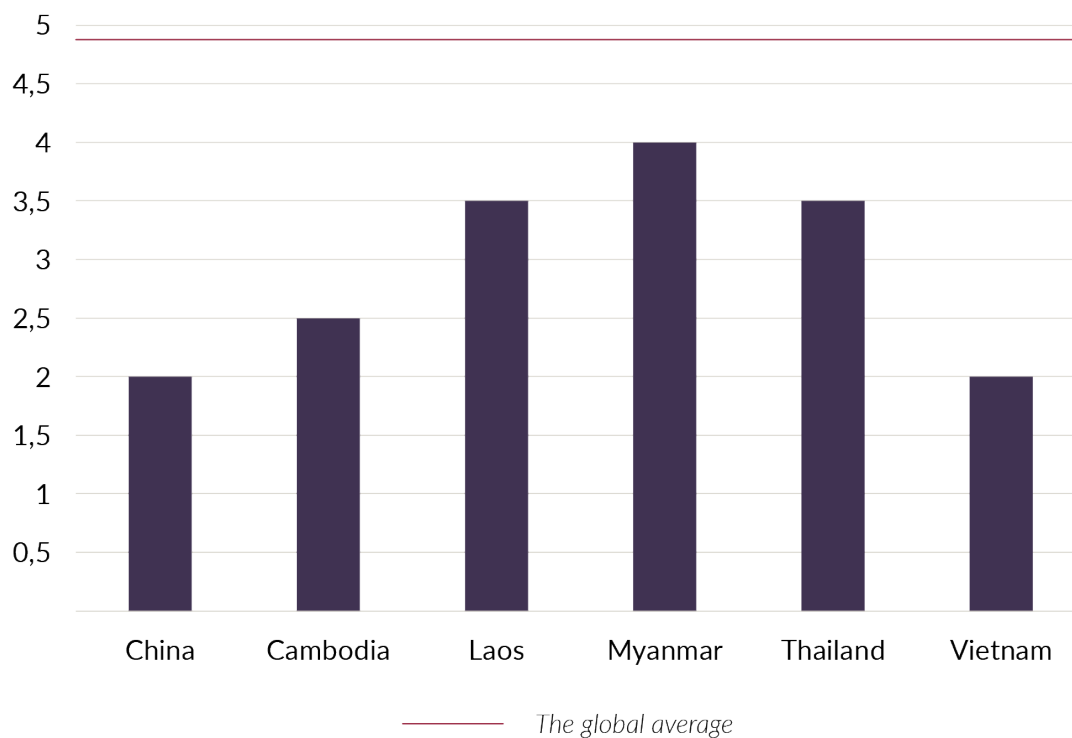
This brief discusses the role that civil society can play in building resilience to organized crime in the Mekong region. It offers insights into the activities that civil society actors are engaging in, and their relationships and challenges with local authorities. It also discusses the role of civil society networks and how these can be strengthened across the region.

## CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE MEKONG

The term ‘civil society’ can be understood to refer to individuals and organizations who take collective action in the public interest, outside of state institutions. It includes citizen and community groups, unions, academics, journalists and others who have an essential role in the running of society.<sup>107</sup> In his introduction to the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, the then secretary general of the UN, Kofi Annan, described the struggle against organized crime as setting the forces of ‘civil society’ against the forces of ‘uncivil society’.<sup>108</sup>

The Mekong is a challenging environment for civil society, especially given that the space for it to operate in the region is shrinking. Under the GI-TOC’s Organized Crime Index, which measures the prevalence of criminal markets and actors as well as state capacity to respond to the phenomenon, most countries in the region are ranked with low levels of resilience. In particular, resilience scores for non-state actors in all the Mekong countries are far below the global average.<sup>109</sup>





**FIGURE 1** Organized Crime Index resilience scores for non-state actors.

Source: GI-TOC, Organized Crime Index, 2021, <https://ocindex.net/>

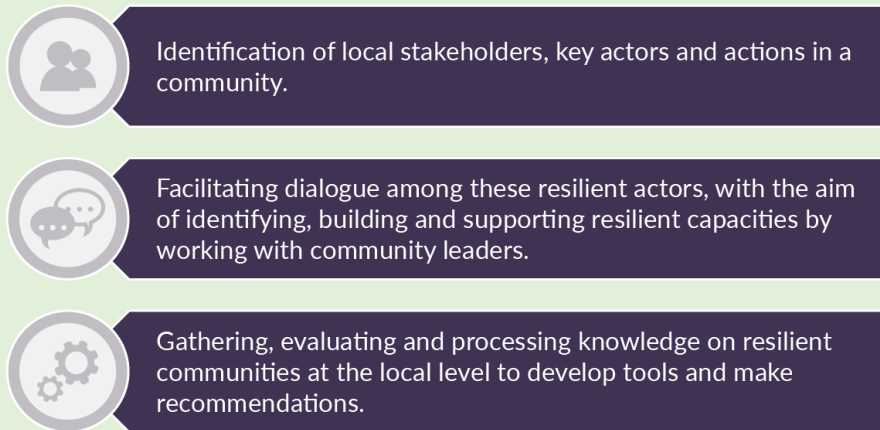
Civil society is not a homogenous group with a single view on organized crime or on what the key countermeasures should be. However, across the Mekong they often face similar challenges, including pressure from governments, difficulties in fundraising, lack of capacity and support, and security risks. In addition, as in many other parts of the world, civil society's understanding of how to address the negative impact of illicit markets in the region is limited. Information and government data on organized crime are often inadequate. Civil society organizations often feel isolated in their efforts and those taking steps to tackle organized crime are frequently threatened and targeted, including by criminal actors within the state, and sometimes killed because of their activities.<sup>110</sup>

In this context, it is no surprise that not many civil society organizations in the Mekong are willing to tackle organized crime. For the most part, they have a diverse portfolio of activities, of which strengthening community resilience is one, but they also deal with human rights, democratization, rule of law and other issues.



## THE RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK

Since 2016, the GI-TOC has been documenting community-level responses to organized crime through a resilience framework where resilience is modelled as a multidimensional operational concept to understand the complex relationship between organized crime and development. It also looks at interrelated community capacities for collective actions that curtail the influence of organized crime and weak governance.<sup>111</sup> The GI-TOC's approach to resilience follows three steps,<sup>112</sup> as shown in the figure below.



**FIGURE 2:** GI-TOC's approach to resilience.

In 2019, the GI-TOC officially launched the Resilience Fund, a mechanism that disburses grants to finance, nurture and assist local initiatives in their responses to organized crime. The Fund identifies and empowers key civil society actors and builds their operational capacity, with the aim of creating resilience networks in communities affected by organized crime and violence. Since its inception, the Fund has supported over 149 beneficiaries, 250 projects in more than 50 countries.

The Resilience Fund has also supported eight individuals and civil society organizations in South East Asia. Their projects fill in the gaps between institutional mechanisms and needs of communities grappling with the effects of organized crime. For example, in 2022 the Fund supported several projects addressing human trafficking and smuggling, which are both rampant across the region. These projects highlight the critical role civil society plays – from tracking, tracing and rescuing people trapped in foreign countries and creating survivor care routes, to building situational and technical capacities among affected communities and government officials. These initiatives are borne out of needs to address local challenges that are at the same time intrinsically tied to larger ecosystems of criminal economies and governance.

## Civil society as service providers

Civil society and government actors have different tools and perspectives, both of which are necessary to forge a safer context for vulnerable people. Civil society is the conduit between broader policy goals and on-the-ground experience. Civil society also plays a vital role in information flows from the local to national and international policy level, alerting policymakers to challenges on the ground. For example, The



Freedom Story (see below) alerted officials to potential trafficking-related risks around the Laos special economic zones when borders reopened after the COVID pandemic. Civil society also helps to translate policy objectives into implementable programmes at the local level.

Many civil society organizations in the Mekong provide crucial services to victims or potential victims of organized crime (e.g. through hotlines and shelters), as well as to former perpetrators (e.g. in the form of post-penal assistance). One such organization is The Freedom Story, based in Chiang Rai, Thailand.<sup>113</sup> It is no secret that civil society organizations and governments in the Mekong often have a contested relationship. However, the example of The Freedom Story shows that collaboration is possible.<sup>114</sup>

## THE FREEDOM STORY

The organization's mission is to prevent child sex trafficking by providing vulnerable children in northern Thailand with education, mentorship and other resources to reduce the risk factors associated with exploitation and increase their resilience. The prevention programme has six pillars:

- 1 Scholarships** to help keep children in school
- 2 Mentorship** to provide stable relationships and advise them through life challenges
- 3 Resource centres** where they have access to workshops, tutoring and a computer lab
- 4 Human rights awareness** – training and support for accessing legal rights as well as the right to bodily privacy and how to identify and respond to abuse
- 5 A sustainable livelihood programme** to help vulnerable families develop alternative sources of income
- 6 Ethical storytelling** – a rigorous process of ensuring their constituents' stories are told with dignity and integrity to offer healing and hope

The Freedom Story's work focuses on the provinces of Chiang Rai and Nan, where poverty, lack of education, precedents of abuse and trafficking, statelessness or ethnic minority status, and lack of guidance on safe social media use are some of the factors that put children at enhanced risk of exploitation.

The organization's work, including through partnerships with other NGOs and government, facilitates action in individual cases, providing relief to beneficiaries, and helps craft broader policies and programmes, such as the Child Safe & Friendly Tourism initiative, which seeks to combat trafficking.

To help address funding and capacity constraints in government, The Freedom Story collaborates with local authorities by complementing their work with resources, capacity as well as translation services for trafficking cases. Reciprocally, government officials support The Freedom Story's objectives, for example, by working together to rescue youths from Chiang Rai who had been trafficked to work in online scams in Cambodia.



## A shrinking independent media

Media organizations form an integral part of any community's response to organized crime, as they provide access to information on the topic. The Mekong has long been a challenging region for journalists to report from, and in the past decade the environment has deteriorated. Basic government data is often inaccessible and many countries have historically restricted the flow of information on the pretext of national security.<sup>115</sup> Some governments even enforce punitive restrictions on the free movement of journalists. For example, in Vietnam foreign reporters need to request permission to travel. Government minders are deployed to accompany reporters, which hampers newsgathering. In Myanmar, vast areas of territory were off limits to journalists even before the coup.

As a result of the shrinking space for independent media, journalists often resort to self-censorship, and consequently civil society organizations dealing with organized crime do not receive information on which they depend. Numerous South East Asian countries are ranked at the bottom of the press freedom index published by Reporters Without Borders<sup>116</sup> and fare badly on the Committee to Protect Journalists' Global Impunity Index.<sup>117</sup> There are countless examples where access to information has been restricted, and journalists attacked or even killed. Myanmar's promising media renaissance during the years of democratic liberalization was short-lived: the regime is reported to routinely lock up reporters. Several have died in detention and many others forced to flee the country.<sup>118</sup> In Cambodia, three prominent independent media outlets have been shut down in recent years.

Tools commonly used to silence criticism are defamation laws and those that prohibit 'fake' news. In Myanmar, defamation carries a multi-year prison sentence. However, even when civil suits are used this poses significant challenges, as they often involve lengthy and expensive court battles.

That certain actors who intimidate the press enjoy impunity is a key obstacle for investigative journalists in the region. For example, in February, the Voice of Democracy in Cambodia published a series of stories linking the industry to political figures, which ultimately forced the government to admit to a problem it had been denying existed.<sup>119</sup> The Voice of Democracy was recently shut down by the Cambodian prime minister.

## Academia and research organizations

Similarly, the scope for academic research and engagement on topics related to organized crime and criminology appears to be limited in the Mekong. Few universities across the region offer such programmes, and it appears that many researchers leave to study and teach abroad.

Universities generally serve three core functions in terms of strengthening resilience to organized crime – through education, research and community engagement. Universities provide research expertise to enhance policy making and are also key institutions in the process of social change and development, as they train young people and mobilize public action. In addition, universities increase awareness of organized crime and provide platforms for community debate and train young researchers in investigative methods, such as financial investigations and court procedures.

In Indonesia, the university environment has received new impetus through the appointment of a new minister of education. He is reported to have introduced significant restructuring at universities across the country. For example, Mataram University in Lombok, Indonesia, has a programme focusing on illegal mining, the extraction of gold and illicit flows. The university is in a unique position, as many local business



and political leaders have graduated from the university and maintain contact with it. Indeed, the alumni network is reported to be one of the university's biggest assets in its research on organized crime as former students remain connected to researchers. They are also invited to teach, share their experience and knowledge with the university.

In addition, the university is well connected to gold miners through its programme of community services. Students in Indonesia are encouraged to spend one semester outside the university campus and work on projects in support of communities, companies or other institutions. Many students have opted to spend time in villages collecting primary data and providing community services.

## STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES

The low resilience rankings recorded in the Organized Crime Index, referred to earlier, confirm that in the countries of the Mekong region, the 'antibodies' needed to combat organized crime are largely lacking. Although this situation is by no means unique to the Mekong, civil society organizations in the region appear especially restricted in their efforts to build resilience and drive front line initiatives to tackle organized crime, and provide an alternative vision of society.

The GI-TOC's experience of engaging with community actors all over the world has shown that individuals and community groups are able to build capacity to respond to and recover from organized crime. Communities have different approaches to countering the type of organized crime that affects them, but, in each case, activities that prove effective are those that focus on the needs of the local community and involve the community at all levels of the process. Such programmes focus not only on what the community is opposed to (such as organized crime, corruption and political clientelism), but also on what the community stands for (including matters such as integrity, transparency, accountability and good governance).<sup>120</sup> And, despite the many challenges, there are some shining examples of courageous and committed civil society organizations in the Mekong.

However, the unfortunate reality is that, on the whole, there is a systemic lack of coordination and solidarity among civil society organizations, and no means of disseminating or sharing successes and good practices. Knowledge of the key issues around organized crime tends to be limited and often biased. In addition, civil society sometimes fails to grasp the links between organized crime and the core issues of social protection and development, which creates a structural barrier to building resilience to organized crime.



## The importance of network building

The importance of civil society networks is not so much to reach a consensus but to have a platform where ideas and experiences relating to common goals can be shared.<sup>121</sup> A greater feeling of solidarity and security can also be born from a network of like-minded individuals and organizations.

Furthermore, if civil society is to increase its impact, its efforts must be scaled up. Today, only a small number of civil society networks address the problem of organized crime and those that exist are often project dependent, with limited resources and significant security challenges. Nevertheless, in Cambodia civil society organizations have built up a network to support the migrants vulnerable of being trafficked to Malaysia with the support of the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund. They provide a helpline, share information and counselling support, and have developed a toolkit that helps spread awareness on related risks and vulnerabilities. Networks between civil society organizations help to build solidarity and improve the knowledge base, increasing their overall impact.

With the aim of strengthening cooperation and exchange between civil society organizations around the world, the Resilience Fund Community Platform was launched in 2022 to activate the Resilience Fund network. This platform will enable the Fund's network to access multilateral forums and dialogue spaces, and to connect with one another. The platform will also host virtual capacity-building sessions, aims to strengthen collaboration among grantees and experts, and will create a digital repository of lessons learned and best practices in localized contexts and local languages.

In addition, in 2020, the GI-TOC piloted VIVA, a secure social media platform that connects community resilience initiatives from around the world. VIVA is a video-based app through which community projects can upload their stories, thereby documenting the impact of organized crime in their communities, as well as their responses to it. The app enables capacity building and social learning among resilience actors, who can also coordinate activities together. Some interactions on VIVA have already led to collaborations and idea exchanges between grantees located in different parts of the world working on similar issues.

Network building strengthens civil society's ability to interface with government and regional authorities. Indeed, thanks to a networked approach, civil society organizations across the Mekong are reported to be able to support relatives of victims of human smuggling and trafficking in their engagement with authorities and facilitate their return. Looking ahead, they should look to create better networks with law enforcement and link civil society organizations to national and multilateral policymakers. For example, in 2022, Resilience Fund invited 19 grantees to participate at the 11th Conference of Parties to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, held in Vienna. They interacted with global stakeholders and published a collective statement<sup>122</sup> highlighting the importance of the role of civil society in cooperating on addressing the transnational threats of organized crime.



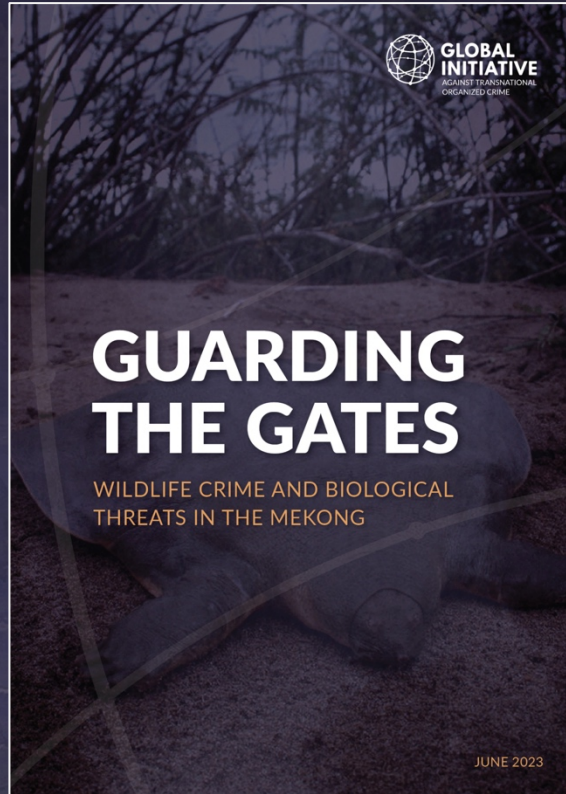


# CONCLUSION

It is now widely recognized that law enforcement responses alone are not sufficient to combat the increasing threat that organized crime poses, and that civil society actors are critical protagonists in the fight against organized crime and need to form an integral part of the response. Civil society members are embedded in the community, provide vital services to their constituents, raise awareness of local concerns and provide key information that informs better evidence-based policy formulation and programming. Bringing experience and data from the front lines against organized crime, developing community-focused responses and offering new perspectives to the broader debates, the value of civil society actors cannot be overstated.

Civil society actors working to strengthen resilience to organized crime in the Mekong face significant challenges. Nevertheless, we find courageous actors at the forefront of local, national and multilateral responses to organized crime, who continually find new ways to navigate the complexities that criminal markets and actors present. Such actors, however, are isolated.

Recognizing their important position as non-governmental, rather than anti-governmental agents, taking steps to capacitate their ability to transform complex situations should be a priority for us all. To promote sustainable development, good governance and regional cooperation across the Mekong countries, civil society change agents who can positively influence the criminal governance paradigm need to be supported in implementing their activities.



9.

# GUARDING THE GATES: WILDLIFE CRIME AND BIOLOGICAL THREATS IN THE MEKONG

13 JUNE 2023

Illegal wildlife trafficking has significant ramifications for national security and the environment worldwide. The illegal wildlife trade (IWT) is highly destructive, contributing to biodiversity loss, driving conflict and hindering economic development, especially in countries with abundant wildlife resources. The global IWT industry is estimated to be worth more than US\$26 billion a year.<sup>123</sup>

South East Asia is a key source, transit and destination hub for IWT and the region accounts for up to a quarter of global demand for illegal wildlife products.<sup>124</sup> Reports refer to a wide range of endangered wildlife products that are trafficked across the region's porous borders.<sup>125</sup> In addition, given how communities in South East Asia are closely interconnected with the ecosystem they depend on, there is a high risk that IWT has direct and indirect ramifications for a number of biological threats, the most serious being the risk of zoonotic pathogens and their implications for local and global population health.<sup>126</sup>

This brief provides an introduction to IWT in the Mekong and explores country-level perspectives and preparedness to respond to IWT and connected biological threats. It also discusses the current 'biosecurity approach' – a term used to describe all measures aimed at preventing the introduction and spread of harmful organisms (e.g. viruses and bacteria). The brief then provides recommendations for the way forward, with a particular focus on enhancing knowledge and improving cross-agency partnerships while safeguarding the health of those operating at the front line.

## WILDLIFE CRIMES IN THE MEKONG

The Mekong is a densely populated region, with over 300 million people. It is recognized as one of the richest biodiverse and agrobiodiverse regions globally.<sup>127</sup> The World Wildlife Fund estimates that the Mekong contains some 20 000 species of plants, 1 200 bird species, 800 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 430 mammal species. More than 2 600 new species have been discovered and recorded in the jungles, rivers and even urban areas of the Mekong since 1997.<sup>128</sup>

The region is a global epicentre for the illegal trafficking of and trade in wildlife, with a long list of affected species, such as pangolins, turtles, snakes, civets and birds.<sup>129</sup> Wildlife is reported to be sourced from all over the region and beyond, and traded continually across its porous borders. Moreover, countries like Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar border one of the world's leading consumer markets for wildlife products: China.<sup>130</sup> Chinese demand is mostly driven by its large emerging middle class demographic, which has created a booming market for rare and exotic meats, wildlife components used in the so-called traditional medicine trade, and other products.<sup>131</sup> The networks involved are often highly organized in their operations and often rely on corruption and bribery to function.<sup>132</sup>

The impact of IWT reverberates beyond the local to the regional and global level. Indeed, its rapid development has contributed to significant loss of biodiversity and threatens several endangered species – lions, elephants, tigers, rhinos, whales, turtles and others – with extinction. It also disrupts natural resources, thereby leading to substantial loss of income for communities.





## Crime convergence and biological harms at Mekong border crossings

The Mekong region exhibits intense pressure exerted by humans over the environmental ecosystems they depend on. With high levels of interaction between people and their surrounding environments for their livelihood, it is a dynamic that results in an untenable contradiction between development and environmental protection – and biosecurity. Fragile environments are placed under enormous pressure, and this intensifies the emergence and spread of zoonotic infections, as well as other biological threats. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the emergence in the Mekong in 2003–2004 of the highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5N1) (commonly referred to as bird flu), leading to a global pandemic. Zoonotic pathogens have significant implications for human population health (as evidenced by COVID-19), and there are equally devastating implications of pathogen transmission from animals to animals, such as avian flu, African swine fever, and foot and mouth disease, all of which can wipe out wild and farmed populations of birds, pigs or cattle, respectively.<sup>133</sup>

Border points are particularly vulnerable to such risks. The six countries of the Greater Mekong share approximately 12 000 kilometres of land borders, which are highly porous and poorly patrolled.<sup>134</sup> They have been described as zones operating at the intersection of often competing notions of human security and traditional understandings of national security,<sup>135</sup> and the trafficking of illicit drugs, wildlife, arms, timber, precious metals and people is reported to be widespread. Borders and border crossings in the Mekong are also often areas of heightened infectious disease.<sup>136</sup>

### WHAT IS 'BIOSECURITY' AND THE 'ONE HEALTH APPROACH'?

Biosecurity refers to measures taken to prevent or control the spread of infectious diseases, pests, or other biological agents that can cause harm to humans, animals or plants. These involve practices and protocols aimed at reducing the risk of introduction, establishment and spread of harmful biological agents.<sup>137</sup>

In the context of biosecurity at borders, such measures encompass those taken to prevent the introduction of harmful biological agents across national borders. Biosecurity is a component of the One Health approach because it involves measures to prevent the spread of biological threats. By adopting a One Health approach to biosecurity, we can better understand and address the complex interactions between human, animal and environmental health.

A key principle of the One Health approach<sup>138</sup> is the need for collaborative action across sectors and disciplines, including public health, animal health and security. Biosecurity measures are no exception, and effective biosecurity requires coordination and collaboration among different sectors and stakeholders. For example, to prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases, it is necessary to have close collaboration between public health officials, veterinary professionals and security personnel.

Biosecurity and organized crime intersect in various ways, with criminal networks exploiting vulnerabilities in the biosecurity system for illicit profit. Ways in which biosecurity and organized crime can be interconnected include illicit trade in endangered species, where organized criminal networks are involved in the illegal trafficking of endangered plants and animals, including exotic species that pose biosecurity risks; counterfeit pharmaceuticals, including fake vaccines, medications, and medical





supplies (these counterfeit products may not meet safety standards and can pose significant risks to public health and biosecurity); and illegal waste disposal, including the improper handling and disposal of hazardous biological waste.

While reporting of such crime convergence in border areas has increased, a deeper understanding of how the wildlife crime value chain is actually linked with other types of organized crime is still needed. In addition, although the biological threat implications of a novel coronavirus outbreak from – potentially – a wet market are still fresh in the minds of global health and security experts, the biological threats posed by the trafficking and trade of wild animals, forest products and other commodities are still widely missing a tactical response.

## CURRENT RESPONSES

Legislative protection measures have steadily improved over the last decades, but efforts to prevent and respond to IWT remain generally inadequate and hampered by the cross-border nature of these crimes. Furthermore, environmental crimes cut across different sectors, such as conservation, trade, and security, and usually fall under the purview of the state agencies responsible for the protection and conservation of the environment.

### THE BOONCHAI CASE: A VICTORY IN THE FIGHT AGAINST INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE CRIME



The arrest of Bach Mai. © Roberto Schmidt/AFP via Getty Images

One case that stands out as illustrative of a lack of prioritization in the authorities' response to IWT is the Bach Mai (or Boonchai) case from Thailand. Bach was first arrested in January 2018 and charged

for his suspected role in the smuggling of 14 rhino horns to Thailand, in violation of an international treaty on wildlife trade and of Thailand's Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act. Bach was assumed to be running a criminal syndicate with his brother Bach Van Lim; he was known to deal internationally in ivory, rhino horn, tigers and pangolins.<sup>139</sup> However, celebrations around his arrest proved premature: in February 2019 he was released again after a key witness recanted his testimony in court. If he had been convicted, he could have faced up to four years in prison and a \$1 300 fine, but instead he walked free.

Despite this setback, the prosecutors in Thailand's Attorney General's office appealed the decision of the judge to dismiss Bach's case as emblematic of an overall lack of justice for high-level wildlife criminals. A four-year battle followed, culminating in September 2022, when the Thai Supreme Court sentenced Bach to five years in prison. The judgment sent a strong message to all wildlife traffickers with this decision. Prosecutors also litigated an additional civil case against Bach for money laundering, and authorities in the Thai Anti-Money Laundering Office were able to seize Bach's vehicles along with some US\$11 million in assets, and froze his bank account.

The Boonchai case is regarded as a significant milestone against IWT in the Mekong. The message is that it is important for countries to become more aware of the seriousness of IWT and how this type of crime can lead to a corrupt support system. The case also highlights the need for a comprehensive and coordinated effort among all actors in the criminal justice chain to tackle IWT and associated illicit financial flows.

Responding to IWT and biosecurity threats is made even more challenging by the capacity and role of state officials posted at border-crossings, compounded by the dearth of information and knowledge on threats, and lack of intra-agency and cross-border cooperation and collaboration. A 2022 GI-TOC report<sup>140</sup> reveals how a large proportion of security sector personnel have limited, if any, knowledge, skills or techniques to deal with the kinds of biological threats they may face when performing their duties in border zones.

This lack of 'threat literacy' is a key barrier to the development of effective partnerships, as security sector agencies simply do not have the capability to play a meaningful contributory role in the response needed to tackle IWT crimes. Similarly, government health agencies need a better understanding of the patterns and operations of IWT actors to support the screening and flagging of potential trafficking of illegal wildlife. Additional dynamics that hold back cross-agency partnership in the Mekong – as elsewhere in the world – include the power differential between the security sector and health and agriculture agencies, as well as the prioritization of trade over the health and well-being of populations and their environments.

## Opportunities for cooperation on IWT and biological threats

With a view to tackling these challenges and to explore ways to improve coordination in the response to biosecurity threats in the Mekong, DFAT, the Asian Development Bank and the *British Medical Journal* supported a regional biosecurity conference in Bangkok, Thailand, in March 2023. The event, co-organized by the GI-TOC, brought together senior representatives from the police, customs, immigration, quarantine services, and border guard agencies; the conference was also attended by civil society representatives, and public health and animal health agencies. The goals were to better understand why agencies are not



working more closely together; to forge better cross-agency collaboration; and encourage earlier warning and surveillance of emerging biological threats relating to the movement of commodities across borders of the Mekong region.

This was the first meeting of its kind and a unique opportunity to share knowledge, experiences and ideas about collaborative partnerships between the civil security sector and the health and animal sectors in relation to biological threats at the local cross-border level or national level. Participants discussed the importance of re-creating, resourcing and enabling scaled-up partnerships among national, bilateral and multilateral partners in response to transnational environmental and biological threats. The discussion took place in the context of the G20 Pandemic Fund. The following key points were addressed: funding strategies, including allocating resources for front line worker protection; enhanced disease surveillance; actions to protect environments and biodiversity; overcoming funding shortcomings, especially the importance of identifying common work priorities among sectors and increasing cross-border collaboration and information sharing; the need for multisectoral collaboration, which should be strengthened, and frameworks and guidelines, such as the WHO's Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases and Public Health Emergencies III and the One Health Joint Plan of Action, which should be used to support and guide work in the region.

The formulation of a Strategic Regional Action Plan on One Health was suggested, along with exploring sustainable sources of funding for regulatory and surveillance activities. Other suggestions included adding One Health to national health security plans; increasing wildlife funding; mapping the environmental sector onto One Health; and providing coordination and funding for emergency responses. Capacity building, collaboration at border points and comprehensive mapping of the entire One Health chain were also highlighted as important areas for multilateral support.

Finally, it was agreed that finding successful solutions will also depend on a strong enabling environment, where regulation, compliance and enforcement are effectively linked across agency jurisdictions, reinforced by targeted social and behavioural change approaches to move people away from high-risk practices.

## **SHARING AND APPLYING GOOD PRACTICES FROM DRUG MARKETS**

Relevant experiences and practices on how to improve collaboration between health and security agencies as well as civil society have a precedent in the area of harm reduction among people who use drugs. As is often the case with IWT, the response to drug markets often suffers from a siloed approach, with law enforcement agencies focusing on seizures and arrests, while health agencies and civil society provide support to people who use drugs. It has long been argued that such lack of coordination not only undermines governments' ability to formulate effective drug policies to address the illicit drug market, but also impact international and regional monitoring systems.

At the conference, participants discussed the implementation of a drug harm-reduction programme in Cambodia, initially aimed at preventing the spread of HIV among users who inject drugs, and how to apply the lessons learned in the area of biological threats. Like the drug harm-reduction programme, a biosecurity approach requires a coordinated effort and good understanding of the risks involved among local communities and authorities, including law enforcement as well as the public health sector. Participants also highlighted the importance of involving communities, as the change of perception and implementation needs to be driven bottom-up.



# CONCLUSION

IWT is a key concern in the Mekong and often converges with biological threats and other types of crime at the region's border crossings. However, current law enforcement responses alone are not sufficient to combat the increasing threat stemming from the illegal wildlife trade. There is significant need, therefore, to foster and develop national and international level multi-agency partnerships, as well as strengthen engagement with communities, particularly in border areas.

Border crossings are a high-risk area but simultaneously offer opportunities for cooperation, as representatives of key agencies are present and these areas hold significant importance for communities. In addition, the regional biosecurity conference clearly showed that despite the significant challenges of responding to IWT and biological threats in the Mekong, there are several entry points that could be leveraged to improve the response. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there also appears to be new momentum and willingness to discuss biosecurity challenges and broaden the IWT discussion.

However, it is important to note that although there is no shortage of ideas, IWT remains a low priority for the governments of the region. Political support and will are crucial in order to effectively address IWT as a threat to national security. And communities need to have a greater role in putting pressure on government agencies to enhance their cross-agency responses to biological threats. This also includes the need to better understand the interlinkages between IWT and biological harms. More and better data needs to be gathered and shared by health and security agencies and civil society actors as a first step to building robust partnerships across agencies, businesses and communities.



# Notes

## GENDER AND ORGANIZED CRIME: COUNTERING INVISIBILITY

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## CASINOS IN THE MEKONG AND WIDER REGION: CONDUITS FOR CRIMINALITY?

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## ORGANIZED CRIME AND DEVELOPMENT: A SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVE

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submission that the UN called 'substantially complete'. Only three countries (China 2018, Myanmar 2017–2020 and Thailand 2018) have 'substantially completed' submissions in the past five WDRs (2017–2021). See UNODC World Drug Report 2021, Statistical Annex 10.1: Responses to Annual Report Questionnaire (table), [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr2021\\_annex.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/wdr2021_annex.html).

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<sup>77</sup> GI-TOC, *The global illicit economy: Trajectories of transnational organized crime*, March 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Global-Illicit-Economy-GITOC-Low.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> The global social media penetration rate is 53.6% as of February 2022; Laos and Myanmar's rates are 51.1% and 37.7%, respectively. See Statista, *Social media penetration in Southeast Asia as of February 2022, by country*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/487981/social-penetration-in-southeast-asian-countries>.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, 'Pillagers in paradise', which looks at the trafficking of Palawan pangolins from the Philippines to Manila and internationally. Alastair MacBeath, Simone Haysom and Emerson Sy, *Pillagers in paradise: The trafficking dynamics of the Palawan pangolin*, GI-TOC, November 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Alastair-MacBeath-et-al-Pillagers-in-paradise-The-trafficking-dynamics-of-the-Palawan-pangolin-GI-TOC-November-2022.pdf>.

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<sup>81</sup> Wahyu Nurbandi, *Online illegal trade in highly endangered parrots in Indonesia*, GI-TOC, November 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/parrots-indonesia-cites-online-trade>.

<sup>82</sup> Theo Clement, Simone Haysom and Jack Pay, *Online markets for pangolin-derived products: Dynamics of e-commerce platforms*, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/online-markets-for-pangolin>.

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<sup>84</sup> For traditional Chinese medicine products, online pharmacies in China and Vietnam were identified as significant online vendors.

<sup>85</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/vietnamxuatkhauladong>.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1358987694440869> and <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1471395326577163>.

<sup>87</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/188736706018963>.

<sup>88</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/groups/501429297752351>.

<sup>89</sup> Lucia Bird et al., *Transformative technologies: How digital is changing the landscape of organized crime*, GI-TOC, June 2020, <https://globalinitiative.net/cyber-tech-organized-crime>.

<sup>90</sup> In 2019, sex offenders were found to be grooming children on Instagram more than on any other online platform; see BBC News, *Instagram biggest for child grooming online – NSPCC finds*, 1 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-47410520>.

<sup>91</sup> ECPAT, *Factsheets on online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) manifestations: Sexting*, 2016, <https://ecpat.org/resource/factsheets-on-online-child-sexual-exploitation-ocse-manifestations-sexting>.

<sup>92</sup> Andy Brown, *Safe from harm: Tackling webcam child sexual abuse in the Philippines*, UNICEF, 19 October 2016, [https://www.unicef.org/protection/philippines\\_91214.html](https://www.unicef.org/protection/philippines_91214.html).

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<sup>94</sup> *The Kenyans lured to become unwitting 'love' fraudsters*, BBC, 26 November 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-63654637>.

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<sup>100</sup> Daniel Kliman et al., Dangerous synergies: Countering Chinese and Russian digital influence operations, Center for a New American Security, May 2020, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/dangerous-synergies>, p 11.

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, Vietnam's government struggles to counter what it calls 'fake news', Radio Free Asia, 10 August 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/vietnam-fake-news-08102022233919.html>.

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<sup>111</sup> GI-TOC, Resilience in Sinaloa: Community responses to organized crime, August 2017, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/resilience-in-sinaloa/>.

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<sup>113</sup> See The Freedom Story, <https://thefreedomstory.org/>.

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<sup>116</sup> See Reporters without borders, <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

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