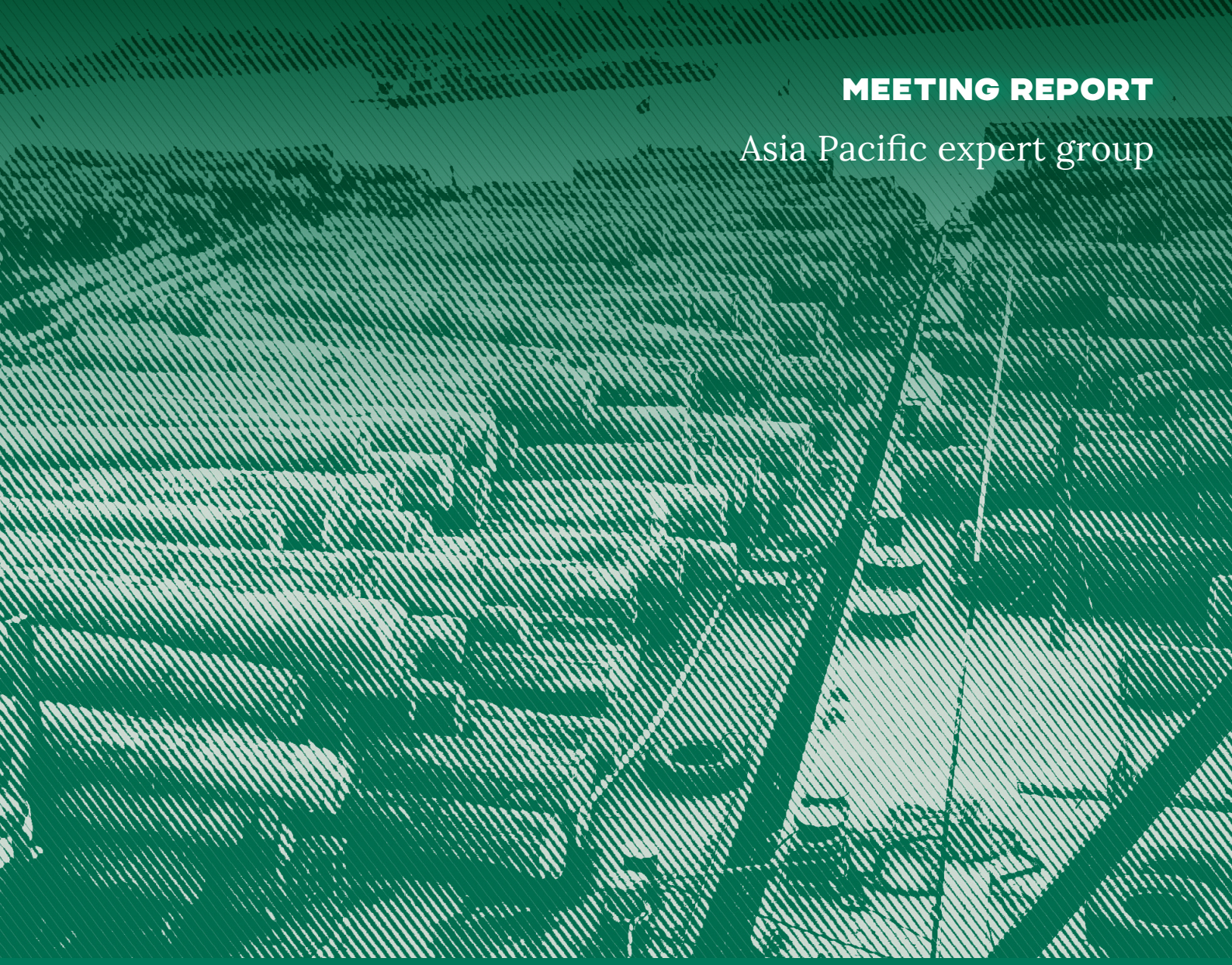

MEETING REPORT

Asia Pacific expert group

EXPOSING ELITE PROTECTION AND CORRUPTION IN ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME ACROSS SOUTH EAST ASIA AND OCEANIA

AUGUST 2024

ECO SOLVE

GI-TOC

GIFP
Global Illicit Flows Programme

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ECO-SOLVE meeting reports include background briefs compiled in preparation for the event, as well as brief summaries of the main points and conclusions discussed. The reports reflect the views of the participants and the overall discussion, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher. We would like to thank all participants for their attendance and insightful contributions, which made this event a success, as well as the European Union for its support of the ECO-SOLVE programme.

Cover: © *Ye Aung Thu/AFP via Getty Images*

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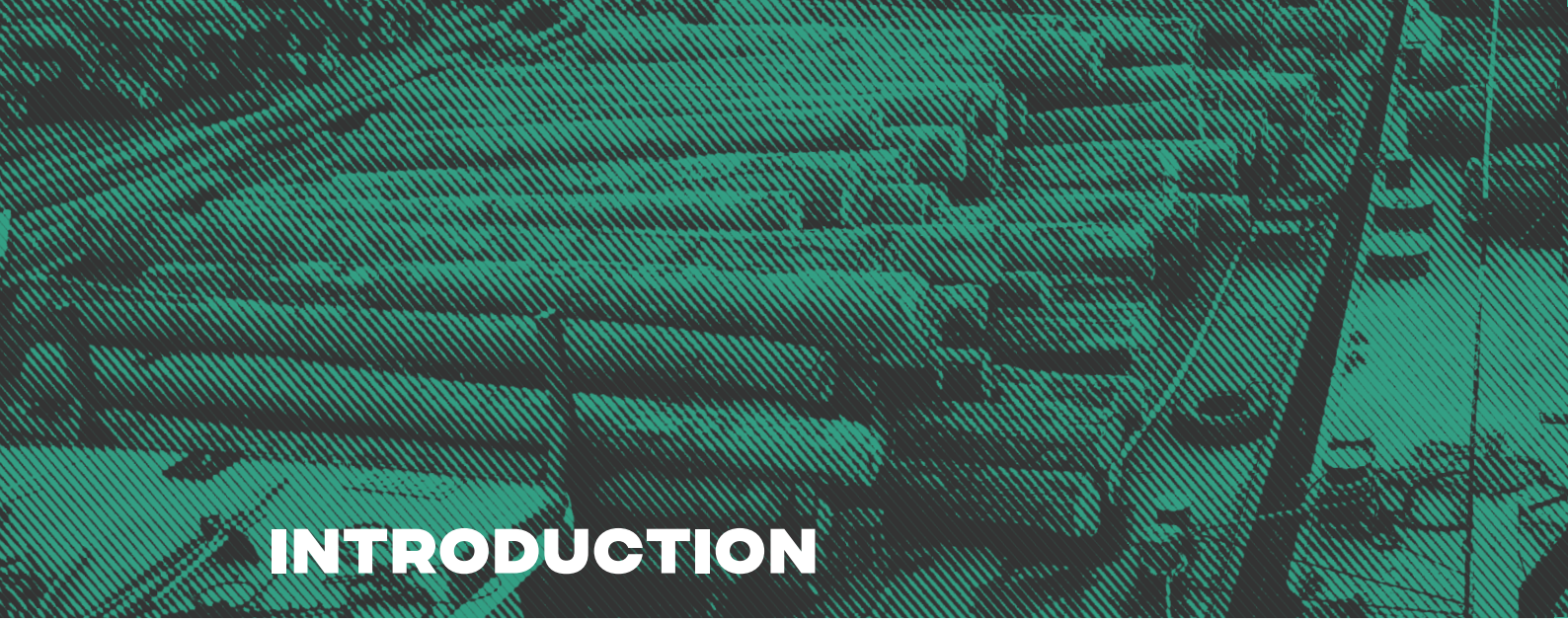


INTRODUCTION

A group of investigative journalists, environmental defenders and anti-corruption activists from South East Asia and Oceania met in Bangkok, Thailand, in February 2024 to discuss the role of corruption and elite protection in environmental crime, and the challenges and opportunities for investigative reporting. The meeting was the second of three regional consultations organized as part of the ECO-SOLVE project, a three-year global programme run by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) and funded by the European Union, which aims to monitor and disrupt illicit environmental flows while strengthening community resilience.[1]

The discussion, which was held under the Chatham House rule, explored how the ecosystem of corruption has evolved over the past decade and how this has affected the work of civil society and environmental practitioners in the two regions. From this rich discussion emerged a strategy – a map for how to increase the chances of corruption exposure coming to light and having an impact.

PATRONAGE NETWORKS, ELITE PROTECTION AND CORRUPTION IN ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME

Environmental crime has a significant impact across South East Asia and is one of the region's highest scoring illicit economies. According to the GI-TOC's 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, 72% of countries in South East Asia have a significant or severe impact from crimes involving flora, fauna and/or non-renewable resources, while almost two-thirds of countries scored highly in all three criminal markets.[2] While environmental crime was found to be less prevalent on average in Oceania in the 2023 Index, some countries – notably Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands – stood out, recording high levels of criminality in at least two of the three environmental crime markets.[3] Across Oceania and South East Asia, environmental crime is facilitated and driven by state-embedded actors, the criminal actor

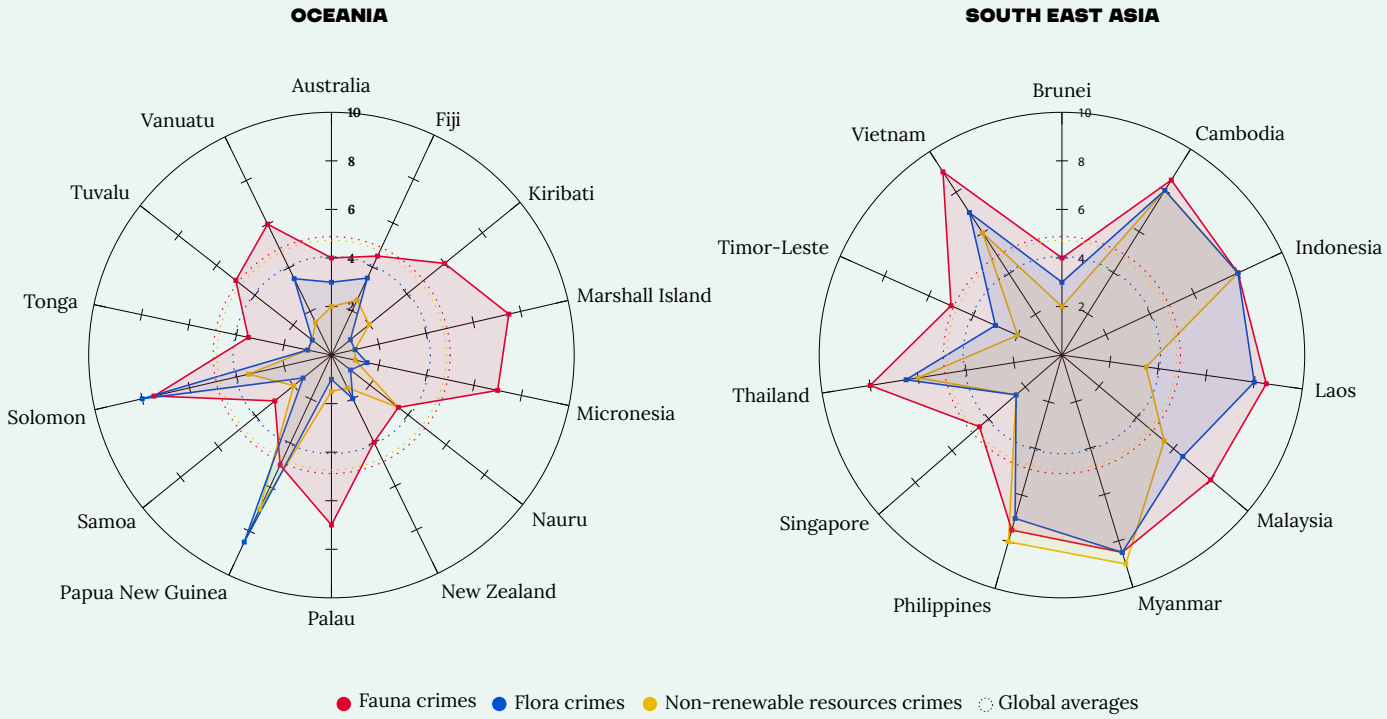


FIGURE 1 Environmental crime scores in Oceania and South East Asia.

SOURCE: GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index 2023, http://www.ocindex.net

type found to be among the most prevalent in the two regions, often working in collaboration with foreign and private sector actors.

Corruption and bribery are key drivers and enablers of environmental crime and reportedly take place at every step of the supply chain. While this is not a new finding per se, nor specific to South East Asia and Oceania, there are numerous indications that corruption and organized crime have evolved over the past decade in the two regions, as criminal actors have invested their illicit income in the formal economy and thereby legitimized their operations.

An example of this can be found in Cambodia, where many of the key players involved in illicit logging have been in the business for decades. Some have since expanded into other criminal industries such as gambling, human trafficking and cyber-scam operations, as well as formal industries including construction, infrastructure, hotels and tourism. The simultaneous construction of road infrastructure, special economic zones, sawmills to facilitate logging, as well as police and military checkpoints across Cambodia further suggests that many of these operations are strategic and collaborative. Given the close links between business tycoons and the political elite – and the clear incentives to keep the patronage system going – participants argued that it was parts of the state that adopted criminal methods, rather than criminals becoming intertwined with the state.

Experts also noted that new forms of corruption related to the exploitation of natural resources have emerged in the two regions, where criminal actors have been able to give legitimacy to their illicit operations. For example, logging operations are sometimes presented as agricultural projects or development opportunities, allowing criminals to operate under the radar, often with the direct support of local authorities. Their activities in the formal economy and open connections to politicians also allow them to manipulate public perceptions and change the narrative around a specific project – for example, by highlighting the economic benefits of questionable operations.

Irregularities have surfaced in connection with Forest Clearing Authorities (FCAs) – special permits that allow for the clearing of forest for agriculture and road construction in Papua New Guinea. According to a report by community advocacy group ACT NOW!, FCAs have allegedly been used in defiance of the Forestry Act and the rules designed to ensure sustainable forest management. In September 2023, ACT NOW! reported that they had uncovered irregularities involving the operations of Malaysian-owned company Global Elite Limited in Papua New Guinea's West Sepik province. The report alleges that the company's Wammy rural development operation used an FCA as a front to illegally export hundreds of thousands of cubic metres of round logs.[4] The conditions under which FCAs can be issued are clear and include an underlying agricultural or land use project and the need to obtain landowner consent. However, according to the report, the palm oil and rubber plantations promised under the Wammy FCA were never established, and instead, thousands of hectares more land than what would have been needed for a palm oil plantation were logged.

Furthermore, the civil society investigators allege that corruption may have taken place, including the company's possible funding of politicians and political parties, bribery of government officials to obtain the logging permit and of police officers to brutally suppress landowner complaints, human rights abuses and failure to enforce forestry and environmental laws. The Wammy project is just one of 24 active logging concessions across nine provinces where logging is authorized under an FCA. Together, the FCAs actively used for

exporting cover an average of 61 849 hectares, the equivalent of more than 86 000 football fields, which are at risk of illegal logging. The Papua New Guinea Forest Authority has denied that Global Elite Limited is misusing its FCA.

Another case of elite corruption involving the private sector was uncovered in Indonesia in June 2020.[5] The investigation by Mongabay, following on an earlier report by Mighty Earth,[6] looked into the Korindo Group, one of the largest logging palm oil producers in Indonesia, which reportedly has a long history of environmental destruction. A report by Mongabay notes that, according to the company's own figures, Korindo has cleared almost 50 000 hectares of rainforest in Southern Papua since 1998,[7] but goes on to show that some of this clearance has had a significant impact on the environment and on nearby communities. In their investigation, the group of journalists traced a US$22 million 'consultancy fee' connected to a major land deal in Indonesia's Papua province.[8] They found this unusual because plantation permits have no significant official costs in Indonesia, and Korindo had already acquired many other permits without the help of so-called consultants. The researchers derived that illicit payments may have been involved as they knew that the government officials presiding over the sector had a propensity for corruption.

The claims made by Mighty Earth were initially challenged in court by Korindo, but the group eventually agreed to drop the lawsuit after the court indicated that it would rule in favour of the environmental NGO.[9] The Forest Stewardship Council, a global green certification body, has since revoked Korindo's membership over disagreement regarding the verification process for ensuring Korindo's efforts to improve its 'social and environmental performance'.[10]

Another way in which the interests of the region's business, political and criminal elites align is through vote-buying and the strategic funding of political parties. Officials are often willing to ignore the enforcement of environmental regulations for a fee. For example, the palm oil industry in Indonesia reportedly offers bribes and political donations to regional politicians in return for decisions that benefit the industry, increase the amount of land ceded to companies and/or turn a blind eye to the enforcement of regulations.[11] A 2021 review by Indonesia's national anti-corruption agency uncovered widespread administrative and legal violations, which led to a quarter of a million hectares of land being taken away from palm oil companies in West Papua alone.[12]

A similar situation can also be seen in Solomon Islands, where – as in Papua New Guinea – around 90% of timber is felled and exported illegally, and logging companies are known to provide financial support to politicians' election bids.[13] Corruption and bribery have had a significant impact on the political process throughout South East Asia and Oceania to the degree that, as one expert noted, 'in some countries corruption is so entrenched that if you take away the patronage system there could be major security concerns' with possible consequences for service provision as a result of elite control over infrastructure.

Widespread corruption and entrenched patronage systems have also facilitated the convergence of environmental crime with other types of organized crime, particularly around major transport hubs and ports, where environmental products are trafficked using the same corruption systems as other illicit commodities. In Solomon Islands, for example, logging

camps are suspected of being used as conduits for the methamphetamine trade. Chinese entrepreneurs are thought to import methamphetamine into the country, which is then sold in small quantities to local Chinese businesspeople, landowners and nightclubs in the capital, Honiara, as well as to loggers, and is leading to the emergence of a domestic consumer market.[14] In addition, special economic zones, including Sihanoukville in Cambodia and the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Laos, often act as hubs of criminal convergence where wildlife trafficking, human trafficking, drug trafficking, financial crime and money laundering all intersect.[15]

One focus that all case studies presented and discussed by experts working on Cambodia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Thailand had in common was how elite protection and corruption are often facilitated by failures in a system that is supposed to serve and protect society. Experts stressed that loopholes are sometimes deliberately created to protect and enrich those in power. In addition, they argued that this is not restricted to specific institutions but rather was a reflection of the overall system, with the judiciary widely cited as the weakest link in the process as 'they do not have the resources, capacity or will to follow up on specific cases or in other instances, cases are opened but never progress'.

In addition to these specific challenges, experts emphasized that loopholes in the system not only persist in South East Asia and Oceania but are increasingly reflective of global fractures or weaknesses. For example, experts argued that the way the international banking system is set up provides countless opportunities for illicit money to move, for global illicit elites to connect and for their proceeds to be laundered. As one participant noted 'elite protection is not a domestic problem any more'.

Another significant concern among experts was the perception that there is no longer a sense of accountability, that even when corruption and bribery are exposed, there are few consequences for those found guilty. For example, the role of Cambodian tycoons in timber trafficking has been widely discussed and well documented.[16] Cambodian businessman Try Pheap, for example, was designated on the US sanctions list in 2019, for his alleged involvement in corruption related to resource extraction. The US Department of the Treasury lists him as being 'responsible for or complicit in, or directly or indirectly engaged in, corruption, including the misappropriation of state assets, the expropriation of private assets for personal gain, corruption related to government contracts or the extraction of natural resources, or bribery'.[17] According to the designation, Try Pheap 'used his vast network inside Cambodia to build a large scale illegal logging consortium that relies on the collusion of Cambodian officials, to include purchasing protection from the government, including military protection, for the movement of his illegal products'.[18] The sanctions listing also notes that he exploited connections with the Cambodian military to be able to traffic timber to buyers in Vietnam, China, Europe and Russia.[19] Despite the allegations against him, Try Pheap has been able to continue his operations – seemingly unobstructed.

While across the region there has been significant push-back from companies on NGOs to withdraw their exposure reports, institutional responses that follow-up and investigate these cases have, so far, been limited.

Implications for civil society and practitioners

The challenges associated with elite corruption and protection in South East Asia and Oceania – and the perception of its pervasiveness – have had a significant impact on the work of civil society and anti-corruption practitioners. Participants reported a widespread acceptance of corruption in South East Asia and Oceania, coupled with a sense that nothing would ever change because 'corrupt politicians and elites are shielded by wealth and influence'.

A primary concern raised in the meeting was the substantial security risks associated with reporting on elite protection and corruption, as elites have entrenched themselves within powerful networks in a way that allows them to act with impunity. Experts also noted the growing pressure on civil society and media organizations more generally, as home-grown free media outlets continue to be shut down and the few that remain are often reliant on external funding. While foreign funding sometimes enables more critical reporting, it also poses difficulties, as these media outlets are consequently perceived as less independent by the communities they serve and/or are sometimes even branded as traitorous by local governments for accepting money.

On the other hand, local media organizations are often influenced or controlled by local elites, including businesspeople and government authorities, who try to attract journalists through financial incentives and perks, including holidays and stable monthly salaries. Competition between international and local independent media organizations was also noted, as big media houses tend to be better funded. The relationship is further challenged as there are few mechanisms that allow for the exchange of skills or opportunities for collaboration.

Journalists and researchers reported feeling an increasing burden to provide 'evidence that would hold up in court' to mitigate against potential legal challenges, rather than just providing the context that is necessary for public understanding, and to spend time in court following cases they have helped uncover and reported on. This has had a particular impact on the methods used to investigate corruption in environmental crime, including field research and interview techniques, with researchers needing to adapt their techniques and provide more rigorous documentation to ensure a higher standard of proof.

Despite the difficulties in accessing financial information, participants agreed that 'following the money' and linking illicit proceeds of environmental crime to money laundering had become a core aspect of their work. It was also stressed that it is important to visit the site, where possible, to get a feel for what is happening on the ground, and to supplement anecdotal information with quantitative data such as company records and satellite imagery. In addition, video footage – often collected as part of undercover investigations – can be a useful tool in documenting elite corruption. While compelling evidence of the crime can often be gathered through other research methods, participants argued that there is particular value in showing how the system works first hand, especially to generate public interest.

The proliferation of digital technologies and artificial intelligence has also significantly shaped the work of journalists and anti-corruption activists, including with regard to corruption related to environmental concerns. This work has been particularly assisted by the development of open data platforms that allow for more data on governance transparency to be generated and shared. For example, the ACT-AI open data platform, launched by the Anti-Corruption Organization of Thailand in 2019, scrapes the internet for public procurement

data, links organizations involved to their owners, shows whether these individuals are politically connected and compiles the data in a user-friendly interface. A dedicated search engine allows citizens to search for projects in their community and – if they find irregularities – contact anti-corruption organizations KRAC (Knowledge Hub for Regional Anti-corruption and Good Governance Collaboration) and HAND Social Enterprise. Although the platform is currently only available in the Thai language and provides data only on procurement contracts (rather than all types of publicly funded projects), it has already helped to uncover numerous cases of corruption.

The widespread use of the platform in its first years of operation also highlights the potential for greater citizen engagement in the future. As one of the platform's founders noted during the meeting: 'We are observing a reinforcing trend where more data on corruption empowers more people to get involved, who then gather more data on corruption.' One of the benefits of platforms like ACT-AI is that the data generated creates a public record that can always be consulted, even if there is no immediate follow-up to concerns raised by citizens.

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR FUTURE ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH EAST ASIA AND OCEANIA

While it is recognized that improving the evidence base and sharing information on elite protection and corruption alone will not necessarily lead to systemic change, it remains less clear why some exposure reporting is successful and others are not. With this in mind, participants explored what could be done to improve impact, agreeing that recognizing the ever-changing nature of the corruption landscape is vital in order to be able to adapt strategies and identify new entry points for public engagement and disruption.

The experts suggested that future engagement should be organized around six building blocks – the '6 Cs' outlined below. While many of these elements are applicable to anti-corruption work globally, they are presented here with a particular focus on the role they could play in South East Asia and Oceania, taking into account the specific regional risks faced by anti-corruption activists and investigative researchers, as well as the low levels of government transparency.

Collaboration

Adding to the challenge of tackling elite corruption is the transnational element, as money is often moved and laundered across borders. This dynamic highlights the clear need for greater collaboration between international and local journalists, as well as broadening the scope of engagement to different sectors and stakeholders, and across countries. Particular emphasis should be placed on fostering cooperation and engagement with the private sector, specifically on how to build partnerships with financial institutions to 'follow the money'.

One example where this was done well is the investigation into the Korindo Group. Here, a group of investigative journalists, including Mongabay, The Gecko Project, the Korean Center for Investigative Journalism-Newstapa and Al Jazeera – with journalists based in the key countries investigating – pored over company records, financial statements and permits going back more than a decade to examine how the company had expanded its land bank. They traced the company's complex ownership structure, from Indonesia to Singapore, to several notorious tax havens, and discovered how it had used corporate secrecy techniques to prevent scrutiny of key aspects of its business.

The journalists bought notary deeds to obtain company records and ownership information, managed to acquire the financial records of listed shell companies and uncovered financial transactions linking the alleged consultancy payment to the plantation in Indonesia's Papua province. They also travelled to Papua where they conducted interviews with former colleagues of the person who had made the payment. Through the interviews, as well as documents and a leaked cache of photographs, they were able to trace this person's activities from the Papuan rainforests in the mid-2000s, through his role in a failed attempt to establish a giant plantation project in Madagascar, to his multimillion-dollar dealings with Korindo.[20]

The Korindo investigation also highlights another crucial element that successful and impactful exposure campaigns seem to have in common: partnerships between different local and international media organizations and NGOs. Participants explained that investigations take time, both to compile and to have an impact. Too often, the results of investigations are simply published without much follow-up, and journalists burn out or run out of money before they see the impact of their work. Exposure reporting is more effective when local newspapers followed up on the story, and partner organizations republished the material or even rewrote articles from their own perspective.

In addition to provoking change locally, participants stressed the need to find ways to create external pressure on corrupt actors by raising awareness among the international community. It was suggested that one way of doing this could be by organizing private briefings for law enforcement and policy makers from countries with direct links to the specific case. It was argued that providing the relevant information to responsible institutions could trigger law enforcement action and enable follow-up investigations that could flag high-risk transactions and individual account holders and lead to the cutback of foreign funding, the imposition of sanctions or travel restrictions. For journalists and researchers, this also means identifying incentives for different countries to cooperate in taking action, particularly as 'companies that are involved in corruption are likely to be involved in corruption in multiple countries'. Experts also argued for leveraging the involvement of states with a strong track record in responding to corruption and organized crime, such as Norway, the UK or Singapore, as they often play a leading role in these debates and may be willing to support disruption efforts.

Consistency

Participants underlined the importance of consistent messaging, so that people and communities know who is working on a particular topic so that they can reach out and share information more easily. Partnerships between media organizations and/or with NGOs also play a key role, as they send an important message to their communities that a particular organization is committed and will continue working on the topic despite the many challenges and dangers involved.

Consistent engagement on the ground can also help to crowdsource ideas for new investigations, and was identified as the most fruitful way to initiate new investigations. However, the success of crowdsourcing information depends on researchers or journalists having pre-existing expertise and credibility on a particular topic or case to encourage other journalists, analysts or NGOs to come forward with additional information. As one journalist noted, 'It is important that people are aware of your work, so they come with information.'

As the countries of the region are very diverse, with many different cultures, languages and priorities even within a single nation, participants argued that it is often difficult to get a particular issue on the national agenda and keep it there. This is especially true in cases of elite protection and corruption that occur in remote areas, but need to be brought to the attention of politicians in the capital. In fact, this was the case with Korindo investigation: journalists from Indonesia described the challenge of getting and keeping the government's attention, especially as policy is shaped by public perception and the perception in the capital was that these crimes were happening far away – and therefore little action was needed. In this context, consistent messaging and reiterating key points – coupled with the use of strategic partnerships – helped to build engagement with government officials and create a sense of urgency around issues of corruption related to environmental exploitation.

Communication

Although corruption is a widespread phenomenon, experts noted that it remains a poorly understood concept and that there is in fact little awareness of the impact it has on society in South East Asia and Oceania. The impact of exposure reporting can be improved by not only naming and shaming elites, but also by explaining the networks that enable and facilitate corruption in a simple and straightforward way. This may also need to involve creating different types of outputs for different audiences, and determining the most appropriate time to publish findings and engage on the issue.

Experts agreed that corruption needs to become everyone's problem, and that there is a particular need to encourage people to take action through more direct communication. One way could be to involve the public in data collection and reporting – as trialled by the ACT-AI open data platform – as this gives people the sense that they can make a difference and that their contributions matter. Another might be to take inspiration from the climate movement and involve more young people, using platforms such as TikTok and creating short-form content to make anti-corruption efforts accessible to a wider audience. As one expert noted: 'You need to meet the people where they get their news, and that's not in the newspaper any more.'

Experts also suggested creating a sense of urgency and prioritization around corruption and environmental crime. Not only is environmental crime still not seen as a priority by many governments in the region (the focus remains on drug trafficking and human trafficking), but there are also so many different types of environmental crime, including illegal logging, wildlife trafficking and environmental pollution, all competing for attention.

Camaraderie

Camaraderie among journalists and activists in the region is particularly important, as attacks against them are reportedly common. Because there are only a handful of people covering specific topics related to environmental crime and corruption, these people are further exposed to safety risks as it is fairly easy to track down where the information comes from or who has access to this kind of data. As one participant noted: 'The most dangerous place to be an investigative journalist is at home.'

Greater solidarity among and support for journalists, NGOs and other civil society actors can help keep stories alive and provide a layer of protection against security and safety concerns. There is not only safety in numbers, but also a sense of solidarity – it is more difficult for authorities to shut down well-networked campaigns or directly target individuals working on particular stories when there are many people involved. In addition, if one organization faces legal threats, another one can pick up the story and keep it updated. Security risks can also be lessened by journalists framing elite protection and corruption as a regional issue, focusing on quantitative data rather than individual stories, or showing that it affects 'everyone' to deflect pressure from one or two specific communities. There is also a need for solidarity and support from international jurisdictions capable of exerting external pressure on corrupt actors.

Whistle-blower protection and regulation were mentioned at various points during the meeting. There is a concern that support for whistle-blowers in the region still varies widely from country to country, with the result that whistle-blowers are reportedly sometimes more likely to approach international journalists than local reporters due to distrust of domestic media organizations and fear of being associated with corrupt elites. Participants argued that the international community also has an important role to play in this regard, as it can share experiences and expertise from other parts of the world.

Confidence

Despite all the challenges and risks, participants noted that there is a group of excellent journalists, investigators and NGO representatives who work on corruption and expose wrongdoing in South East Asia and Oceania. While not all exposure investigations have the desired impact, it is important to note that some progress has been made in the fight against elite protection. Continued engagement and focus on the issue is also an important way of encouraging community activism and international support.

A starting point here could be to identify individuals within current corporations and governments who are willing to spearhead reforms. While the feasibility of this will vary from country to country – and participants recognized that this would not be possible everywhere in South East Asia and Oceania – identifying anti-corruption champions and 'islands of integrity' could be an important first step. This should include the strengthening of anti-corruption institutions and agencies and empowering them to lead these reforms, including by removing regulatory confusion about who is responsible for anti-corruption matters.

Where local reform is currently not feasible, experts argued for increased external pressure. Every single case of corruption and elite protection in environmental crime is transnational, so more needs to be done to follow the money, to see where illicit proceeds are laundered and invested, and to create more opportunities for local responses. This must include strengthening anti-money laundering reforms and ensuring they can and will be implemented. As one participant asked, 'How is still it possible that you do not need to show how you earned the money that you spend on your children's education?'

Creativity

Creativity refers to the need to find diverse and novel ways of exposing corruption and writing about its impact. Indeed, as one expert noted: 'People don't digest statistics very well.' Instead, there is a clear need to localize content (including by publishing it in vernacular languages), making it relatable for local communities and explaining why it matters. For example, one strategy (where feasible) could be to name individuals and companies to add colour to the story and make the evidence more compelling. Experts argued that there is a balance to be struck between local and global – exposing the guilty individuals and keeping the story specific, while also explaining the system and networks that enable corruption and environmental crime, which are often transnational. In the past, successful campaigns have been tied to high-profile events – such as the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) – as they were able to leverage international attention.

An element of creativity is also needed to find new platforms for sharing information and raising awareness in order to ensure that information reaches the right people for effective distribution to stakeholders. Experts suggested publishing an 'information pack' rather than a single report, which would allow for more targeted publications that appeal to different groups of stakeholders and thereby permit a more diverse group to get involved. This way, one article could focus on raising public awareness, while another could provide detailed information on modus operandi for law enforcement agencies, and a third could detail corporate records and financial transactions to enable financial institutions to conduct follow-up investigations. As one participant put it: 'It takes a network to take down a network.'

Just as corruption and environmental crime vary across the two regions, so too should the approach taken to expose it. Participants noted that there are significant cultural nuances to shaming and the fact that people in different cultures react differently to being exposed. They shared concerns about exposure fatigue and the feeling that reporting leads nowhere and publishing information about corruption makes no difference. As one expert noted: 'Just because someone is committing corrupt acts does not mean that he or she can be shamed.'

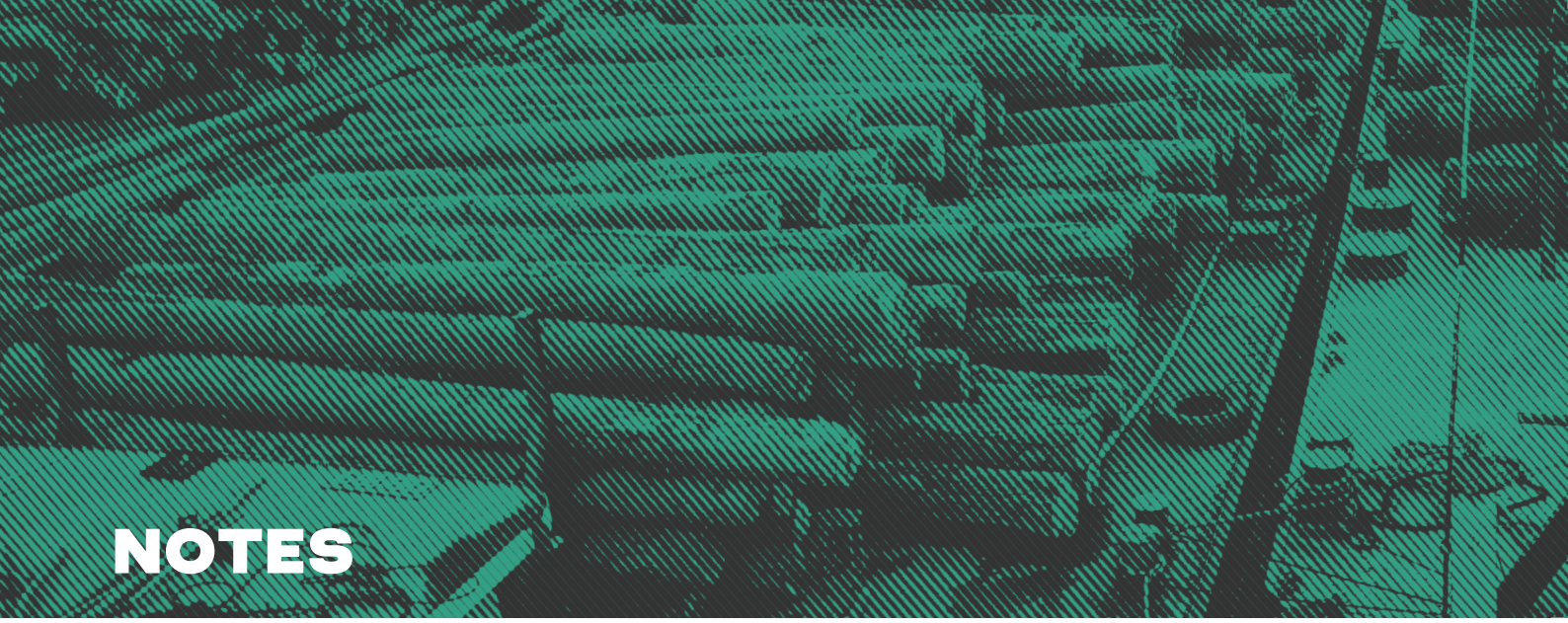
The diverse geographies of South East Asia and Oceania, with their own distinct regional priorities, can be used to highlight the diversity of the phenomenon of elite corruption in environmental crime. By bringing these local issues to a wider audience and integrating them into global discussions, one can raise awareness and drive political action on issues that might otherwise be overlooked. Pressure can also be brought to bear through the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global watchdog on money laundering and terrorist financing. For example, the FATF's decision in 2022 to quietly remove Cambodia from its grey list, despite the country's poor track record in combating money laundering, must be openly challenged.

Creative action aimed at creating pressure for change should also include the use of sanctions. Even if the effectiveness of the global sanctions regime remains questionable, sanctions can act as a deterrent and discourage further corruption. In addition, also the international community, including international organizations and donors, has a responsibility to speak out against corruption. Not only do they have access to a variety of tools that are beyond the reach of regional stakeholders, such as EU timber regulation and the US Magnitsky Act that specifically focuses on human rights abuses, but they also have direct influence on regional governments through the provision of aid and other project funding.

CONCLUSION

Elite protection and corruption in environmental crime have a serious impact on the economies and societies of South East Asia and Oceania. Indeed, corruption is often referred to as the 'most serious problem of society', but it also remains a somewhat abstract issue whose precise impact is not well understood. Elite corruption and protection have also evolved significantly over the past decade, as illicit actors involved in logging or the illegal wildlife trade have been able to add a degree of legitimacy to their activities by investing their proceeds in the private sector and the formal economy. Corruption will continue to evolve as new opportunities for influence and personal gain arise, including in relation to carbon credits and climate change targets – issues that have received little attention to date.

Unsurprisingly, the evolution of corruption has had a significant impact on attempts to expose elite protection in South East Asia and Oceania. Not only are these regions grappling with significant changes in the information ecosystem, with independent journalists and researchers facing massive restrictions on reporting and significant safety risks, but they are also constantly having to find new strategies for exposing elite corruption and raising awareness of wrongdoing by those in positions of power. Going through corporate records and tracing payments has become a core component of reporting work. The '6 Cs' engagement strategy presented here will hopefully inspire corruption advocates, investigative journalists, experts and donors to meet these new challenges and work towards better regional strategies to tackle elite protection and corruption in environmental crime.



NOTES

1 The first meeting took place in Nairobi, Kenya, and covered elite protection and environmental crime in Africa; see https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/eco-solve-africa-regional-consultation. The final consultation will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, later in 2024, and will focus on Latin America.

2 GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index 2023, http://www.ocindex.net.

3 Ibid.

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5 The Gecko Project and Mongabay, The consultant: Why did a palm oil conglomerate pay $22m to an unnamed 'expert' in Papua?, 25 June 2020, https://news.mongabay.com/2020/06/the-consultant-why-did-a-palm-oil-conglomerate-pay-22m-to-an-unnamed-expert-in-papua. See also The Gecko Project and Mongabay, How we calculated Korindo's revenues from clearing Papuan rainforest, 29 June 2020, https://news.mongabay.com/2020/06/how-we-calculated-korindos-revenues-from-clearing-papuan-rainforest.

6 See Burning paradise: The oil palm practices of Korindo in Papua and North Maluku, August 2016, https://www.mightyearth.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2016-08-25-FINAL-Korindo-report-English-3.pdf.

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