



Australian Government



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

THE 2025 ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE MEKONG RESULTS

November 2025



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Introduction

In November 2025, the third iteration of the Global Organized Crime Index was released by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) providing a structured way to understand how organized crime manifests globally and how states and societies respond to it. The Organized Crime Index, covering all 193 UN member states, enables comparative, data-driven analysis at global, regional and national levels, while also serving as a framework for dialogue and policy engagement. This third iteration captures developments up to the end of 2024, allowing for comparison of trends in criminality and resilience over time.

When the concept was first developed, there was no global metric or strategy for assessing organized crime. Discussions were often concentrated in the Global North, overlooking regions most affected by illicit economies. Existing analyses tended to focus on criminal activity itself, with less attention paid to how states and non-state actors respond. The Index was created to fill this gap. It aims to:

- To establish a comprehensive knowledge base on organized crime worldwide;
- To map how both state and non-state actors, such as, civil society, and the private sector confront criminal threats;
- And to provide a baseline for future research and policy innovation in tackling organized crime.

The Global Organized Crime Index is an expert-led tool designed to measure the scale and pervasiveness of organized crime and the strength of state resilience to combat it. It is based on a comprehensive literature review, multiple rounds of independent expert scoring and a verification and calibration process, including regional expert group meetings and internal calibration.

How the Index works

The Index measures two dimensions: criminality and resilience, recognizing their mutual importance.

Criminality is assessed through two components: the scope and scale of criminal markets and the structure and influence of criminal actors. Since 2023, the Index includes 15 criminal markets (expanded from the original 10) and five actor types, incorporating private-sector actors alongside traditional organized crime groups. Resilience is evaluated by looking at the 12 'building blocks of resilience' that are assessed to be the foundational requirements for building resilient, strong systems to tackle the complex nature of organized criminality. Each indicator is independently scored on a scale of 1 to 10, with higher scores indicating greater capacity and effectiveness.

Given the clandestine nature of organized crime, the real value of the Index lies not only in the numbers but in the ability to contextualize them so as to understand the environments in which criminal activity takes place and how resilience can be strengthened. Its purpose is to act as a catalyst for constructive dialogue, to help policymakers, researchers and practitioners better understand complex criminal ecosystems and to identify opportunities for reform. Starting with the third iteration and as future editions are developed, the Index has, and will continue to gain predictive capacity, enabling users to anticipate trends and assess whether resilience measures are keeping pace with the evolving nature of organized crime.

Key Global Findings

The 2025 Global OC Index indicates that the world is at a crossroads when it comes to dealing with illicit economies. Organized crime is undermining democracy, the sovereignty of states and even international peace and security. The Index highlights six major shifts in the criminal landscape during this pivotal moment of global change, characterized by geopolitical rivalry, technological advancements, conflict and a decline in democracy.

Drug markets are shifting to a duopoly.

Cocaine and synthetic drugs have significantly expanded globally since the first Index edition in 2021. While cannabis remains the most widespread drug, it is declining amid more permissive laws. The heroin market has dropped sharply, though it persists in some regions, including South East Asia, and particularly the Mekong countries.

'Invisible', generally non-violent, crimes are rising.

Financial crimes are the world's most pervasive market and have seen the sharpest rise since the last edition. Cyber-dependent crimes, though less widespread, have also expanded. Both markets show weak correlation with resilience, revealing that existing measures are ill-equipped to address them.

Counterfeiting is growing and systemically connected.

Although often overlooked, counterfeiting is rising globally, driven by technology, social media, and economic pressures. This market has diversified and industrialized, encompassing everything from luxury items and everyday consumer goods to life saving medicines. Counterfeiting also shows the strongest correlation with other criminal markets, highlighting overlapping networks, routes, and financial flows.

Criminal actors are adapting.

State-embedded actors remain the most influential criminal actor globally, but foreign and private-sector actors are gaining ground. Foreign actors saw the sharpest rise since 2021, while private-sector actors, including financial intermediaries, also increased notably since 2023.

Resilience is plateauing.

Resilience continues to lag behind evolving organized crime threats. Institutional measures are weakening: 'international cooperation' rose only slightly since 2023 amid a fractured multilateral system, while 'judicial system & detention' saw the steepest decline.

Evidence shows that resilience has a measurable impact on criminality.

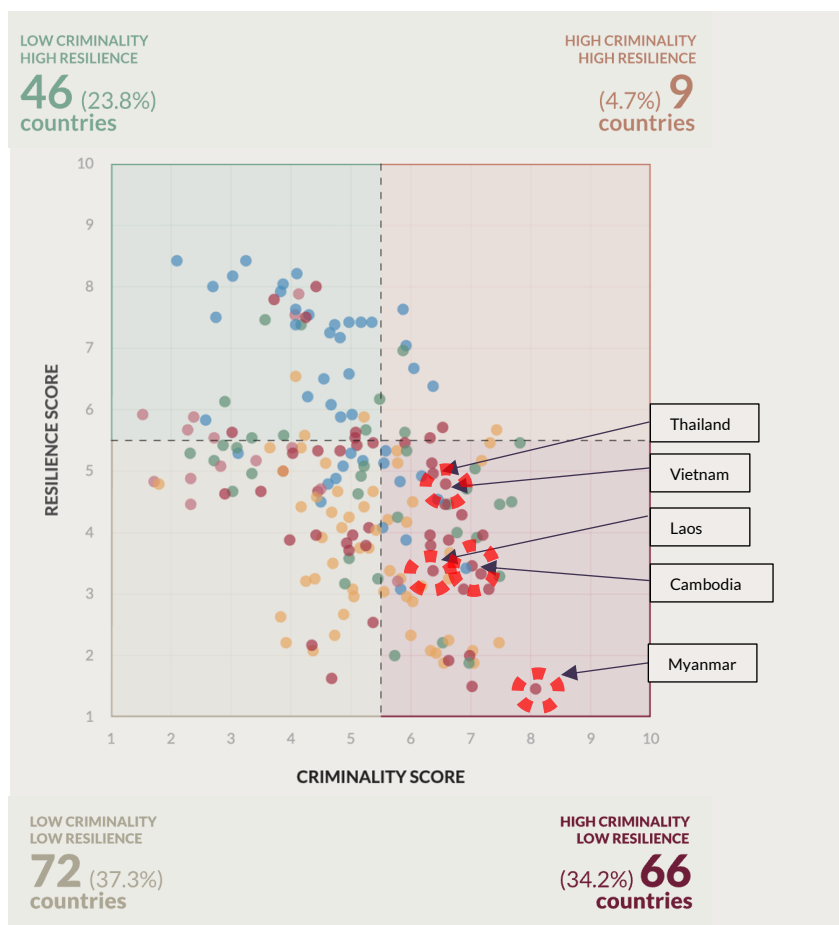
For the first time, the 2025 Index introduces a forecasting component that projects criminality trends over the next five years. It builds on previous editions and uses continuous data collection to support deeper, long-term analysis. To this end, the Index vulnerability matrix, which measures how criminality and resilience interact across all countries covered by the tool, served as the starting point. Following a statistical analysis and using state-embedded actors as a proxy for criminality, the 2025 Index finds that a 1.0-point increase in resilience corresponds to a 1.8-point reduction in the presence of state-embedded actors, underscoring that strengthening resilience can measurably reduce the ability of these actors to manipulate state institutions for illicit gains.

The Mekong in the global context

Organized crime remains deeply entrenched in the Mekong, which covers Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar. The region's average criminality (6.88) is well above both the global average, the Asia continental average and the South East Asia average. This is driven by a broad spectrum of illicit markets, from drug trafficking and fauna crimes to cyber-dependent crimes and by a criminal actor ecosystem that combines state, foreign and private interests. Resilience across this region, meanwhile, lags behind the development of these markets. The largest institutional declines have occurred in judicial integrity indicating a weakened accountability precisely where it is most needed to counter adaptive, transnational networks.

Looking at the countries, Myanmar, with a criminality score of 8.08, ranks first for criminality globally, underscoring how conflict, state capture and transnational organized crime intersect. Cambodia and Vietnam follow at 7.02 and 6.58, respectively, while Thailand and Laos stand at 6.37.

In all cases, resilience trails behind: Thailand's 4.96 and Vietnam's 4.79 mark the upper end, Cambodia's 3.46 and Laos's 3.38 remain low, and Myanmar's 1.46 is the weakest resilience score in the world. These figures illustrate not only a clear imbalance between the scale of criminality and the capacity of states to build resilience but also the different pathways through which organized crime embeds itself within a country, ranging from conflict-driven state complicity to regulatory permissiveness and cross-border fluidity.



Globally, criminality has grown steadily over the past four years, rising from 4.87 in 2021 to 5.08 in 2025, while resilience has declined slightly, from 4.82 to 4.78. While this change may look small, it is significant as it highlights that the global system as a whole is struggling to keep pace with the evolution of organized crime. In other words, criminality is expanding faster than states collective capacity to respond. The gap between the two scores is widening – a finding which holds true in the Mekong as well.

The 2025 Index vulnerability matrix illustrates how criminality and resilience interact across all countries, dividing them into four quadrants. The Mekong countries cluster within the high-criminality/low-resilience quadrant, meaning they face multi-market criminal threats yet lack the institutional capacity to contain them.

The Mekong countries are not alone: this zone includes 66 states worldwide (34.2% of all UN member states) and has been growing since the last iteration of the index.

This matrix highlights that the desired outcome is for countries to move towards the top-left quadrant, low criminality and high resilience, depicted in green. From the current findings, it is clear that a lot needs to be done by countries and societies in the Mekong to achieve this as are currently in the least desirable quadrant. In addition, there is no single or easy toolkit that can propel countries towards the top-left quadrant regardless of their position within the vulnerability matrix. Nevertheless, two elements are essential: a clear understanding of their current criminality–resilience situation, and an awareness of how that situation may develop over time.

Criminality in the Mekong

What stands out in the region is the density and interconnection of markets. The region contains high levels of virtually every major illicit economy measured by the Global Organized Crime Index and scores highly in synthetic drugs, human trafficking, environmental crime, financial and cybercrime as well as smuggling of goods and natural resources.

For example, drug markets have long formed a key part of the Mekong's traditional illicit economy but are themselves shifting. Synthetic drugs dominate production and trafficking, centred on Myanmar's Shan State and extending through Laos and Thailand into regional and global consumer markets. Heroin persists as a legacy trade, though its relative importance is declining, while cannabis trends are fragmented as liberalisation in Thailand contrasts with continued prohibition in neighboring countries.

Another example is human trafficking which remains endemic across all five countries, increasingly intertwined with cyber scam operations and exploitation for forced criminality. Child sexual exploitation remains a key concern both online and through cross-border movement facilitated by porous borders and digital anonymity.

Across the Mekong, financial crime has expanded into a structural vulnerability, fuelled by weak regulation, entrenched corruption and the growing use of special economic zones (SEZs) and cross-border networks. From embezzlement and tax evasion to Ponzi schemes, romance scams, investment fraud and illicit financial flows, criminal actors, including state-embedded and foreign actors are exploiting both the low levels of public awareness and regulatory gaps faster than authorities can address them.

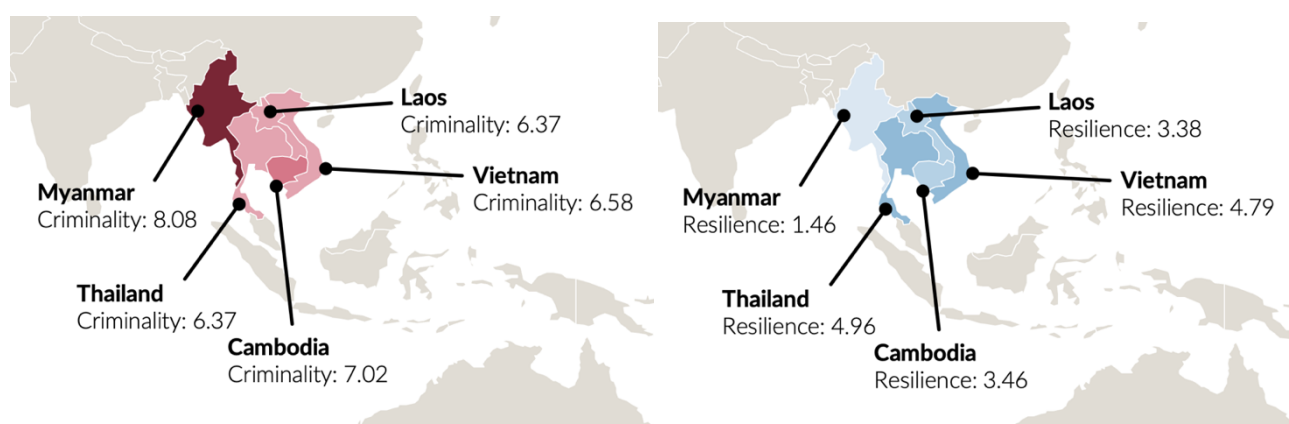
This multiplicity of criminal markets pushes criminality scores upward not because of one dominant market but due to the coexistence and overlap of many. Myanmar's drug economy (particularly heroin and synthetic drugs) remains a global anchor of production, yet the same country also hosts some of the largest scam and fraud complexes in the world. Cambodia, Laos have emerged as hubs for financial crimes, including cyber scam operations and illicit investment, where SEZs and loosely governed border areas provide infrastructure for cross-border criminal operations. Thailand occupies a dual position: a transit for trafficking and a consumer economy for both drugs and counterfeit goods, with advanced logistics and financial systems that simultaneously facilitate resilience and create opportunity. Vietnam stands out for its mix of entrenched fauna crimes and rising synthetic and cyber markets, showing how economic modernization has fostered both diversification and sophistication in criminal activity.

Another defining feature of the Mekong is the hybrid nature of its criminal actors. The Index's global finding that state-embedded actors are the most influential is confirmed in this region but with a significant caveat: foreign networks are not peripheral; they are integral to how organized crime operates. Chinese and transnational South East Asian groups are active across the Mekong, forming joint ventures with domestic

elites and armed actors.

Most strikingly, cyber scam operations exemplify a collusion of diverse criminal actors and convergence of various forms of transnational organized crime on a large scale, including human trafficking, cybercrime, corruption, money laundering and fraud. They are widely run by Chinese-speaking organized crime groups, local criminal networks and benefit from an umbrella of protection of state-embedded actors. This means they are not captured in only one criminal market indicator in the Global Organized Crime Index, but many.

CRIMINALITY AND RESILIENCE IN THE MEKONG



Resilience in the Mekong

Globally, the findings of the Organized Crime Index indicates that “invisible” crimes, such as financial and cyber-dependent crimes, are on the rise but show a weak correlation with resilience. The Mekong is no exception. As previously mentioned, the cyber-scam economy in countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos blurs the boundaries between markets and actors, pushing the total criminality upward while revealing the limited capacity of existing regulatory and enforcement systems to keep up with the pace. Although progress has been made in the regional response to cyber scam operations, including joint operations, civil society support for victims and international pressure through sanctions, these efforts clearly still continue to fall short of addressing the deeper vulnerabilities and intersectionalities that enable the scam economy to expand. Regulatory systems remain riddled with loopholes, enforcement capacity remains limited and the structural conditions allow criminal actors (and those that facilitate them) to adapt far more quickly than institutions can respond.

The Mekong’s resilience scores show a region under sustained strain. Thailand and Vietnam maintain mid-range performance, yet these levels remain insufficient to offset systemic vulnerabilities. More specifically, while institutions and systems to respond are often in place and enable participation in regional cooperation frameworks, lack of implementation and enforcement as well as moderate transparency measures limit the effectiveness. In addition, even these more stable environments face erosion in areas such as judicial independence, financial oversight and civic space, resulting in the lack of appropriate accountability and leaving countries vulnerable to cross-border crime and corruption.

The situation appears different in Laos and Cambodia, where resilience was assessed to be much weaker. These

countries not only continue to struggle with limited transparency, weak anti-corruption enforcement and highly centralized governance systems that limit oversight but also civic participation is more restricted than at their respective neighbors. These weaknesses for example, enable criminal networks to operate within SEZs and exploit regulatory gaps in banking, construction and resource extraction.

At the extreme end, Myanmar stands as the world's least resilient state and society, with conflict, state capture and systemic corruption dismantling any remaining institutional safeguards. The collapse of rule of law structures since the 2021 coup has deepened the intersection between political elites, the military, armed actors and organized crime undermining all indicators from governance to victim protection. Across the Mekong, these weaknesses in transparency, anti-money-laundering systems and judicial independence drive a self-reinforcing cycle between criminality and state vulnerability.

Where do we go from here?

One of the most striking findings of the 2025 Index is the measurable relationship between resilience and state-embedded actors. A single-point increase in resilience is capable of corresponding to a 1.8-point reduction in the presence and influence of state-embedded actors, showing in concrete terms that strengthening institutions can directly limit the power of those networks that deeply enable organized crime. Seen in this light, the Mekong's resilience gap does not only point to institutional weaknesses, it is also a clear indicator of where progress is possible and needed. Improving resilience is therefore not an abstract objective: it is one of the most effective ways for reducing criminal infiltration in governance, markets and communities.

The key question, of course, is how resilience can be strengthened in environments where state-embedded actors and increasingly foreign actors are a major part of the problem. That challenge is at the core of the forthcoming Expert Briefing, where we will examine these findings in more detail as well as focus on which reforms are most relevant to the Mekong, where momentum is stalling and how targeted cooperation across all levels of society (within governments, between states, and with civil society) can realistically shift the balance.