



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# CRIMINAL CURRENTS

CLIMATE CHANGE AND  
ORGANIZED CRIME THREATS  
IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

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## SUMMARY

Climate change and organized crime are increasingly interconnected global challenges. Climate change can create conditions that enable organized crime by intensifying poverty, weakening governance and driving displacement, while organized crime exacerbates environmental degradation and undermines efforts to mitigate or adapt to the impacts of climate change. Together, they form a mutually reinforcing cycle that erodes resilience and stability.

In the Pacific Islands, a region that is highly vulnerable to sea-level rise and extreme weather events, the intersection of organized crime and climate change has profound implications. It erodes resilience, hampers sustainable development, threatens livelihoods and food security, weakens the rule of law and exacerbates social instability. Organized crime also impedes effective climate action.

In some cases, organized crime and climate change have a direct impact on each other, as is typically the case with environmental crimes; in others, the connections are more indirect but no less harmful, as exemplified by the link between human trafficking and climate-induced displacement. Corruption is a constant enabler of this relationship.

Amid this sobering reality, however, recognition of the organized crime–climate change nexus – and the growing body of evidence supporting it – presents a critical opportunity for intervention. With a clearer understanding of how these threats intersect, we can take informed action to address current challenges while also anticipating, preventing and mitigating future risks.

By analyzing current trends and learning from other regions, we can begin to identify potential future vulnerabilities, such as the exploitation of new natural resources and new climate adaptation measures, climate change-induced human smuggling, and environmental degradation linked to domestic drug production. Existing and potential threats highlight the urgent need to ‘crime-proof’ climate policy and programming, ensuring that efforts to build resilience in the face of a warming planet do not unintentionally create new opportunities for criminal exploitation. At the same time, it is crucial to monitor how new developments in criminal landscapes have the potential to negatively affect the environment.

### Key points

- Climate change is a tangible and immediate existential threat to the Pacific Islands. It affects health, educational outcomes and family integrity, undermining the factors that make societies more immune to transnational organized crime.

- Climate change is a threat multiplier in the Pacific Islands. It intensifies existing vulnerabilities and introduces new security challenges that undermine stability, well-being and sovereignty.
- Organized crime is growing in scale, diversification, sophistication and level of harm in the Pacific Islands. Environmental crimes that exploit natural resources directly reinforce climate change, and the effects of climate change exacerbate weaknesses that facilitate illicit activities.
- Corruption is a key enabler in the relationship between climate change and organized crime. It facilitates environmental crimes, undermines climate action by diverting funds and weakening regulations, and makes climate finance vulnerable to misappropriation.
- Future risks at the nexus of climate change and organized crime could include illicit exploitation of new natural resources, such as those from deep-sea mining; exploitation of new climate adaptation measures, such as citizenship schemes and digital nation initiatives; climate change-induced human smuggling due to future displacement; and environmental degradation resulting from domestic drug production linked to expanding synthetic drug markets.
- Addressing these threats and risks requires a multifaceted approach that strengthens governance, combats corruption, enhances monitoring and enforcement, and increases transparency in resource management and climate finance.
- Increased international cooperation is crucial, particularly in terms of climate finance and technology transfer. It is essential to support locally led adaptation initiatives and document loss and damage.
- Policy responses at regional and international levels should be coordinated, and programming in organized crime and climate change should be integrated to mitigate risks. 'Crime-proofing' climate interventions, innovations and financing is essential.



The people of Kiribati are under pressure to relocate due to climate change effects such as sea-level rise and warmer sea temperatures, which have killed off vital coral reefs. © Jonas Gratzner/LightRocket via Getty Images



## INTRODUCTION

Nowhere is climate change a more tangible and immediate threat than in the Pacific Islands, where its effects have already been profound and existential. One of the most pressing and visible dangers is sea-level rise, which accelerates coastal erosion and inundation, rendering land uninhabitable and damaging critical infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> Low-lying atoll nations such as Tuvalu and Kiribati are particularly at risk, facing the possibility of losing their entire landmass to the ocean.<sup>2</sup> To put it bluntly, ‘the Pacific continues to face a climate “code red”’, as reiterated by regional organizations in a recent security outlook report.<sup>3</sup>

The increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events – including tropical cyclones and droughts – exacerbate these challenges, causing widespread destruction, loss of life and severe setbacks to development. These disasters devastate homes and infrastructure, contaminate freshwater sources and destroy agricultural land, intensifying food and water insecurity. Additionally, shifting rainfall patterns and rising temperatures place immense pressure on agricultural systems, threatening staple crops and traditional food sources.<sup>4</sup>

The warming oceans present another critical challenge, leading to bleaching and ocean acidification that devastate coral reef ecosystems.<sup>5</sup> These reefs are natural coastal barriers, vital fishing grounds and biodiversity hotspots, making their decline a severe blow to the environment and local economies. The resulting depletion of fish stocks directly threatens the livelihoods and food security of coastal communities that rely heavily on fishing.<sup>6</sup>

Faced with these existential threats, the Pacific Island countries (PICs) have become leading voices on the global stage, demanding urgent climate action, justice for victims and accountability from the world's largest polluters. Today, it is nearly impossible for a Pacific gathering or policy discussion to take place without climate change featuring in it – and for good reason. Climate change is transformative, touching every aspect of human life. Increasingly, discussions are shifting towards its broader security implications.

Despite this, the intersection between climate change and organized crime remains largely unexplored. In the PICs, organized crime is increasing in scale, diversification, sophistication and harm, and understanding how these two seemingly distinct yet mutually reinforcing threats interact should therefore be a priority. Recognizing significant gaps in existing data, this policy brief outlines the security implications of climate change in these countries, explores the ways in which it intersects with organized crime, and examines how corruption facilitates these interactions. Finally it looks ahead, identifying four probable future risks based on current trends.





**FIGURE 1** Pacific Island countries and territories.

## Overview of the criminal landscape

According to the 2025 Global Organized Crime Index, fauna crimes, financial crimes and human trafficking are the three most prevalent illicit markets across the Pacific Islands, with significant (scores of 6.0–7.0) or severe (scores of 8.0–10) influence. Notably, Micronesia ranks among the highest globally for fauna crimes, scoring 6.30 out of 10. Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing – particularly of tuna – is the most widespread form of organized crime in Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau, where predominantly Asian fleets and ‘blue boats’ – wooden vessels originating from South East Asia – engage in illicit activities. The vast fishing grounds of the Pacific and the extensive exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of individual countries make enforcement a daunting challenge.

As fish are one of the region's most important natural resources and a critical source of income for governments and local communities, the expansion of IUU fishing threatens economic stability and food security. Compounding this issue, the fishing industry is closely linked to various forms of human exploitation, including the trafficking of fishermen and the sexual exploitation of women and girls, who are coerced into serving clients in the sector.

## Flora crimes and illegal logging

In Melanesia, flora crimes rank among the highest in the world, with Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands at the epicentre. Illegal logging dominates this market, with more than half of the timber harvested unlawfully and primarily



destined for Asian markets. As with IUU fishing and mining, logging operations often become hotspots for labour exploitation, human trafficking and trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, affecting domestic and foreign victims – including children.

### **Financial crimes: a severe illicit market**

Papua New Guinea has the highest-scoring individual criminal market in Oceania: financial crimes (8.50 out of 10). The so-called 'resource curse', commonly associated with parts of Africa, is evident in Papua New Guinea's logging and mining industries. The country's vast natural wealth, coupled with high levels of corruption, has enabled widespread mismanagement of public funds and multimillion-dollar fraud

schemes, with illicitly obtained money often funnelled into real estate markets in Australia and domestically.

### **Drug trafficking: a rapidly growing threat**

The Pacific Islands are also experiencing a surge in drug trafficking, driven by growing demand in Australia and New Zealand and the region's strategic location along smuggling routes. Synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamines, have emerged as the fastest-growing and most harmful illicit market. This trend is particularly evident in Fiji, where the market scores 7.50 out of 10, coinciding with a sharp rise in drug-related HIV infections. ■



## CLIMATE CHANGE AND SECURITY

**T**he Pacific Islands face profound challenges due to climate change, which threatens livelihoods and the very existence of their people. This crisis extends beyond environmental concerns, deeply affecting the region's economy, society and culture while also posing significant security risks.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, climate change acts as a threat multiplier, intensifying existing vulnerabilities and introducing new security challenges that undermine stability, well-being and sovereignty. As its effects grow, understanding the intricate link between climate change and security becomes increasingly critical for the region's future.

Despite their vulnerability, the PICs are not passive victims of climate change. Pacific leaders have emerged as global 'norm entrepreneurs' in the ocean-climate nexus, arguing for greater international action and recognition of their unique circumstances.<sup>8</sup> They have framed climate change as a security issue, emphasizing that in addition to being an environmental problem it poses a direct threat to their territorial integrity, security and the existence of some islands. This perspective is reflected in the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, which recognized climate change as the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of Pacific communities.<sup>9</sup>

Pacific officials' voices are not the only ones getting louder. This is unsurprising, since it is individuals at grassroots level who are the most directly affected by insecurity caused by climate change. Pacific communities' wealth of traditional knowledge and practices have enabled them to adapt to environmental changes for generations. Integrating this Indigenous and local knowledge with contemporary science is increasingly recognized as crucial for developing effective and culturally appropriate adaptation and mitigation strategies. Pacific islanders are also using cultural expressions and activism to demand climate justice on the global stage, highlighting their resilience and agency in the face of the crisis.<sup>10</sup>

Mindful of this reality, the 2023 Pacific Climate Security Assessment Guide,<sup>11</sup> developed by the Pacific Islands Forum and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), identified five main ways in which climate change affects security in the Pacific:

- Climate change challenges livelihoods and the blue economy. Changes in ocean temperatures, acidification and extreme weather events threaten fisheries and fishing communities. The decline in fish stocks and the degradation of marine ecosystems undermine economic stability and food security, potentially leading to social unrest and increased dependence on external aid.
- Climate change threatens land availability and usability, putting pressure on food, water and health security. Sea-level rise, coastal erosion and increased frequency of extreme weather events reduce habitable land, contaminate freshwater sources and damage agricultural lands. This intensifies competition for scarce resources, potentially leading to disputes and conflicts over land and water. The impact on agricultural

productivity and water quality directly affects food security and public health, increasing vulnerability to diseases and malnutrition.

- Climate risks exacerbate disasters and erode the resilience of vulnerable groups and governments. More intense and frequent cyclones, storm surges and droughts overwhelm local coping capacities and strain government resources. These disasters can lead to displacement, loss of life and damage to critical infrastructure, further eroding the resilience of vulnerable populations and the ability of governments to provide essential services.
- Climate change affects mobility trends and can exacerbate risks. Environmental changes are already contributing to internal and potentially international migration and displacement. While mobility can be an adaptation strategy, it can also create social pressures in receiving communities (raising questions of land tenure and citizenship) and potentially exacerbate existing tensions at the intercommunal and interstate levels. The development of concepts such as 'digital citizenship' by Tuvalu highlights the unprecedented challenges to traditional notions of statehood and identity.<sup>12</sup>
- Climate change threatens maritime boundaries and sovereignty and could undermine regional stability. Sea-level rise poses an existential threat to low-lying island states and challenges the legal basis of their maritime zones and sovereignty. The Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-Related Sea-Level Rise, adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2021, demonstrates the region's proactive approach to safeguarding sovereign rights. Failure to address this issue could lead to disputes over maritime resources and undermine regional stability.<sup>13</sup>

While these pathways highlight the intersections between climate change and security, they overlook an important element: organized crime. In fact, many of the issues discussed in the guide intersect with – and affect – illegal activities. Climate-induced displacement can give rise to human trafficking and smuggling, for instance, and severe weather events that destroy livelihoods might push individuals to engage in criminal activities as a matter of survival.

The nexus between climate change and security also intersects with geopolitical vulnerabilities in the Pacific. As the effects of climate change intensify, PICs will depend more heavily on external resources, creating opportunities for major powers to politicize funding and potentially undermining regional efforts to advance climate security by building resilience.<sup>14</sup> The geopolitical rivalries that play out between traditional partners such as Australia and New Zealand, and newer partners such as China, have already intersected with climate change-related initiatives and financing.

In February 2025, the Cook Islands signed a comprehensive strategic partnership deal with China, encompassing cooperation in areas such as climate resilience and disaster preparedness. This agreement has prompted discussions about transparency and regional influence, particularly concerning New Zealand's interests in the Pacific.<sup>15</sup> There are some positive implications to China's expanding diplomatic, security and commercial engagement in the region, such as strengthening Pacific law enforcement and building infrastructure. However, there is mounting evidence that this presence has also coincided with a spike in organized criminality and corruption.<sup>16</sup>



**Adverse weather events – including super tropical cyclones – are increasingly threatening the livelihoods of people across the Pacific Islands by exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.** © Fred Payet/AFP via Getty Images





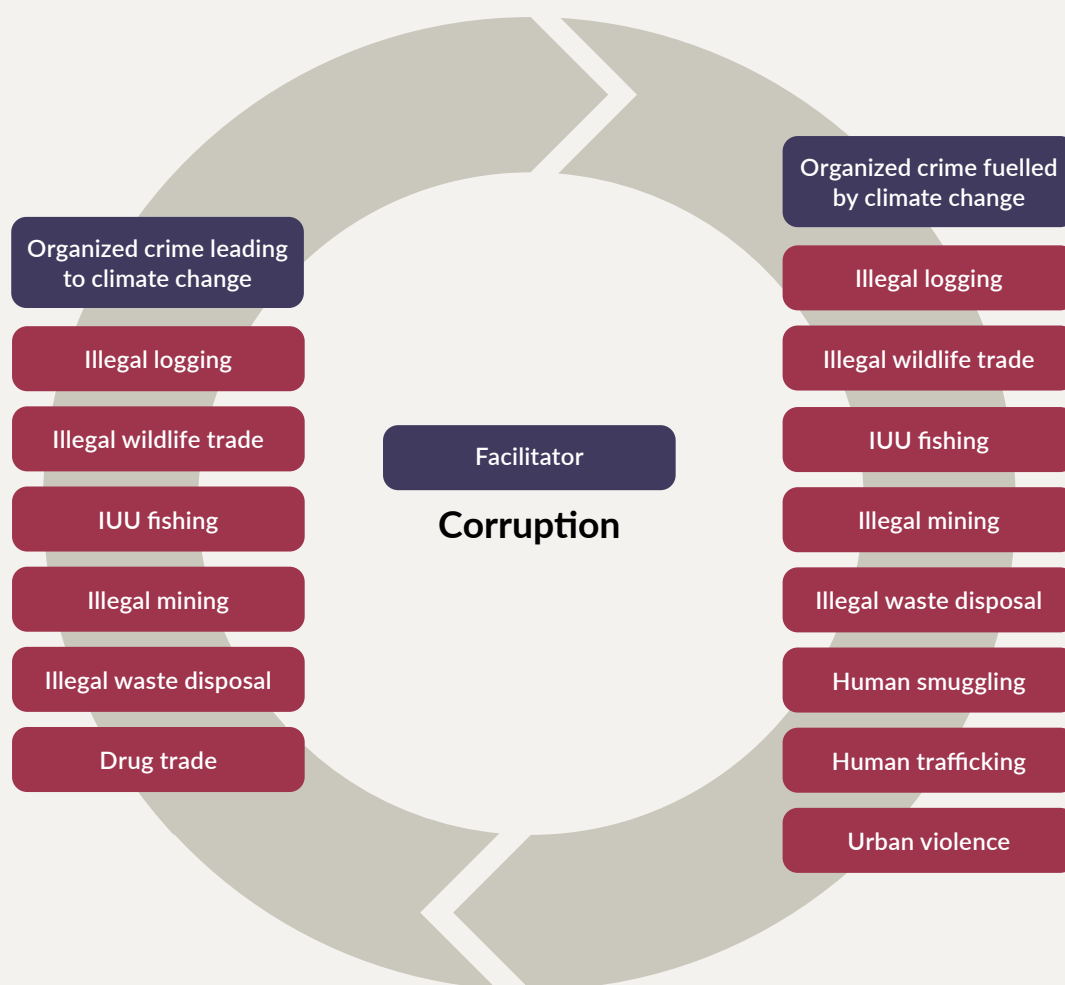
# WHEN CLIMATE CHANGE AND TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME INTERSECT

**T**he nexus of organized crime and climate change in the Pacific Islands is a complex and evolving issue with significant current manifestations and potential for dangerous consequences. Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and creating new avenues for illicit activities. At the same time, there are crimes that have direct and indirect effects on the environment, causing degradation and undermining the functioning of ecosystems. By applying the analytical framework introduced by a recent primer on the subject,<sup>17</sup> the intersections between climate change and organized crime can be classified into broad categories, as illustrated in Figure 2. The arrows in the diagram indicate the many instances in which climate change and organized crime amplify each other, giving rise to mutually reinforcing dynamics.

## Climate change and organized crime as mutually reinforcing challenges

Across the Pacific Islands, environmental crimes targeting fauna, flora and non-renewable commodities are widespread and sometimes represent the islands' largest organized criminal markets. This is the case for IUU fishing in the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau and Tuvalu,<sup>18</sup> for instance, and illegal logging in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, environmental criminal activities that directly exploit the PICs' weak monitoring and regulatory systems often fuel the corruption of complacent officials, who in turn disregard and undermine crucial conservation efforts. Additionally, they contribute to the destruction of natural environments (such as forests) on which Indigenous communities and the wider population rely. These crimes contribute to climate change in several ways. Illegal logging and deforestation are linked to a decrease in carbon sequestration (trees absorbing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing it in their trunks, branches, leaves and roots) and biodiversity loss. IUU fishing and illegal wildlife trafficking lead to the reduction or loss of certain species, damaging ecosystems and creating the conditions for climate change. The illegal extraction of non-renewables such as minerals pollutes water systems and the air.



**FIGURE 2** The organized crime–climate change nexus.

These changes to the natural environment can have profound social, cultural and economic consequences. Indeed, the damage resulting from illegal practices can reduce communities' ability to rely on the natural environment for their livelihood. This raises the risk that community members may turn to illicit or criminal activities as a source of income, creating a cycle of environmental degradation contributing to climate change.

### Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing

Evidence shows that climate change can exacerbate existing environmental crimes where organized crime is already present. The most documented intersection is with IUU fishing, which can be intensified by shifting fish stocks, contested boundaries and socio-economic pressures resulting from climate change.<sup>20</sup> It is impossible to overstate the importance of the fishing industry for Pacific livelihoods, national GDPs, and as a main source of foreign exchange – especially for small island nations whose economies exhibit little diversification. Notably, the western and central Pacific tuna fishery is the world's largest, and a substantial proportion of the catch comes from Pacific Island EEZs.<sup>21</sup> Yet the industry is bedevilled by illegal practices.

Foreign fishing vessels, particularly those linked to Chinese and South East Asian actors, are frequently identified as key perpetrators of IUU fishing, exploiting weak EEZ monitoring. IUU fishing is also a conduit for crimes such as the labour exploitation of fishermen and human and sex trafficking.

Overfishing, fishing of protected species, disregard for seabeds and coral reefs, and the fact that vessels might be less likely to comply with engine emission standards are among the aspects of IUU fishing that undermine the marine ecosystem and Pacific biodiversity. Yet oceans' fundamental role in carbon sequestration, heat absorption and oxygen production makes their preservation crucial to counter climate change.<sup>22</sup>

## Illegal wildlife trade

Organized criminal networks are also engaged in the trafficking of endangered species such as reptiles, birds and marine species, often destined for Asian markets. These practices have been reported in Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, among others. Solomon Islands, for instance, has long been on the radar of conservationists concerned with the exports of wild birds such as parrots and cockatoos, which are then laundered into the global wildlife trade by being declared as captive bred.<sup>23</sup> Notably, there is also a convergence between this trade and the logging sector, as logging ships are known to traffic birds out of the country.<sup>24</sup>

The illegal wildlife trade is smaller than IUU fishing but its impact on the environment and climate is far from inconsequential. The poaching of these species contributes to a loss of biodiversity, with effects on the functioning of ecosystems. Additionally, the illegal cross border trade in animal species can spread zoonotic diseases by bringing humans and wildlife into close contact. Climate change compounds this risk by altering habitats, driving species migration and expanding the range of disease vectors, thereby increasing the likelihood and reach of outbreaks.

## Illegal logging

Like the ocean, forests are essential for carbon sequestration. Malaysian, Indonesian and Chinese companies are responsible for illegal logging practices in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and, to a lesser extent, Fiji, some of the world's largest exporters of tropical timber. A large proportion of this timber is exported illegally, with criminal actors using falsified documentation and exploiting weak

enforcement. Timber is also extensively harvested in protected areas.<sup>25</sup> The destruction of forest ecosystems releases sequestered carbon into the atmosphere and undermines the way of life of Indigenous communities who are the traditional land-owners of these areas.<sup>26</sup> Illegal logging also intersects with the exploitation of foreign loggers and Pacific communities.

Climate change is also beginning to affect the forestry sector itself. Increased storm damage, droughts and fires are weakening forest ecosystems and reducing legal timber yields. At the same time, the diversion of



Milled logs of Pacific rosewood from a Solomon Islands rainforest. Illegal logging releases sequestered carbon into the atmosphere, worsening climate change. © Auscape/Universal Images Group via Getty Images



government capacity towards other climate-related crises can create enforcement gaps that illegal loggers are able to exploit. In this way, climate change both drives and is driven by illegal logging, reinforcing a damaging cycle.<sup>27</sup>

## **Illegal extraction of non-renewable resources**

Completing the list of crimes exploiting natural resources is illegal mining, which includes sand mining in Fiji,<sup>28</sup> small-scale artisanal mining, and the operations of multinationals in the likes of gold-rich Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. The actors involved – especially in the commercial sector – thrive thanks to limited oversight and corruption, giving rise to an ecosystem of human exploitation.<sup>29</sup> On the environmental front, mining activities are responsible for deforestation, soil erosion and pollution from the release of chemicals (such as mercury) used in their operations. The repercussions of poisoned water and soil are numerous and can have far-reaching consequences for humans, animals and ecosystems. For instance, the disruption of agriculture can undermine food security, leading to communal tensions and poverty. To sustain themselves, people may then resort to criminality such as artisanal mining, perpetuating this cycle.

## **Indirect connections between climate change and organized crime**

Apart from instances in which climate change and organized crime directly intersect and feed off each other, there are several scenarios in which the connection is less obvious. Here, the effects of climate change create conditions or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities that indirectly facilitate or intersect with organized crime. This is often the case with human-centric activities.

### **Human trafficking and climate-induced displacement**

Climate change is increasing the risk of human trafficking in the Pacific Islands. Displacement due to rising sea levels and extreme weather events can force individuals to seek new homes and livelihoods, making them susceptible to exploitation by traffickers.

In Kiribati and Tuvalu, climate change is increasing irregular migration attempts due to reduced habitable land. While direct links to organized human smuggling are not yet strongly evidenced in these contexts, the vulnerability of displaced populations to trafficking is a significant concern. The risk of trafficking has also increased in the Federated States of Micronesia as a result of climate-induced displacement.<sup>30</sup>

More broadly, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has highlighted how significant levels of climate change-induced migration (including regular migration) and adverse weather conditions, including cyclones, flooding and droughts, have safeguarding repercussions for children who are removed from extended family networks and communities who care for them and end up in unsafe conditions.<sup>31</sup> At the regional level, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific shares these concerns.<sup>32</sup> Recently, New Zealand authorities have recorded a noticeable increase in the number of adoptions of minors from Kiribati. Although these adoptions follow legal channels, there are concerns that limited checks may result in children falling into the care of unsuitable individuals who could exploit them. A government interviewee recalled a case involving a single I-Kiribati woman in New Zealand who adopted 12 children under the age of 11, claiming she was 'rescuing them from climate change'. The woman received government financial support for each adopted child, and the children disclosed

that their biological parents in Kiribati were expected to send her monthly payments. Another case involved a woman who had brought seven girls to New Zealand and forced them into domestic servitude.<sup>33</sup>

Experience from elsewhere – including Central Africa, the Arab world and the United States – points to an increase in gender-based violence (GBV) during severe climate events, whereby women are forced into unsafe situations and risk being assaulted.<sup>34</sup> While this remains an under-explored area, given the existing high levels of GBV in the Pacific islands (double the world's average<sup>35</sup>) it is legitimate to anticipate that adverse weather events and natural disasters might put already vulnerable individuals at even greater risk.

## **Increased competition for scarce resources**

As climate change intensifies resource scarcity (e.g. fish, water and arable land) in the PICs, organized crime could exploit this through extortion, protection racketeering and illegal control over diminishing resources. Their established presence in IUU fishing means that companies engaged in illicit practices are well-placed to capitalize on further declines in fish stocks due to climate change. For example, in 2021 the government of Kiribati ended the commercial ban on fishing in the Phoenix Islands in the face of financial constraints and the desire to increase revenue generation. To do so, it lifted the closure of the Phoenix Islands Protected Area, which had been a no-take zone (in which all fishing, mining and other extractive activities had been banned). This decision increased the risk of overfishing and was met with concern by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).<sup>36</sup>

Competition for resources and services is also a by-product of rural to urban migration, especially as some lower-lying islands and atolls become uninhabitable and people relocate to towns and cities. Here, the new arrivals could become a strain on services such as health and education. As experienced in other parts of the world, this form of migration can also lead to the proliferation of informal settlements with limited infrastructure and services. Criminal actors may even step in to provide these services in the absence of the state. Coexistence between new and established dwellers can become conflictual, leading to social tensions. With employment opportunities lacking (already scarce in most PICs), engaging in informal and illicit activities may become the only available option, propelling illicit economies and crime.

## **Destruction, hardship and criminal recruitment**

Climate-related events such as powerful cyclones are common in the Pacific Islands. Alongside earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, they devastate infrastructure and traditional economies. While Pacific islanders have shown a high level of resilience to adverse weather and climatic changes, there is the risk that illicit activities become more appealing after the destruction of livelihoods. In the same vein, it could be argued that broader climate impacts have the potential to erode community cohesion and moral authority against criminality within societies, while increasing despair over economic futures. This could make individuals more vulnerable to recruitment or involvement in illicit activities.<sup>37</sup>

Extreme weather events destroy critical infrastructure, including police stations and border control facilities, creating security vacuums that organized crime networks can exploit. This is compounded by the fact that police forces have numerous responsibilities, including disaster response, which limit their capacity to tackle crime. Acknowledging the relevance of climate change for law enforcement and the shared responsibility towards it, the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police have joined other police

organizations from around the world in participating as ‘climate incident observers’ under the auspices of the UN Police.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, bureaucracies in vulnerable countries can become consumed by climate-related priorities and emergencies. This could create an environment more conducive to organized crime and corruption (which become or remain lower priorities), further hindering effective climate action. This risk is one of the factors highlighting the importance of coordinating policy responses to climate change and organized crime, as well as ‘crime-proofing’ climate efforts.

## **Corruption as an enabler in the crime–climate nexus**

Corruption is a fundamental enabler across all the intersections between climate change and organized crime and deserves special attention owing to the current and potential risks it poses.

First, corruption facilitates environmental crime by allowing illegal activities to go undetected or unpunished through bribery, manipulation of permits (e.g. for logging) and weak enforcement. Environmental crime, including illegal logging, fishing and wildlife crime, is considered to be the fourth-largest organized crime activity globally.<sup>39</sup> The Global Organized Crime Index shows that environmental crime is mainly a challenge in countries with low corruption perceptions index scores, underlining the link between corruption and organized environmental crime.<sup>40</sup> In the PICs, as in other regions with high prevalence of environmental crime, corruption among state-embedded actors in law enforcement and customs agencies facilitates illicit activities, including those linked to environmental crime, and hinders the effective implementation of regulations.

Second, corruption significantly undermines climate action and finance by diverting funds, weakening regulations and enabling criminal networks involved in environmentally damaging activities. Climate finance – intended for mitigation and adaptation – is particularly vulnerable due to insufficient and poorly coordinated corruption controls and transparency requirements.<sup>41</sup> This is especially evident in the Pacific, where the increasing need for climate adaptation and disaster relief funding creates fertile ground for large-scale corruption. The urgency and scale of disaster responses often result in weakened oversight, allowing funds to be misappropriated or diverted by criminal elements. This vulnerability is highlighted by the case of Papua New Guinea, where about US\$2 million in public climate funds was allegedly misappropriated by climate change officials.<sup>42</sup> Such misuse of funds drains resources meant to reduce emissions and protect affected communities, and undermines public trust and the overall impact of climate finance.

Finally, corruption can enable violence against climate activists. According to Global Witness, almost all killings of environmental defenders since 2012 occurred in countries with low corruption perceptions index scores,<sup>43</sup> suggesting a correlation with high levels of corruption. Corruption helps guarantee impunity for perpetrators of violence against activists who threaten powerful political or economic interests involved in environmental crime or benefiting from a lack of regulation.<sup>44</sup> This risk is particularly acute in Papua New Guinea, where there is deep concern for the safety of environmental defenders, especially those who have been denouncing illegality in the forestry sector.<sup>45</sup>





## FUTURE RISKS

**T**he environmental and criminal pictures are changing rapidly, prompting Pacific governments and criminal actors to design adaptive and creative measures to achieve their respective priorities of survival and financial gain. This burst of innovation paves the way for new criminal risks that should be considered when designing and implementing policies and initiatives. Four areas present the likeliest risks: deep-sea mining, exploitation of new climate adaptation measures, climate change-induced human smuggling and environmental degradation resulting from domestic drug production.

### Illicit exploitation of new resources

The potential future development of deep-sea mining in the Pacific, driven by demand for the minerals needed for green technologies, presents a new frontier for organized crime involvement. The lack of established and robust regulatory frameworks in international waters and national jurisdictions could create opportunities for illegal extraction, financial crimes and corruption. While some argue that the polymetallic nodules that could be mined from the seabed are critical for renewable energy technologies, detractors worry that the lack of knowledge about the potential environmental impact means exploration should be paused.<sup>46</sup>

### Exploitation of climate adaptation measures

Pacific islanders have shown a high degree of adaptability to climate change, including developing creative solutions to counter the challenges of adverse weather, climate change and topography. One of the best-known initiatives is Tuvalu's sale of the right to manage its .tv internet domain.<sup>47</sup> However, there are risks attached to new initiatives in the absence of strict oversight. Nauru's golden passport scheme, launched to fund relocation due to sea-level rise, is acknowledged to be 'ripe for criminal exploitation'.<sup>48</sup> The country is planning a mass inland relocation and is charging US\$105 000 for passports, which it says will allow visa-free entry to 89 countries. There are fears that criminals could use these passports for money laundering and to evade law enforcement, as happens in Vanuatu and other countries that have implemented similar citizenship schemes.<sup>49</sup> A previous attempt by Nauru to sell passports resulted in citizenship being sold to al-Qaeda members.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, there are genuine cyber-security risks for Tuvalu, as the country is set to become the first digital nation by 'recreating its land, archiving its culture and digitizing its government', so that it can

'exist as a nation even after its land is no more'.<sup>51</sup> The region has been targeted by highly disruptive cyber-attacks in recent years;<sup>52</sup> without the ability to counter them, the new initiative could be a serious vulnerability.<sup>53</sup>

## Climate-induced human smuggling

While most Pacific islanders can travel visa-free to other PICs and territories for short-term visits, there is no free movement of people within the Pacific, notwithstanding growing calls for its adoption.<sup>54</sup> Significant future displacement due to uninhabitable islands could lead to the emergence of organized human smuggling operations to exploit vulnerable populations seeking refuge in other countries. While current organized smuggling may be limited, the scale of potential future displacement could create a lucrative market for criminal networks.

## Drug production and environmental degradation

Elsewhere, illicit drug production causes environmental degradation resulting from the clearing of forests to grow crops such as coca, the release of chemicals used in drug manufacturing, and high energy consumption needed for indoor cannabis cultivation.<sup>55</sup> In the PICs, cannabis is grown outdoors, and there is no cocaine production. Yet the increase in domestic synthetic drug manufacturing, especially of methamphetamines in Fiji and Papua New Guinea, suggests there is a risk of toxic waste being released into the environment. This is the case in other methamphetamine-producing countries, such as Mexico.<sup>56</sup>



A Chinese research vessel docks in the Cook Islands, where it will support investigations into deep-sea mining. The increasing demand for minerals for green energy technologies presents a new frontier for organized crime.

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## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**T**he Pacific Islands face a critical challenge at the nexus of organized crime, environmental degradation and climate change. These issues are interconnected and mutually reinforcing: climate-related challenges heighten vulnerabilities to transnational organized crime and vice versa. Addressing these risks requires a multifaceted approach that focuses on strengthening governance, combating corruption at all levels, enhancing monitoring and enforcement capabilities, and increasing transparency in resource management and climate finance. Failure to tackle these intertwined problems effectively will severely undermine the region's ability to achieve sustainable development and respond to the escalating threats posed by climate change.

As argued by many climate change specialists, tackling the challenges of climate change in the Pacific also requires increased international cooperation, particularly in terms of climate finance and technology transfer. Support for locally led adaptation initiatives that build on community resilience and Indigenous knowledge is also essential. Furthermore, there is a critical need for better documentation of loss and damage experienced by Pacific communities to inform global negotiations and mobilize resources for recovery and adaptation. By amplifying the voices and experiences of Pacific peoples and supporting their efforts to build resilience, the global community can contribute to a more secure and sustainable future for the region.<sup>57</sup>

Understanding the social and political dimensions of climate change is crucial for effectively addressing climate-related security risks, including organized crime. The erosion of social norms due to increased social pressure and disputes resulting from climate impacts is already evident in some cases.<sup>58</sup> Recognizing the critical role of Pacific villages and community groups as first responders, and supporting them with financial aid and the necessary equipment, is essential for building resilience from the ground up.<sup>59</sup> Civil society can also build resilience to organized crime in a region where the phenomenon is expanding and where, mirroring the climate challenge, geopolitics is a factor shaping funding and responses.<sup>60</sup>

Given the urgency and interconnectedness of climate change and organized crime, regional and international policy responses must be coordinated. Programming in each area has the potential to mitigate the risks and harms posed by the other. In practical terms, this means boosting evidence



collection and awareness of the nexus within the relevant policy and programme development teams. In turn, this would foster integration and mainstreaming. At present, climate change is factored into every policy area, while the mainstreaming of organized crime lags behind. This approach would also encourage collaboration between institutions and countries, recognizing that neither climate change nor transnational crime can be contained within national borders and that no country or region can address these issues alone.

One advisable practical outcome of this approach would be to 'crime-proof' climate interventions, innovations and financing. However, new vulnerabilities are likely to emerge and become the targets of criminals and compromised officials.



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