Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

2023
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Foreword

Communities situated at and along the borders of Southeast Asia are uniquely aware of, vulnerable to, and capable of helping address, organized crime. Border regions have changed remarkably in recent years as rapid integration within ASEAN and with near neighbours has accelerated cross-border movement and trade, bringing with it economic opportunities but also significant security challenges. At the same time, it is increasingly clear that traffickers and organized crime groups have capitalized on regional economic integration – something UNODC has examined most recently in the accompanying report titled *Transnational Organized Crime Threats in the Context of Advancing Economic and Security Agendas in Southeast Asia*.

To capture the grassroots perspective of the situation at borders and the challenges communities face, UNODC conducted an extensive and in many respects groundbreaking survey of people in border communities in five countries of Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Thailand and Viet Nam. Thousands of interviews were conducted to generate a picture of how trafficking challenges are perceived and understood, and to understand and identify innovative opportunities that may exist to address organized crime. The insights gathered through this exercise have also found new perspectives to advance the region’s economic and security agendas, including the recently agreed ASEAN Border Management Cooperation Roadmap.

There is often a significant gap in expectations and perceptions between people that live in border regions and the security institutions that work around them. Aside from physical and geographic isolation, the languages and cultures in border communities may differ and resource allocation and management issues can also be contentious. These gaps can be a challenge for border communities to understand and accept while also being detrimental to state security, and yet at the same time they can be an important advantage for traffickers and organized crime. To build resilience, law enforcement institutions and border communities require fundamentally stronger patterns of trust and cooperation between them, including in areas such as sharing information, reducing the influence and access of organized crime, and promoting alternatives to illicit activities.

The survey results presented within this report provide an unprecedented insight into the nature of community-institution gaps, experiences with organized crime, and potential priorities for strengthening security in border communities. The breadth and depth of the survey data helps to illustrate opportunities for community policing and mobilization, cross-border cooperation, recovery and rehabilitation, and in some ways to sustainable livelihood development.

At the same time, the limitations of controlling ever increasing illegal flows of goods, people and money using traditional law enforcement methods have become clearer and clearer, and governments in Southeast Asia need to consider alternatives and partnerships as a priority. Very positively, there is a growing awareness and interest of officials and institutions to the connections and opportunities around integrating security, economic and social agendas. Experience in border management gained through initiatives including the activities of the border liaison office network, port intelligence units, and port control units, as well as through programmes that support law enforcement and justice strategies, has also created relationships that can be leveraged to advance new ideas that will address trafficking and transnational organized crime. The voices of border communities highlight the potential for new forms of cooperation, and UNODC stands ready to support these alongside our government, non-government and academic partners.

Jeremy Douglas
Regional Representative
Southeast Asia and the Pacific
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACRM</td>
<td>Asian Research Centre for Migration in Chulalongkorn University</td>
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<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<td>ATS</td>
<td>Amphetamine Type Stimulant</td>
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<td>BLO</td>
<td>Border Liaison Office</td>
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<td>CBTx</td>
<td>Community-Based Treatment</td>
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<td>CLMV</td>
<td>Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam</td>
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<td>FGD</td>
<td>Focused Group Discussion</td>
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<td>GMS</td>
<td>Greater Mekong Subregion</td>
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<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organization</td>
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<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organization for Migration</td>
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<td>LCDC</td>
<td>Lao PDR Commission on Drugs Control</td>
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<td>LECS</td>
<td>Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey</td>
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<td>LAO PDR</td>
<td>Lao People’s Democratic Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>MMT</td>
<td>Methadone Maintained Therapy</td>
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<td>MoU</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>NADA</td>
<td>National Anti-Drug Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisations</td>
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<td>NPS</td>
<td>New Psychoactive Substances</td>
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<tr>
<td>ONCB</td>
<td>Office of Narcotics Control Board</td>
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<td>UNODC</td>
<td>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime</td>
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Executive Summary

The economies of Southeast Asia have experienced rapid growth over the past two decades. They have also experienced increased economic integration, including as the result of agreements to facilitate cross-border travel and trade.¹

Organized crime and cross-border illicit trafficking are also expanding and diversifying across the region. Transnational crime revenues are estimated to be at least USD 100 billion per year. Despite border closures and movement restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, both the regional economy and cross-border trafficking of illicit goods continued to grow. Officials made significant seizures of illegal goods moving throughout ASEAN in 2020 and developing countries in Asia experienced only a 0.2% contraction in their national economies.²

Economic inequality and increasing poverty are drivers of organized crime and illicit trafficking. However, very little is understood about the local factors that facilitate and motivate illegal trade across the borders of Southeast Asia at the community level. It is even less clear what role border communities play in illicit trafficking and how they perceive criminal activity.

UNODC carried out a comprehensive survey in border areas across Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Thailand, and Viet Nam. The survey intended to understand the hidden dynamics of illicit trafficking, organized crime and irregular crossing in border regions. The survey gathered information about respondents’ perceptions of the local factors that influence illegal trafficking across borders, particularly land-based trafficking. It also gathered information on perceptions of border crossings, and on different types of trafficking occurring across Southeast Asia.

This report analyses the results of the survey to identify patterns that can facilitate future government and UNODC programming in the region. It is part of a package of insights and recommendations alongside UNODC’s report Protecting Peace and Prosperity in Southeast Asia, which together provide a unique combination of data and analysis ranging from the regional policy level down to individual experiences in remote border regions.

Findings

Perceptions of illicit trafficking

Among survey respondents, drug trafficking, contraband and counterfeit goods, wildlife and timber trafficking, and human trafficking and smuggling were the most commonly mentioned type of trafficking. However, responses revealed additional information on perceptions of the type of illicit trafficking. For example, the region is known as a primary hub for wildlife and timber trafficking,³ but respondents predominantly associated illicit trafficking with drug trafficking. This was different for Malaysia, where trade in contraband and counterfeits was the most commonly cited issue.⁴

In each location, 60-80% of respondents believed that the majority of their community members have an unfavourable perspective toward illicit trafficking. That leaves 20-40% who are unsure or believe that their community is favourable towards

³ Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index”, 2021, p. 61
⁴ This is consistent with existing literature - UNODC, “Transnational Organized Crime in Southeast Asia: Evolution, Growth and Impact”, 2019, p.139-140
illicit trafficking. There appeared to be a pattern in respondents’ beliefs: the more they believe trafficking is happening, the more they believe their fellow citizens are tolerant or favourable towards it, even if the individual themselves does not report such tolerance.

With the exception of Viet Nam, more than 80% of respondents across all locations agreed that trafficking in endangered species is a crime. However, the majority show low levels of interest and readiness to support the fight against wildlife trafficking. Many respondents who agreed to participate in fighting against wildlife and timber trafficking stated their desire to preserve the environment for future generations. In addition, the analysis revealed that younger people are more likely to show a stronger willingness to participate in activities related to combating wildlife trafficking. On the other hand, those who expressed their disinterest cited a lack of time or concern.

**Perceptions of drivers**

Macro-level drivers of trafficking featured most. Economic drivers featured most strongly, with 70-90% of respondents in all five countries suggesting that economic drivers are the strongest motivation for involvement in illicit activities. Social factors such as lack of awareness, weak regulatory frameworks and negative peer influence were also commonly mentioned by respondents as perceived drivers. There are differences between countries: in Cambodia, more than half of the respondents cited social factors; elsewhere the range was 4-24%.

**Perceptions of border crossings**

Respondents in all survey locations identified economic reasons and migrating to alleviate economic challenges as the main motivation to cross the border. Other responses included shopping, visiting family and friends, travel, health and education.

The majority of respondents in all countries believed that it was easy to cross the border in the past, notably prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but that crossing borders has become more difficult recently, mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Expectations for the future differed by country. Lao PDR and Malaysia believed that the situation will continue to be difficult, whereas Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam believed that it will become easier again.

In addition, the survey assessed border communities’ needs in relation to border crossings. There is high-level government interest in streamlining trade and positive migration in all countries included in this study. Respondents consistently suggested the following: streamline the border pass and visa issuing process; reduce the cost of document issuance; develop transportation infrastructure; and assist with legal paperwork for employment. This shows that there is also individual and community-level support for reducing the barriers to local migration and trade.

**Perceptions of prevention measures**

Awareness-raising was suggested as a primary strategy on both the community and individual level. On the community level, in four countries respondents emphasised awareness-raising. On the individual level, four countries emphasised awareness-raising. The history of public information campaigns would suggest that governments and civil society may benefit from new approaches to awareness-raising and behaviour change targeted at specific activities, crimes or alternatives to crime.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations are intended for local governments and international partners, as well as to inform the design of UNODC’s Regional Programme for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. These recommendations follow the key findings of the survey and highlight avenues of possible effort in implementing the 2021 ASEAN Border Management Cooperation Roadmap.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Improve coordination between officials and communities in border regions</strong></th>
<th>This survey has shown that there is a lot of interest from border communities in more effective law enforcement. The challenge is to strengthen positive connections between officials and communities. Law enforcement agencies can be supported to conduct effective, efficient community engagement. Through provision of advice and technical assistance on outreach, communications and responses. By building on existing attitudes at the local level, the benefit will be to generate better practical cooperation between citizens and officers, reducing the space and increasing the costs of organized crime.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Develop community policing initiatives that engage officials and community leaders</strong></td>
<td>There is an opportunity for local officers and community leaders to work together to improve monitoring of border areas and community outreach with individuals. Respondents from all countries emphasised that they would like local authorities to conduct more frequent monitoring, and to participate in awareness-raising campaigns with local residents. Additionally, respondents from Thailand mentioned that community leaders could play an increasing role in tackling illicit trafficking together with other community actors. Therefore, local officers and community leaders could benefit from capacity-building sessions.</td>
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<td><strong>Develop different types of community engagement for different types of illicit trafficking</strong></td>
<td>Do not attempt outreach, communications or enforcement based on generalised appeals against crime. For example, survey respondents in Thailand with a negative perception of drug trafficking tended to have a less negative perception of general smuggling, such as smuggling of food and clothing. In other countries, wildlife trafficking was more tolerated because it was seen as important for economic survival in rural communities. Security agencies and leaders in border communities can be assisted with methodologies for identifying priorities among different crimes, analysing community support and resistance, then tailoring enforcement and outreach strategies accordingly.</td>
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<td><strong>Build connections between BLOs and local police stations to improve information gathering and sharing</strong></td>
<td>There is an opportunity to improve cooperation between Border Liaison Offices (BLOs) and local police stations to strengthen information gathering and sharing capacities. The BLO concept has prioritised domestic inter-agency cooperation and cross-border cooperation, with lesser focus on how law enforcement agencies in border regions interact with communities. Ties between BLOs and local police stations in border communities can be developed with a view to improving information gathering processes and communication channels.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Strengthen locally sensitive analytical capacities</strong></td>
<td>The survey indicates the type of community information that can be available; it also shows that there is a willingness among affected communities to provide input. Law enforcement agencies charged with tackling illicit trafficking and illicit border crossings struggle to collect, integrate and interpret data that could safeguard communities and demonstrate their responsiveness to community concerns. International and institutional partners can usefully engage officials in developing, managing and responding to large-scale data and qualitative patterns of reporting drawn directly from community inputs.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Roll out new livelihood development approaches in border communities</strong></td>
<td>The survey has shown that individuals across survey locations see economic factors as primary drivers of many types of illicit trafficking. This highlights the opportunity to invest in livelihood development programmes, with lessons learned from applying them in Southeast Asia in relation to illicit drug cultivation. Livelihood development objectives like expanding access to education, improving infrastructure and generating new cash crops or other licit activities are all worth applying to hotspots of trafficking and criminal activity crossing borders. Collecting reliable data on the effects of these programmes will help to understand impacts more precisely, and therefore help to scale livelihood development approaches across the region.</td>
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<td><strong>Galvanise action against human trafficking in affected communities</strong></td>
<td>Data suggests that rates of human trafficking in all five countries are high, but not many respondents seem to recognise this. Low recognition rates suggest two theories: (1) respondents are unfamiliar with the term “human trafficking”, or (2) respondents are familiar with the term but do not perceive it as relevant locally. Whatever the reason, an effective approach would focus on concrete local issues rather than a broad concept of “human trafficking”, for example specifically addressing forced marriages or forced child labour.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Place rapid border checkpoints and digitalisation of travel documents within the ASEAN trade facilitation agenda</strong></td>
<td>The study has shown that there is community-level support for reducing the barriers to local migration and trade. The ASEAN trade facilitation agenda should consider the implementation of these measures where benefits to local, licit economies can be identified and where implementation expertise and support can be sought. The benefit of implementing rapid border checkpoints and travel document digitisation would be to reduce the incentive and tolerance for illicit border crossings, and to increase legal opportunities available to illicit border crossings.</td>
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<td><strong>Invest in educational outreach campaigns to provide young people with knowledge and skills to resist participation in organized crime</strong></td>
<td>Teachers tend to be trusted communicators to engage in a wide range of conversations with students and their parents. Providing teachers with tools to facilitate discussions with their students to understand crime-related issues and build skills to resist participation in organized crime could help address the root causes of involvement in organized crime from early stages. With the support of partners and educational agencies, teachers with an interest in engaging their communities can be identified in border communities across Southeast Asia.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Support local capacities to reduce and recover from the impacts of illicit activities</strong></td>
<td>For communities covered in this survey, drug use, human trafficking, environmental destruction, violence and imprisonment are not abstract concepts. They produce trauma and poverty for individuals. Resilient communities have the capacity to address the psychosocial and economic impacts people suffer from illicit activities. It is valuable to invest in scaling and improving effective programmes on social and mental health in border communities, for example in relation to synthetic drug use, or human trafficking victimisation.</td>
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<td><strong>Focus on behaviour change</strong></td>
<td>Individuals and community groups need new tools that make it easy to convert passive condemnation into active resistance against criminal activity. Communication approaches should focus on two levels: individual behaviour change and wider social norm change. Behaviour change can target individuals at risk of developing criminal behaviours and/or members of the community who can be nudged from passivity to activity. Norm change is still targeted but will involve multiple methods run in parallel. Experience from around the world demonstrates that approaches have to be tailored to particular groups of people and specific behaviours or norms, not a generalised campaign.</td>
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Introduction
Introduction

Southeast Asia has experienced rapid economic growth over the past two decades. In 2020, the year in which the global COVID-19 pandemic took its largest toll on the world economy, developing countries in Asia experienced only a 0.2% contraction on average. However, with economic growth and improved regional connectivity, illicit activities have increased and become more integrated, particularly within border economies. UNODC has estimated the revenues of transnational crime in Southeast Asia at USD 280 billion per year, projecting they could reach USD 350 billion per year by 2025. Although border closures and movement restrictions were put in place in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, officials still made significant seizures of illegal goods moving throughout the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2020 and 2021. Disruptions to supply and demand for illicit goods were therefore only short-lived as organized crime in the region adapted methods and began to take advantage of porous borders. At the same time, the pandemic’s negative effects on growth, employment and income created new vulnerabilities to organized crime.

There are many global drivers of organized crime and illicit trafficking. A study that examined 59 different countries found that economic and institutional failures, together with a corrupt judiciary and already existing black markets can result in higher levels of organized criminal activity within a country. Economic drivers are also relevant, and high unemployment rates, reliance on informal markets, and economic disparities have also been associated with higher rates of organized crime. In addition, asymmetries in income levels, law enforcement, and legal penalties between neighbouring countries could increase vulnerability levels to cross-border illicit trafficking.

Despite overall growth, Southeast Asia is impacted by high levels of economic inequality, and many countries have seen an increase in poverty levels and unemployment in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, consolidating the rule of law is a challenge in the region, where many individuals perceive corruption and state capture as an issue affecting their governments. In 2020, 23% of residents of ASEAN countries reported having to pay bribes to access basic state services. Additionally, In Myanmar, armed groups now have significant influence and control over the government and state entities. This combination of conflict and corruption in the region also contributed to growth in illicit trafficking.

Apart from these high-level factors, little is understood about the local factors that facilitate and motivate illegal trade across the borders of Southeast Asia at the community level. It is even less clear what role border communities play in illicit trafficking and how they perceive criminal activity.

The present report highlights the connection between local resilience and regional security. Gaining a better understanding of localised and micro-level factors would enable governments and

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10 Ibid.
11 State capture involves criminals or private entities using their influence to change legislation and law enforcement to their favour.
12 Jennifer Schoeberlein, “Corruption in ASEAN: Regional trends from the 2020 Global Corruption Barometer and country spotlights”, Transparency International Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer, 24 November 2020
13 Ibid.
international partners to identify new avenues for cooperation that are more tailored to the situation on the ground. This, in turn, can further strengthen partnerships with Southeast Asian states and support them in reaching their development and security goals.

To gain insight into the dynamics of illicit trafficking and organized crime, UNODC implemented a comprehensive survey in border regions around Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Thailand, and Viet Nam. This survey gathered information about respondents’ perceptions of the local factors that influence illegal trafficking across borders, particularly land-based trafficking. The survey also assessed the level of interest or opinions on irregular border crossings, and on issues such as wildlife trafficking, human trafficking and movements of illicit substances across borders.

This report analyses the results of the survey to assess perceptions of illicit trafficking, border crossings and preventative strategies among border communities. The aim is to identify patterns that can facilitate future UNODC programming in the region and identify areas of focus for cooperation with border communities in Southeast Asia. Insights in the present report are inspired by the 2021 ASEAN Border Management Cooperation Roadmap, the overarching regional policy for border control, security and administration. The Roadmap’s Section C on “possible priorities” includes several that are directly relevant to this survey’s evidence. Recommendations at the end of this report provide detail on how ASEAN can advance the Roadmap’s priorities.14

Cross-border trafficking in Southeast Asia

Drug and precursor trafficking pose a significant threat to the region. Methamphetamine production and trafficking in particular has grown quickly, along with the trafficking of other synthetic drugs in recent years.15 Better logistics and smoother border crossings have reduced costs and risks for precursor chemical and illicit substance trafficking, particularly in the Golden Triangle region.16 Precursor chemicals are often diverted from licit pharmaceutical industries in China that are difficult to monitor, before being transported to Myanmar where they are converted into synthetic drugs.17

Counterfeit goods and products, including medicines, are thought to be the most profitable type of organized crime activity in Asia. Most are produced in China, with significant production also occurring in Malaysia, Thailand and Viet Nam.18 There is also a significant market for counterfeit and contraband goods that are transported across borders without paying taxes, such as hygiene products, cigarettes, cooking oil and food.

Migrant smuggling and human trafficking are also of concern in Southeast Asia. The number of international migrants in Southeast Asia has increased from 248.9 million in 2015 to 271.6 million in 2019, with intraregional migration playing an important role.19 Most migrants move across borders legitimately, but a significant minority are smuggled through irregular routes across the region, for example from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR, to Thailand for economic reasons.20 Thailand remains a regional centre for labour migrant smuggling and for human trafficking, especially for the purpose of sexual exploitation.21 Labour trafficking cases connected to the fishing and agriculture sector also appear to be rising. Myanmar also appears to be experiencing more trafficking, with the number of women trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation doubling in recent years.22

Wildlife and timber trafficking is taking place across Southeast Asia, damaging biodiversity and undermining sustainable development. The illegal wildlife trade depletes natural assets upon which many rural communities depend to fuel the rising

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15 UNODC, “Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest developments and challenges”, May 2020
16 The border area between Thailand, Lao PDR, and Myanmar.
22 Ibid.
demand for wildlife and timber products in the region’s rapidly growing economies.\(^{23}\) Forests across the region, particularly in Cambodia, have undergone extensive commercial logging over the last 30 years, with forest cover dropping significantly.

**UNODC engagement in rural and border communities**

People in rural and remote areas can be more vulnerable to organized crime and illicit trafficking due to a lack of employment opportunities, low incomes, and limited access to public services and education.\(^{24}\) Moreover, people living in border areas may experience increased vulnerabilities due to their proximity to trafficking routes and areas with more criminal presence.\(^{25}\)

Governments have adopted development-oriented approaches to reduce the root causes of illicit trafficking in rural and border communities. UNODC has supported rural and remote communities in Southeast Asia affected by illicit trafficking by providing sustainable livelihood options as well as enhancing access to education, health care, and infrastructure. UNODC has also supported communities by assisting law enforcement activities in border and rural areas, such as the creation of Border Liaison Offices (BLOs) across the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).\(^{26}\) By establishing BLOs

\(^{23}\) Ibid.


\(^{25}\) Ralph Espach, Javier Meléndez Quiñonez, Daniel haering, & Miguel Castillo Girón, “Criminal Organizations and Illicit Trafficking in Guatemala’s Border Communities”, CNA, December 2011

in key border areas impacted by illicit trafficking, UNODC has encouraged intelligence sharing and cross-border cooperation in the fight against illicit trafficking.

UNODC has also implemented livelihood development programmes across the region that have directly benefited vulnerable individuals by changing crops for smallholder farmers, improving community access to infrastructure and creating new economic opportunities. For example, the Shan Mountain Coffee initiative, which supported smallholder farmers in Myanmar to switch illicit crops to coffee production\(^27\), is one of the many development-focused initiatives UNODC has undertaken in the region to combat illicit trafficking. Community Based Drug Treatment (CBT) programmes have been a focus of UNODC in the region as a way to tackle compulsory treatment programmes and to reduce local demand for illicit substances. UNODC has carried out comprehensive research on the benefits of CBT and has highlighted that measures to tackle supply alone are insufficient to holistically address illicit trafficking in the region.\(^28\)

### Scope of the report

The main purpose of this study is to identify local factors related to illicit activities around borders and assess relevant perceptions among residents of border areas. The study also identifies gaps and common themes between local/micro-factors observed in the survey findings, and macro-level factors at the national or international level. The result is a series of recommendations to reduce the threats and improve the responses to organized crime.

The report first presents findings applicable to the region as a whole. Common themes were identified that can be addressed via a regional approach. At the same time, recommendations at the regional level are relevant to implement in any of the countries individually. The report then presents findings by survey location and compares these to other survey locations. This helps to generate location-specific insights and to consider localised recommendations.

The primary recommendations are available at the end of the report. There are also “Explore” boxes throughout the report, which highlight immediate findings that could be further addressed by UNODC, international governments and donors, or local actors.

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**EXPLORE: What is Livelihood development?**

Livelihood development is “a process to prevent and eliminate the illicit cultivation of plants containing narcotic drugs (....) recognizing the particular sociocultural characteristics of the target communities and groups, within the framework of a comprehensive and permanent solution to the problem of illicit drugs.”\(^29\)

It also covers preventative initiatives in areas having already eliminated illicit crops, to prevent a recurrence, or in areas vulnerable to illicit activities. These programmes aim to enhance socio-economic development by increasing community engagement in initiatives that reduce the vulnerabilities leading people towards illicit activities.

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\(^{28}\) UNODC & UNAIDS, “Compulsory drug treatment and rehabilitation in East and Southeast Asia”, January 2022

Methodology
Methodology

Overview

UNODC surveyed border communities in five Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Thailand, and Viet Nam. Originally, the project also included Myanmar and Indonesia, but the COVID-19 pandemic did not allow for data collection in those countries. The questionnaire collected both structured responses and open-ended information. It included socio-demographic information, residents’ perceptions of illicit trafficking, and information regarding border crossings.

Data collection was conducted by a team of 46 young professionals, UN National (9) and Community (37) Volunteers, who assisted UNODC Southeast Asia in collecting onsite and online data in all five countries. The border communities surveyed were typically located in rural and remote areas, thus making them particularly challenging to reach. Through the collaboration with the United Nations Volunteer’s Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, this report is able to provide detailed information from more than 40 border provinces.

Research approach

Data collection

The survey returned 4,950 complete responses. Each country’s sample was drawn from around 10 border communities, which were selected based on local illicit trafficking statistics and the involvement of the communities in such activities. Respondents were identified through a combination of snowball and convenience sampling techniques. The sampling strategy ensured diversity in terms of gender, age, education level and employment types.

At the beginning of the data collection process, the COVID-19 pandemic reached its peak in Southeast Asia, leading many countries to enforce lockdowns. Mobility restrictions impacted the data collection method, which was diversified by including remote interviews, via phone and online forms. For example, when Cambodia was placed under lockdown, surveyors canvassed the local areas, approached residents, and obtained their consent to conduct phone interviews. After receiving the contact information, surveyors performed the interview over the phone. When Malaysia enforced the lockdown, surveyors recruited participants using online advertisements on social media and screening questions to apply eligibility criteria. The interviews were conducted via an online survey form. In Viet Nam, surveyors conducted remote interviews from the beginning.

Survey Instrument

The Appendix contains details of the survey instrument, which had three main sections: 1) socio-demographic information of respondents, 2) perceptions and experience of organized crime, and 3) border crossings. There was a mixture of structured and open-ended questions. Socio-demographic data included information on
gender, age, education, income, marital status, and occupation. Respondents were questioned about their perceptions of various forms of illicit trafficking occurring in their communities; their suggestions or willingness to participate in efforts to prevent residents from becoming involved in organized crime; the reliability of local authorities on these issues; and ideas for reducing organized crime. Respondents were also asked for their perceptions and experience of border crossings, the most common routes for crossing borders, and the impact of COVID-19.

**Data Analysis**

Open-ended responses were quantified based on thematic coding, which enables some comparability and deeper insights into opinions, perceptions and experiences. Cross tabulation and multinomial logistic regressions were used to analyse differences and similarities across demographic groups’ opinions and behaviours. All patterns reported in the country sections are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level, with a p-value smaller than 0.001.

**Limitations and interpretation**

Several limitations affect the data’s interpretation: The data collection was conducted both in-person and remotely. The COVID-19 pandemic forced field teams to adapt their sampling strategies. Field teams in different countries recruited participants in different ways (e.g. in-person selection, social media advertisement, and convenience sampling). Different sampling methods may reach different socio-demographic groups, thus reducing how strongly the results can be generalised. Moreover, the variety of sampling methods made it possible that a respondent knew a surveyor, which could have an impact on how they answered questions.

It was not possible to conduct primary data collection for Myanmar and Indonesia. The COVID-19 restrictions imposed in these countries impeded the collection of primary data. Furthermore, previous literature on the topic is scarce. As a consequence, the findings reported in this study cannot be generalised to these countries. Data collection and communication with respondents was conducted in each country’s local language and, upon completion, translated by field officers into English for analysis. The translation of open-ended questions may be influenced by each translator’s interpretation of responses. As a result, there is the possibility that certain answers in English may have been translated into a meaning that does not properly reflect the original response. Qualitative responses were quantified based on thematic coding. The coding was conducted utilising a combination of manual review and text mining techniques. This method may miss nuance and miscategorise the respondent’s intention.
Findings
Findings

Regional themes

Perceptions of illicit trafficking

Most analyses of organized crime and plans to deal with it are formulated based on inputs from officials and case evidence from crimes. The survey generated a different perspective: that of residents in border regions affected by or participating in organized crime. Their perceptions and experience provide novel insights and are important to consider when formulating actions against organized crime. [INSERT: Bar chart] *Percentages do not add up to one hundred since some respondents provided more than one answer.

Figure 2: Types of illicit trafficking happening in the area according to respondents, by country

Among survey respondents, drug trafficking, contraband and counterfeit trade, wildlife and timber trafficking, and human trafficking and smuggling were the most commonly mentioned type of trafficking. This largely aligns with existing analysis, which suggests that wildlife and timber trafficking, synthetic drug trafficking and human trafficking dominated the region’s illicit markets in 2020.30

However, responses revealed some additional insights. For example, the region is known as a hub for wildlife and timber trafficking,31 but respondents predominantly associated illicit trafficking with drug trafficking, with the exception of Malaysia, where the most common references were to the trade in contraband and counterfeits. It may be that the long-term emphasis of official campaigns on drugs, combined with the prominence in entertainment of drug-related crime, have given drug trafficking a strong place in respondents’ imagination. It may also be that illicit wildlife, timber and counterfeit trades do have as strong a sense of immorality around them, and therefore are downgraded in importance even where respondents are aware of them. In any case, the data suggest that more effective action against wildlife, timber and counterfeit trades would require more effective attitude and behaviour change among border communities.

Respondents in all five countries shared similar sentiments regarding illicit trafficking. In each location, 60-80% of respondents believed that the majority of their community members have an unfavourable perspective toward illicit trafficking. That leaves 20-40% who are unsure or believe that their community is favourable towards illicit trafficking. There appeared to be a pattern in respondents’ beliefs: the more they believe trafficking is happening, the more they believe their fellow citizens are tolerant or favourable towards it, even if the individual themselves does not report such tolerance. A qualitative comparison of attitudes and the location of respondents suggested that one factor affecting attitudes was the connections across a border between villages that share a culture and history, with an accompanying trade in smuggled daily goods.

30 Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index”, 2021, p. 61

31 Ibid. p.61
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

EXPLORE
A regional strategy for combating illicit trafficking should build from data on the prevalence of types of trafficking and current knowledge, attitudes and behaviours towards illicit activities. For example, different types of trafficking may be more widely recognised as “trafficking” than others; or might be considered more severe than others. The survey suggests communities have varying degrees of tolerance for different forms of trafficking. Regional strategies should explore the relative significance of different types of trafficking for individuals, in order to prioritise available response mechanisms.

Many respondents cited common items in each type of illicit trafficking. These were similar across all study locations in the case of drug trafficking, contraband trafficking, human trafficking and smuggling, but varied with regard to wildlife and timber trafficking, which is addressed in the country findings.

- **Drug trafficking**: methamphetamine was most often cited as a primary drug being trafficked, most notably in Lao PDR and Thailand. Cannabis was also commonly cited.
- **Contraband and counterfeits**: illicit cigarettes, alcohol, and infected foods were the most commonly mentioned items. Respondents in Thailand and Lao PDR highlighted the trading of second-hand or stolen vehicles.
- **Human trafficking and smuggling**: human trafficking and smuggling were rarely raised. The related issues cited most often were forced labour, sex trafficking, and migrant smuggling. However, respondents did not always make a distinction between smuggling and human trafficking.

Most of the survey locations shared similar opinions on wildlife trafficking. Except for Viet Nam, more than 80% of respondents agreed that trafficking in endangered species is a crime. However, the level of interest and their readiness to support the fight against wildlife trafficking were somewhat independent of this recognition. Except for Cambodia, the four other locations had between 10% and 60% less favourable responses on the level of interest or willingness to participate in prevention activities.

Many respondents who agreed to participate in fighting against wildlife and timber trafficking stated their desire to preserve the environment for future generations. The data also suggest that younger people are more likely to declare a stronger willingness to participate in activities related to combating wildlife trafficking. On the other hand, those who expressed their disinterest cited a lack of time or concern for the livelihood of their neighbours. Communications campaigns and enforcement interventions will be more effective if they work directly on or with these varying sentiments among border residents.

EXPLORE
It is likely that human trafficking and smuggling are less often associated with “trafficking” than other types because it is much harder to spot and much easier to be involved in, e.g. when trying to cross a border irregularly for work. Survey data on border crossings (see below) showed that border crossings were perceived to be relatively easy before COVID-19, especially if they were irregular. However, additional research should explore reasons of low recognition of human trafficking among individuals in border communities.

At the same time, increasing understanding of human trafficking and smuggling as a crime, e.g. via awareness-raising and behaviour change approaches, will likely work towards reducing its prevalence. In contrast to other forms of illicit trafficking, human smuggling involves not only the trafficker but also the trafficked – and this “supply” side could be addressed particularly well by means of behaviour change activities, taking into account the contours of community and victim opinion.
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

Perceptions of Drivers

Previous studies have found that the main drivers of illicit activities are economic and social. Economic drivers often include livelihood issues such as unemployment, insufficient wages, and high demand for cheap labour from less developed countries. Social drivers include social exclusion, such as a lack of education and geographical isolation, or systemic problems such as corruption and weak enforcement.

The survey results support previous studies, with a purer emphasis on economic drivers. On the individual level, macro-level drivers were of primary concern, with the vast majority of respondents citing economic and social factors as the main drivers of illicit activities in all survey locations. Economic drivers featured more strongly, with 70-90% of respondents in all five countries emphasising that economic drivers are the strongest motivation for someone to be involved in illicit activities. Respondents tended to emphasise two different perspectives on economic drivers:

1. maintaining one’s livelihood, which has more of a defensive sense; and
2. maximising profit, which has more of a wealth-seeking or status-seeking sense.

Perceptions of Prevention

Preventing and responding to crime effectively requires an understanding of victims’ and communities’ perceptions and capacities. Survey respondents gave their opinions on which measures are the most effective in border communities to combat illicit trafficking. Across all survey locations, the suggestions were similar regarding economic and social measures, for example promoting economic development, awareness-raising and strengthening law enforcement and legal frameworks.

Economic factors were the main drivers, but economic stimulus was not always the most important preventive strategy that respondents suggested. Instead, respondents in all of the countries except Lao PDR prioritised social measures. On social measures, respondents varied in the emphasis they placed on awareness and attitudes, versus laws and regulation. Cambodian respondents thought that raising awareness was more important than improving the system, whereas respondents in Lao PDR, Malaysia and Viet Nam were more likely to suggest working on regulations.

Respondents were also asked specifically about preventive strategies for their community and their own willingness to get involved in addressing organized crime. Awareness-raising was again the most popular suggestion overall for community strategies, although it was not the most common suggestion in Cambodia. Similarly, at the individual level, awareness-raising was the most popular suggestion, with the exception of respondents in Thailand. Further details on national patterns are available below in the country sections.

Perceptions of border crossings

Not every border crossing takes place for labour migration; nor is each crossing connected to...
illicit trafficking. Nevertheless, patterns of border crossing provide an indicator of the context in which trafficking takes place, as do the related issues of border infrastructure and law enforcement generally in border regions. The survey therefore collected residents’ perceptions of border crossing difficulties, habits of border crossing and suggestions for border management.

The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have increased illicit trafficking globally, and Southeast Asian countries, especially fragile and vulnerable communities in rural and remote areas, encountered harsh economic difficulties as a result. As motivations to cross the border, respondents in all survey locations reported economic reasons and migrating to alleviate economic challenges. Other reasons included shopping, visiting family and friends, travel, health and education.

The majority of respondents in all countries believed that it was easy to cross the before COVID-19. During the pandemic, crossing borders became more difficult. Expectations for the future differed by country: people in Lao PDR and Malaysia believed that the situation will continue to be difficult, whereas Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam believed that it will become easier again.

Regarding border management, UNODC’s research and programmes with ASEAN Member States have demonstrated a strong top-level interest in streamlining trade and positive migration in all countries included in this study. All respondents consistently stated the following: streamline the border pass and visa issuing process; reduce the cost of document issuance; develop transportation infrastructure; and assist with legal paperwork for employment. This shows that there is also individual and community-level support for reducing barriers to local migration and trade.

**EXPLORE**

Respondents suggest there would be a big appetite for digitisation or other methods of reducing paperwork and accelerating crossings. The benefit would be to reduce incentives for and tolerance of illicit border crossings. Even better, law enforcement agencies would have much more efficient access to information on licit movements.

Cambodia
Cambodia

Demographics

Gender
- Male: 504
- Female: 396

Age
- 18-24 (137)
- 25-44 (456)
- 45-64 (190)
- 65+ (23)
- N/A (95)

Marital status
- Married: 331
- Single: 569

Children
- Yes: 558
- No: 342

Work
- Agriculture (280)
- Goods and services (208)
- Unemployed (122)
- Manufacturing (18)
- Other (270)

Education
- No formal education (77)
- Primary school (309)
- High school (432)
- University (83)
88% of Cambodian respondents believed that their community views illicit trafficking negatively. One-third of respondents nonetheless believed that there is some level of involvement in illicit trafficking in their communities. The majority of respondents had a negative perspective of illicit trafficking, but they still recognised that illicit trafficking exists in their community. Among the five countries, this...
was the lowest share of respondents who believed that trafficking occurred in their community. In total, 30% of respondents thought this was the case, compared to 38-66% in the other countries. There was no significant distinction of opinions by gender or age.

The types of illicit trafficking in Cambodia include drug trafficking, illicit logging, human trafficking, smuggling and theft of historical artefacts. The latter was not covered in the survey, and out of the four survey categories (drug trafficking, wildlife and timber trafficking, contraband and counterfeits, and human trafficking/smuggling), drug trafficking was perceived to be the most common type of trafficking in the Cambodian communities surveyed.

Drug trafficking

Drug trafficking in Cambodia has increased significantly in recent years, especially along the borders with Thailand and Lao PDR. The volume of drug seizures in 2020 was three times higher than in 2015. In 2020, methamphetamine seizures were the biggest, and ketamine and heroin seizures also drastically increased. The gravity of the situation was also reflected in the survey carried out for this report. Seven out of 10 Cambodian respondents believed that drug trafficking is happening in their communities. However, there was no specific mention of the type of drugs being trafficked.

Wildlife and timber trafficking

Cambodia has become a major transit and source country of wildlife and timber trafficking. For example, more than 3.2 tonnes of ivory from Mozambique in 2018, and almost 25,000 live mammals and birds, were seized between 2007 and 2015. In addition, the country has one of the greatest recent rates of deforestation in the world, having lost nearly 64% of its tree cover since 2011. This has become a major threat to the ethnic minorities who heavily rely on sustainable forest use for their livelihoods.

These phenomena are also acknowledged by survey respondents. Almost half of the respondents mentioned environmental crimes, which is almost twice as high as in other survey countries. The survey also indicated that the type of trafficked items may vary not only across countries but also within one country, based on the location. For example, illicit fishing was mentioned by 22 respondents from Stung Treng provinces (35% of respondents in that province), which is located along the Mekong River, whereas it was unmentioned in other locations.

Contraband and counterfeits

Trade in counterfeits and contraband has surged in Cambodia. In 2019, Cambodia seized more

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35 GSDRC, "Drivers and enablers of serious organised crime in Southeast Asia", 2019, p. 3

36 ASEAN, "Drug Monitoring Report", 2020, p. 55-56

37 Ibid. p. 61

38 TRAFFIC, "Southeast Asia at the heart of wildlife trade", February 2020, p. 51

than 100 tonnes of counterfeits, including medical products, cosmetics, cigarettes and alcohol. 40 28% of respondents highlighted this trade as the main concern in their community, which is the second-lowest rate among all survey locations. Respondents did not specify product types. However, when the survey asked for their definition of illicit trafficking, the most often listed item was contraband and counterfeit products by almost 20% of respondents, while drugs were only mentioned by 7%. This may imply that border communities are more exposed to the issues of contraband and counterfeits in their daily lives.

**Human trafficking and smuggling**

Human trafficking is one of the most widespread forms of trafficking in Cambodia. Human traffickers exploit Cambodians and foreigners from other countries. Traffickers send Cambodian and ethnic Vietnamese women and girls in rural areas to clandestine sex establishments in cities. 41 Cambodian labour migrants who have been trafficked work in agriculture, factories, construction and domestic service, which frequently entails debt-based coercion. 42 Furthermore, between 41,000 and 151,000 Cambodian nationals attempted irregular entry to Thailand and almost one-third of them used smuggling services. 43

However, in the survey, only 15% of respondents mentioned human trafficking and smuggling as a type of illicit trafficking in their community. It may indicate that the public understanding of the topic is relatively low, or that certain terminology affected the outcome. For instance, respondents may demonstrate higher awareness if the question addressed human trafficking topics that are locally familiar, such as sexual exploitation or illegal labour conditions.

**Drivers of illicit activities**

Figure 6: Cambodia - Reasons for engagement in illicit trafficking/contraband according to respondents

![Graph showing reasons for engagement in illicit trafficking/contraband according to respondents]

**Economic factors**

Cambodia has been a fast-growing country economically, averaging a 7.7% GDP growth rate between 1988 and 2019. The country’s economic growth contributed to good performance on poverty reduction. 44 The population living under the national poverty line declined from almost 48% in 2007 to 13.5% in 2014. In 2015, the country attained lower middle-income status and it aims to achieve upper middle-income status by 2030. 45 However, the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a threat to Cambodia. The national lockdown slowed the domestic economy. Tourism and hospitality services, which are Cambodia’s second largest

42 Ibid.
growth driver and key source of foreign currency earnings, were still subdued in 2021.46 Poverty is higher than before the pandemic, especially in rural areas – 17.8% of the population is identified as poor, and 22.8% in rural areas.47

This survey and existing literature agree that economic conditions are closely linked to illicit activities in Cambodia. Economic vulnerability encourages some individuals to get involved in trafficking due to a lack of opportunities for basic needs or upward mobility. One study, for example, found that the main driver of involvement in illicit trafficking was the lack of legitimate opportunities to gain a modest income. Interviewing more than 90 traffickers, the study suggested that traffickers are generally poor and uneducated, most of whom were also female.48

Cambodian respondents to the survey highlighted economic factors as a primary driver of illicit activities. Economic factors consisted of two major elements: maintaining one’s livelihood and pursuing profitability, as indicated by around 40% of respondents respectively. The former included a high rate of unemployment and low wages, whereas the term ‘greed’ is often mentioned in the latter case. In addition, answers related to profitability were also often associated with lacking employment opportunities and decent wages. Both the survey and prior research point to the importance of the strong links between economic motivations and the possibility of involvement in illicit trafficking. Continued efforts and new innovations in reducing poverty and socio-economic inequality are needed by providing alternative livelihood options in border communities.

Social factors

Cambodia’s rapid economic development has resulted in improvements in social sectors such as education, health, infrastructure, and governance. However, a significant level of inequality persists. In other survey countries, economic concerns dominated responses, but more than half of Cambodian respondents also emphasised social factors as driving involvement in illicit activities, with the majority citing ‘lack of knowledge’. Education may be an important element in this perceived lack of awareness of options, though further research would need to corroborate this. Even though Cambodia’s education system has improved49, the gap in access to education opportunities between rural and urban regions continues to be significant. Dropout rates of secondary school students in rural areas are much higher than among students in urban areas, and female illiteracy in rural areas is two times higher than those in urban areas.50 With a majority of border regions being rural, a lack of education could exacerbate the information gap and further isolate vulnerable people, making them more likely to get involved in trafficking or other illicit activities.

Existing evidence suggests that insufficient enforcement undermines Cambodia’s efforts in combating organized crime, including slow legislative processes, weak penalties in wildlife trafficking, and corruption.51 Cambodia’s synthetic drug market, for instance, has grown due to its proximity to the Golden Triangle, porous borders, corruption and low enforcement capacity.52 However, survey respondents did not frequently mention corruption and insufficient law enforcement.

46 World Bank Group, “‘Special Focus: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on learning and earning in Cambodia’, December 2021, p. 46
47 Ibid, p. 10
51 Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index: profile Cambodia”, 2021, p. 4
52 Ibid, p.3
Cambodia is one of the major migrant-sending countries in ASEAN. The majority of its migrants head to Thailand, which requires substantial foreign labour.\textsuperscript{53} Existing research suggests it is mostly rural populations who migrate, and that the main drivers of migration are a lack of employment opportunities, lack of access to markets and higher wages.\textsuperscript{54} The focus on economic reasons for crossing borders was also confirmed in this research: similar to the other survey countries, 87\% of respondents in Cambodia identified ‘livelihood’ as the main reason for border crossings.

In addition, ‘health’ was notably more popular as a response in Cambodia compared to other countries. This included medical examinations and treatment, as well as the purchase of medical supplies. This may reflect the increase in medical tourism in Cambodia, due to better medical systems and easier access to services.\textsuperscript{55}

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated movement restrictions affected respondents’ perceptions on the ease of border crossings. Asked about perceptions of border crossings before the outbreak of the pandemic, over 70\% of respondents believed that it was not difficult to cross the border. This fell to 18\% during the pandemic. Apart from citing COVID-19 related prevention measures, those

\textsuperscript{53} World Bank, “Migrating to Opportunity”, 2017, p. 10
\textsuperscript{54} Vutha Hing & Vouch Cheng LV, “Policy Priorities to better manage migration in Cambodia”, Mekong Economic Research Network, 30 July 2014, p. 8
respondents who believed that crossing the border is difficult mostly cited the complicated screening process and high costs. Roughly two-thirds of respondents thought that crossing borders will be easier again after the pandemic subsides. Younger respondents were more pessimistic, reporting more concern for the pandemic’s lingering impacts. Respondents who believed that the border crossing was difficult mainly cited the high costs of a passport. Existing evidence suggests that the vast majority of migrants possess some legal documents allowing them to stay or work in Thailand, such as work permits, border passes, and passports. Nevertheless, the number of irregular migrants is significantly higher than the number of people migrating legally.

In contrast, most Cambodian survey respondents seem to think that migration occurs mostly legally. More than 70% agreed that members of their communities cross the border legally, while only 9% disagreed.

A telling exception was Banteay Meanchey province, where 70% of respondents disagreed that people cross legally. This province is a major migration route and appears to have a lot of trafficking – it has well-developed road infrastructure and porous borders. The survey suggests that residents are conscious of related illicit activities, at least in terms of illegal border crossing.

80% of respondents mentioned economic drivers of illicit activities, but only 19% cited economic strategies for prevention, such as employment opportunities, vocational training and tax changes. Few respondents in any country recommended economic assistance from the local authorities and Cambodia had the lowest proportion, at 3%.

Additional research may be required to identify why people focus on economic drivers but not on economic solutions. It may be that respondents are pessimistic of any structural change in the economy, or that they see other strategies like awareness-raising as more directly impactful. A well-designed, localised intervention for livelihood development, supported by effective government and non-government communications, should be tested.

87% of Cambodian respondents identified social factors, such as ‘raising awareness’ and ‘enhancing law enforcement’ as the main preventative strategies for combating illicit trafficking. Cambodian respondents also placed a greater focus on raising awareness and improving law enforcement than on economic measures. Respondents noted that there was a need for increasing public awareness of the negative impacts of illicit trafficking but also on related legislation. Stricter implementation of current laws and expanding local authorities were cited as the primary solution for improving law enforcement. In 2021, the government revised the ‘Safe village-commune-district policy’ framework,
which addresses eight goals to combat major illicit trafficking activities and make communities safer.\textsuperscript{61} In 2022, the National Police furthermore issued a guideline for implementing the policy, with a primary objective of improving community policing capabilities.\textsuperscript{62}

**EXPLORE**

It is possible that perceptions of law enforcement and focus on local authorities as a source of support may change in the context of these policy changes. To understand whether and how these measures may serve as good examples of promoting prevention strategies at a community level, changes can be monitored closely, for example via a follow-up survey in the future.

**Perceptions of prevention measures at community and individual levels**

In contrast to other survey countries, Cambodian respondents specified which actors should be involved in community-level prevention efforts. Nearly 70% of respondents cited local authorities, demonstrating the necessity for close cooperation between local communities and local law enforcement. NGOs and the national government were mentioned by 17% and 14% of respondents, respectively.

On an individual, Cambodian respondents indicated a willingness to participate in community or national-level activities. As was the case in other survey countries, half of the Cambodian respondents identified ‘raising awareness’ among individuals as their top response, likely because this is perceived as the easiest way to contribute as an individual. Many respondents expressed a desire to participate in information dissemination initiatives. Furthermore, over one-third of respondents mentioned cooperating with local authorities, mostly in terms of reporting criminal offences.

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Main focus areas for prevention strategies in Cambodia

Drug use

Figure 14: Cambodia - Replies of respondents to the question “Do you think people in this area use drugs?”

Official estimates of the number of drug users in Cambodia have been steadily increasing. Most users are between 18 and 35 years old, and over 90% of them use methamphetamine as a main substance. The Cambodian government has tried to make the CBT more accessible to the public, but the country’s use of forced detention and rehabilitation has been continuously criticised. According to one study, women and marginalised groups have a greater risk of being charged.  

More encouragingly, Cambodia has been investing in efforts to prevent and reduce drug use. The community-based treatment program (CBTx) is part of a broader strategic approach to combating illicit drug use, which aims to reduce both supply and demand. CBT focuses on demand reduction, while governments focus on supply reduction. CBTx and care services are currently available in 451 health centres in Cambodia. These programmes and services are focused on amphetamine type stimulants (ATS), beginning in 2014 and following a pilot with UNODC in Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, and Stung Treng provinces.  

Apart from CBTx, the Cambodian government has conducted public awareness-raising activities on drug use aimed at the general public, community leaders and members since 2015. The activities included dissemination of messages through media, publications for educational purposes to relevant agencies and establishment of an anti-drugs library in schools. This should be continued with a greater emphasis on community engagement.

Most survey respondents appear aware of drug use in their communities, with 75% believing that people in their communities used drugs. The majority of respondents indicated that the most positive element of responding to drug use is behaviour change. This often involves sending users to treatment centres. The survey may indicate that many people are aware of treatment availability, but many seem unaware of the distinction between compulsory and voluntary programmes. This may be a useful area to focus government and non-government communications, particularly if Cambodia wants to increase the impact of its services.

Timber trafficking and deforestation

Figure 15: Cambodia - Replies of respondents to the statement “You are affected by the cutting down of forests”

In Cambodia, border community residents do not consider illicit logging as beneficial for local livelihoods, since it is usually associated with large-scale trade that shifts profit elsewhere. However, small-scale logging provides considerable economic benefits for locals. One study revealed that

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64 UNODC, “Guidance for Community-Based Treatment and Care Services for People Affected by Drug use and Dependence in Southeast Asia”, 2014, p. 5
65 UNODC & UNAIDS, “Compulsory drug treatment and rehabilitation in East and Southeast Asia”, January 2022
66 Ibid, p. 26
67 ASEAN, “Drug Monitoring Report”, 2020, p. 57
68 Forest Trends, “The Socio-Economic Context of Illegal Logging and Trade of Rosewood Along the Cambodian-Lao Border”, November 2013, p. 3
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

Problems of illicit logging in Northeast Cambodia can be ten times higher than regular wages. Ilicit logging and timber trafficking is also socially acceptable among community members, who have few alternative livelihood opportunities and limited assistance from the government.

EXPLORE

Local profits from illicit (rosewood) logging are an urgent target for innovative responses, in particular to generate viable alternative livelihoods.

Cambodia’s illicit logging industry attracts poor poachers as well as public officials. Existing evidence suggests that the main driver of illicit logging is not just poverty, but also greed and profitability that motivates officials to engage in trafficking. Research has also revealed that local authorities and village chiefs have interrupted community forest monitoring activities.

In the survey, over 80% of Cambodian respondents expressed concern about deforestation. Most respondents were well aware of the negative impact of illicit logging, with links to natural disasters and climate change.

EXPLORE

Given the existing attempts at community-level security operations and the high level of interest in working against deforestation shown in the survey, developing community-oriented policing initiatives should be a priority.

Wildlife trafficking

Figure 16: Cambodia - Replies of respondents to the statement “Trafficking in endangered species is a crime”

Figure 17: Cambodia - Replies of respondents to the statement “I am interested in the issue of trafficking in endangered species”

Figure 18: Cambodia - Replies of respondents to the statement “I want to be involved in resolving the issue of trafficking in endangered species”

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69 Ibid, p. 5
70 Ibid, p. 4
71 Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index: profile Cambodia”, 2021, p. 3
72 Jason Motlagh, “A Life-or-Death Hunt for Tree Thieves: Rangers are fighting against long odds to protect Thailand’s last stands of prized Siamese rosewood”, 14 March 2016, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/160309-thailand-cambodia-timber-trafficking-rosewood>
More than 80% of Cambodian respondents recognise trafficking in endangered species as a crime. A similar proportion showed their interest in the topic and willingness to be involved in resolving it. Younger people and people who live in urban areas are more likely to report a stronger willingness to participate in responses.

The Cambodian government has made efforts to combat wildlife trafficking. For example, in March 2022, the government and international partners launched a ‘zero snaring’ campaign to eliminate snares used to capture animals. The campaign involves both local authorities and communities in the provinces on the Mekong River’s eastern bank. The main purpose is to increase awareness of the issue by learning relevant law and the value of wild animals.74

**EXPLORE**

Results from the ‘zero snaring’ campaign will indicate opportunities and barriers to awareness-raising around wildlife. The survey results suggest that youth-focused leadership of community efforts may be beneficial by harnessing the greatest energy and willingness to confront these issues.

Local demand for the wildlife trade includes wild meat and ingredients used in traditional medicines.75 For the rural poor, traditional medicine is sometimes the only healthcare option available.76 Even though Cambodia has improved its health sector significantly, the country still has a serious shortage of medical staff. 40% of physicians and 74% of specialists work in urban areas, whereas 80% of Cambodians still live in rural and remote areas.77

**Border Crossing**

Cambodian respondents made suggestions to ease border crossing for people who wish to work in neighbouring countries. More than half of the respondents highlighted the importance of expediting border procedures and lowering their costs. More than a quarter of respondents emphasised the role of local authorities and the government. This included enhancing transparency at the border and promoting better cooperation with ASEAN member states to establish a legislative legal framework to facilitate labour mobility.

These results echo interviews conducted by UNODC seven years ago with people in border villages. Lengthy procedures and high costs made it difficult for many to obtain official travel documents.78 According to one study, the average cost of irregular labour migration from Cambodia was USD 123, while regular labour migration was USD 548.79 These prior studies and the present survey indicate that administrative burdens and costs are a major factor encouraging irregular border crossing.

Official opacity and corruption are additional challenges. For example, workers who crossed the border in Banteay Meanchey province have reportedly been overcharged in clearance fees, which put traders and porters in financial difficulty.80 In the survey, all the respondents who mentioned corruption issues were from provinces bordering Viet Nam: Mondulkiri, Kampot and Tbong Khmum.

The Cambodian government has invested in its border management system. Recently, the government cooperated with international organisations to pilot a border pass system along

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74 Xinhua, “Cambodia launches ‘zero-snaring’ campaign to protect animals”, 03 March 2022, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/20220303/76a6f79e09a1458ab256c37fe727be13/c.html>
75 Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index: profile Cambodia”, 2021, p. 3
77 Yurie Kobashi et al., “Improving the Rural-Urban Balance in Cambodia’s Health Services”, International Journal of Health Policy and Management (IJHPM), 2021, p. 1
Battambang province’s border with Thailand. It automates the registration of entries and exits and has all of a traveller’s records, which enables faster checks. This could be a good starting point for improving border security while facilitating legitimate crossings.

**EXPLORE**

Continued investment in border systems will help to facilitate positive economic cooperation across borders while protecting national security and making business more difficult for traffickers.
Lao People’s Democratic Republic
### Lao People’s Democratic Republic

#### Participant’s social demographic information

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<th>Other (82)</th>
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<th>Primary school (403)</th>
<th>High school (476)</th>
<th>University (158)</th>
</tr>
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</table>
Map 3: Map of survey locations
68% of Laotian respondents suggest that people in their community have a negative view of trafficking. More than 50% believe that members of their community are involved in illicit activities, which is the second-highest proportion among the survey countries. Male respondents were more likely than female respondents to have negative perspectives on illicit trafficking and to believe that members of the community are involved. Furthermore, people working in agriculture are more likely to believe that their community has a higher tolerance for illicit activities, compared to people working in manufacturing or services. One possible reason for this difference may be the history of opium poppy cultivation in the border areas of Lao PDR, leading to higher awareness or perceptions of tolerance among agricultural workers.

Drugs trafficking

Although Lao PDR was the third-largest illicit opium poppy producing country in the world until 1998, eradication efforts by the government and international partners have reduced cultivation to marginal levels. Now, Lao PDR functions as a main transit country for methamphetamine trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). Large quantities of methamphetamine have been trafficked from Myanmar to Thailand or Viet Nam through the northwest border of Lao PDR. The northern part of Lao PDR is known as one of two opium producing countries in the region and as a transit area for heroin trafficking from northern Myanmar to China.

The survey data aligns with the existing evidence on the importance and intensity of production and trafficking of drugs in the country. For the majority of respondents in Lao PDR, drug trafficking was the main concern in terms of illicit activities. Similar to Thailand, over 170 respondents specified methamphetamine as the main trafficked substance in their communities. Cannabis, heroin and amphetamine were also mentioned.

Wildlife and timber trafficking

Timber trafficking is one of the most profitable and prevalent forms of illicit activity in rural areas.
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

The primary market driver is a high demand for protected wood (e.g. Siamese rosewood) in Vietnam and China. Illicit timber that is destined for China often crosses the land borders of Lao PDR. Illicit logging has a severe impact on the ecosystem of the country, such as the destruction of forests in Saravan and Sekong provinces. Lao PDR also has a major illicit wildlife market and serves as a transit point for wildlife trafficking, including trafficking of ivory and tiger parts.

In the survey, most Laotian respondents believe that trafficking in endangered species is a crime, but not many thought that environmental crimes were occurring in their community. Only 19 respondents mentioned forests and non-timber forest products as subject to trafficking. These findings may indicate that tolerance for environmental crime is higher than, for example, drugs and human trafficking.

On the other hand, over 60% of respondents believed that they were affected by deforestation. Responses related to natural disasters were the most common, such as floods and drought. 60 respondents specified that ‘slash-and-burn’ practices - a traditional farming practice that involves the burning of forest to create a field – made an impact. The majority of respondents who stated that they were not affected by deforestation did not specify a reason for this belief.

Contraband and counterfeits

Less than 10% of respondents in Lao PDR mentioned counterfeit goods, the lowest proportion among the survey countries. Half of these respondents specifically mentioned second-hand or stolen vehicles from Myanmar or Thailand. There are no comprehensive studies regarding counterfeits and contraband trade in Lao PDR. Several studies have explored the country’s falsified medicine issue, specifically counterfeit artesunate antimalarial tablets. However, this was not mentioned among survey respondents.

EXPLORE

Further research on counterfeits and contraband in Lao PDR would be necessary in order to formulate responses that engage the community and have macro-level impacts on security and the economy.

Human trafficking and smuggling

Between 18,000 and 43,000 Laotians attempt irregular entry to work in Thailand each year. Lao PDR is also a major transit country for nationals of neighbouring countries on their journey to Thailand. During this journey, many migrants are exposed to exploitation in domestic services, agricultural and fishing industries, and commercial sex trade. Similarly, Laotian women frequently work as waitresses without pay while abroad and men are often trafficked for forced labour in fishing vessels and livestock farms, and construction sites.

Despite the prevalence of these trafficking and smuggling issues, survey respondents rarely

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86 Ibid. p. 3
90 Ibid, p. 71
raised them. Only 11 respondents cited human trafficking as a type of illicit activity in their community and one respondent cited smuggling, which was the lowest share of respondents across all survey countries. Basic awareness-raising or more advanced behaviour change engagements with border communities would be necessary if law enforcement agencies wish to reduce human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

Main Drivers of Illicit Activities

Lao PDR was the third-largest opium poppy cultivation producer in the world, and existing research identifies main drivers of production and trafficking to be primarily related to poverty.\textsuperscript{97} The amount of opium poppy cultivation has decreased significantly as a result of governments and international partner’s strenuous efforts to eradicate the opium poppy cultivation.\textsuperscript{98} Small-scale cultivation continues in northern regions, and may increase as a result of economic constraints caused by COVID-19.

The survey corroborates existing studies. Respondents overwhelmingly cited economic concerns as the main drivers for individuals to get involved in illicit activities—94% of respondents, the highest among the survey countries. Respondents in other countries rated involvement in trafficking for livelihood and profitability reasons almost equivalently, more than 60% of respondents in Lao PDR cited livelihood issues as the main driver of illicit trafficking.

**Economic factors**

Lao PDR has been growing fast economically, which has contributed to poverty reduction and increased access to basic services such as education, health and infrastructure.\textsuperscript{91} However, recent natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic impeded the country’s economic progress.\textsuperscript{92} In addition, GDP growth is not diversified and is largely based on the exploitation of natural resources.\textsuperscript{93} One study identified that the national poverty headcount rate has decreased by 18.3% in 2019,\textsuperscript{94} but this leaves nearly a fifth of Lao people’s incomes below the poverty line, which is 1 USD per day.\textsuperscript{95} Most individuals with these low incomes share several common features, including being a member of an ethnic minority, low levels of education and no access to employment.\textsuperscript{96}

91 UNCTAD, “Vulnerability Profile of Lao PDR”, January 2021, p. 10
93 ILO, “Triangle in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note”, December 2021
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.

97 UNODC, “South-East Asia Opium survey 2010 - Lao PDR, Myanmar”, December 2010, p. 23
98 Ibid.

**Social factors**

Economic growth in Lao PDR enabled the government to make significant progress in non-economic areas, such as education and health. However, existing research indicates a large disparity between urban and rural areas. For example, even though the country achieved a high primary school enrolment rate of 97%, one-fifth of students drop out of school, with rates of student...
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

Dropouts in rural and remote regions being even higher. Furthermore, law enforcement is often weak and corruption is a significant issue. Despite the government’s anti-corruption agenda, the issue of corruption persists at all levels of government, including the facilitation and protection of illicit trafficking.

In contrast to this evidence of major social challenges, survey respondents rarely mentioned non-economic factors. Only 4% nominated any as drivers of illicit activities. Of these, the majority cited a lack of awareness of community members around risks and alternatives. The low proportion of people mentioning social factors could reflect the overwhelming concern for basic economic needs, or perhaps a simplified understanding of what causes crime. In either case, it may suggest a need for sophisticated community mobilisation around any responses other than direct economic interventions.

Border crossing

Figure 23: Lao PDR - Main reasons for border crossings according to respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Livelihood Shopping Education Family Health Travel

Labour migration is an important option for people from Lao PDR to secure a livelihood. Approximately 1.3 million Lao nationals are in another country as

Figure 24: Lao PDR - Replies of respondents to the statement “Before COVID-19, it was difficult to legally cross the border”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree or disagree</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 25: Lao PDR - Replies of respondents to the statement “At present, it is difficult to legally cross the border”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree or disagree</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 26: Lao PDR - Replies of respondents to the statement “In the future, it will be difficult to legally cross the border”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree or disagree</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

99 EPDC, “Lao PDR Core USAID Education Profile”, epdc.org, 2012
of 2017, with Thailand being the major destination country.\textsuperscript{101} Existing studies found that the main drivers for migration, particularly among young people, are low wages, poor job stability and better livelihood options elsewhere.\textsuperscript{102} UNODC’s in-depth interviews in 2014 also suggested that poverty is the main driver behind irregular migration to Thailand.\textsuperscript{103} The present survey reinforced these findings, with some nuance. Seven out of ten respondents stated that border crossings occur for ‘livelihood’ reasons, followed by travel, shopping, and healthcare.

Among those respondents who perceived border crossing to be difficult, more than half were from Attapeu and Xiengkhouang provinces. These results are also connected to other findings. Almost 90% of all respondents in Lao PDR believed that members of their communities use official routes to cross the border. Just four per cent of respondents stated that people use illegal routes, but nearly half of them lived in the Attapeu and Xiengkhouang provinces. Attapeu province is well-known for illegal logging along the Vietnamese border.\textsuperscript{104}

After the COVID-19 outbreak, 88% of respondents stated that it was difficult to cross the border due to border closures and additional COVID-19 prevention measures. More than half of respondents are pessimistic about the ease of border crossings in the future, which is the highest rate across all survey countries. Female respondents are more optimistic than males. In all cases, expectations for future crossings appear to be linked to predictions regarding the pandemic.

**Perceptions of Prevention**

The survey collected respondents’ perspectives on the state of border mobility before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the data collecting period, and in the future. In comparison to responses in other survey countries, Laotian respondents have a more pessimistic view about border crossing. More than one-third of respondents stated that border crossing was easy prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, but they expected that the challenges they are currently facing will remain in the future.

More than 70% of respondents stated that the border crossing was not difficult before the COVID-19 outbreak if people held a valid passport. On the other hand, the 9% of respondents who experienced difficulties in border crossing mentioned a lack of travel documents and the inconvenience of moving through border checkpoints.

Lao PDR is the only survey country with a high number of people emphasising economic strategies against illicit activities – 44% stated that economic assistance in border communities would be the most effective preventive measure. This is lower than the number of people identifying economic

\textsuperscript{101} ILO, “Triangle in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note”, December 2021, p. 1
\textsuperscript{102} IOM, "An analysis of Migration Trends of Lao Migrants for Lao People’s Democratic Republic in Two Selected Provinces: Savannakhet and Xayaboury”, 2021, p. 2
concerns as the primary driver for illicit trafficking but, compared to the other countries, most aligned with the emphasis placed on economic drivers. The vast majority of respondents cited possible positive effects from better and more job prospects and higher income, and 90 respondents indicated that encouraging people to change their careers to agriculture would be beneficial.

Rural residents and marginalised populations in remote areas depend heavily on agriculture, often with insufficient and unstable incomes. This is likely linked to involvement in illicit activities, ranging from opium poppy cultivation to trafficking across borders. The country adopted a livelihood development plan as a part of its poverty reduction efforts against opium poppy cultivation. UNODC also implemented several livelihood development projects, such as supporting opium poppy farmers to change their livelihood to coffee cultivation.\(^\text{105}\)

In addition to the 44% of respondents who focused on economic assistance to prevent illicit trafficking, economic assistance was also recommended as a focus for local authorities' assistance. 26% of respondents suggested economic prevention measures would be a good approach for local authorities to encourage the community's participation in the fight against illicit trafficking. They believed the most effective strategy is to support livelihoods by providing more job opportunities and financial assistance. Suggestions for financial assistance included investment in agriculture or funds for prevention programmes.

**EXPLORE**
Efforts to develop alternative livelihood options should be continued in order to prevent the expansion of opium poppy production and trafficking. In addition, further study and expansion of existing programmes are required to prevent other forms of trafficking, such as wildlife and timber trafficking and human trafficking.

Beyond the emphasis on economic interventions, 44% of respondents suggested non-economic approaches to prevention. Most of these mentioned stricter regulations, such as more frequent monitoring and stronger law enforcement. Enhancing law enforcement and improving communication with the community were the second most popular suggestions. On the other hand, awareness-raising was rarely discussed by Laotian respondents (similar to Malaysia), which aligns with the overall lower share of respondents citing a lack of awareness as a key driver (4%). In Saravan province, several respondents mentioned a need for forestry inspectors to monitor illegal activities, which may reflect the fact that illicit logging is prevalent there.\(^\text{106}\)

**EXPLORE**
Individual provinces will benefit from tailored prevention strategies that are aligned with the most pressing issues. As the findings from Saravan province suggest, law enforcement support in the province will need to look different due to the higher prevalence of illicit logging, compared to other provinces where trafficking in drugs is more pressing for the community.


Perceptions of prevention measures at community and individual levels

Figure 28: Lao PDR - Replies of respondents to the question “What do you think could be done at the community level so people do not get involved in illicit trafficking/contraband?”

Laotian respondents believed that awareness-raising is the most effective strategy at both a community and individual level. It is possible that people considered this as the easiest approach to make an impact. On a community level, economic support was prioritised as the second most effective approach. Along with increased job opportunities and vocational training, many respondents indicated a desire to encourage their community members to redirect their livelihoods toward more legitimate options, such as farming. Some respondents also suggested the establishment of community-based units able to cooperate with the authorities and initiate action by authorities.

EXPLORE

On the economic front, respondents made various suggestions, including: 1) creating job opportunities by building factories or employment agencies, 2) providing vocational training, and 3) promoting alternative crop cultivation and reorienting their livelihood towards a more legitimate and sustainable source of income. The Lao PDR government and international partners have collaborated on livelihood development projects. For instance, UNODC has supported an initiative with former opium farmers from Houaphanh since 2016, to provide higher income alternatives with licit crops. As one result, farmers successfully exported coffee to Europe in 2021.

EXPLORE

The high demand for economic assistance, with a particular emphasis on agriculture, suggests it would be beneficial to continue improving sustainable livelihood development models. Existing approaches in Lao PDR are promising, should be expanded and strategically tested for effects on illicit trafficking. However, licit crop farming may also be detrimental to the environment and “export-oriented” production of cash crops may result in a decline in subsistence crop production. Therefore, programme design would need to take account of environmental and food security considerations.

Deforestation in Lao PDR may contribute to an increase in illicit trafficking, as it can have a detrimental impact on socioeconomic conditions, especially among the rural poor living in forested areas. Laotians engage in logging and land-clearing with the promise of increased income through agriculture, but this “expansion of agriculture” is the main driver of Lao PDR’s deforestation. ‘Shifting cultivation’ (slash-and-burn) methods can be sustainable if the population density is low, but this is not the case in many relevant areas of Southeast Asia. Deforestation is frequently linked to other problems, such as climate change and food insecurity, so the practice may further increase the motivation for individuals to be involved in illicit trafficking.

Shifting cultivation is not prohibited in Lao PDR, but the government aims to eventually eradicate the approach. Similar to opium poppy cultivation, shifting cultivation is typically practised in the country’s northern uplands. Wider areas of the country are heavily affected by the practice, for example as a contributor to the smog issue in Vientiane. Some efforts have been made to move from shifting cultivation to sustainable commercialised crops, such as coffee and rubber. Farmers often accepted new production offers if they felt that it would increase their revenue; but establishing market links has remained a challenge in remote areas.

## EXPLORE

Deforestation may undermine socioeconomic conditions for the rural poor living in forested areas and so drives illicit activities in two ways. Finding alternatives is urgent. Licit crop farming may also be detrimental to the environment and “export-oriented” production of cash crops may reduce subsistence crop production. Economic interventions must therefore incorporate environment and food security concerns.

### Wildlife trafficking

Wildlife trafficking may have serious consequences, such as the depletion of endangered species and the disruption of ecosystems. It is important to address this issue as part of comprehensive efforts to combat illicit trafficking.
Almost 70% of respondents report that they want to be involved in resolving the issue of trafficking in endangered species. Those who responded negatively were more likely to believe that illicit activities may be critical for people in the community to maintain their livelihoods.

In a perhaps surprising finding, respondents with lower income were more likely to see wildlife trafficking and deforestation as serious. They also showed higher interest in participating in anti-wildlife trafficking activities. This may reflect the fact that the impacts of these threats are greatest on the rural poor living in forested areas. It also suggests that there is an encouragingly high level of community interest in working against these illicit activities.

Over half of respondents believed that members of their communities use illicit drugs and ‘youth’ is frequently mentioned. Drug use is often associated with entertainment and peer pressure. One study corroborated this perspective, showing that many young people use methamphetamine (yaba) for recreational purposes and social networking with peers, as well as to increase their productivity at school or work. Some female respondents used it to conform to both modern and traditional gender roles.116

When the survey asked how drug use should be tackled, more than one-third of respondents stated that rehabilitation services are needed. In addition, 26% of respondents highlight the importance of law enforcement, including more frequent monitoring and reporting to the local authorities. This may reflect a view that drug use is a criminal behaviour; drug users in border communities in

the country may face a stronger stigma than those in Cambodia or Malaysia, where only 14% and 4% of respondents, respectively, had the same perspective.

The government’s policy on drugs has been shifting towards health-focused approaches and it plans to expand community-based treatment services.\textsuperscript{117} To raise awareness about the programme, the community hospital in Vientiane and local authorities held a campaign to disseminate information in surrounding villages.\textsuperscript{118} Lao PDR Commission on Drugs Control (LCDC) also conducted anti-drug campaigns to raise awareness, particularly among the young population, of the negative impact of drug use and trafficking.\textsuperscript{119} Several positive outcomes resulted from the treatment service and awareness-raising campaigns, including decreased relapse and greater access to the service.\textsuperscript{120} However, the country continues to prioritise “custodial” methods, which has restricted drug users’ access to adequate treatment due to fear of detention.\textsuperscript{121}

**EXPLORE**

Community-based treatment services can improve public health and reduce the demand for illicit drugs. Survey respondents are supportive of such approaches. The survey and other research suggest a focus on youth in reducing demand and reducing involvement in drug trafficking.

**Border Crossing**

Respondents in Lao PDR provided similar suggestions as respondents in other survey countries regarding border crossings. Almost one-third of respondents emphasised the reduction of administrative burdens, for instance by streamlining crossing processes, reducing costs, or providing legal assistance to issue documents for work and travel. More than 140 respondents highlighted the need for the government’s assistance in information dissemination, the establishment of bilateral agreements with neighbouring countries and facilitating employment opportunities.

Respondents highlighted the importance of having personal connections through family and friends to access job information. This may imply that a large number of people rely on informal networks to obtain employment information. In addition, there are 35 recruitment agencies in Lao PDR, with 33 agencies permitted to send Lao migrant workers abroad. The government added some requirements regarding licensing in the Decree on Placement of Lao Workers to Work Abroad, but it is not yet clear whether all previously licensed agencies will need to requalify.\textsuperscript{122}

According to one study, many (aspiring) migrants fall victim to human trafficking during journeys that begin voluntarily but took place based on false information regarding employment opportunities. Between 200,000 and 450,000 people in Lao PDR fall victim to human trafficking each year, and a majority of the victims are girls aged between 12 and 18.\textsuperscript{123}

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\textsuperscript{117} UNODC & UNAIDS, “Compulsory drug treatment and rehabilitation in East and Southeast Asia”, 2020, p. 16
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, p. 16
\textsuperscript{119} ASEAN, “Drug Monitoring Report”, 2020, p. 77
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, p. 17
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, p.17
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, p. 2
Malaysia

Demographics

Gender
- Male: 372
- Female: 336

Marital status
- Married: 381
- Single: 336

Children
- Yes: 383
- No: 336

Work
- Agriculture (57)
- Goods and services (300)
- Unemployed (166)
- Manufacturing (43)
- Other (146)

Education
- No formal education (5)
- Primary school (18)
- High school (245)
- University (449)

Age
- 16-24: 175
- 25-44: 336
- 45-64: 186
- 65+: 14

719 respondents
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

Map 4: Map of survey locations

Perceptions of Illicit Trafficking

Figure 35: Malaysia - Replies of respondents to the statement “People in this place despise illicit trafficking”

Of all the survey countries, Malaysia had the smallest proportion of respondents who thought that their communities opposed illicit trafficking (60%). 25% were uncertain about how their community perceived illicit trafficking, which was the highest among the survey countries. Furthermore, 66% believed that members of their community were involved in illicit trafficking, which is also the highest among survey countries. Malaysia also had the most respondents who reported knowing someone arrested for illicit trafficking. This may indicate a higher tolerance for certain illicit activities.

Figure 37: Malaysia - Types of illicit trafficking happening in the area according to respondents
Contraband and counterfeits

Malaysia is the only survey location where trade in contraband and counterfeits is a primary concern in border communities — more than 60% mentioned this, and the most frequently listed items were illicit tobacco, with fewer respondents citing alcohol and pirated goods. Respondents who knew someone who had been arrested for illicit trafficking also often noted this was related to counterfeit goods.

Existing literature aligns with some of the survey findings. Prevalent counterfeits in Malaysia include cigarettes, clothes, footwear, cosmetics and perfumes. Almost one in every two cigarettes consumed in Malaysia is an illicit product (counterfeit or smuggled), mainly due to the high taxation. Malaysia’s northern border is referred to as a smuggling route of smaller quantities of illicit cigarettes from Thailand.124

Drug trafficking

Malaysia is a transit and destination country for heroin and various synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine.125 New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) have also become a serious threat.126 Malaysia has seized crystalline methamphetamine trafficked from the Golden Triangle127, and Tawau City is the primary stopover location for crystalline methamphetamine en route to Indonesia.128

More than one-third of respondents cited drug trafficking as their main concern in their community. Few respondents mentioned methamphetamine. In light of the serious situation, the level of awareness is considerably lower than in other countries and counterfeit goods appeared to be much more prominent as a problem recognised by respondents.

Wildlife and timber trafficking

Environmental crimes were mentioned by only 8% of respondents in Malaysia, whereas they were highlighted by 20-49% of respondents in other survey countries. Among those respondents who mentioned this type of trafficking, half specified ‘turtle eggs’ as being trafficked. Even though Malaysian respondents rarely cited environmental crimes, the country has a substantial illicit market for wildlife and timber trade. Malaysia is one of the top three global suppliers of legal tropical timber and some observers claim that it is also a key supplier of illegal tropical timber.129 Sarawak and Sabah states are major sources of illicit logging, with the majority of the timber then exported to China and Viet Nam.130

Malaysia also has been targeted for organized crime in wildlife trafficking as one of the world’s most biodiverse countries. The country is a major transit hub for smuggling pangolins, ivory, and reptiles and other wildlife parts from domestic sources and Viet Nam, to Thailand and Indonesia.131 In addition, persistent poaching has reduced the Malayan tiger population drastically.132

Human trafficking and smuggling

Only 17% of Malaysian respondents mentioned human trafficking and migrant smuggling, a lower proportion than in most other countries. 30 of these specified ‘labour migration’, linked to labour exploitation issues and the smuggling of irregular migrant workers. Malaysia employs a lot of migrant labourers from other countries, including many employed irregularly, particularly from Indonesia.133 Over half of the smuggled migrants between 2013 and 2018 appear to have been Indonesian nationals.134 Malaysia is also a source country for sex trafficking. The country has reported sexual exploitation cases at an average of 260 victims each year, and the majority were Malaysian women and girls.135 Girls from rural areas are particularly vulnerable to domestic trafficking for sex slavery.136

130 Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index - Malaysia”, 2021, p. 3
132 Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index - Malaysia”, 2021, p. 3
133 World Bank, “Migrating to Opportunity”, 2017, p.56
135 Ibid, p. 75
136 Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index - Malaysia”, 2021, p. 3
Main drivers of Illicit Activities

Figure 38: Malaysia - Reasons for engagement in illicit trafficking/contraband according to respondents

Economic factors

Malaysia is an upper-middle income country that has diversified its economy from agricultural and commodity production to include manufacturing and service sectors.  
137 Malaysia’s efforts to alleviate poverty resulted in the revision of the poverty line, which increased from $231 to $521 in 2019. However, rural residents averaged less than $2 per day in earnings in 2019. In addition to the high income gap and rising living costs, economic difficulties caused by COVID-19 put low-income households at risk.

As was the case in other survey locations, almost 80% of respondents perceived economic factors as the main driver of illicit trafficking. Respondents suggest that ‘unemployment’ and ‘rising living costs’ have caused an increase in illicit trade. Besides livelihoods and profitability for traffickers, 67 respondents emphasised the demand side, noting the lower price of contraband goods.

Social factors

Only 10% of respondents mentioned social factors as main drivers of illicit trafficking, which is similar to Lao PDR and Thailand. The majority of these respondents highlighted weak regulations, and fewer respondents mentioned low awareness. In addition, community tastes appear to have an influence: rice is a popular commodity to import illicitly and illicitly in areas connected to Indonesia, Cambodia, Viet Nam and Thailand, because of its perceived higher quality.

The existing literature suggests that weak law enforcement is one of the main drivers of illicit activities. In the illicit tobacco trade, high taxes and weak enforcement both contribute;  
139 corruption and lax enforcement are also relevant to illicit logging.  
140 Low penalties do not appear to be much of a deterrent. Malaysian Customs has recognised the necessity of implementing stricter penalties to deter the illicit trade.

Through the conducted survey, UN Community Volunteers strove to address the main reasons for drivers of illicit trafficking, noting that “the respondents’ answers gave [them] greater insight into the root causes of illicit trafficking, which has been normalized in the daily life of Tawau, Malaysia” (Rima Pammusu, United Nations Community Volunteer, Tawau (Malaysia)).

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141 ibid, p. 7
Malaysia hosts a lot of migrant workers, including a lot of low-skilled labourers attracted by its relatively higher wages. For example, around one-third of workers in the service sector and a quarter of workers in the agricultural sector are migrants. A World Bank report estimates that 2.96 to 3.26 million migrant workers were living in Malaysia at the end of 2017, including 1.23-1.46 million irregular migrants.

Only a slight majority of 56% believed that community members cross the border legally. Eight out of ten respondents in Sabah state indicated the use of illegal routes. Many cited water crossings and used the phrase ‘illegal rat routes’ to refer to certain irregular crossings. This aligns with other research. For example, one study noted that there is only one official land border checkpoint in east Malaysia and there are a lot of ‘unofficial’ border crossing points between Sarawak (Malaysia) and Kalimantan (Indonesia). UNODC research identified more than 70 human trafficking cases in the border area of Sarawak state between the year of 2020 and 2021. Entries and exits by water in Sabah state

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145 UNODC, Illicit Trafficking - Prevention in Thailand around the Malaysia-Indonesia Border Area in Sarawak State (Internal research).
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia are located in Tawau,146 which is a major transit point for methamphetamine trafficking. All of this suggests that community members are accurately reporting a high number of irregular crossings. As was the case in other survey countries, the primary reported motivation for crossing the border in Malaysia was for livelihood. However, a lot of responses were addressed from the standpoint of migrant workers who wish to cross the border to Malaysia rather than Malaysians looking to cross over into other countries.

Similar to Viet Nam, only half of the Malaysian respondents reported that crossing the border was easy before the COVID-19 pandemic. Other survey countries stated that border crossings were easy if one holds valid travel documents, but the majority of the Malaysian respondents indicated that the border crossing was easy due to the availability of illegal routes and low border security. This tendency was highlighted by respondents in Sabah and Kelantan states, which border Indonesia and Thailand, respectively. Those who believed that the border crossing was difficult commonly stated the complicated security procedures and strict control of authorities. Some respondents mentioned the possible difficulties for migrants in completing procedures.

Furthermore, only 60% of respondents believed that crossing the border is difficult at the moment. Besides the context of the pandemic situation, strict border control was mentioned the most. Those who were uncertain or believed that it is not difficult to cross provided various reasons, including the ease of irregular crossings.

Malaysians shared a similar outlook to Laotians. Half of the respondents expected that border crossing will remain challenging in the future. 109 respondents also believed that the border control system would improve as the country grows, consequently making the border crossing procedure stricter. By and large, younger generations expressed more negative expectations about border crossing. The younger the respondents, the more they believe that border crossing has been difficult in the past and is difficult now, and will continue to be so in the future.

Perceptions of prevention measures at community and individual levels

Figure 44: Malaysia - Replies of respondents to the question “What do you think could be done at the community level so people do not get involved in illicit trafficking/contraband?”

Figure 45: Malaysia - Replies of respondents to the question “What do you think you could do, so people in your community do not get involved in illicit trafficking/contraband?”

Malaysian respondents suggested awareness-raising as an effective preventive strategy at the community and individual level, which is consistent with other countries. ‘Campaign’ was emphasised as a main type of activity at the community level, and in contrast to other survey locations, some respondents cited social media and mobile messenger applications as campaign tools. In addition, ‘guiding people’ was most commonly stated as a prevention method at the individual level.

The second highest responses varied. On the community level, enhancing law enforcement comes second place, with an emphasis on monitoring and analysis. Few respondents mentioned NGOs as a type of stakeholder that can conduct monitoring or act as a communication link between authorities and communities.

On an individual level, enhancing cooperation with local authorities by reporting incidents was in second place, followed by ‘staying vigilant’. In addition, a stronger sense of self-efficacy was observed in responses, with only 2% believing that individual-level efforts would be ineffective in preventing illicit trafficking.

Malaysian respondents also encouraged increased cooperation between communities and local authorities to promote community engagement in anti-illicit trafficking initiatives, similar to respondents in Thailand. Several respondents proposed establishing a ‘hotline’ to facilitate incident reporting and to ensure that authorities can intervene promptly.

EXPLORE

Mentions of online and mobile tools for campaigning suggest potential innovations in community mobilisation, intelligence gathering and cooperation between authorities and border residents.

Main focus areas for prevention strategies in Malaysia

Contraband and counterfeits

63% of respondents identified the trade in contraband and counterfeits as the most prevalent form of illicit activity in their communities. Both the survey and prior research suggest that illicit tobacco is of primary concern. The existing literature identifies high taxation as the main driver of the illicit trade in tobacco. In 2015, the Malaysian government drastically increased taxation on cigarettes, which was followed by a rise in tobacco smuggling and cigarette counterfeiting.\textsuperscript{147} With the financial uncertainty caused by COVID-19 becoming a concern for many vulnerable communities on the border, the financial incentives to smuggle contraband and counterfeit goods are likely to have increased, and illustrate the importance of strategic taxation in relation to illicit markets.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

EXPLORE

When the Malaysian government raised taxes on cigarettes drastically in 2015, a spike in contraband trade followed. Strategic taxation policies that involve regular but gradual rises rather than sudden spikes may help to mitigate the incentives for individuals involved in the irregular trade of everyday taxed goods.

Drug use

Figure 46: Malaysia - Replies of respondents to the question “Do you think people in this area use drugs?”

Almost 60% of respondents believe that people in their area use drugs. Some respondents said drug use is prevalent among youth, and associated with other factors related to age, such as peer pressure, a search for entertainment and a lack of awareness of risks.

In 2020, official data suggested there were 8,732 drug users under the age of 19, and 83,401 drug users aged between 19 and 39. One study identified the main causes of drug abuse among youth as recreational purposes, lack of religious affiliation, and personal problems, including financial issues and domestic violence.

One-third of respondents suggested sending drug users to a rehabilitation centre, and 18% of respondents suggested increased penalties. Unlike Lao PDR and Cambodia, reporting to authorities was rarely discussed. Given penalties are considerably harsher than in other countries, respondents may be demonstrating a higher stigma toward drug users, which may make it harder for users to get adequate treatment.

Prior research suggests that Malaysia still focused heavily on coercion-based approaches in drug treatment. Even though the country initiated a shift toward a more balanced approach by promoting harm reduction programmes and transforming some compulsory facilities to voluntary facilities called “Cure and Care” centres, the number of compulsory drug detention centres (CDDCs) has remained steady since 2015 and the number of voluntary centres has decreased.

EXPLORE

In order to promote a long-term and sustainable approach that reduces drug use and improves public health, it is crucial to reduce the stigma or fear of arrest that drug users may have and to provide adequate treatment services that are based on voluntary care.

Border crossing

To ease the border crossing process for people to work or find job opportunities, the majority of respondents mentioned that assistance for work-related visas will be crucial (e.g. visa extensions, work permit issuance before crossing the border). Some respondents also mentioned that it would be beneficial to establish legitimate employment agencies or centres for foreign workers.

Malaysia has a lot of private employment agencies that help Malaysian employers to hire foreign labour. High competition in the industry enables efficient service and reasonable fees. Therefore, most of the migrant workers are being recruited through agents or directly by employers. However, there are also unlicensed recruiters and migrant workers can be at risk from falsified documents and illegitimate contracts. The government is aware of these issues, launching a National Action Plan on Forced Labour (NAPFL) 2021-2025 in November 2021.

149 ASEAN, “Drug Monitoring Report”, 2020, p. 80
152 UNODC & UNAIDS, “Compulsory drug treatment and rehabilitation in East and Southeast Asia”, January 2022, p. 19
154 ILO, “Triangle in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note”, December 2021, p. 2
Demand for migration to Malaysia for jobs is high. Respondents demonstrate awareness that measures to facilitate legal movements will be beneficial in curbing irregular migration and criminal activity.
Thailand
Thailand

Demographics

1,209 respondents

Gender

Male 520
Female 682

Age

18-24 (246)
25 – 44 (527)
45-64 (370)
65+ (61)

Marital status

Married (725)
Single (419)

Children

Yes (763)
No (441)

Education

No formal education (45)
Primary school (277)
High school (470)
University (280)
N/A (69)

Work

Agriculture (350)
Goods and services (500)
Unemployed (25)
Manufacturing (265)
N/A (69)
Map 5: Map of survey locations

- Myanmar
- Lao PDR
- Thailand
- Cambodia

Survey locations:
- Chiang Rai
- Chumphon
- Kanchanaburi
- Mae Hong Son
- Tak
- Nakhon Phanom
- Sri Sa Ket
- Sa Kaeo
- Songkhla
- Narathiwat
- Tak
- Mae Hong Son
- Chumphon
- Kanchanaburi
- Nakhon Phanom
- Sri Sa Ket
- Sa Kaeo
- Songkhla
- Narathiwat
Perceptions of illicit trafficking

59% of respondents believed that people in their communities had a negative view of illicit trafficking, which is the lowest rate across the survey countries. Among the 21% of respondents who believed that people have a higher tolerance for illicit trafficking, six out of ten respondents were from Narathiwat and Songkhla provinces. In addition, 40% of respondents believed that their community members were involved in illicit trafficking. Most of the respondents were from Tak, Songkhla, Narathiwat and Kanchanaburi provinces. Additionally, the survey analysis found that the lower the respondent’s income, the more likely they are to believe that others are involved in illicit trafficking. It seems plausible that this relationship arises because many low-level traffickers come from poor backgrounds.

Drug trafficking

Thailand is a consumption and transit country for methamphetamine produced in Myanmar. A substantial rise in drug production and trafficking arrests in Thailand involving synthetic drugs is indicative of this phenomenon. Crystalline methamphetamine was the most frequently seized substance in 2020, followed by heroin, ketamine, and methamphetamine tablets. While crystalline seizures accounted for the majority of cases, heroin and ketamine seizures also increased more than 2-3 times compared to 2019.

In addition, opium poppy cultivation is practised on a limited scale, notably in the northern regions. According to the Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB), there were 23 hectares of illicit opium poppy cultivation in 2020. A lack of job prospects, income disparity and lack of infrastructure were primary drivers of opium poppy cultivation. The results of the survey supported the literature – opium was cited by only one respondent.

The rise in methamphetamine seizures was also reflected in the survey. 61% of respondents highlighted drug trafficking as the main concern of their communities. Methamphetamine was the most commonly cited substance in Thailand and Lao PDR, which is consistent with the rise in methamphetamine trafficking in the GMS. Cannabis and kratom leaves were also cited by several respondents.

Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

## Contraband and counterfeits

Thailand’s counterfeiters produce and export counterfeit cosmetics, footwear, textile and leather products. The country is also a source of false health supplements and medicines. Additionally, the country has been a transit and destination country for smuggled oil and fuel. More than half of survey respondents mentioned the trade in counterfeit and contraband goods, the second-highest across all survey locations. Illicit tobacco, alcohol, and oil were commonly cited by respondents.

Many respondents mentioned the informal trade between Narathiwat province of Thailand and Kelantan state of Malaysia. The two regions have a long history of informal trade of Malaysian rice, which is transported to Thailand. The contraband trade has been challenged by stronger border management in response to political instability between Thailand and Malaysia in 2004. However, the markets persist, based on “formalised networks of traders”, as indicated by respondents to the survey.

## Wildlife and timber trafficking

Thailand is a source and transit country for Siamese rosewood trafficking. Rosewood loggers are predominantly from across the Cambodian border, and are often assisted by Thai or Cambodian brokers and the Cambodian army. In addition, Thailand is a key transit and destination country for illegal wildlife trafficking in the region, most notably the trade in ivory, tiger skins, pangolins and rhino horn. The country also has the world’s largest wildlife market in the world.

Thai respondents’ recognition of environmental crimes appears low compared to the extent of the issue in the country. Only 20% of respondents identified wildlife and timber trafficking as their communities’ major concerns. Several respondents specified trafficked wildlife and timber, including barking deer, lizards, bamboo, and phayung wood.

## Human trafficking and smuggling

Over the last two decades, Thailand has become an important destination for labour migrants, mainly from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam. The number of non-Thai residents increased to 4.9 million in 2018, with migrants making up over 10% of the workforce in Thailand. There are a large number of irregular labour migrants, many of whom are at risk of being exploited and trafficked. Thailand is a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking in the area, with the majority of victims becoming forced labourers or victims of sexual exploitation. Children from low-income households, ethnic minorities and stateless people in the country are often targeted. The crime often involves organized crime and corrupt officials at the borders.

Even though Thailand has serious human trafficking issues, the awareness of the issue in the border communities appears to be low. Only 13% of respondents mentioned human trafficking and smuggling, and several respondents provided remarks on labour migration and prostitution. Basic awareness-raising or more advanced behaviour

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158 Ibid, p. 146
159 Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index - Thailand”, 2021, p. 2
162 Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index - Thailand”, 2021, p. 2
163 Ibid, p. 2
165 Global Initiative, “Global Organized Crime Index - Thailand”, 2021, p. 2
change engagements with border communities would be necessary if law enforcement agencies wish to reduce human trafficking and migrant smuggling.

**Main drivers of Illicit Activities**

**Figure 50: Thailand - Reasons for engagement in illicit trafficking/contraband according to respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>1005 (83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livelihood</td>
<td>507 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit</td>
<td>470 (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheaper</td>
<td>57 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>138 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>52 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation</td>
<td>19 (2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Economic factors**

Thailand is an upper-middle-income country and has achieved great strides in economic and social development over recent decades. This economic progress has enabled the country to consolidate high levels of social development in areas such as education and health.

In spite of the overall strength of the Thai economy, it has slowed in recent years. The country’s economic and social imbalances between urban and remote areas continue to widen. Additionally, COVID-19 has had a significant influence on the country, resulting in a high unemployment rate and the collapse of many middle-income households. Since 2020, at least 200,000 more people have become impoverished. The impacts appear to have been disproportionately bad for rural children from low-income households or ethnic minority communities, since many of them could not finish primary education. Many have likely become more vulnerable to human trafficking. Moreover, increased poverty in rural and remote areas may reintroduce individuals to opium poppy cultivation or drug trafficking.

The survey findings corresponded with regional trends. 83% of Thai respondents suggested that economic factors were the key drivers of illicit trafficking, with the two different motivations of subsistence livelihoods and a search for wealth/status. In addition, 15% of respondents emphasised the benefit of the cheaper price of the contraband products – the majority of these respondents were in Narathiwat and Songkhla provinces.

**EXPLORE**

Even though Thailand successfully reduced opium poppy cultivation through the implementation of livelihood development projects, it is important to continue implementing these to prevent the possible increase in poppy cultivation again due to economic hardships caused by COVID-19. It would also be useful to adapt these approaches to attempt an impact on other illicit activities, such as wildlife trafficking and human trafficking.

**Social factors**

Over recent decades, economic progress has enabled Thailand to consolidate improvements in areas such as education and health. However, the social marginalisation of some living in rural and isolated areas makes them more vulnerable to illicit activities. For example, children in Thailand appear susceptible to human trafficking as a result of a lack of education and a limited understanding of their rights. In addition, people from Northern Hill tribes, where many do not have citizenship, are often targeted by human traffickers.

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Only 11% of Thai respondents perceived social factors as main drivers of illicit activities, such as a lack of awareness and peer influence. In addition, several respondents showed a more relaxed attitude towards the trade in contraband goods, while they were strongly against drug trafficking. Cultural factors were also mentioned as motivators of illicit trafficking within border communities, such as personal preferences to consume products with halal marks. These findings connect with the existing literature, which has found that cultural and family connections between Thailand and Malaysia promote cross-border trade of all kinds. Some respondents also mentioned relationships between law enforcement and border community members as undermining effectiveness against illicit activities:

“(The border crossing in the future) could be more difficult because Malaysia has changed the system to allow people to cross the border. Nevertheless, Malaysian officers are letting people from here, crossing, to work over there conveniently sometimes, because Malaysian officers think of us Narathiwat people like their relatives, helping each other.”

“(The border crossing in the future) seems to be difficult, because Thailand is building a wall by the river. But Malaysian authorities still allow people to get into Malaysia to purchase goods for resale back at home, because they understand the problems of the locals in Narathiwat. They are also Malay people, speaking the same language, same religion, we are relatives since ancestors.”

**EXPLORE**

A clear understanding of cultural enablers of illicit trafficking allows for specific prevention initiatives or policies to be developed. For example, understanding the demand for halal goods in border villages in Thailand as a driver of the movement of contraband trade from Malaysia can help to create a specific prevention strategy.
Figure 54: Thailand - Replies of respondents to the statement “In the future, it will be difficult to legally cross the border”

Within ASEAN, Thailand is one of the main host countries for migrants, owing to its higher wages for labour migrants and the country’s high demand for low-skilled workers. However, only 14% of respondents believe that people in their community cross the border illegally. As is the case in the other survey countries, ‘livelihoods’ is the major reason for border crossings in Thailand, highlighted by more than 70% of respondents. This encompasses the purchase and resale of products, which may indicate trade in contraband goods. Several respondents cited trade in wildlife commodities, such as wild mushrooms, wild pakwan, timber and bamboo.

The movement restrictions caused by the pandemic affected respondents’ perceptions on the ease of border crossings. More than 80% of respondents believed it was not difficult to cross the border before COVID-19. A majority of respondents in other countries claimed that it requires the possession of valid travel documents, but a substantial number of Thai respondents stated that many individuals took advantage of porous borders to cross without documents. Those who stated that it was difficult to cross the border highlighted the complicated border screening procedure and associated fees.

On the other hand, almost nine out of ten respondents believed that it is difficult to cross the border at the moment due to additional restrictions associated with the pandemic. Only a few respondents stressed other difficulties, such as obtaining documents, as a more relevant factor than COVID-19.

Half of the respondents anticipated easier border crossing in the future, similar to the results in Cambodia and Viet Nam, while 28% of respondents expressed pessimism. These predictions are contingent on predictions for how the pandemic evolves. Some respondents who claimed that crossing the border will be difficult expressed their concerns about Myanmar’s political situation, while others stated that border procedures may get more complicated as advanced screening technologies appear at border checkpoints. Concerns about political turmoil in Myanmar were primarily stated by respondents from Mae Hong Son province. This could be impacted by the hosting of Karen refugees from Myanmar’s Kayin state in April, 2021 in the province.168

EXPLORE

The survey and existing literature suggest that Thailand has issues relating to its porous border regions. In order to facilitate economic development and enhance border security simultaneously, establishing rapid border checkpoints would be beneficial.

Thai respondents suggested both economic and social approaches to prevent illicit trafficking, similar to Lao PDR. 49% of respondents believed that economic solutions could help prevent illicit trafficking. Apart from creating job opportunities and supporting local businesses, promoting trade with Malaysia was highlighted, to facilitate legitimate imports of products that many locals need, such as halal goods and items for Muslim women.

57% of respondents suggested social approaches to reducing illicit activities, such as raising awareness and enhancing law enforcement. Among the respondents who mentioned awareness-raising, several respondents suggested that the learning experience they had in school and community events was helpful. Awareness-raising initiatives in schools and communities can have a positive impact on beneficiaries and respondents gave the following examples:

“I learnt from the meeting within the community about how to protect ourselves from drugs. My teachers also taught about these things when I was in classes.”

“I learnt about the illegal trade from school and self-study. I know what I should and shouldn’t do, also as I saw examples in the news, I don’t want to repeat that.”

Many Thai respondents believe that close cooperation between communities and local authorities would be the most important prevention measure, with some mentioning capacity-building and joint monitoring activities. Additionally, 16% of respondents considered that economic support from local authorities would be beneficial to facilitate community participation in combating illicit trafficking. This included vocational training for youth and funding for various community activities.

Perceptions of prevention measures at community and individual levels

“I learn from the TV about bad examples, and I won’t be like them. Also, at school and with my family, they always implanted the idea since I was young that I must not break any laws.”
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

As with other survey locations, ‘awareness-raising’ was highlighted as the primary strategy at the community level to combat illicit trafficking by 37% of respondents, followed by economic support and enhancing regulation with 28% and 23%, respectively. Thai respondents emphasised the importance of the community’s role much more than respondents in other countries. Those who mentioned ‘enhancing regulations’ emphasised the community’s proactive involvement in monitoring operations. In addition, some respondents who suggested ‘economic support’ highlighted the need to support local businesses and promote alternative livelihoods, such as agriculture.

Respondents also suggested building networks in communities that can carry out various activities, such as community-based patrolling, social activities to reduce drug use, and supporting programmes for local businesses. These findings suggest that community-based initiatives may have a good probability of success in Thailand’s border communities.

On an individual level, one-third of respondents believed that the best way to prevent illicit trafficking is to take a decision to not get involved themselves. Raising awareness came in second place, which included efforts of individuals to persuade neighbours and family members to not get involved, and to understand the harmful impacts of illicit trafficking.

In addition, a similar number of respondents mentioned that improving individual job prospects could help. Many answers acknowledged that people’s livelihoods are deeply linked with selling contraband products, therefore it is important to give them an effective opportunity to change their occupation.

Overall, respondents engaged with the survey and looked forward to hearing what collective perceptions of prevention measures at community and individual levels were. Ms. Kirana Boonmatanyarat, United Nations Community Volunteer in Nakhon Phanom (Thailand) reported that “the survey respondents from the Learning centre praised [it], underlining how valuable it was to have an organisation conducting this kind of research on people’s opinion on drugs and illegal trading in their own communities”.

EXPLORE

Many respondents believed in the promotion of different career paths for those who make a living with trade in Malaysian contraband products, so a livelihood development approach may be relevant in this area.

Promoting community policing is also recommended. Respondents showed enthusiasm for participating in monitoring activities, but given that their level of trust in local authorities’ capacity was the lowest across all survey countries, capacity-building of law enforcement officers is also required.
Main focus areas for prevention strategies in Thailand

Trade in contraband goods

The survey covered the issue of informal trade in Narathiwat and Songkhla provinces. Not only were prices and porous borders highlighted as the main drivers, but the cultural context also played a significant role. The establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) throughout the country, including the two provinces stated above, would be an effective approach to reduce informal trade and boost economic cooperation through formal channels. However, while SEZs would be a solution to reducing illicit trade by providing tax incentives, they may introduce an additional security risk if the facilities are not equipped with security infrastructure to prevent other forms of illicit trafficking.

Drug use

The most commonly abused substance in the country is methamphetamine tablets, followed by crystalline methamphetamine and cannabis. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of new drug users has been declining, while older users who fell into a relapse have increased. Drug use has had a huge negative impact on ethnic minorities. For instance, Muslim communities in the southern provinces are experiencing a drug use crisis, with around 35% of the population, mainly aged between 14 and 30, depending on a combination of local kratom leaves, cough syrup, Coca-Cola and methamphetamine.

Drug treatment measures in Thailand have faced many challenges. The country ran a ‘war on drugs’ for several decades and now has the world’s highest share of prisoners in prisons for drug offences, who accounted for 80% of all prisoners. Over-incarceration has accelerated other health issues, such as the spread of HIV. The country established compulsory rehabilitation centres to solve the high costs of incarceration and health issues, but this again involved overcrowding issues without proper drug treatment. Courts initiated a diversion programme to outpatient psychosocial counselling instead of imprisonment. However, a weakness may be that the decision between diversion and punishment is subject to a judge’s discretion, and some judges are not in favour of the programme.

Border crossing

Prior research has suggested that Thailand may lack safe and effective recruiting systems and governance frameworks that enable and regulate labour mobility, so a large number of labour migrants are vulnerable to exploitation at all stages of the migration procedure. To ease the border crossing and have more work opportunities, survey respondents suggested a better work permit system that facilitates employment documents. Other respondents mentioned that better conditions for

\[169\] ASED, “Drug Monitoring”, 2020, p. 109
\[171\] https://idpc.net/blog/2021/04/drug-rehabilitation-in-thailand-treatment-or-punishment
\[172\] https://fileserv.idpc.net/library/en-cdghnpdz0345.pdf p.28
\[173\] https://idpc.net/blog/2021/04/drug-rehabilitation-in-thailand-treatment-or-punishment
workers coming from Myanmar and Lao PDR are needed.

The country’s ad hoc measures to fill immediate labour shortages by allowing temporary stays for irregular migrants from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar has continued since 1992, without the establishment of a comprehensive legal framework.\(^\text{177}\) This has resulted in the majority of migrant workers getting temporary permits or remaining irregular.

Currently, there are two pathways for labour migration in Thailand. One is the official channel established by MoU between Thailand and Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam (CLMV). It provides full access to employment opportunities in Thailand. The other channel is the ‘Nationality Verification’ system, which enables undocumented migrants to achieve legal status and stay in the country. Even though the government provides an official service, due to the high costs and complicated procedures associated with the MoU Channel, only a small number of migrants utilise it and most of them still use the irregular routes.\(^\text{178}\)

**EXPLORE**

Enhancing and streamlining current migration services is crucial for encouraging legitimate labour migration and reducing the space for human trafficking and labour exploitation. Border communities in this survey seem prepared to support this.

\(^\text{177}\) Ibid., p.1  
\(^\text{178}\) Ibid., p.16
Viet Nam

Demographics

Gender
- Male: 475
- Female: 440

Age
- 18-24: 126
- 25-44: 573
- 45-64: 191
- 65+: 12

Marital status
- Married: 750
- Single: 169

Children
- Yes: 752
- No: 164

Work
- Agriculture: 427
- Goods and services: 135
- Unemployed: 46
- Manufacturing: 42
- N/A: 101

Education
- No formal education: 50
- Primary school: 215
- High school: 503
- University: 147
- N/A: 6
Map 6: Map of survey locations
Perceptions of Illicit Trafficking

Figure 58: Viet Nam - Replies of respondents to the statement “People in this place despise illicit trafficking”

Figure 59: Viet Nam - Replies of respondents to the statement “Some people in this place are involved in illicit trafficking/contraband”

66% of respondents in Viet Nam believed that people in their communities shared a negative view of illicit trafficking. With regards to community involvement in illicit trafficking however, respondents’ perceptions varied more. 38% of respondents believe that members of their community engage in illicit activities and 35% believe they do not.

Drug trafficking

Viet Nam is a transit country for drug trafficking, with the majority of drugs coming from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand. Myanmar is the key source country of methamphetamine trafficking for domestic use in Viet Nam. According to ASEAN drug monitoring, Ho Chi Minh city and southwest border provinces have become major transit spots or destinations for illicit substances. In 2020, the seizure of methamphetamine tablets in Viet Nam increased by 113%, while the seizure of heroin and marijuana decreased by 47% and 56%, respectively.

Contraband and counterfeits

Vietnamese respondents mentioned trade in counterfeits and contraband goods more frequently than in other countries. This issue was mentioned more frequently by respondents from Lao Cai, Cao Bang, Quang Ninh, and Long An provinces. Over half of the respondents cited the term ‘explosives’, which was mostly firecrackers but also included small weapons such as guns and grenades. Illicit tobacco was also often mentioned.

Viet Nam only records a handful of counterfeit seizures each year. Moreover, the explosive contraband trade, notably fireworks smuggling, happens consistently each year, mostly for

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celebrating the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, after the Vietnamese government officially prohibited the sale and consumption of fireworks in 1995.\textsuperscript{182}

**Wildlife and timber trafficking**

Regarding environmental crime, there were more mentions of wildlife crime than illicit logging in Viet Nam. Viet Nam is a major timber exporter and a wood furniture manufacturer. After Lao PDR imposed a sawn wood export ban in 2016, timber trafficking from Cambodia increased.\textsuperscript{183} The majority of roundwood and sawn wood is imported from sources with a high risk of illegality.\textsuperscript{184}

Viet Nam is also a main transit point for illicit wildlife products from Malaysia and Indonesia, and it has a large domestic consumer market.\textsuperscript{185} Pangolin scale trafficking has been a major concern, as well as the trafficking of tigers.\textsuperscript{186} Vietnamese respondents were more likely to recognise wildlife trafficking in relation to the trafficking of ‘animals’, whilst there was no mention of timber trafficking by respondents.


\textsuperscript{183} UNODC (2019), ‘Transnational Organized Crime in Southeast Asia: Evolution, Growth and Impact’, p. 132

**Human trafficking and smuggling**

Viet Nam was second lowest among survey countries for recognising human trafficking or migrant smuggling as an issue - only 8% of respondents mentioned these and mostly in relation to irregular migration. The majority of victims are remote ethnic minority groups and women.\textsuperscript{187} One of the most common patterns of human trafficking is the exploitation of people migrating overseas for job opportunities. Some unlicensed recruitment companies charge excessive fees to trap individuals in debt, and force them to work in fishing, agriculture and logging. Major destinations include Malaysia and Lao PDR.\textsuperscript{188}

**Main drivers of Illicit Activities**

**Figure 61: Viet Nam - Reasons for engagement in illicit trafficking/contraband according to respondents**

![Figure 61: Viet Nam - Reasons for engagement in illicit trafficking/contraband according to respondents](image)

**Economic factors**

The Vietnamese economy has proven resilient through different crises, the latest being COVID-19. Viet Nam was one of only a few countries to observe GDP growth in 2020. However, the COVID-19 Delta variant affected Viet Nam badly in 2021, with the economy slowing.\textsuperscript{189} Viet Nam is the 13th most populous country in the world with more than 95 million people, so a poverty rate of 9.8 percent


implies around 9 million impoverished people.\textsuperscript{190} About 6.6 million are from ethnic minority groups, although they only account for around 15 percent of the total population.\textsuperscript{191} A low-income household in Viet Nam tends to have characteristics such as low education, dependence on agriculture, and limited access to infrastructure.\textsuperscript{192} Poverty in Viet Nam makes people more vulnerable to human trafficking. A drive to secure a livelihood leads many to embark on risky migration that turns into trafficking, including sexual exploitation and modern slavery.\textsuperscript{193}

As in other survey countries, a majority of respondents in Viet Nam cited economic motivations as the key drivers of illicit trafficking. However, a slightly higher number of respondents mentioned profitability rather than livelihoods. This may imply that the Vietnamese community view illicit trafficking in a more negative light, i.e. as greed rather than necessity.

**Social factors**

24% of respondents highlighted social factors as a main driver of illicit trafficking. A majority of these respondents cited ‘lack of awareness’ as the reason people in their communities fail to take action against illicit trafficking. Only one respondent pointed out systemic issues related to the lack of response and capacity of the authorities. This finding may relate to respondents’ high level of trust in the authorities’ capacity to tackle illicit trafficking - 74% reported such trust. It could also be explained by respondents’ reluctance to express their views about the government to the survey enumerators. Most border regions in Viet Nam are rural or remote, so a lack of education\textsuperscript{194} could exacerbate vulnerabilities and the gap between communities and authorities. This would appear particularly risky in relation to human trafficking, as well as to cross-border trafficking in wildlife, timber and drugs.

\textsuperscript{190} Ngo Ha Quyen, “Reducing rural poverty in Viet Nam: issues, policies, challenges”, Mekong Development Research Institute, March 2019, p. 2

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid. p.2

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid. p.2


\textsuperscript{194} UNICEF, “Global Out-of-school Children 2016: Viet Nam country study”, 2016, p.133-141
Viet Nam is a major source country for labour migrants. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vietnamese government promoted labour migration in Viet Nam as a means of poverty reduction. 195 Thailand has been a common destination for Vietnamese migrant workers. Many migrant workers travel overland through irregular routes that cross Lao PDR. Similar to other countries, almost 80% of respondents said that the main reason for crossing the border is to secure a livelihood. Among those, more than one third of respondents cited ‘trade’ or ‘buying and selling’, but they did not specify if this was legitimate or irregular trade. However, trade in counterfeit and contraband goods was frequently identified by respondents from Lao Cai, Cao Bang, Quang Ninh, and Long An provinces. 

Most Vietnamese respondents believed that people cross the border legally, but a considerable minority of respondents from two provinces bordering China reported that people use illegal routes. Around 40% of respondents from Lao Cai province believed that people use illegal routes to cross the border, primarily over water. 27% of respondents from Dien Bien provinces also stated that people cross the border illegally, mainly land routes. 

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated movement restrictions affected respondents’ perceptions regarding the ease of border crossings. Almost two-thirds of Vietnamese respondents perceived that crossing the border was easy before the pandemic, as long as one could provide valid travel documents. On the other hand, people who stated that it was difficult to cross the border mostly cited the complicated procedures and the inconvenience of travelling to/through official checkpoints. 

Overall, 85% of Vietnamese respondents believe it is currently difficult to cross the border due to pandemic control measures, but most expect it to become easier again in future. respondents expressed a less pessimistic view on the crossing border situation in the future. Interestingly, their predictions were not solely based on the evolution of the pandemic, but also on expected success in developing better infrastructure and establishing relationships with neighbouring countries that would facilitate crossings.

195 ILO, “Triangle in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note”, December 2021, p. 1
EXPLORE

Around 40% of respondents from Lao Cai province bordering China believed that people use the illegal routes to cross the border, primarily over water routes. Measures to incentivise regular border crossings should focus more on provinces where this phenomenon has been reported more frequently among border communities, as this may indicate a need for infrastructure that allows for legal crossings from Viet Nam to China.

Additionally, more than seven in ten respondents in Viet Nam believed that their local authorities have the capability to tackle illicit trafficking, which is the highest rate across all survey countries. Programmes to tackle illicit trafficking in Viet Nam should therefore involve local authorities and continue to consolidate their positive relationship with local communities.

Perceptions of Prevention

Figure 66: Viet Nam - Major factors preventing people from getting involved in illicit trafficking/contraband according to respondents

70% of respondents believe that social interventions are the most useful, such as stricter enforcement and awareness-raising. In addition, 38% of respondents stated that economic assistance would be useful to reduce illicit trafficking in their communities. Along with common responses such as creating job opportunities and providing vocational training, many respondents noted that financial support for local businesses and underprivileged households would reduce the likelihood that they would become involved in illicit trafficking.

Furthermore, 26% of respondents wanted local authorities to do more awareness-raising activities, in order to facilitate community engagement in combating illicit trafficking. Other respondents highlighted the need for cooperation between communities and local authorities by installing hotlines and other communication channels that would allow individuals to protect their identities. Some respondents also stated that the procedure for registering community associations should be simplified to facilitate the community’s engagement, which often requires local authorities’ permission.

Respondents indicated support for programmes supporting vulnerable households to build skills and to develop alternative livelihood pathways. Livelihood development projects in border communities impacted by illicit trafficking could be well received by community residents.
‘Awareness-raising’ was highlighted as a key preventative measure at both community and individual levels by 60%-70% of respondents. On a community level, some respondents also highlighted the importance of financial support for local prevention activities.

“Currently, the allowance for the leader of the militia and self-defence group is not much... Meanwhile, travelling here is very difficult (sometimes it’s raining, you can’t ride, you have to walk from house to house). Therefore, I would like to increase the financial support for cooperative participants like me.”

On an individual level, 28% of respondents stated that preventing illicit trafficking is either impossible or they are unsure what to do. It is the highest rate across all survey countries, and it may suggest that some initial mobilisation and demonstration activities will be valuable to developing greater community willingness to get involved.

**EXPLORE**

Awareness-raising campaigns were also highlighted by respondents as a key measure that should be taken against illicit trafficking. This could indicate that border communities in Viet Nam would react receptively to community-based campaigns that would help those vulnerable to trafficking learn about the risks and dangers of the trade, whilst understanding what alternatives could be available to them.

**Main focus areas for prevention strategies in Viet Nam**

**Drug use**

Official estimates of the number of drug users in Viet Nam have remained steady in recent years, at around 200,000 to 235,000 individuals, with 96% of them men. The country has implemented compulsory drug treatment, community-based treatment and Methadone Maintained Therapy (MMT). The services also include education and vocational training. Viet Nam has been shifting its emphasis more towards harm reduction, aiming to reduce the number of compulsory centres and emphasising community-based treatment services. However, according to 2020 statistics, there are still
97 public compulsory facilities with almost 35,000 patients, and only 16 voluntary facilities throughout the country.198 Viet Nam’s Department of Social Vices Prevention estimates that seven out of ten drug users are under 30 years old, and 5% of users have been under 18 years old.199 Existing literature suggests that the level of drug awareness among students, teachers and parents is very low.200

55-75% of respondents in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Malaysia agreed that individuals use drugs in their communities, but fewer respondents in Viet Nam concurred (19%). A partial exception was Nghe An province, where 30% mentioned that people in their community use drugs.201 Unfortunately, the survey did not ask respondents how to tackle drug use. More research or a follow-up survey would be essential to assess the level of stigma and community experiences of drug treatment services, as well as to implement effective community-based programmes in the region.

Border crossing

Similar to other survey countries, many Vietnamese respondents suggested that the authorities reduce administrative burdens and increase employment opportunities in order to reduce irregular border crossings to work in neighbouring countries. Fewer respondents emphasised the importance of development in infrastructure such as better roads, transportation, and more checkpoints to increase access to legal border crossings.

The Vietnamese government has promoted labour migration in order to expand job opportunities and alleviate poverty. As part of its poverty-reduction efforts, the country has subsidised people from “designated poor districts” in 20 provinces that wish to migrate.202 Loans and financial aid were provided for vocational training, medical screening and other services. However, the ILO pointed out that such measures may encourage vulnerable populations, such as ethnic minorities and others with “limited education”, to move without sufficient preparation.203

Furthermore, the Vietnamese government recently announced a plan to improve socio-economic development in the land border region, in accordance with ‘Resolution No. 23/NQ-CP on Economic Development in Land Border Areas’.204 The plan included improving road infrastructure and completing land and forest allocations, notably for ethnic minorities, to improve livelihood conditions in border communities.205 However, there are still concerns. While the government provides some assistance in the labour migration process for vulnerable groups, many individuals continue to face significant financial and social difficulties, which can impede labour mobility. According to the ILO survey of Vietnamese migrant workers who work in Malaysia, the median cost of labour migration was 1,370 USD, which included recruiting agency fees, visas, transportation and vocational training.206

EXPLORE

In spite of recent moves towards voluntary treatment centres, compulsory treatment centres remain common in Viet Nam. Rates of drug use are relatively steady and are not decreasing. It would be beneficial to expand further the availability of voluntary treatment centres.

EXPLORE

Investing in regular migration opportunities has provided many people in Viet Nam with livelihood alternatives to illicit trade and trafficking. Creating more local opportunities through livelihood development programmes can help to sustain livelihoods in border communities while strengthening local economies.

202 ILO, “Triangle in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note”, December 2021, p. 1
203 Ibid, p. 1
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia
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Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusion

Transnational organized crime and illicit trafficking in Southeast Asia are complex. Prior research has shown common drivers such as weak governance, lack of alternative livelihoods, conflict and cultural tolerance towards certain types of illicit activity, but country-specific drivers and local drivers are also relevant to understanding and acting against organized crime. Little research has been done to understand individual perceptions of what drives illicit trafficking in the region, and prior studies have neglected to focus on border communities where a significant amount of illicit trafficking takes place. This study examined perceptions and experiences of illicit activities in border communities in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, Malaysia and Viet Nam. It is the first report of its kind, complementing local studies with a regional view and complementing more threat-focused analysis with a community-centred perspective drawn from thousands of individual voices. The results here are part of a package of insights and recommendations alongside UNODC’s report Protecting Peace and Prosperity in Southeast Asia. That report focuses on crime and the national/collective response, while the present report is the first ever focused on community experiences. Together, they provide a unique combination of data and analysis ranging from the regional policy level down to individual views from remote border regions.

Overall, the majority of border community respondents believe public sentiment towards illicit activities is negative, but they emphasise different activities. Most respondents chose drug trafficking as a major concern. Human trafficking and environmental trafficking appeared to be less associated with illicit trafficking for the majority of respondents across all countries. Respondents in Thailand and Malaysia indicate a higher tolerance for trade in smuggled goods, particularly everyday goods such as food and clothing. Some respondents across Thailand also expressed understanding of the importance of wildlife trafficking for the livelihoods of many people who do not have economic alternatives.

When asked about what they believed were the major drivers for illicit trafficking in the region, the majority of respondents across all countries pointed to economic factors, but preferred prevention measures varied. While all countries thought that non-economic approaches such as enhancing law enforcement and awareness-raising were most significant, respondents from Lao PDR and Thailand mentioned economic support (i.e. creating employment opportunities) as equally important. In general, younger people presented higher awareness of wildlife trafficking issues. In addition, no statistically significant findings were observed in gender, but additional studies or a follow-up survey are necessary to identify gender-focused prevention strategies for certain forms of trafficking, notably human trafficking.

Border crossing was also explored among respondents of the survey. The study found that most people agreed that people in their cities crossed the border legally, and illegal border crossing routes were mentioned by less than 10% of respondents. Malaysia was the country with the highest number of respondents that mentioned illegal crossings (20%), with the respondents from Sabah states mentioning the most. Respondents in all countries cited ‘livelihood’ as the most important reason to cross the border, which included motives of trading (both licit and illicit). In the case of Cambodia, 25% of respondents also stated medical issues, which may indicate the trend of medical tourism in the

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207 Iffat Idris, “Drivers and enablers of serious organised crime in Southeast Asia”, K4D Helpdesk Report, 30 August 2019, p. 2
Drivers of Illicit Trafficking in Border Communities in Southeast Asia

country due to the easier access and better medical systems. Perceptions of the difficulties of crossing borders varied for the future, however respondents from all countries agreed that crossing the border currently was challenging due to consequences of COVID-19. All countries also agreed that crossing the border was easy before the pandemic outbreak as long as people held valid documents. However, a considerable number of respondents in Thailand also highlighted that individuals took advantage of porous border conditions.

Respondents across the region had different ideas about how to make legal border crossings easier in the future, and emphasised various factors that authorities should consider to encourage positive migration among border communities in Southeast Asia. Facilitating and streamlining screening procedures at border crossings were mentioned, as were lower costs for expediting travel documents, increasing legitimate job opportunities and providing assistance to potential migrants to organise legal documents.

Prior to this survey, UNODC successfully supported individuals and communities impacted by illicit trafficking throughout Southeast Asia with a variety of different programmes. These programmes have focused on supporting security infrastructure, livelihood development initiatives and building capacities of actors involved in combating illicit trafficking. Some examples of past programmes that sought to tackle illicit trafficking in Southeast Asia include the establishment of BLOs across Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand and Lao PDR. They also include livelihood development programmes such as the establishment of the Shan Mountain Coffee initiative, which supported farmers in Shan State to replace opium crops with coffee, and similar initiative in Houaphanh province in Lao PDR. In addition, UNODC has worked to promote Community-based Treatment programmes for those affected by drug use in order to tackle criticisms that involuntary treatment centres violate human rights and do not effectively reduce the demand for illicit substances.

Existing development-centred approaches have the potential to be expanded to the greater region in order to respond to shifting trends in various forms of illicit trafficking. Findings point to a particular need for anti-crime interventions that are diverse and holistic, and that combine strategies to tackle supply as well as demand moving forward. UNODC stands ready to support capacity-building and operational impacts in line with our strategic work at the national and regional level, furthering the umbrella framework for cooperation detailed in the 2021 ASEAN Border Management Cooperation Roadmap.

Recommendations

Improve coordination between officials and communities in border regions

Law enforcement officers in border regions are acutely aware that they need the help of the community to reduce the threat of organized crime. This survey has shown that there is a lot of interest from border communities in more effective law enforcement. The challenge is to strengthen positive connections between officials and communities. Law enforcement agencies can be supported to conduct effective, efficient community engagement through provision of advice and technical assistance on outreach, communications and responses. By building on existing attitudes at the local level, the benefit will be to generate better practical cooperation between citizens and officers, reducing the space and increasing the costs for organized crime.

Develop community policing initiatives that engage officials and community leaders

There is an opportunity for local officers and community leaders to work together to improve monitoring of border areas and community outreach with individuals. Respondents from all countries emphasised that they would like local authorities to conduct more frequent monitoring, and to participate in awareness-raising campaigns with local residents. Additionally, respondents from Thailand mentioned that community leaders could play an increasing role in tackling illicit trafficking together with other community actors. Therefore, local officers and community leaders could benefit from capacity-building sessions. The direct benefit is to enable a division of labour between official and unofficial influences on organized crime threats with a collateral benefit of improving understanding and trust between local officers, community leaders and community members.
Develop different types of community engagement for different types of illicit trafficking

You would not assign a forensic scientist to lead a SWAT patrol and you would not assign a cybercrime specialist to lead in crowd control. A similar rule applies to strategising on criminal behaviour in border regions: different behaviours require different specialist responses. Do not attempt outreach, communications or enforcement based on generalised appeals against crime. For example, survey respondents in Thailand with a negative perception of drug trafficking tended to have a less negative perception of general smuggling, such as smuggling of food and clothing. In other countries, wildlife trafficking was more tolerated because it was seen as important for economic survival in rural communities. Security agencies and leaders in border communities can be assisted with methodologies for identifying priorities among different crimes, analysing community support and resistance, then tailoring enforcement and outreach strategies accordingly.

Build connections between BLOs and local police stations to improve information gathering and sharing

There is an opportunity to improve cooperation between BLOs and local police stations to strengthen information gathering and sharing capacities. BLOs are coordinating offices for national law enforcement agencies which facilitate and promote greater cross-border cooperation. Located near recognised border crossings, BLOs act as a centralised clearing house for information received from the vicinity of border areas and a point where joint actions can be taken and coordinated. The BLO concept has prioritised domestic inter-agency cooperation and cross-border cooperation, with lesser focus on how law enforcement agencies in border regions interact with communities. Ties between BLOs and local police stations in border communities can be developed with a view to improving information gathering processes and communication channels.

Strengthen locally sensitive analytical capacities

The outreach recommendations above come with an added benefit: effective communications activities will be two-way, which means that they create opportunities to generate new streams of data and report on trends and concerns among affected communities. This survey indicates the type of community information that can be available; it also shows that there is a willingness among affected communities to provide input. Law enforcement agencies charged with tackling illicit trafficking and illicit border crossings struggle to collect, integrate and interpret data that could safeguard communities and demonstrate their responsiveness to community concerns. International and institutional partners can usefully engage officials in developing, managing and responding to large-scale data and qualitative patterns of reporting drawn directly from community inputs. Doing so in multilateral teams would also be helpful for developing a community of practice that cuts across borders (more on international cooperation below).

Roll out new livelihood development approaches in border communities

The survey has shown that individuals across survey locations see economic factors as primary drivers of many types of illicit trafficking. This highlights the opportunity to invest in livelihood development programmes, with lessons learned from applying them in Southeast Asia in relation to illicit drug cultivation. Livelihood development objectives like expanding access to education, improving infrastructure and generating new cash crops or other licit activities are all worth applying to hotspots of trafficking and criminal activity crossing borders. Collecting reliable data on the effects of these programmes will help to understand impacts more precisely, and therefore help to scale livelihood development approaches across the region.

Galvanise action against human trafficking in affected communities

Data suggests that rates of human trafficking in all five countries are high, but not many respondents seem to recognise this. Low recognition rates suggest two theories: (1) respondents are unfamiliar with the term “human trafficking”, or (2) respondents are familiar with the term but do not perceive it as relevant locally. Whatever the reason, an effective approach would focus on concrete
local issues rather than a broad concept of “human trafficking”, for example specifically addressing forced marriages or forced child labour. Campaigns and community mobilisation would focus on highlighting, encouraging and facilitating positive actions that individuals can take. The benefit is to reduce the space for trafficking and move from generalised awareness-raising to targeted action.

**Place rapid border checkpoints and digitalisation of travel documents within the ASEAN trade facilitation agenda**

The study has shown that there is community-level support for reducing barriers to local migration and trade. Respondents suggested there could be demand for digitisation or other methods of reducing paperwork and accelerating crossings in cases where people wish to transit for licit purposes and this can be demonstrated to border authorities. The ASEAN trade facilitation agenda should consider the implementation of these measures where benefits to local, licit economies can be identified and where implementation expertise and support can be sought. The benefit of implementing rapid border checkpoints and travel document digitisation would be to reduce the incentive and tolerance for illicit border crossings, and to increase legal opportunities available to individuals in border communities. In turn, law enforcement agencies would have much more efficient access to information on the movements of individuals in order to detect suspicious activity associated with illicit trafficking.

**Invest in educational outreach campaigns to provide young people with knowledge and skills to resist participation in organized crime**

Teachers tend to be trusted communicators to engage in a wide range of conversations with students and their parents. With many of the countries reviewed in this report focussing more heavily on education, there is an opportunity to revisit curricula and teacher capacity-building to update methods to tackle youth involvement in organized crime. Providing teachers with tools to facilitate discussions with their students to understand crime-related issues and build skills to resist participation in organized crime could help address the root causes of involvement in organized crime from the early stages. With the support of partnerships and educational agencies, teachers with an interest in engaging their communities can be identified in border communities across Southeast Asia. A training programme for teachers can then be developed and if positive results are observed, permanent changes to school curricula can be rolled out and scaled up.

Younger generations also showed a higher desire to participate in prevention activities, especially those linked to environmental crime. Educational activities can be connected to promoting agency among youth to create initiatives that engage the community and promote climate positive behaviour.

**Invest in psychosocial and economic resilience for victims**

By focusing on individuals in border communities, the survey highlights the personal impacts of illicit activities like drug use, human trafficking, environmental destruction, violence and imprisonment. For the people involved, these are not abstract concepts; they are events that produce trauma and poverty for individuals and families. Resilient communities have the capacity to address the psychosocial and economic impacts people suffer from illicit activities, for example through counselling, addiction recovery and personalised support for generating new incomes. It is valuable to invest in scaling and improving effective programmes on social and mental health in border communities. Beyond the individual humanitarian benefits, effective recovery reduces the likelihood of further community impoverishment and insecurity. Priority themes would include synthetic drug use and human trafficking victimisation.

**Focus on behaviour change**

Most survey respondents suggested that awareness-raising is important. However, most respondents believe that drug, contraband, wildlife or timber trafficking is taking place. So awareness may not be the key issue. Instead, individuals and community groups need new tools that make it easy to convert passive condemnation into active resistance against criminal activity. Communication approaches should focus on two levels: individual behaviour change and wider social norm change. Behaviour change can target individuals at risk of
developing criminal behaviours and/or members of the community who can be nudged from passivity to activity. Norm change is still targeted, but will involve multiple methods run in parallel. Experience from around the world demonstrates that approaches have to be tailored to particular groups of people and specific behaviours or norms, not a generalised campaign. This kind of structural change was re-emphasised by Community Volunteers: “Research carried out by the UNODC can be used to strengthen the criminal justice system, build capacity, and support law enforcement work to address all kinds of trafficking. I strongly believe that it will help inform future policy-decision making to create societal level change” (Regina Lim, UN Community Volunteer, Malaysia).
Appendices

Appendix I - Data Collection

UNODC surveyed border communities in five Southeast Asian countries, namely Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Thailand, and Viet Nam. Originally, the project also included Myanmar and Indonesia, however the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic did not allow for data collection in those countries. Information on illicit trafficking taking place in those countries is significantly scarce, limiting the insights gathered in this report.

A strong partnership with UNV’s Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific was established to deliver data collection with a team of highly qualified and committed individuals. The data collection was conducted by a team of 46 young professionals, UN National (9) and Community (37) Volunteers who assisted UNODC Southeast Asia in collecting onsite and online data in all five countries. The volunteers were balanced between males and females, and one of them was a person with a disability, which testifies to UNV’s efforts at inclusion.

Across the five countries included in this study, UN Volunteers reached out to 4,950 community members to capture perceptions of border communities on illicit trafficking and information regarding border crossings. In each country, UN Community Volunteers were supported by a national UN Volunteer specialist, while in Viet Nam all UN Volunteers were national specialists.

The border communities surveyed within this study were typically located in rural and remote areas, thus making it particularly challenging to reach them. In addition, language barriers often required the use of interpreters to communicate with the interviewees.

Appendix II - Country Information

In Cambodia, the majority of people around border provinces are;
Ethnicity: Khmer (following by Phoung, Tumpon and others),
Careers: Agriculture (followed by Trading in Goods/Services, Students and others) and a large number of unemployed people,
Age: 26-50 (following by 18-25 and above 50 of similar proportion),
Education: Secondary education (followed by Primary and University education),
Population: the current population in Cambodia is around 17.1 million.

In Lao PDR, the majority of people around border provinces are;
Ethnicity: Lao Loum (followed by Lao, Lue and others),
Careers: Trading in Goods/Services (following by Agriculture, Industrial/Manufacturing workers and others) and a large number of unemployed people,
Age: 26-50 (following by 18-25 and above 50),
Education: Secondary education (followed by Primary and University education),
Population: the current population in Lao PDR is around 7.5 million.

In Malaysia, the majority of people around border provinces are;
Ethnicity: Malay (followed by Chinese, Bugis, Dusan, Iban and others); in Peninsular Island, ethnic people living around border provinces are Malay (Chinese, Indian and others), while in Borneo Island ethnic people living around border provinces are Bugis (Chinese, Dusun, Iban, Malay, Kadazan and others),
Careers: Trading in Goods/Services (following by Agriculture, Industrial/manufacturing workers, Public servants, and others),
Age: 26-50 (following by 18-25 and above 50),
Education: University (followed by Secondary and Primary education),
Population: the current population in Malaysia is around 33.1 million.

In Thailand, the majority of people around border provinces are;
Ethnicity: Thai (following by Malay, Myanmar, Karen, Mon, and others),
Careers: Trading in Goods/Services (following by Agriculture and Industrial/manufacturing workers and others),
Age: 26-50 (following by 18-25 and above 50 of similar proportion),
Education: Secondary education (followed by Primary and University education of similar proportion),
Population: the current population in Thailand is around 70.1 million.
In Viet Nam, the majority of people around border provinces are;

*Ethnicity:* Vietnamese (Kinh) (following by Van Kieu, Tay, Nung and others),
*Careers:* Agriculture (followed by Trading in Goods/Services, Public servants and others),
*Age:* 26-50 (following by 18-25 and above 50),
*Education:* Secondary education (followed by Primary and University education),
*Population:* the current population in Viet Nam is around 98.8 million.