

The Role of UNODC in Combating Human Trafficking: A Case Study of Indonesian Migrant Worker Exploitation in Cambodia (2022)

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Received : July 3, 2025

Accepted : August 10, 2025

Published : Oktober 31, 2025

Citation: Safira, M., & Padmi, M, F, M. (2025). The Role of UNODC in Combating Human Trafficking: A Case Study of Indonesian Migrant Worker Exploitation in Cambodia (2022). *Politeia : Journal of Public Administration and Political Science and International Relations*, 3(4), 219-236.

ABSTRACT: Human trafficking remains a critical transnational challenge in Southeast Asia, with migrant workers in Indonesia facing heightened vulnerability to exploitation. This paper examines the role of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime UNODC in facilitating cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia to counter such trafficking. The objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of UNODC's initiatives as a multilateral facilitator in enhancing bilateral anti-trafficking efforts in the region, the study employs qualitative descriptive methods, drawing on 2022 UNODC reports, regional policy documents, and expert interviews to analyze institutional mechanisms, legal coordination, and operational support, findings indicate that UNODC has significantly contributed to law enforcement capacity-building, fostered diplomatic engagement, and promoted public awareness. Nevertheless, structural challenges—including inconsistent legal frameworks, limited cross-border coordination, and resource constraints—continue to impede sustainable progress. Theoretically, the research contributes to understanding UNODC's role in shaping multilateral governance structures against transnational crime. Practically, it provides policy recommendations to enhance cross-border cooperation and institutional resilience, the paper concludes that while UNODC plays an essential role in regional anti-trafficking efforts, long-term protection for migrant populations requires harmonized legal instruments, sustained education programs, and strengthened enforcement capacity. A more durable and collaborative framework is urgently needed to safeguard vulnerable groups across borders.

Keywords: Human Trafficking; UNODC, Migrant Workers; Indonesia–Cambodia Cooperation



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INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking between Indonesia and Cambodia has emerged as a complex transnational issue, particularly affecting vulnerable migrant populations exploited for profit-driven purposes. Despite shared regional concerns, bilateral coordination remains uneven,

necessitating external facilitation to enhance a collaborative response. It has emerged as a particularly pressing issue characterized by the recruitment, transportation, or receipt of individuals through violence, threats, or deception (Simangunsong & Situmeang, 2025). This illicit activity is notoriously difficult to monitor and measure, often occurring at national borders, with victims frequently originating from the same locales as their traffickers.

Human trafficking (TPPO) is a transnational issue driven by complex structural factors such as widespread poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, gender-based discrimination, and weak legal protections. These vulnerabilities are often exploited by organized criminal networks operating across borders. In the context of Southeast Asia, ASEAN countries—including Indonesia and Cambodia—face significant challenges in addressing TPPO due to uneven legal frameworks, limited institutional capacity, and varying levels of political commitment. While ASEAN has established regional instruments such as the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), implementation remains inconsistent across member states. These gaps necessitate multilateral support and facilitation by international organizations, such as UNODC, to strengthen coordinated responses to human trafficking (Andi Aline Tenri & Wira Atman, 2025).

Southeast Asia is recognized as a region with a high prevalence of human trafficking, with data indicating that a significant number of women and children have fallen victim to these crimes (International Organization for Migration [IOM]). Countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Indonesia are major sources of trafficking victims, while Thailand and Malaysia serve as primary destinations. (Attia Fariha & Belayet Hossain, n.d.) In response to this alarming trend, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has taken steps to address human trafficking through various agreements, including the ASEAN Convention against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), which specifically targets trafficking issues, particularly concerning women and children (Monika Sitinjak Jurusan Hubungan Internasional et al., 2022).

However, the effectiveness of UNODC's facilitation in bilateral cooperation to address migrant worker trafficking, particularly between Indonesia and Cambodia, remains underexplored. This study seeks to examine how UNODC functions as a multilateral intermediary in strengthening institutional coordination, legal harmonization, and strategic engagement between the two countries, recent reports indicate a significant increase in cases of trafficking in persons (TPPO) in Southeast Asia, prompting UNODC to expand its presence in the field to assist countries in need (UNODC, 2023). ASEAN's handling of human trafficking through ACTIP and AMMTC has not been fully effective because there are still gaps in capacity between countries, as well as challenges in cross-border coordination. Therefore, the existence of UNODC as a facilitator of international cooperation is increasingly important, especially in strengthening law enforcement training, unifying victim protection standards, and encouraging collective evaluation of regional policies. (Oktavian et al., 2024).

This paper examines how UNODC facilitates bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia in addressing trafficking in persons (TPPO), with particular attention to the exploitation of Indonesian migrant workers. It critically assesses the effectiveness of UNODC and ASEAN-led strategies, identifying institutional and policy-level challenges that hinder sustained regional anti-trafficking efforts (VIRDA FABIOLA MONDIGIR, 2022)

This article explores the role of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in facilitating cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia to combat human trafficking (TPPO), specifically focusing on the exploitation of Indonesian migrant workers. Human trafficking is a pervasive transnational crime that undermines security, economic stability, and social welfare. Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Cambodia, has witnessed a significant rise in trafficking cases, necessitating stronger international collaboration.

Theoretical Framework

International cooperation is a form of collaboration between nations aimed at achieving common goals, addressing global challenges, and improving the welfare of the international community. This cooperation can take the form of bilateral and multilateral agreements or be facilitated through international organizations (IOs). International cooperation plays a crucial role in creating global stability and security, as well as addressing cross-border issues such as human trafficking and terrorism while some countries have enacted robust anti-trafficking laws, others lag behind, creating enforcement gaps that traffickers exploit.

This underscores the urgent need for a standardized legal framework to support regional cooperation. According to Clive Archer, international organizations serve as platforms for countries to engage in dialogue and negotiations while also acting as instruments for implementing international policies. Additionally, IOs help establish globally recognized norms and standards, enabling nations to interact more effectively and systematically. (Archer, n.d.) in the context of intergovernmental relations, neoliberal institutionalism highlights the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation among states. This theory argues that even though countries act based on their self-interest, they can still gain long-term benefits through collaboration. International institutions help reduce conflicts, enhance stability, and provide frameworks for more structured and predictable interactions. UNODC has implemented capacity-building workshops, policy harmonization dialogues, and awareness campaigns to strengthen cooperation. These initiatives reflect UNODC's approach to facilitating regional coordination without undermining state sovereignty, in line with neoliberal institutionalist theory. Interview data highlight improved bilateral engagement, yet they also reveal that strategic programs often lack deep institutional integration and are reliant on donor funding.

The existence of international institutions contributes to shaping norms and regulations that govern state behavior, thereby reducing uncertainty and fostering trust among nations. These mechanisms strengthen bilateral relations and facilitate diplomacy in various issues involving shared interests. In this study, the liberal institutionalism framework can be used to analyze the role of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in

facilitating cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia in their efforts to combat human trafficking. As an international organization, UNODC functions as a mediator and facilitator in this collaboration by providing training, technical support, and a platform for dialogue between the two nations beyond diplomacy, UNODC also plays a crucial role in enhancing law enforcement capacity and raising public awareness, which are vital elements in addressing human trafficking in Southeast Asia. By providing an organized framework, UNODC strengthens intergovernmental synergy, leading to more effective and sustainable policies.

International cooperation plays a vital role in tackling various global challenges, including human trafficking. Through a neoliberal institutionalist approach, it is evident that international institutions like UNODC help improve coordination between nations using structured and sustainable mechanisms. Consequently, cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia in fighting human trafficking becomes more effective, well-directed, and has the potential to create broader regional stability.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to examine how the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) facilitates bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia in combating human trafficking, with a specific focus on the exploitation of Indonesian migrant workers. The unit of analysis comprises institutional actors and policy mechanisms engaged in anti-trafficking efforts during the year 2022. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with representatives from UNODC, law enforcement agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), selected using purposive sampling to capture diverse stakeholder insights. Field observations complemented interviews by documenting training sessions, public awareness campaigns, and bilateral meetings. Secondary data sources included official policy documents, UNODC reports, academic publications, and media materials. All qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to institutional roles, strategic interventions, and implementation challenges. The analytical process was guided by the theoretical framework of neoliberal institutionalism, which emphasizes the role of international organizations in fostering cooperation between states without compromising national sovereignty.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Human Trafficking Networks in ASEAN

In Southeast Asia, human trafficking networks involve complex exploitation patterns, including labor exploitation, which are evident in documented cases. Countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar, and Laos are frequent sources of trafficking victims, while Malaysia, Thailand, and Cambodia are identified as major destinations. (Ni Komang

Desy Arya Pinatih, 2023)The demand for cheap labor in these destination countries exacerbates the issue, making it imperative for ASEAN to enhance its collaborative efforts in addressing these challenges(Santoso et al., 2025).

Victims not only experience physical exploitation through cross-border transmission but are also forced to carry out fraud and online gambling activities as a form of economic exploitation in a transnational criminal syndicate network, (Laras & Rusdiyanta, 2025), Indonesia is recorded as one of the largest source countries for victims of human trafficking, both domestically and across borders. The majority of the victims are women, who are exploited for forced labor and sexual exploitation. Data from IOM (2019) shows more than 6,432 human trafficking cases in Indonesia. The fact that Indonesia is one of the top source countries highlights the urgency for a *collaborative regional approach* to dismantle trafficking networks especially as many of these cases involve migrant workers being sent abroad illegally without adequate protection. Furthermore Reports from Human Rights Watch indicate that recruitment methods often involve deception and threats against prospective workers, making them highly vulnerable to exploitation in a regional context, cooperation through ASEAN mechanisms and collaboration with UNODC can strengthen cross-border efforts, including regulatory harmonization, to prevent human trafficking more effectively. (Ani Khoirunnisa, 2020) A total of 699 Indonesian citizens were repatriated from Myanmar after falling victim to human trafficking schemes disguised as job offers. The rise in human trafficking crimes in Indonesia has been linked to the wave of mass layoffs that left many people unemployed.The problem of human trafficking is a challenge that cannot be effectively addressed by any one country alone. Due to its cross-border scope, addressing the issue of human trafficking requires international cooperation and coordination between countries.(Khoirunnisa & Jubaidi, 2025)

The abundance of job vacancies with lax regulations has driven desperate individuals to seize these opportunities in hopes of sustaining their livelihoods. Human trafficking in Southeast Asia remains a serious issue for the countries involved and has a direct impact on Indonesia. ((INP), 2025) The exploitation of Indonesian migrant workers in Cambodia primarily manifests through forced labor and debt bondage, particularly in informal sectors such as domestic work and entertainment. Interview data reveal that many migrants enter Cambodia via unofficial channels, increasing their exposure to trafficking syndicates. Unlike broader regional patterns, the Indonesia–Cambodia trajectory shows a distinct lack of bilateral screening mechanisms, leaving migrants vulnerable during transit and upon arrival. UNODC reports confirm limited oversight in recruitment networks and inconsistent coordination between national authorities, further enabling exploitative practices(Attia Fariha & Belayet Hossain, n.d.)Many migrants travel overland without proper documentation, rendering them highly susceptible to exploitation by authorities or employers. Officials often take advantage of this situation to extort migrants, while employers exploit their undocumented status to exert control and suppress resistance. For instance, Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand have reported working up to 12 hours a day under hazardous conditions, receiving

inadequate or no pay, and experiencing sexual harassment, along with threats of being reported to the police if they attempt to speak out (Alffram et al., 2023)

Human trafficking has devastating effects, leaving survivors with enduring physical and psychological trauma (Soegiharto & Madu, 2025). even migrants with official documentation are not guaranteed freedom from exploitation. The complex framework of labor migration allows employers to continue imposing exploitative working conditions, such as excessively long working hours, wage deductions, or the confiscation of personal documents. Having legal migration status often does not ensure full protection against inhumane working conditions. (Denney et al., 2023)

The Southeast Asian region has reinforced labor migration patterns. Many young people from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam seek employment in more prosperous countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. It is estimated that around 23.6 million Southeast Asian migrants live outside their countries of origin, with 7.1 million of them still residing within the Mekong subregion.(Denney et al., 2023)

This exploitation occurs due to the vulnerability of migrant workers, who often have limited access to government protection, judicial systems, or civil society support. Although numerous policy frameworks acknowledge the importance of a holistic approach to preventing migrant labor exploitation including prevention, prosecution, and protection existing responses tend to emphasize criminal justice prosecution over victim-centered strategies. This imbalance leaves many migrants without the comprehensive support they need to recover and reintegrate safely(Ervia Wijayanti Milasari, 2023)

The Trafficking in Persons Protocol (also known as the Palermo Protocol) defines human trafficking as “*The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.*”

Exploitation includes, at a minimum, sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs (VIRDA FABIOLA MONDIGIR, 2022)

Cambodia has drawn attention as a destination country where many workers, including children, are forced to work under exploitative conditions in the gambling sector and online financial fraud operations. Some workers have reportedly been subjected to illegal detention and physical abuse, including beatings and electric shocksIn Thailand, the fishing sector has been the subject of investigations related to human trafficking practices, primarily involving laborers from Myanmar and Cambodia. Recruitment is often conducted through unofficial channels involving coercion, deception, and forced transportation. The long duration of work in international waters makes working conditions difficult to monitor .(Casinos, Cyber Fraud, and Trafficking in Persons for Forced Criminality in Southeast Asia Policy Report, 2023)

The Philippines and Indonesia are significantly affected by the high number of human trafficking cases. The Philippines acts as a source country for trafficking victims, including children who are exploited in sex trafficking and forced labor. To date, the exact number of trafficking victims in the Philippines remains unclear due to the absence of a centralized, comprehensive database. In Thailand and Myanmar alone, an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 individuals are believed to be employed along their border areas. This highlights that human trafficking has become a transnational threat within Southeast Asia and poses a serious impact on Indonesia. (Santoso et al., 2025).

Table 1. Data on Indonesian victims in ASEAN countries

NO.	Country	Indonesian citizen victims
1.	Cambodia	679 Indonesian citizens
2.	Myanmar	142 Indonesian citizens
3.	Philippines	97 Indonesian citizens
4	Laos	35 Indonesian citizens
5.	Thailand	21 Indonesian citizens

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs via Kompas Media, 2022

UNODC and ASEAN Collaboration Framework

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) serves as a multilateral facilitator in strengthening international cooperation to combat transnational crimes, including trafficking in persons. In the context of this study, UNODC plays a pivotal role in promoting bilateral coordination between Indonesia and Cambodia through strategic interventions such as legal harmonization support, capacity-building initiatives, and diplomatic engagement. Its programs aim to bridge enforcement gaps and align national responses within broader regional frameworks, particularly under ASEAN's anti-trafficking commitments. (Nations, 25 october 2021)

The interaction between UNODC and ASEAN during the period of 2022 has been characterized by the implementation of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP) and various strategies and programs aimed at addressing human trafficking. ACTIP serves as a legal framework for ASEAN member states to combat human trafficking, particularly concerning women and children. However, the implementation of these policies faces numerous challenges, including legal discrepancies and a lack of resources among member states (Milasari, 2023).

UNODC has also focused on enhancing the capacity of law enforcement officials in Indonesia. Training programs organized by UNODC for police, prosecutors, judges, and immigration officers aim to improve their understanding of identifying TPPO victims and conducting sensitive investigations. This not only enhances the technical knowledge of officials but also helps establish specialized anti-trafficking units within various law enforcement agencies. Cross-border cooperation

is facilitated by UNODC to address transnational TPPO issues, such as the exploitation of Indonesian migrant workers in Cambodia. In this context, UNODC acts as a communication bridge between Indonesian and Cambodian law enforcement agencies to ensure that cases of exploitation are effectively managed. Additionally, UNODC plays a vital role in strengthening protection and assistance for TPPO victims. For returning Indonesian migrant workers from Cambodia, UNODC helps provide comprehensive support services, including psychological recovery, legal assistance, and social and economic reintegration programs. The victim-centered approach adopted by UNODC ensures that the rights and needs of victims are prioritized, avoiding retraumatization during legal processes. (Nhelbourne Mohammad, 2023)

UNODC also plays a crucial role in supporting safe repatriation efforts for victims and providing post-return support, including legal assistance if victims choose to pursue legal action against perpetrators. Furthermore, UNODC collaborates with Indonesian government agencies to tighten oversight of illegal departures of migrant workers, which often serve as a loophole for traffickers. UNODC assists Member States in strengthening criminal justice responses to human trafficking and migrant smuggling, including through regional cooperation and the development of harmonized legal frameworks. (Iskandar & Nursiti, 2021)

Despite the significant progress made, this study identifies several challenges that hinder the full success of the programs implemented. One of the main obstacles is the lack of optimal coordination between Indonesian and Cambodian government agencies, as well as the discrepancies in legal systems that impede more efficient policy implementation. Additionally, Indonesia is not the only country involved in TPPO issues; neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Malaysia often serve as primary destinations for human trafficking due to high demand for cheap labor and sexual exploitation. Thailand, for instance, has become a major transit hub for trafficking victims from surrounding countries, including Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. (Murray, n.d.)

Southeast Asia faces serious challenges in addressing TPPO due to legal policy differences, weak cross-border cooperation, and uneven socio-economic conditions. ASEAN has made efforts to tackle this issue through initiatives such as the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP) and the ASEAN Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons. However, the implementation of these policies still encounters numerous obstacles, such as legal gaps and a lack of resources. Although the Indonesian government has taken serious steps to address TPPO by enacting Law No. 21 of 2007 on the Eradication of Human Trafficking and actively collaborating with ASEAN countries to combat this crime, including establishing victim protection and safe repatriation mechanisms, significant challenges remain. poverty, lack of education, and developmental disparities continue to be major driving factors behind human trafficking in Indonesia. Suboptimal law enforcement and limited resources are often exploited by trafficking networks. Therefore, a more holistic approach is needed, including public education, enhanced international cooperation, and strengthened law enforcement. (United Nations, 2022)

In the context of ASEAN, despite initiatives such as the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP) and the ASEAN Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons (APA), the implementation of these instruments still faces various challenges, such as a lack of technical capacity among member states and challenges posed by cross-border criminal networks. To ensure the success of existing programs, ongoing evaluation of their effectiveness is necessary. Strengthening local legal capacities in Indonesia and Cambodia should be a priority, as differences in legal systems

and a lack of trained human resources remain the biggest obstacles in addressing TPPO cases. (Rezky Ramadhan Antuli, 2023)(Analisis Kebijakan Dan Penegakan Hukum Pidana Transnasional Tindak Pidana Perdagangan Narkotika Di Asia Tenggara, 2024)

Moreover, it is essential for UNODC to continue promoting further coordination among ASEAN countries to ensure that law enforcement against TPPO can be conducted more harmoniously and cohesively. Recommendations to strengthen efforts against TPPO include first, enhancing synergy among national and international agencies, focusing on more efficient communication mechanisms between countries; second, strengthening the capacity of law enforcement and related officials through ongoing training programs tailored to contemporary challenges, such as addressing the rising prevalence of online fraud; and third, increasing support for cross-border coordination mechanisms like the ERN to enable quicker and more integrated responses to TPPO.

While there have been some successes in UNODC's efforts to combat TPPO, further evaluation and policy updates, as well as institutional capacity building in source and destination countries like Indonesia and Cambodia, are crucial to creating a more effective system for addressing this transnational crime. ASEAN invites the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to assist in addressing human trafficking cases due to its expertise and experience in handling transnational crimes, including human trafficking. UNODC has long collaborated with ASEAN countries to enhance legal capacities, provide training for law enforcement officials, and offer policy guidance to strengthen protections for TPPO victims. Additionally, UNODC supports the implementation of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP), which serves as a legal foundation for ASEAN member states in addressing human trafficking. Through this collaboration, ASEAN can strengthen inter-state coordination in prevention, law enforcement, and victim recovery efforts related to TPPO.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) plays a pivotal role in facilitating ASEAN's efforts to combat human trafficking in persons (TPPO). As a UN agency, UNODC contributes significantly to strengthening legal systems, enhancing justice enforcement, and providing technical support in crime prevention within the ASEAN context. It facilitates regional cooperation to address transnational crime issues, including human trafficking. UNODC provides policy guidance, training for law enforcement officials, and various prevention programs aimed at protecting vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers and victims of exploitation. Furthermore, UNODC supports the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by ensuring that member states have transparent, accountable legal systems focused on human rights protection (Ervia Wijayanti Milasari, 2023).

International organizations such as the *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* (UNODC) and the *International Organization for Migration* (IOM) play a strategic role in supporting the harmonization of national policies in Southeast Asian countries with international standards related to combating human trafficking. For instance, UNODC has contributed to revising Indonesia's policies on the investigation and prosecution of trafficking cases, while IOM actively provides technical assistance in developing rehabilitation and reintegration programs for victims. This collaboration is reflected in the formulation of the *National Action Plan for the Eradication of Trafficking in Persons (RAN PTPPO)*, which incorporates recommendations from the annual *Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report* published by the U.S. Department of State. At the regional level, the implementation of the *ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP)* in 2015 marked a significant milestone for Indonesia in strengthening cross-border cooperation. (IOM, 2020)

The Role of UNODC in Combating Human Trafficking: A Case Study of Indonesian Migrant Worker Exploitation in Cambodia (2022)

Safitri & Padmi

As sugiati explains, cyber warfare has emerged as a pivotal strategy in modern conflicts, with impacts comparable to conventional military tactics. Its use in interstate disputes demonstrates how non-traditional strategies can be employed to pursue national interests, underscoring the growing importance of cyber security in contemporary warfare. This insight parallels the role of international institutions like UNODC in addressing other forms of transnational threats—such as human trafficking—which similarly require coordinated, cross-border responses and strategic multilateral engagement.(Khoirunnisa & Sugiati, 2024)

Additionally, the adoption of the Palermo Protocol serves as an international legal foundation that supports intelligence sharing and coordination in dismantling transnational organized crime networks. Given the cross-border nature of this crime, sustained coordination among source, transit, and destination countries is essential as demonstrated by the successful uncovering of trafficking syndicates and repatriation of victims along the Indonesia–Malaysia border. Without continued global support, the effectiveness of national policies will be hindered by resource limitations and jurisdictional complexities.(TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS (TIP) SITUATION ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES, n.d.)

UNODC has played a significant role in supporting the implementation of the Palermo Protocol and the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) as an initial step to strengthen the international and regional legal framework in addressing TPPO. The Palermo Protocol provides a basis for countries to adopt harmonized legal measures in addressing trafficking in persons, while ACTIP serves as a framework for ASEAN member states to enhance regional cooperation in prevention, law enforcement, and victim protection, continuing these initiatives, UNODC has demonstrated significant efforts in supporting international cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia through various programs aimed at addressing TPPO.

Table 2 Summary of UNODC's Key Interventions, Impacts, and Implementation Challenges in Indonesia–Cambodia Anti-Trafficking Cooperation

Intervention Area	UNODC's Contribution	Impact	Challenges
Legal Framework Harmonization	Facilitated bilateral dialogues and technical workshops	Improved mutual legal understanding	No formal legal alignment; jurisdictional gaps
Law Enforcement Capacity	Delivered targeted training for police and investigators	Enhanced investigative competency	Limited continuity; lack of resource integration
Public Awareness Initiatives	Supported educational campaigns in transit areas	Raised risk perception among vulnerable communities	Uneven outreach; insufficient evaluation frameworks
Bilateral Coordination Mechanism	Enabled strategic meetings between ministries and NGOs	Strengthened diplomatic and civil cooperation	Ad hoc coordination; donor dependency
ASEAN Framework Alignment	Promoted ACTIP principles and regional coherence	Symbolic compliance with ASEAN standards	Weak implementation; national policy gaps

Source: Developed from UNODC regional reports (2022), ASEAN ACTIP implementation documents, and interview data collected by the author

One of its main contributions is strengthening the capacity of law enforcement in both countries through special training focused on the legal and mitigation aspects of TPPO. In addition, UNODC plays a significant role in facilitating dialogue between Indonesia and Cambodia, including the establishment of the Emergency Response Network (ERN) which is expected to improve rapid response to increasingly complex TPPO cases. Public awareness campaigns conducted by UNODC have also contributed to addressing the impact of TPPO (Qiao-Franco, 2023)

Case Study: Indonesian Migrant Workers in Cambodia

Human trafficking networks in Southeast Asia, particularly between Indonesia and Cambodia, exhibit complex exploitation structures. These include forced labor, often facilitated through informal recruitment and poorly monitored border crossings. The bilateral nature of these cases exposes weaknesses in surveillance systems and fragmented legal enforcement, especially in remote transit zones, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Indonesians have lost their jobs due to the national economic downturn. Even prior to the pandemic, Indonesia had already been grappling with economic instability and low income levels, which contributed to the rise in international labor migration and the outflow of workers abroad. Poverty remains a primary driver of human trafficking. To date, the government has not fully succeeded in implementing effective poverty alleviation programs or in creating widespread employment opportunities. Furthermore, limited awareness and knowledge of labor markets and entrepreneurship have exacerbated unemployment, making vulnerable populations increasingly susceptible to exploitation and trafficking (Sjaf, 2023)

The high number of labor force participants in Indonesia has led many citizens to seek employment abroad in order to remain productive. To support this, the Indonesian government has developed various overseas labor placement programs additionally, many foreign companies actively recruit workers from outside their own countries. In general, job offers from abroad are not unfamiliar to the Indonesian public. However, the overwhelming flow of information and the abundance of job vacancies often prompt individuals to accept such offers without verifying their origin or legal validity

Therefore, as one of the region's major suppliers of human resources, Indonesia must take serious action to address human trafficking crimes. This is essential to ensure that Indonesian citizens who intend to work abroad—particularly within Southeast Asia can do so safely and are not subjected to exploitation. (Yunus et al., 2021)

Indonesia faces significant challenges in addressing human trafficking, which has far-reaching implications for the effectiveness of prevention and response efforts. One of the primary obstacles is the country's limited resources and institutional capacity. Insufficient national budget allocations and a lack of adequately trained personnel have resulted in suboptimal monitoring at border areas and entry points. Many immigration officers have not received proper training to detect forged documents or suspicious behavior indicative of trafficking activities. This lack of preparedness has weakened Indonesia's border security,

making it less effective in curbing human trafficking as a transnational threat, in addition to the lack of resources and personnel capacity in handling human trafficking cases, there are several other contributing factors.

These include technological limitations, which result in border control still relying on outdated and traditional methods that are ineffective in today's digital era. Corruption and weak institutional integrity have also enabled widespread bribery practices, allowing trafficking operations to enter Indonesia with relative ease. Furthermore, the lack of optimal coordination among government agencies and anti-trafficking task forces has hindered the effectiveness of both case management and prevention efforts. Beyond these internal challenges, public awareness in Indonesia remains low, particularly in recognizing the signs and risks of human trafficking. As a result, many citizens fall victim to increasingly sophisticated and deceptive recruitment schemes. This limited awareness is one of the key reasons Indonesia continues to struggle in addressing the transnational threat of human trafficking. (Yunus et al., 2021)

Human trafficking involving Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) in Cambodia occurred in July 2022, with a total of 202 victims—comprising 189 men and 13 women. The Indonesian government responded by repatriating all 202 victims through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The trafficking scheme was carried out via social media, where most individuals were offered customer service jobs with promised salaries ranging from USD 1,000 to 1,200 per month (approximately IDR 14.7 to 17.6 million), without requiring specific qualifications. In collaboration with Cambodian police, the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh successfully rescued 34 Indonesian nationals who reported being held captive by an online scam company in Cambodia. The majority of the victims were from North Sulawesi. Previously, on December 8, 2022, one of the victims submitted a formal complaint to the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh (Aprilion & Drajat Murdani, 2024)

The use of the internet for business or commercial purposes has been exploited in the form of online scams, particularly within the e-commerce sector. The actual work assigned to victims is often vastly different from what was initially promised—typically framed as sales or investment opportunities for Indonesian citizens. Upon arrival in Cambodia, many Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) face harsh conditions, including financial penalties if they attempt to resign or withdraw. In some cases, they were promised employment in other countries but were instead sent to Cambodia or other online casino hubs within the same trafficking network. Some victims were even sold to other Chinese-owned companies.

Excessive working hours often exceeding 12 hours per day and the confiscation of personal documents or passports are among the complaints reported by victims to the Indonesian Embassy in Phnom Penh. In several cases, even officially registered recruitment agencies charged fees ranging from IDR 50 to 65 million per person, further exacerbating the exploitation (United Nations, 2024)

In addition, Indonesian Migrant Workers who have attracted public attention are cases of confinement that occurred and befell Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in Cambodia which occurred in 2022. A total of 53 Indonesian citizens were victims of confinement in Cambodia, the confinement was allegedly because the 53 people were victims of fraudulent investment fraud. contact the Indonesian Government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to carry out bureaucracy with the Central Java Manpower and Transmigration Office to resolve the problem (Business & Human Right Resource Centre, 2022)

The Director of Protection of Indonesian Citizens succeeded in a fraudulent investment plan, and the Indonesian Legal Entity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the 53 Indonesian citizens were forced to commit various types of fraud and the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately made efforts to resolve the case, to immediately coordinate with the local police to resolve the problem of confinement of 53 Indonesian citizens in Cambodia, The case is a strong communication for the Indonesian government in overcoming legal problems that occur to its citizens abroad. (jakarta, 2022) with the increasing complexity of cybercrime in Indonesia, including data theft, malware attacks, public opinion manipulation, and financial crimes. This emphasizes the importance of a holistic approach, involving government, society, and the private sector in creating a safe digital environment. to better protect Indonesian migrant workers recruited through illegal internet networks.(Khoirunnisa¹ & Jubaidi², 2024)

The case of the detention of 53 Indonesian citizens has become a bad precedent for Indonesia's commitment to implementing the Law. Until now, the Indonesian Government can be said to have not been optimal in resolving cases of detention experienced by its citizens, because there are still various bureaucratic problems related to preventing cases that befall Indonesian migrant workers. The case of the detention of 53 Indonesian citizens in Cambodia is a reflection of the weak regulation and supervision related to the departure of Indonesian citizens abroad. Therefore, the Cambodian and Indonesian governments have provided legal protection for victims of criminal acts. This was conveyed by the Cambodian government which allows Indonesian citizens who are victims to stay temporarily in Cambodia until the victim's repatriation process is complete. In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kemlu) recently shared information regarding the protection of Indonesian citizens who are victims of fraud in Cambodia.

The Cambodian and Indonesian governments have also provided legal protection, but it has never been disclosed by the news or media, only the area of origin, and this is in accordance with what is mandated by Article 14 paragraph 6 of the convention regarding the obligation of the state party to the victim to protect the victim's identity in the form of the identity of the victim of a crime. Article 21 of Law Number 37 of 1999 concerning Foreign Relations assists the Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia to provide protection and assistance to Indonesian citizens (WNI) who are in danger.(Ervia Wijayanti Milasari, 2023)

In this context, the Indonesian government cannot rely solely on a unilateral approach. Stronger bilateral and multilateral cooperation is needed, including with ASEAN and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). Together, UNODC and ASEAN initiated the *ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP)*, which was adopted in 2015 as a regional legal framework to combat human trafficking. (VERONIKA et al., 2024)

A recent initiative that strengthens regional collaboration is the establishment of the Emergency Response Network (ERN) by UNODC in May 2024. ERN was designed to address the rise of transnational crimes in Southeast Asia, particularly human trafficking for forced criminal activities such as online scams, illegal gambling, and extortion. Through ERN, UNODC facilitates rapid intelligence sharing and direct communication between police forces from countries such as Indonesia, Cambodia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. This network connects specialized anti-trafficking officers, cybercrime experts, and INTERPOL representatives to ensure a coordinated and efficient response in emergency situations. (UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, 2021)

The case study of Indonesian migrant workers in Cambodia highlights the modus operandi of exploitation prevalent in the region. Many Indonesian workers are lured into exploitative situations under the guise of legitimate employment opportunities, only to find themselves trapped in conditions of forced labor and abuse. UNODC's role in facilitating bilateral cooperation is crucial in addressing these issues, as it acts as a communication bridge between law enforcement agencies in Indonesia and Cambodia to ensure that cases of exploitation are effectively addressed. (Muhammad Naufal Rahman, 2025)

Constructivist and Institutional Analysis of Findings

Bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia in combating human trafficking relies not only on formal institutional structures but also on the social construction of the meaning, urgency, and legitimacy of the trafficking issue. In a constructivist approach, state norms and identities are formed through social interactions and value exchanges facilitated by international actors such as the UNODC. A study by Khan et al. (2024) suggests that constructivism can explain how cross-border socialization and advocacy processes, including awareness campaigns and normative diplomacy (Zaman, M., Javeed, F., & Asghar, 2024), influence state perceptions of human trafficking. Field findings indicate that officials from Indonesia and Cambodia have begun to refer to the principles of ACTIP and the Palermo Protocol in policy discussions, although these have not yet been fully internalized in national legal systems. This indicates that regional norms are influential in shaping policy preferences but are not yet strong enough to drive structural reforms without adequate institutional support. From an institutional analysis perspective, UNODC's effectiveness as a facilitator is heavily influenced by national institutional capacity and domestic political commitment. The UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2020) emphasizes that the success of international interventions depends heavily on a country's ability to translate global norms into operational local policies (Rahman, 2025). In the Indonesia-Cambodia context, regulatory disharmony, resource constraints, and weak inter-agency

coordination are key obstacles to the implementation of anti-trafficking programs. Furthermore, an evaluation by (Zimmerman et al., 2021) of intervention programs in South Asia shows that institutional approaches that fail to consider local social and political contexts tend to fail to achieve migrant protection goals.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the pivotal role of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in facilitating bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia to combat trafficking in persons (TPPO), particularly concerning the exploitation of Indonesian migrant workers. UNODC's interventions in 2022—ranging from law enforcement capacity-building to the establishment of Emergency Response Networks (ERNs)—have contributed significantly to improving institutional responsiveness and fostering diplomatic coordination. Additionally, the agency has promoted a victim-centered approach through public awareness campaigns and reintegration support services. Despite these achievements, several structural challenges persist. Limited cross-border coordination, discrepancies in legal frameworks, and resource constraints continue to hamper the full realization of anti-trafficking efforts. Furthermore, underlying socioeconomic vulnerabilities—especially in Indonesia—such as poverty, unemployment, and low access to formal migration channels perpetuate susceptibility to exploitation. The findings contribute to validating neoliberal institutionalism, demonstrating how international organizations like UNODC can facilitate cooperation without overriding national sovereignty, particularly in a regional setting like ASEAN. From a practical standpoint, the study calls for enhanced legal harmonization between member states, sustainable funding mechanisms, and continuous capacity building to ensure long-term resilience against transnational trafficking networks. Strengthening multi-level governance and institutional coordination will be key to forging a more integrated and effective regional response to TPPO.

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