

# **Cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia in Combating Human Trafficking**

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## **Abstract**

Human trafficking (TPPO) against Indonesia citizens (WNI) in Cambodia has increased significantly between 2021 and 2023. One of the main factors driving this high number of cases is the prevalence of job vacancy scams targeting Indonesian job seekers with the lure of high salaries and attractive working conditions. This study analyzes the implementation of bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Cambodia in handling TPPO through three key aspects: intelligence exchange, law enforcement capacity building, and repatriation mechanisms. The method used is a qualitative approach through document analysis, including the 2022 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), ASEAN-ACT reports, and IOM data. The results of the study show that despite improved coordination and success in several cases, disparities in law enforcement capacity between countries remain a major obstacle. Recommendations include policy harmonization, joint training, and strengthening multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms to maximize the effectiveness of bilateral cooperation.

**Keywords:** Indonesia, Cambodia, TPPO, Bilateral Cooperation, Complex Interdependence

## Introduction

Human Trafficking (TPPO) of Indonesia citizens in Cambodia increased significantly in 2021-2023, driven by the rise of job scams that lure job seekers with promises of high salaries and attractive working conditions. Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs recorded 1,800 Indonesian victims of human trafficking sent abroad during this period, with the majority sent to Cambodia, where they were trapped in forced labor in illegal sectors such as scam call centers and online gambling (Kusumawardani 2023). To improve prevention, enforcement, and victim protection, the two countries are strengthening cooperation through three key measures: (1) 2022 MoU on intelligence sharing on TPPO syndicates (Fachri 2022), (2) Training for 150 law enforcement officers (Callista et al. 2025, 5–8), and (3) repatriated 347 victims throughout 2023.

Previous studies have focused more on the protection of domestic victims or regional dynamics in the Mekong region, while studies on the implementation of Indonesia-Cambodia cooperation are still minimal. In fact, both countries are sources, transit points, and destinations for TPPO in Southeast Asia. Surtees' (2020) research only discusses Indonesia's national response, so a specific analysis of bilateral cooperation is needed to identify challenges and opportunities for improving TPPO handling mechanisms (L S Johnson et al. 2020, 2–4).

To date, a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the 2022 MoU has not been conducted even though it is important to assess its effectiveness within the framework of complex interdependence that emphasizes political, economic, social, and cultural interrelationships (Keohane dan Nye 2015, 3–35). The MoU covers trade, investment, and the protection of migrant workers. The implementation of cooperation is analyzed through three aspects: intelligence exchange, law enforcement capacity building, and repatriation mechanisms. Although intelligence exchange has increased by 25% since 2021, there is still a large disparity in the capacity of official only 40% of Cambodia officials are trained in TPPO investigations, compared to 75% in Indonesia (Pinatih, Mahendra, dan Purwanti 2023, 447–49). The repatriation mechanism is also hampered by bureaucracy, with processing times of 3-6 months (Hanara et al. 2021, 50–55). Conversely, multi-stakeholder coordination (multiple channels of interaction) between the government, NGOs, and the private sector has been shown to accelerate response in some cases (Surtees dan Johnson 2021, 24–26).

Bilateral cooperation based on complex interdependence reduced TPPO cases by 30% after the formation of the Joint Task Force in 2022 (ASEAN-ACT 2022, 40–41). However, capacity gaps and disparities in law enforcement budgets continue to hamper its effectiveness. This phenomenon is in line with the 2000 Palermo Protocol, which

emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive definition of TPPO to guide prevention, enforcement, and victim protection at the international level (Anggrela dan Robi Sugara 2024, 472–473).

The Indonesia-Cambodia case is dominated by forced labor in the online scam sector, with a 140% increase in cases from 2020 to 2022, with the majority recruited through social media (B. N. Indonesia 2025). Job vacancy fraud is the main *modus operandi* in Southeast Asia, exploiting high unemployment and low digital literacy. Informal migrant workers, such as domestic workers and plantation laborers, are the most vulnerable group, with 40% experiencing violence and 72% of TPPO cases involving them (Perempuan 2024). The situation calls for stronger legal protection policies, improved digital literacy, and strict verification of cross-border job vacancies.

**Research Method**

This study uses a qualitative approach with document analysis as the main method to evaluate the effectiveness of Indonesia – Cambodia cooperation in handling TPPO through the perspective of complex interdependence. Primary data sources include the 2022 Indonesia – Cambodia MoU, ASEAN-ACT reports, and IOM statistics, which provide official and up to date data on the legal framework, law enforcement, and victim protection.

Secondary data came from investigative media coverage and interviews with victims, which provided field perspectives and supplemented official information. Content analysis was conducted using three main categories: (1) legal framework, (2) law enforcement, and (3) victim protection, to identify strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in implementation.

The validity of the findings is reinforced through data triangulation, namely cross-confirmation between official sources, the media, and the experiences of victims. This approach allows for a more holistic understanding of the dynamics of transnational trafficking in persons, in line with the characteristics of complex interdependence that emphasizes multi-actor involvement and multi-channel interactions.

**Result**

The latest data reveals the success of law enforcement agencies in uncovering human trafficking networks in the ASEAN region. The high number of discoveries indicates an increase in the effectiveness of regional cooperation in combating human trafficking. The 2023 ASEAN Police report notes that 12 human trafficking networks were successfully uncovered in the ASEAN region over the past year (Rahman 2024, 126). This data shows a significant increase compared to the previous year, which only managed to uncover 7 networks (Hourn 2023,

11). The joint operation involved nine ASEAN member states and focused primarily on cross-border trafficking routes. These findings prove that intensive regional cooperation can increase the effectiveness of efforts to combat human trafficking networks in the ASEAN region.

The establishment of the Joint Task Force and digital data-sharing platform represents a significant breakthrough in the regional handling of human trafficking. This initiative enables faster and more effective coordination between countries in tracking, preventing, and cracking down on cross-border human trafficking networks. The ASEAN-ACT report shows that the establishment of the ASEAN Joint Task Force on TIP in 2022 has increased the effectiveness of case handling by 40% compared to the previous period (Sumner, Adviser, dan ASEAN-ACT 2022, 6). The ASEAN-TIP Data Hub digital platform, launched in 2023, has been used to share information on more than 500 cases of trafficking in persons in its first six months of operation. Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows that this mechanism has helped uncover three large trafficking networks operating in the Indonesia-Cambodia-Malaysia corridor within a period of three month (A. Indonesia 2023, 2). The implementation of the Joint Task Force and collaborative digital platform proves that a technology-based approach and structured cooperation can significantly improve the effectiveness of TPPO handling at the

regional level.

The transnational nature of human trafficking syndicates requires effective cross-border coordination between relevant countries. Modern human trafficking networks have evolved into organized criminal operations that exploit regulatory differences and vulnerabilities in various national jurisdictions to expand their operations. The UNODC report (2022) reveals that 72% of TPPO cases in Southeast Asia involve at least three different countries in their crime chain (UNODC 2022, 46). Interpol data (2023) shows that TPPO syndicates operate in an average of 4-5 countries simultaneously, with modus operandi that continues to adapt (Interpol 2023). A special ASEAN-ACT study (2023) found that cases of trafficking in persons in the Indonesia-Cambodia-Malaysia corridor increased by 35% during the pandemic, with perpetrators taking advantage of travel restrictions to smuggle victims (ASEAN-ACT 2023, 14). These facts reinforce that without strong cross-border coordination, law enforcement efforts will be fragmented and less effective in dismantling increasingly global human trafficking syndicates.

The establishment of a Joint Task Force and a digital data-sharing platform are crucial breakthroughs in strengthening the regional handling of human trafficking cases. These two initiatives create an integrated coordination system that addresses the main

challenges in handling cross-border human trafficking, namely fragmentation of information and slow response between jurisdictions. ASEAN-ACT data (2023) reveals that the ASEAN Join Task Force on TIP, formed in November 2022, has successfully increased the resolution of transnational cases by 58% in its first 6 months of operation, while reducing response times from an average of 3 months to just 17 days (Rahman 2024). Meanwhile, in its first five months, the ASEAN TIP Data Hub (2023) platform has facilitated the exchange of 2.415 pieces of intelligence data from eight member countries, identified 17 new patterns of modys operandi and most improtantly, enabled the rescue of 342 victims (Hourn 2023). The achievement demonstrates the effectiveness of technology-based collaborative systems in handling contemporary TPPO. The synergistics implementation of these two mechanisms not only improves operational effectiveness, but also creates a law enforcement ecosystem that is more adaptive and responsive to developepments in contemporary TPPO modes.

The transnational nature of human trafficking syndicates makes cross-border coordination an urgent necessity in efforts to combat them. These criminal networks deliberately exploit regulatory differences between countries and loopholes in immigration systems to expand their operations, requiring a coordinated response from various legal jurisdictions. According to a UNODC report (2022), approximately 75%

of human trafficking cases in Southeast Asia involve transit through at least two countries, with modus operandi that continues to evolve (UNODC 2022, 42–50). Findings from ASEAN-ACT (2023), particularly in the Indonesia-Cambodia corridor, show a 42% increase in cases during 2022, with 85% of these involving perpetrators of various nationalities who coordinated in an organized manner (ASEAN-ACT 2023, 20–24). These facts confirm that without strong and systematic cross-border coordination mechanisms, law enforcement efforts will continue to face difficulties in reaching TPPO syndicates that are increasingly global and digitized.

There is a significant disparity in the digital forensic capabilities of law enforcement agencies between Indonesia and Cambodia, which has an impact on the effectiveness of handling human trafficking cases. This gap poses a serious challenge given that human trafficking increasingly relies on digital technology and requires special expertise to uncover. This data is reinforced by findings from the UNODC (2022) which show that 68% of human trafficking cases in Southeast Asia currently involve digital evidence, but only 45% are successfully resolved due to limited technical capacity (UNODC 2022, 71–73). A special study in the Indonesia-Cambodia corridor found that this disparity in capacity resulted in case resolution times in Cambodia being three times longer than in Indonesia. This finding highlights the

urgency of capacity building programs and bilateral technical cooperation to equalize digital forensics capabilities in order to strengthen the effectiveness of human trafficking responses in the region.

The joint training initiative between the Indonesian National Police and ASEAN-ACT is a strategic step in improving the capacity to handle human trafficking in the region. The program is designed to standardize competencies and build a network of collaboration between countries in dealing with increasingly complex and organized forms of human trafficking. The ASEAN-ACT report (2023) notes that the joint training program implemented throughout 2022-2023 has trained 250 officials from 8 ASEAN member countries, with a primary focus on digital investigation techniques and victim protection (DFAT 2023).

The evaluation results show a 45% increase in participants ability to uncover digital-based TPPO cases after attending the training. Furthermore, data from the Indonesia Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023) reveals that cases handled by training alumni have a 30% higher resolution rate than regular cases (Andriansyah 2023). The success of this joint training program demonstrates that a collaborative and sustainable approach is key to building effective regional capacity to combat TPPO.

Capacity gaps between countries in handling human trafficking are a serious obstacle to resolving cross-jurisdictional cases. Differences in technical capabilities, resources, and legal frameworks between countries of origin, transit, and destination create loopholes that TPPO networks exploit to evade law enforcement. The ASEAN-ACT study (2023) reveals that the disparity in digital investigation capacity between Indonesia and Cambodia reaches 37%, with only 35% of Cambodian officials trained in digital forensics compared to 72% in Indonesia (ASEAN-ACT 2024, 11). UNODC data (2022) shows that 65% of cross-border TPPO cases in Southeast Asia experience delays in resolution due to imbalances in technical capacity between the countries concerned (UNODC 2022, 119–30). A special report by the IOM (2023) on the Indonesia-Cambodia corridor found that case resolution times in Cambodia are 2.8 times longer than in Indonesia due to limited investigative resources (UNODC 2023, 52). These findings underscore the need for coordinated capacity-building programs and a harmonized approach to investigation standards in order to address the disparities that hinder the effectiveness of regional TPPO responses.

Integrated repatriation mechanisms have shown significant improvements in accelerating the return of victims of trafficking in persons (TPPO). This multi-stakeholder collaboration addresses three key challenges: lengthy administrative processes, difficulties in

accessing legal aid, and the need for psychosocial support for victims. The latest IOM data (2025) shws that repatriation time has been drastically reduced from an average of 3 months to just 2 weeks following the implementation of the integrated mechanism (U. Indonesia 2025). This process involves the synergy of the Indonesia Embassy as coordinator, local NGOs for assistance, and LPSK (Witnessand Victim Protection Agency) in providing legal aid. This success shows that a collaborative approach with a clear division of roles among stakeholders can overcome various obstacles in the repatriation process for victims of trafficking in persons.

**Discussion and Analysis**

Breaking the chain of transnational human trafficking syndicates is crucial to curbing the flow of victims, given that 82% of cases in Southeast Asia involve networks in  $\geq 3$  countries with potential profits of USD 150 billion/year. Cross-border operations have been proven to reduce the flow of victims by 30-40% in certain corridors (ASEAN-ACT 2024, 14).

The theory of multiple channels of interaction is relevant to strengthening non-hierarchical coordination between state and non state actors. Its application in ASEAN has increased coordination effectiveness by up to 40% through cooperation between law

enforcement agencies, NGOs, and the private sector, and has accelerated the repatriation of victims from 3 months to 2 weeks. Hamornizing investigation standards is an urgent need, as procedural differences between Indonesia and Cambodia hamper 45% of legal proceedings. The implementation of joint ASEAN investigation SOPs has increased the resolution of transnational cases by 35%.

Imbalances in law enforcement capacity hinder reciprocal dependence, with a 0.15 point disparity in the Rule of Law Index reducing the effectiveness of cooperation by up to 40%. Improving the capacity of officials is key to creating balanced bilateral cooperation. The low politics approach to victim recovery has been shown to increase boluntary repatriation by 35% and cut bureaucracy by up to 60%, thereby creating a more inclusive space for cross-border collaboration (Women 2023).

Finally, institutionalizing international cooperation minimizes conflict and increases legal certainty. ASEAN countries with strong institutions recorded 45% fewer disputes and 82% of trade disputes resolved without escalating conflict (Bank 2023), proving the important role of institutions as a mechanism for conflict prevention.

**Conclusion**

Bilateral and multilateral coperation has proven effective in

reducing TPPO rates in ASEAN, but its effectiveness is still hampered by disparities in law enforcement capacity between countries. The integration of a complex interdependence framework offers a comprehensive approach that accommodates the roles of state and non-state actors through various channels of interaction, thereby enhancing cross-border coordination. The lack of post-repatriation data on victims is a major challenge in evaluating recovery programs, underscoring the need for an integrated and sustainable monitoring system. Harmonizing extradition laws and strengthening research on victim reintegration are strategic recommendations for developing victim-centered TPPO responses while strengthening regional cooperation. The synergistic implementation of these two aspects is believed to create more effective, sustainable, and adaptive enforcement and recovery mechanisms for transnational crime dynamics in the region.

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### **Declaration of Conflict Interest**

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article