
CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGIONAL ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING GOVERNANCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRAK

Kata Kunci:
Asia Tenggara
Perdagangan manusia
Kejahatan transnasional
Organisasi masyarakat sipil
ASEAN

Proses globalisasi telah meningkatkan ancaman kriminalitas lintas batas di kawasan Asia Tenggara, termasuk perdagangan manusia. Jumlah kasus perdagangan manusia di kawasan Asia Tenggara terus meningkat dalam beberapa tahun terakhir. Untuk menanggapi kondisi ini, diperlukan tindakan strategis dan komprehensif untuk memperkuat aksi dan tata kelola antiperdagangan manusia regional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan peran organisasi masyarakat sipil dalam mengatasi masalah perdagangan manusia di Asia Tenggara. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan menganalisis berbagai informasi mengenai keberadaan organisasi masyarakat sipil antiperdagangan manusia di kawasan Asia Tenggara dari dokumen resmi, penelitian sebelumnya, situs berita, dan sumber informasi sekunder lainnya. Penelitian ini menunjukkan keterlibatan organisasi masyarakat sipil dalam inisiatif antiperdagangan manusia di Asia Tenggara, termasuk dukungan bagi ASEAN dan pemerintah nasional dalam mengambil tindakan pencegahan, bantuan dalam melindungi korban, dan penganiayaan terhadap pelaku. Organisasi masyarakat sipil juga melakukan kegiatan independen seperti advokasi, kampanye, dan upaya pendidikan untuk meningkatkan kesadaran di kalangan elit pemerintah dan masyarakat lokal di Asia Tenggara tentang ancaman kejahatan perdagangan manusia.

ABSTRACT

Keywords:
Southeast Asia
Human trafficking
Transnational crimes
Civil society organizations
ASEAN

The process of globalization has increased the threat of cross-border criminal activities in the Southeast Asian region, including human trafficking. The number of human trafficking cases in the Southeast Asian region has been on the rise in recent years. In response to this condition, strategic and comprehensive actions are needed to strengthen the regional anti-human trafficking action and governance. This study aims to explain the role of civil society organizations in addressing the problem of human trafficking in Southeast Asia. This research uses a qualitative method by analyzing various information regarding the existence of anti-human trafficking civil society organizations in the Southeast Asian region from official documents, previous research, news sites, and other secondary sources of information. This research shows the involvement of civil society organizations in anti-

human trafficking initiatives in Southeast Asia, including support for ASEAN and the national governments in taking preventive measures, protecting the victims, and persecuting perpetrators. Civil society organizations also carry out independent activities such as advocacy, campaigning, and education efforts to increase awareness among government elites and local communities in Southeast Asia about the threat of human trafficking crimes.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, Southeast Asia has been a relatively peaceful and stable region. There have been no major wars in Southeast Asia since the successful integration of the Indochinese states into the ASEAN regional framework in the 1990s. The achievement of regional political stability does not necessarily make Southeast Asia utterly free from non-traditional security threats. The process of globalization and integration of Southeast Asian countries into the global political and economic system has encouraged the growth of cross-border criminal activities in the region. One of those criminal problems is human trafficking, which continues to increase and is becoming more difficult to overcome by national governments and regional authorities in the Southeast Asia region. Currently, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific regions are the centers of the global human trafficking syndicate chain. It is estimated that every year, millions of people, including children in Southeast Asia, become victims of illegal human trafficking and smuggling. The value of profits for perpetrators of human trafficking and smuggling crimes in the Southeast Asia region can reach hundreds of billions of USD each year (Caballero-Anthony, 2018).

The role of ASEAN is crucial in overcoming the increasingly significant problem of human trafficking in the region. ASEAN centrality is needed as a forum for Southeast Asian countries and the other Asia-Pacific neighbors in creating adequate collective policy responses to deal with the complexity of human trafficking problems in the region. There have been several actions taken within the ASEAN framework, starting with the creation of the ASEAN Declaration Against Trafficking in Persons, Particularly Women and Children, in

2004 as a statement of commitment and affirmation of all member countries against human trafficking and smuggling (ASEAN, 2004). Following the declaration, in 2015, ASEAN countries agreed on the ASEAN Plan of Action in Combating Transnational Crime document, which was then followed by the establishment of the ASEAN Plan of Action Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children document. The agreement broadly mandates all member countries to increase legal capacity and strengthen territorial border control, intensify persecution of perpetrators, and accentuate regional cooperation to respond to the growing human trafficking networks in the Southeast Asia region (ASEAN, 2021). Given the broad scope of human trafficking operations, ASEAN also promotes collaboration with external partners through programs such as the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking Program, Triangle ASEAN with the International Labor Organization, and Safe and Fair in collaboration with the United Nations and the European Union (Martinus and Aridati, 2024).

The regional level initiatives have been followed by several efforts of the national governments of Southeast Asian countries to strengthen their anti-human trafficking supervision and capability. For example, the Indonesian government has recently increased investigations and persecution of perpetrators and applied protection and recovery measures for human trafficking victims (US Department of State, 2024). Similarly, the Malaysian government since 2007, has issued the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act (ATIPSOM) in dealing with the problems of human trafficking and smuggling (US Department of State, 2024). Likewise, Thailand has released the Anti-Human Trafficking Effort initiative, which emphasizes the government's ambition to strengthen preventive measures, protection of victims, and persecution of perpetrators of human trafficking and smuggling crimes. The initiative was then conducted by amending regulations, reforming actions, and expanding cooperation with other countries and other international entities (Royal Thai Government, 2023). Various ASEAN initiatives and national governments have not been able to address the complexities of human trafficking in Southeast Asia. The number of trafficking victims in the region has increased in recent years. Similarly, criminal networks of human traffickers continue to expand across countries in Southeast Asia.

Amidst ASEAN and governments' limitations, civil society organizations (CSOs) have an important role in addressing the problem of human trafficking in Southeast Asia. The

operational flexibility of civil society organizations, along with their extensive regional networks, offers an alternative governance model as a solution to the lumbering response of ASEAN and national governments to the threat of human trafficking in Southeast Asia. This study argues that the crucial roles of civil society organizations in the regional anti-human trafficking initiatives pervade, first, assisting and supporting the government's preventive measures, investigations, and persecution of perpetrators while providing adequate protection for victims under international standards and provisions set by ASEAN. Second, civil society organizations can also act as critical actors that provide input and pressure for the government and ASEAN to act more seriously in overcoming the problem of human trafficking and smuggling in the region. And the third, civil society organizations can conduct campaigns, and a series of other collective activities aimed at increasing public awareness of the Southeast Asian peoples regarding the dangers of human trafficking criminals.

Research Methods

This study employs an analytical, descriptive, qualitative approach, incorporating a literature review technique, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in addressing the issue of illegal human trafficking in Southeast Asia. Based on this method, researchers conducted an in-depth search of various information sources regarding human trafficking and smuggling practices in Southeast Asia, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Through the available data and information, an analysis was then conducted on the strategic responses and the central role of civil society organizations in responding to the current rise in human trafficking and smuggling activities in Southeast Asia. The primary data and information sources in question include official documents contained on the websites of national governments and regional organizations in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, secondary data and information were obtained from digital media, the results of studies in previous scientific journal articles, and documents from civil society organizations contained on their websites and social media. Through the application of this method, this research can provide a comprehensive explanation of the activities and roles of civil society organizations in the governance of handling human trafficking issues in Southeast Asia.

Theoretical Framework: Role of Civil Society Organizations in The International Anti-Human Trafficking Initiatives

In examining the crucial role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in combating human trafficking issues in the Southeast Asian region, this study is grounded in the theoretical understanding that CSOs are significant actors that cannot be overlooked in the dynamics of contemporary international relations. Through the concept of global civil society, Mary Kaldor (2013) explains the possibility of the direct participation of civil society in the dynamics of the new global politics. The existence of international non-state organizations (NGOs), transnational advocacy networks, civil society organizations, and other manifestations of social movements has provided space for civil society to fight for its aspirations and interests in the regional and international spheres. Utilizing the breadth of social networks in the era of globalization, civil society can launch certain political campaigns and agendas to influence state policies and political decisions of other international authorities. In addition, by utilizing available resources, civil society networks can implement various activities that are specifically aimed at resolving transnational problems independently without intervention from the state government (Kaldor, 2013).

Following this understanding, in examining the relationship between civil society organizations, state governments, and ASEAN, Nandyatama (2017) revealed that CSOs have an essential role in advocating values regarding the protection of human rights that are often neglected in the region. The wave of democratization in Southeast Asia in the early 2000s has opened opportunities for CSOs to thrive and play significant roles in the region. Even in most Southeast Asian countries, civil society organizations receive full legitimacy from the government and society to participate in the state's political and economic policies formulation and implementation. Likewise, at the regional level, the growing reputation of transnational community organizations has eroded ASEAN's state-centric tendencies, although still to a limited extent. There are efforts by CSOs to encourage reform of the Southeast Asian regional political order, which is considered outdated and incompatible with the reality of the contemporary regional problems. By being directly involved in the dynamics of politics within the country and ASEAN, civil society organizations become normative forces that socialize new regional values and oppose the domination of non-intervention norms, consensus, and incrementalism, which are considered too rigid and

complicate the response of state governments and ASEAN when faced with complex regional problems, especially concerning the protection of human rights (Nandyatama, 2017).

Furthermore, Nandyatama (2017) explains that the advocacy of the civil society organizations in Southeast Asia can be divided into three areas, namely, supportive, critical, and adaptive. The supportive aspect refers to the role of civil society organizations as supporting elements and implementers for government policy and ASEAN initiatives in overcoming regional problems, especially regarding the protection of human rights. In contrast to supportive organizations, critical groups view governments and regional authorities as having complex political and bureaucratic limitations that make them incompetent in solving the problems and challenges faced by society. On the other hand, elites in government are often involved as actors responsible for the occurrence of violence against humanity and other regional problems in Southeast Asia. Therefore, instead of working with government authorities, critical civil society organizations are actively launching advocacy actions and carrying out a series of other independent programs aimed at overcoming the problems. Finally, there are also adaptive civil society organizations. This group of organizations carries out their advocacy efforts more flexibly by being willing to work together with government authorities as well as launching critical actions against state and ASEAN authorities if they are deemed to be neglecting or deviating (Nandyatama, 2017).

The research report of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (2018) explains more about the importance of the participation of civil society organizations in anti-human trafficking initiatives. The criminal act of human trafficking is a complex problem that requires a holistic approach and the involvement of various elements, including civil society, in overcoming it. Although the government holds the prime responsibility, the wide scale of today's transnational criminal networks reinforces the government's inclusivity in building cooperation and strategic relations with civil society organizations at the local and international levels. There are at least six dimensions of civil society organization involvement in anti-human trafficking activities, including academic groups, labor unions, protection and counseling centers, human rights campaign movements, specialist advocacy groups, and other non-profit organizational entities. The contributions of civil society are categorized into several types as follows: (1) Participating in national and regional coordination mechanisms; (2) Developing national and regional legislation and policies; (3)

Cooperating with the state in developing referral mechanisms; (4) Management of assistance for victims; (5) Launching anti-human trafficking campaigns to the public; (6) Collaborating with the business and private sectors; (7) Helping provide access for victims in seeking justice; (8) Developing capacity building and research activities on human trafficking. Intensive contributions from civil society organizations can increase preventive measures and protection for victims while strengthening persecution against perpetrators of human trafficking crimes (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2018).

Discussion and Result

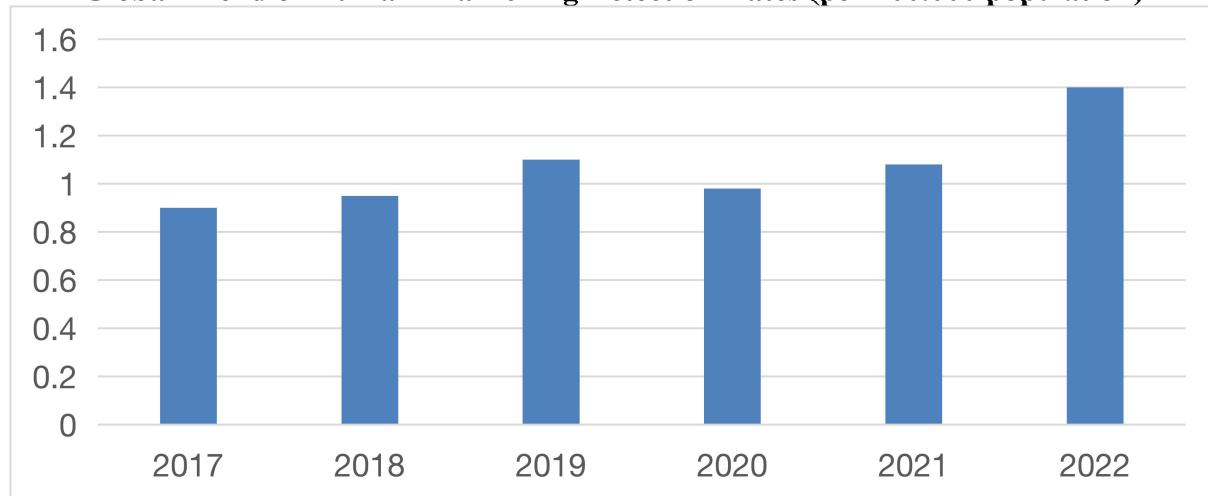
Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia

The end of the Cold War, followed by the successful integration of Indo-China countries within the ASEAN framework, made Southeast Asia a relatively stable region with minimal potential conflict between countries. The absence of military conflict between Southeast Asian countries has driven the rapid acceleration of economic growth and increased public welfare in recent years. However, this does not necessarily mean that the Southeast Asian region is completely free from contemporary security threats. The process of globalization and integration of the Southeast Asian countries in the global market not only generates profits but also increases the vulnerability of people in the region to the threat of increasingly complex and uncontrolled transnational criminal activities. It is undeniable that the Southeast Asian region has become an important part of various criminal acts and transnational illegal commodity trade, one of which is human trafficking. Several countries in the region with large populations and low levels of welfare, such as Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Vietnam, generally become supplier areas or countries of origin for the victims. Meanwhile, several other relatively more developed countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, usually become destination areas in the chain criminal network of human trafficking in the region (Caballero-Anthony, 2018).

Based on the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024, criminal activities of human trafficking have increased significantly in recent years after experiencing a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was an increase in the detection rate of human trafficking worldwide in 2022, with a global average percentage reaching 25% compared to 2019. The largest increase in detection rates occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa and North America, which are known as the centers of human trafficking criminal activity, with an increase in

percentage ranging from 80-100% from the pre-pandemic period. In the Asia Pacific, the recent number of human trafficking cases and arrests is still below the number of cases detected in the period before the pandemic. However, it is estimated that the number of human trafficking cases in this region has increased by 20% compared to the number of cases found during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The ratio of human trafficking victims in 2022 reached 1.4 people per 100.000 population. This figure has exceeded the previous record in 2019, which was estimated at 1.1 people per 100.000 of the world's population becoming victims of human trafficking crimes. Most of the victims are trafficked across borders and employed as sex workers and illegal laborers. Many of them are also exploited as criminal workers, forced into marriage, and have their organs removed (UNODC, 2024).

Figure 1
Global Trend of Human Trafficking Detection Rates (per 100.000 population)



Sources: Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 2024

The Southeast Asia region is part of a wider human trafficking criminal network that includes South Asian, East Asian, and Pacific countries. Indeed, the number of findings of illegal human trafficking and smuggling activities in the Asia Pacific region is relatively lower compared to Sub-Saharan Africa, North and South America, and Eastern Europe. However, these records do not necessarily indicate that the Asia Pacific region is completely free from the problem of human trafficking. Otherwise, the recent fantastic economic development and integration of the region into the global political and economic system have the potential to make this region a new center for the global human trafficking market. This is coupled with internal political instability and the still weak law enforcement capacity of Southeast Asian countries, which allows transnational criminal activities to develop rapidly in the region. As

explained by Caballero-Anthony (2018), human trafficking networks and activities within the Southeast Asian region are getting increasingly intensive, with the number of victims reaching millions of people each year. The flow of human trafficking in Southeast Asia is now also increasingly complex and widespread, where many of the victims from Southeast Asian countries are being illegally trafficked and exploited to East Asian countries, mainland Europe, and North America (UNODC, 2024).

The recent human trafficking spike in the region has been correlated with the existence of online gambling and scamming criminal networks in Southeast Asia. Based on the report of the IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (2024), since the end of the pandemic, there has been an increase in human trafficking activities related to online gambling and fraud businesses centered in less developed states. It is estimated that every year, hundreds of thousands of victims, generally from Indonesia, Vietnam, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, are illegally trafficked to work as slaves in illegal online business centers located in the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. Not only are they employed as operators with excessive working hours and minimum wages, but the victims are also exploited as sex workers, drug couriers, and even their organs are removed to be traded in the global illicit markets. The value of money from human trafficking activities integrated with online scamming and gambling, and other transnational criminal activities in the region is estimated to reach trillions of USD each year (Magromo, 2024). Along with the large potential profits generated, the number of cartels involved in these illegal business operations also continues to increase, making the human trafficking problem in Southeast Asia more complex and harder to cope with.

In carrying out their operations, the cartels usually recruit victims by first spreading job offers through various social media platforms. The initial jobs offered include formal fields such as accounting, marketing, and customer service, located in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. To attract victims, the perpetrators also promise high salaries, adequate accommodation, an attractive work environment, and various other benefits. After falling into the trap, the victims are first sent to transit areas in Thailand before being sent to countries with illegal industrial centers. Instead of being employed properly with adequate salaries, the victims are forced to become operators of online fraud and illegal gambling activities and commit other crimes. They are detained at work and are not allowed to communicate and disseminate

information to outside parties. The perpetrators aren't hesitant to launch verbal threats and commit intense physical violence against victims who refuse. It is not uncommon for that situation to eventually culminate in acts of murder, organ removal, and disposal of the victims. Criminal operations are carried out consistently with various patterns and variations of activities, making it difficult for security authorities and law enforcement in the region to conduct surveillance and make arrests (IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2024).

Regional Responses toward the Increasing Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia

ASEAN centrality is urgently needed in producing a concrete and adequate response to the human trafficking criminal network in Southeast Asia. Various forums and regional cooperation frameworks within the ASEAN framework provide a platform for national governments to intensify collaborative actions against human trafficking. Aware of the urgency of a regional response to the problem of human trafficking, since 2004, ASEAN countries have agreed to the ASEAN Declaration Against Trafficking in Persons, Particularly Women and Children. The declaration contains several important points that affirm the commitment of all member countries to strengthen national law enforcement and increase regional cooperation to encounter the increasingly massive threat of human trafficking.

This declaration also confirms the intention of member state governments and the willingness of civil society in the region to optimize the function of monitoring and protecting victims, especially women and children, as well as increasing persecution measures against perpetrators of human trafficking (ASEAN, 2004). Although the fight against human trafficking has been declared, at that time, there were no specific protocols or guidelines for countries in dealing with the problem. It was only at the 27th ASEAN Summit forum held in Malaysia that the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) document was agreed upon by all member countries. Referring to the document, there are three main ASEAN agendas in handling the problem of human trafficking, namely: (1) Maximum prevention and resistance to trafficking in persons activities and guaranteeing fair and effective punishment for perpetrators; (2) Protection and assistance to victims based on human rights principles; (3) Promoting cooperation between all regional elements in achieving the goal of eradicating criminal acts of human trafficking, especially in the Southeast Asia region (ASEAN, 2015). The declaration and anti-human trafficking convention were then followed by the ratification of the ASEAN Plan of Action

Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (APA), which contains technical instructions for countries and communities in dealing with the issue of human trafficking in the region. There are three forms of concrete action demanded in the action plan, namely, first, strengthening law enforcement and border control between ASEAN countries. Second, the importance of member country governments in intensifying prosecution efforts against perpetrators of human trafficking crimes. Finally, strengthening regional cooperation based on the principle of shared responsibility to increase effective responses to human trafficking problems on both the supply and demand sides (ASEAN, 2015).

The existence of a specific anti-human trafficking protocol and action plan is the basis for ASEAN in realizing various strategic steps. Following the increase in human trafficking criminal activities after the pandemic, ASEAN countries, through the Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC) in 2023, launched the ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Work Plan Against Trafficking in Persons (Bohol TIP Work Plan) 2023-2028. There are five objectives of this initiative, including identifying work priorities, providing an anti-human trafficking platform, facilitating coordination between countries, developing ACTIP and APA monitoring and evaluation functions, and learning from the development of the human trafficking challenges. This program has been realized through the implementation of various specific activities in all member countries based on the four pillars of APA, namely, prevention, protection, persecution, and collaboration and coordination (ASEAN, 2023). Reflecting on the transnationality of the human trafficking criminal network, ASEAN has been intensifying its cooperation with surrounding countries. Some of these include the implementation of the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking Program 2018-2028. Through this program, Australia provides technical assistance, information, and funding to ASEAN countries in increasing regional and national capacity and developing public policies in addressing human trafficking problems (Australia Government's Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023). Likewise, along with the strong nexus of trade and human smuggling between ASEAN countries and East Asian countries, ASEAN has implemented various anti-human trafficking collaboration programs involving the governments and community organizations in China, Japan, and South Korea.

Regional-level initiatives encourage the Southeast Asian countries' governments to develop specific policies to address human trafficking issues. In response to the increasing number of

victims of trafficking in persons related to criminal acts of fraud and online gambling originating from Indonesia today, the Indonesian government is currently launching a series of strategic actions. Among them is increasing collaboration with destination countries, such as the Philippines, Myanmar, and Cambodia, in efforts to protect and repatriate victims. As a result, by 2023, thousands of victims of human trafficking were successfully identified, rescued, and repatriated. Moreover, hundreds of people have been arrested in connection with these crimes (Executive Office of the President, 2023). Collaborating with the National Human Rights Commission, the Indonesian government has recently also been intensively implementing various anti-human trafficking campaign programs to increase public awareness of the magnitude of the threat of human trafficking. These efforts are focused on communities in remote areas, especially in West Kalimantan and East Nusa Tenggara, as the two provinces with the largest number of human trafficking victims in Indonesia (Putri, 2024). Similar efforts have also been taken by other Southeast Asian countries, such as Malaysia, which has increased preventive policy aspects, efforts to protect victims, and arrests of human trafficking criminal networks based on the international and regional procedures, and ATIPSOM Act protocol mechanisms (Malaysia Working Group on Trafficking in Persons, 2024). Likewise, Vietnam has been increasing technical cooperation with European countries such as the UK and France to produce concrete strategic efforts to deal with the recent human trafficking trends (Vietnam Law and Legal Forum, 2025).

Critical Roles of Civil Society Organizations in the Regional Anti-Human Trafficking Responses

The formulation of cooperation and initiatives within the ASEAN regional framework has not immediately succeeded in stopping the development of human trafficking criminal networks in Southeast Asia. The complexity of problems at the regional and national level of each member country has made human trafficking issues increasingly difficult to overcome. Despite the huge attention and commitment to anti-human trafficking by ASEAN countries through ACTIP and APA, and various other cooperation initiatives, the real regional actions are still feeble and ineffective. This is rooted in several factors, among them, first, the dominance non-intervention principle in the region makes it difficult for ASEAN countries to create and implement concrete actions when faced with non-traditional security problems like human trafficking and human rights violations. According to Nandyatama (2017), the

continued doctrine of non-intervention and excessive prioritization of state sovereignty has led to ASEAN's rigidity in dealing with humanitarian crises and transnational crime that require a faster, more flexible, and comprehensive regional response. In this regard, the internalization of new principles and values in the region regarding the prioritization of humanitarian action and the urgency of handling transnational criminal problems is still limited, resulting in minimal regional cohesion and partial responses (Prayuda et al, 2020).

Internal problems in each country in the region also hinder efforts to overcome human trafficking problems in Southeast Asia. Most Southeast Asian countries are developing countries that generally have complex problems regarding weak legal enforcement frameworks, high levels of corruption, and minimal control of border areas. The weak institutional capacity and capabilities of the state also facilitate and provide opportunities for perpetrators of transnational criminal acts, including human trafficking, to carry out their operations more freely (Sitinjak et al, 2024). The rampant practices of corruption, bribery, and money laundering involving government officials and elites allow transnational criminal activities to continue to grow. Therefore, initiatives to eradicate transnational criminal acts need to be preceded by reforms in governance and strengthening national law enforcement in each Southeast Asian country (Japriyanto et al, 2022). Reflecting on the case of Indonesia and several other Southeast Asian countries, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2025) report states that those countries existence as a source of trafficking in persons and other form of illicit trade is also related to the vastness of the country's territorial area combined with limited control over border areas. It must be acknowledged that the capacity and capabilities of defense elements and law enforcement authorities in Southeast Asian countries face many obstacles and are not yet completely capable of controlling all illegal trade activities throughout the border areas.

The massive threat of human trafficking criminal activity networks has urged ASEAN and its member countries to implement more inclusive policies by opening wider participation of civil society organizations (CSOs). Optimizing the involvement of civil society organizations is considered essential to provide adequate resources and appropriate recommendations for combating human trafficking to states and regional authorities. The ACTIP and APA documents, as the basic anti-human trafficking legal documents in the region, have emphasized the importance of collaborative action with civil society organizations and other

non-state entities. As a manifestation, various networks of community organizations that have been formed include the ASEAN Foundation, the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People Forum (ACSC/APF), and ASEAN Youth as a platform for civil society elements in conducting discourse processes and organizing advocacy activities toward regional issues, including human rights violations, transnational crimes, and human trafficking. As in the implementation of the ACSC/APF Forum in Indonesia in 2023, representatives of community organizations and groups throughout Southeast Asia urged ASEAN and national governments to carry out regional security reforms that prioritize human rights protections to address current human security threats (YAPPIKA, 2023). Similar discourses were also held in the 2024 ACSC/APF Forum, which discussed the issue of protecting marginalized groups, refugees, and illegal migrant workers in Southeast Asia. The results of the forum discussions were then used as recommendations and policy options for ASEAN and its member countries in responding to the problem.

As mentioned before, the roles of civil society organizations in anti-human trafficking governance in Southeast Asia pervade two aspects of activity, namely, supporting and advocacy. In the first aspect, civil society organizations become supporting elements for ASEAN regional initiatives and specific policies of each government in the region in dealing with human trafficking problems. In this case, the government and civil society organizations built collaborative relations in launching a series of anti-human trafficking programs. However, it is not uncommon for civil society organizations to act independently by initiating protection activities for victims and monitoring perpetrators of human trafficking without any intervention from the government and ASEAN regional organizations. In addition, civil society organizations also conduct various campaigns and other forms of information dissemination. This aims to raise public awareness among Southeast Asian people about the dangers of human trafficking and to encourage solemn responses from governments and regional institutions.

One of the major civil society organizations in the Southeast Asia region that focuses on human trafficking issues, especially illegal labor and sex trafficking, is the International Justice Mission (IJM). In collaboration with government authorities and local communities throughout Southeast Asian countries, this organization prioritizes preventive action by carrying out intensive campaigns and outreach to the public to minimize the number of

victims. However, IJM's activities also include detecting perpetrator networks, rescue actions, and providing protection assistance to victims of human trafficking in Southeast Asia. Moreover, this organization is also actively encouraging Southeast Asian governments to reform policies, strengthen national legal systems, and fight corruption as important instruments in producing effective anti-human trafficking policy outputs (IJM, 2025). Responding to the high level of human trafficking related to scams and online gambling in Southeast Asia in recent years, a network of human trafficking victims formed the Global Anti-Scam Organization (GASO) and the Global Anti-Scam Alliance (GASA) in Singapore. The two community organizations have different scopes of activities. GASO focuses on rescue efforts and legal protection for victims. Meanwhile, GASA is an industry-based organization that involves the participation of governments, financial institutions, and technology organizations in launching joint preventive actions (Hemrajani, 2025).

Figure 2
IJM's Scope of Activities

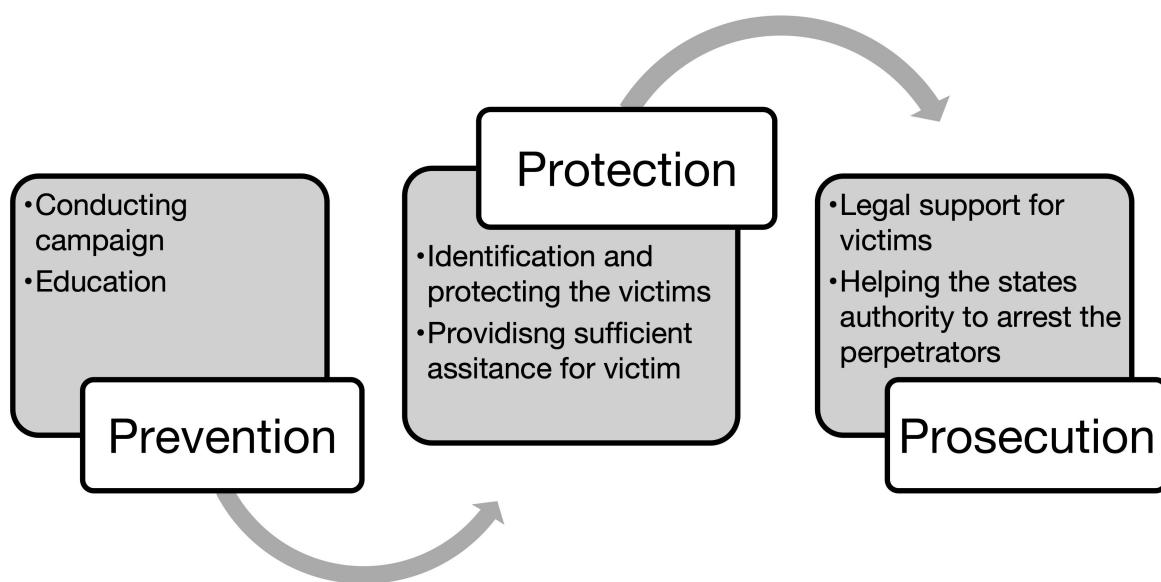


Sources: International Justice Mission, 2025

As civil society awareness increases, nowadays, there are many community organizations participating in the anti-human trafficking governance in Southeast Asia. The Alliance Anti-Trafficking (AAT) organization is a community organization that aims to eliminate human trafficking and smuggling activities, especially those related to the exploitation of women and children in Southeast Asia. AAT operations include the Indo-China countries and Thailand, which are centers for human trafficking and exploitation activities in the region. In

collaboration with the government and other community elements, the scope of advocacy activities carried out includes: (1) Preventive actions by promoting campaigns and education, especially for women and children; (2) Protection and rescue actions for victims of trafficking; (3) Providing adequate legal assistance and upholding justice for victims; (4) Coordinating with state authorities in designing and implementing the process of repatriating victims (AAT, 2025). Another anti-human trafficking organization is ECPAT, which is based in Thailand and has a vast network in other Southeast Asian countries. Unlike the others, ECPAT focuses on protecting children from exploitation and trafficking. In carrying out campaign and education activities, this organization not only collaborates with local and regional organizations throughout Southeast Asia but also builds intensive relationships with governments and community elements in more than 130 other countries in the world (ECPAT, 2025).

Figure 3
Anti-Human Trafficking Initiatives of CSOs



Sources: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2018

Responding to the spread of human trafficking criminal networks, civil society organizations in Southeast Asia operate both in countries of origin and destination countries. In countries of origin, civil society organizations focus on preventive and protective measures to minimize the number of human trafficking victims. Preventive measures and protection programs that

can be carried out include campaign and education activities, development of victim support and protection systems, data evaluation and monitoring processes, and advocacy and legislative processes to encourage reform of anti-human trafficking governance (Limocelli, 2017). Through a series of these activities, it is expected that the level of human trafficking victims in the Southeast Asia region can be gradually reduced along with the growing awareness and understanding of the public about the dangers of human trafficking crimes. As a country with the largest number of human trafficking victims in the region, many community organizations operate to carry out preventive and protective actions in Indonesia. These organizations form alliance networks to intensify their actions in combating human trafficking. One manifestation of this is Dark Bali, which is a coalition of local anti-human trafficking organizations throughout Indonesia. Several local organizations that are members of the coalition include Compassion First, Flourish, Freedom Port Alliances, Gerasa, Kusuma Bongas, Kita Design, Project Karma, and various other organizations with various scopes of preventive and protective activities to help the community evade the threat of human trafficking crimes (Dark Bali, 2025).

Similar forms of civil society alliances have also been implemented in several other Southeast Asian countries that are seriously hampered by human trafficking problems. As in Thailand, where the existence of large civil society organizations in the field of human trafficking, including AAT, A21, Chiwa Project, IJM, MAST Human, and various other anti-human trafficking organizations, formed the Thailand Anti-Trafficking Community (TATC) coalition. The formation of the alliance aims to intensify cooperation and collaboration between organizations, resulting in a more significant civil society resistance response to human trafficking criminals in Thailand and surrounding countries (TATC, 2024). The existence of civil society is also essential in Cambodia, along with its existence as a destination country for human trafficking related to scamming and illegal online gambling activities in the region. The manifestation of this coalition is the Chab Dai Coalition, which is a form of local Cambodian anti-human trafficking and anti-slavery organizations. The areas of activity of the Chab Dai Coalition include survivor restoration, community empowerment, system strengthening, and movement building. Based on the Impact Report (2024), the Chab Dai Coalition in 2024 has succeeded in saving 114 victims of human trafficking and child trafficking in Cambodia. Recently, this coalition has also launched hundreds of types of

training activities for community groups and students to increase the social capacity of the Cambodian people to encounter the threat of human trafficking.

Compared with the actions of governments in Southeast Asia, the response of civil society organizations has several advantages. First, the flexibility of civil society bureaucracies allows them to act more quickly and efficiently. For example, in response to the growing threat of human trafficking related to sexual exploitation and online fraud in Southeast Asia, IJM, as one of the largest anti-human trafficking organizations, has directly intensified campaigns and information dissemination through its website and social media platforms, targeting the young generation in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia who are often become the victims (IJM, 2025). Second, the previous explanation has demonstrated the ability of civil society organizations to operate across national borders in addressing the transnational nature of human trafficking. While a government's response is limited to its own sovereign territory, civil society organizations possess extensive networks and can operate in multiple host and origin countries simultaneously. Using the same organization as an example, IJM has been able to rescue victims and assist in prosecuting perpetrators in four countries simultaneously, central to human trafficking and forced labor in the region: Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines. To date, IJM has successfully rescued and returned more than five hundred victims to their home countries and assisted in the prosecution of fifteen perpetrators in these four countries (IJM, 2025). Finally, the close relationship between civil society organizations and grassroots communities allows them to launch anti-human trafficking activities that directly target local communities. For example, the Alliance Anti Traffic (AAT) has implemented various protection and education projects in vulnerable communities in Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Laos (AAT Thailand, 2021).

Conclusion

The conclusion that can be drawn is that human trafficking is a manifestation of transnational criminal problems that occur in the Southeast Asia region. Currently, there has been a significant increase in the trend of human trafficking activities, along with the rise in other criminal activities such as drug trafficking, human organ sales, scamming, and online gambling. Along with the globalization process and complex regional interdependence, the existence of human trafficking criminals in the Southeast Asia region is surging, with a complex network both in the origin and destination countries. In response to the human

trafficking problems that occur, ASEAN has declared a commitment to combating human trafficking criminal networks, followed by the establishment of special regional protocols of ACTIP and APA as guidelines for regional countries in implementing adequate anti-human trafficking policies.

The complexity of human trafficking problems in the Southeast Asia region demands concrete action, involving community elements. The existence of civil society organizations plays a central role in supporting regional authorities and national governments in determining and implementing strategic policies to deal with the threat of human trafficking crimes. In several cases of human trafficking in Southeast Asia, there has been collaborative action between national governments and civil society organizations in launching preventive activities, providing protection to victims, and undertaking prosecution measures for identified perpetrators. The contribution of civil society organizations is not just a complement to the regional anti-human trafficking framework governance. Often, without government support and intervention, civil society organizations in Southeast Asia conduct advocacy through campaigns and education activities to raise public awareness in Southeast Asia about the magnitude of the threat of human trafficking. In addition, civil society organizations also carry out monitoring and evaluation to produce a more comprehensive regional anti-human trafficking response. A series of independent civil society initiatives is crucial to overcome the weaknesses of the ASEAN bureaucratic system and countries' internal constraints that often make them incapable of matching the growth and flexibility of human trafficking activities in Southeast Asia.

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