

LORENZO
COLANTONI

ALESSIO
SANGIORGIO

ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMES BETWEEN THE EU AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

A REVIEW OF TRENDS,
OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS
FOR EFFECTIVE ACTION

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This report was funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund – Police



TRAFFIC

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Cover: a beach in Alas
Purwo National Park,
Banyuwangi, Indonesia

Introduction	4	4 OBSTACLES	44
Reading guide	6	4.1 Legislative obstacles	45
About UNITE	7	4.1.1 Legislative obstacles – regional level South East Asia	45
About IAI	7	4.1.2 Legislative obstacles – EU	47
About the Authors	7	4.2 Operative obstacles	48
		4.2.1 Operative obstacles – regional level South East Asia	48
		4.2.2 Operative obstacles – EU	49
1 CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND SOUTH EAST ASIA	8	4.3 Sector specific obstacles	50
1.1 Trade between the EU and South East Asia	9	4.3.1 Sector specific obstacles – waste trafficking	50
1.2 Diplomatic connections between the EU and South East Asia	10	4.3.2 Sector-specific obstacles – wildlife trafficking	51
1.3 Interactions between trade, diplomatic relations and environmental crimes	12	4.3.3 Sector-specific obstacles – forestry crimes	53
		4.4 Obstacles to EU–South East Asia cooperation	54
2 ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMES BETWEEN THE EU AND SOUTH EAST ASIA	14	5 SOLUTIONS	56
2.1 Waste trafficking	15	5.1 Solutions – EU	57
2.2 Wildlife trafficking	17	5.2 Solutions – South East Asia	58
2.3 Forest crimes	18	5.3 Solutions – bilateral	58
2.4 Other crimes	20	6 REFERENCES	62
		6.1 Workshops	63
3 LEGISLATIVE AND OPERATIVE FRAMEWORKS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA AND THE EU	22	6.2 Questionnaires	63
3.1 Legislative frameworks	23	Bibliography	66
3.1.1 South East Asia Regional level	23	Notes	75
3.1.2 South East Asia National legislation	24		
3.1.3 ASEAN	25		
3.1.4 EU	29		
3.1.5 International legislation	33		
3.2 Operative frameworks	34		
3.2.1 South East Asia	35		
3.2.2 EU	38		
3.2.3 International agencies and institutions	39		
3.2.4 Civil society and other players	40		

INTRODUCTION AND READING GUIDE



The EU and South East Asia share a set of particularly relevant connections: remarkable trade (flowing in both directions) and significant diplomatic relations above all, as well as a series of initiatives and policy collaborations aimed at delineating common paths towards addressing global topics – the ecological transition and security issues in particular. Such connections have been growing and evolving especially in recent years, also thanks to efforts by the von der Leyen Commission, and they are expected to continue doing so in the near future.

As legal trade has grown and consolidated between the two regions, however, such has also been the case for illegal trafficking and activities, particularly those that affect the environment: the export of agricultural products towards the EU, such as palm oil, has heavily contributed to illegal deforestation across South East Asia in the past two to three decades, while wildlife trafficking has steadily grown in both directions for at least the past ten years. Following the Chinese ban on waste imports in 2018, a new wave of illegal waste shipments coming from Europe (and to some extent other regions) has hit South East Asia, quickly turning the issue into one of the key environmental problems now affecting the two regions.

The growth and relevance of these environmental offenses indicate urgent and effective action, and both the EU and South East Asia already have and could deploy the necessary tools to address them. Activities undertaken during the five years of the European Green Deal have produced key new legislation on environmental issues that strongly empowers EU institutions, such as the new Environmental Crime Directive or the EU Deforestation-free Regulation (EUDR). The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also demonstrated a growing attention to environmental issues, and an interest in boosting diplomatic connections with the EU. New technologies will also allow for cheaper and faster detection of offenses, from satellite images to drones and DNA scanners. It will be however essential to improve and expand current collaborations between law enforcement agencies (LEAs), the judiciary, customs and civil society from both sides for effective and immediate action. Above all, a renewed focus on environmental enforcement across regulations and initiatives will be key to face these renewed threats.

This report aims at providing an overall picture of the environmental crimes taking place between the EU and South East Asian countries; it analyses the economic and political background and exchanges between the two regions (section 1), the status and trends of major environmental offenses (section 2), the legislative and operative frameworks for both the EU and South East Asian countries (section 3) and the existing obstacles to effective action (section 4). Finally, it proposes a series of solutions and policy recommendations to address them (section 5).

This report has been realised through a consolidated methodology where data was collected in four steps:

- **Desk research**, which provided a general picture of the information available, key trends and issues, as well as a map of all the relevant players involved in action against environmental crimes between the EU and South East Asia.
- **Questionnaires**, which have been sent to representative from LEAs, the judiciary, customs and civil society on both the EU and the South East Asian side, as well as a selection of international institutions and NGOs, for a total of 42 questionnaires delivered and 19 replies. A detailed list of all the entities that were reached is available in the References section of this report. The questionnaires were meant to provide core information about trends, legislative and operative frameworks and challenges faced by the different players.
- **Workshops**, which were conducted online, also in this case with representatives from LEAs, the judiciary, customs and civil society on both the EU and the South East Asian side, as well as a selection of international institutions and NGOs, for a total of 11 workshops. A detailed list of all the entities involved is available in the References section of this report. Workshops were meant to fine tune and expand the information received through the questionnaires.
- **Consolidation of data and information** gathered through the previous steps, which were then analysed and presented in this report.

The document focuses on waste trafficking, wildlife and forestry crimes in particular.

About UNITE

This report was produced as part of the European ISF UNITE project.

Led by the Law Enforcement Directorate for Environment and Public Health (CESAN) of the French Gendarmerie, this project aims to fight against criminal networks involved in waste or endangered species trafficking, including illegal trade in timber, in and via the EU, and to recover the assets generated from these illegal activities.

UNITE works on a transnational level and brings together law enforcement agencies, EU agencies and NGOs, stakeholders from the financial and private sectors and the general public.

One of core project activities has been to strength the law enforcement and judiciary cooperation between the EU and countries from South East Asia, as well as with observers from Africa, to further rapid intelligence exchanges, sharing of best practices and joint operations. Therefore, an intelligence-sharing network has been set up with five South East Asian countries in order to carry out a coordinated inspection operation: Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Malaysia. This report however focuses on all of South East Asia (taking as a reference the ten member of ASEAN) to provide a full perspective of the dynamics and the trends occurring in the region, as well as in the EU as a whole.

About IAI

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation, focusing on topics such as European integration, security and defence, energy and climate policies, as well as key regions such as the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. The IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (The International Spectator), an online webzine (AffariInternazionali), two book series (Trends and Perspectives in International Politics and IAI Research Studies) and other paper series related to IAI research projects.

About the Authors

Lorenzo Colantoni is Senior Fellow in the Energy, Climate and Resources (ECR) Programme of IAI and coordinated the analysis behind this report. Alessio Sangiorgio is Junior Researcher in the ECR Programme of IAI.

The content of this report reflects the views of the authors only and is their sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information the report contains.

The content of this publication is based on the information available at the time of the research, on authors' analysis, and on the information provided by national and international partners involved in the research during the project.

An aerial photograph showing a large body of water in the foreground, a road running along the shore, and agricultural fields in the background. The text '1. CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND SOUTH EAST ASIA' is overlaid in large white letters.

1. CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

Economic and diplomatic ties between the EU and South East Asia

The EU and South East Asia share significant economic and diplomatic ties, and have done so for decades; relations between the then European Community and ASEAN have been steady since 1977, as have the bi-directional flows of goods between the two regions. Such connections have been evolving in recent years and in several sectors have been growing stronger – this is the case for instance with security cooperation and the trade of agricultural products. The connections are pushed by regional and global trends and initiatives, the most relevant being for instance the European Green Deal and the increased demand for critical raw materials because of the energy transition. This in turn is affecting the status of environmental crimes and trafficking taking place between the EU and South East Asia, both negatively and positively: while criminal interests are growing and are keen to enter lucrative markets such as those of waste and agricultural commodities, stronger ties between the two regions offer greater opportunities for more effective cooperation on enforcing environmental legislation. To some extent, new EU Regulations such as the EUDR will actually demand an increase in cooperation to work smoothly on both the European and the South East Asian side; in this sense, greater collaboration on these topics is to be expected in the years to come to satisfy the requirements of such pieces of legislation.

1.1 TRADE BETWEEN THE EU AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

Trade skewed towards South East Asia

Trade between the EU and South East Asia has been growing steadily in recent years, reaching almost 272 billion euros in total goods exchanged between EU and ASEAN member states.¹ This is divided respectively into 179.8 billion euros of imports into the EU, and in 92 billion euros of goods going to South East Asia. Trade balance has indeed been historically skewed in favour of Asian countries, and this has increased over the years: while EU imports from South East Asia surpassed exports by 19.2 billion euros in 2011, this increased to 56.3 billion in 2022 – an almost threefold increment. The situation is however varied and, while for some countries their share of exports towards the EU has increased (Vietnam, Cambodia), for others their imports have instead been rising (Malaysia, Myanmar).² Some players are also more involved in these exchanges: Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia represented more than 90 per cent of total trade in 2022.³

The role of raw materials trade

The increase on the South East Asian side has been largely due to greater exports of raw materials, particularly minerals and agricultural products – two sectors that are particularly affected by environmental crimes. Bilateral trade in services is also relevant and growing, being valued at 82.4 billion euros in 2020,⁴ and so are investments: in 2022, 10.7 per cent of all foreign direct investments to South East Asia came from the EU⁵ – a share greater than that of China (6.9 per cent) and surpassed only by the US and Japan.

« Lagoons for breeding eels in Northern Italy

From a global perspective, the EU remains one of the key trading partners for South East Asia. Considering ASEAN member states, in 2022 10.2 per cent of total trade was with the EU, which was also the third-largest partner after China and the US⁶ (although climbing down from the second position it held in 2019).⁷ ASEAN countries as a whole are the third largest EU trading partner as well, after China and the US.⁸

The Union has tried to boost its trade relations with South East Asia through a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which was initially proposed in 2007 following a 2006 Communication⁹ by the European Commission identifying the region as one of the priorities for the EU. However, despite the initial enthusiasm, negotiations had not been successful and were suspended in 2009; the EU then changed strategy and proceeded with individual FTAs with ASEAN Member States, two of which have been so far signed (Singapore and Vietnam, which respectively entered into force in 2019 and 2020). FTAs have been discussed with Indonesia (since 2016), Thailand (since 2013), Malaysia (since 2010) and the Philippines (since 2015), but negotiations have been stalling in recent times because of concerns over human rights and the rule of law, as well as trade disputes between the EU and some ASEAN countries. Particularly relevant are those with Malaysia¹⁰ and Indonesia¹¹ on palm oil used for biofuel production, since the EU declared such imports from the two countries as at high risk of indirect land-use change and thus deforestation. This in turn significantly limited their employment as renewable fuels and was perceived by the two countries as an unfair obstacle to market access.

Various attempts have been made by the European Commission to revive the FTA, such as a joint statement of the EU-ASEAN working group in 2017¹² and a 2020 Resolution of the European Parliament citing the agreement.¹³ The last of such efforts was in 2022 following consultations between EU representatives and ASEAN economic ministers,¹⁴ but the strong complaints brought in by Indonesia and Malaysia following the enactment of the EUDR in 2023 will likely undermine any further attempts, at least in the short term.

1.2 DIPLOMATIC CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

South East Asia has always had a strategic importance for Europe, and both European countries and the EC/EU have historically worked hard to maintain strong relations with the region – this despite the complications following the decolonisation process. The EU has had strong diplomatic connections with ASEAN since 1977, and many have been the milestones of this cooperation: the 2007 Nuremberg Declaration of EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership, the 2017 ASEAN-EU Plan of Action for 2018–2022, the elevation of EU-ASEAN relations to a stra-

The FTA EU-ASEAN

Security connections

tegic partnership in 2017 and the 2021 EU accession as part of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South East Asia, among the most relevant. The most significant attempt by the EU to boost relations with South East Asia was however the 2022 pledge by Commission president Ursula von der Leyen to deliver ten billion euros of investment in the region through the Global Gateway initiative.¹⁵ The decision was shared during the summit organised in Brussels to celebrate the 45 years of EU-ASEAN relations and was likely largely motivated by the need to receive support from South East Asia against China and Russia;¹⁶ however, the pledge will also be relevant to enforcement action against environmental crimes, considering the strong focus on supply chain transparency and the green transition in von der Leyen's declaration.¹⁷ Action against illegal logging and wildlife trafficking will also likely receive attention and budget from the Global Gateway, since the funding will also contribute to the activities of the Green Team Europe Initiative for South East Asia (which indeed focuses on these two topics as well).¹⁸

Fluctuating relations and competitors for the EU

Despite all these efforts, relations between ASEAN countries and the EU have been fluctuating and competition from other countries to exert influence in South East Asia is strong. In 2023, Indonesia did not even list the EU among its "Important Partner Countries" on the website for the annual summit it was hosting (despite including the UN, the US and China).¹⁹ Trade has not been the only sector where relations have sometimes been complicated; in several cases the EU's security priorities have not been aligned with those of many ASEAN countries (as in the case of the invasion of Ukraine, on which Vietnam and Thailand have been largely neutral). Many South East Asian countries are however trying to counter-balance China's pressure, especially concerning claims over the South China Sea (which are particularly relevant for Vietnam and the Philippines);²⁰ while this may bring them closer to the EU, European initiatives such as the Global Gateway have been so far hardly a match for the money poured by Beijing through the Belt and Road Initiative.²¹ The latter is also entirely funded by the Chinese government, while the Global Gateway largely relies on public money to catalyse private investments, which makes the initiative's objectives harder to deliver and less aligned to the EU's overall strategy. Not by chance, out of the 10 billion euros pledged, at the time of writing more than half is still to be mobilised.²² Similarly, the US's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework is another competitor for the EU's action in South East Asia, and Australia is also a strong challenger; relations with ASEAN are clearly a priority for the country because of its geographical position and much effort has been made since 1974. Australia managed to overcome significant hurdles in recent times, such as participation in the 2007 and 2017 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, India and the US, as well as the 2021 AUKUS security pact. Although both of these moves were not welcomed warmly by several countries in South East Asia, ultimately they did not interfere with the strengthening of relations.²³

1.3 INTERACTIONS BETWEEN TRADE, DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMES

This framework for trade and diplomatic relations between the EU and South East Asian countries is deeply linked with the environmental crimes taking place between the two regions, and with their ability to counteract them and collaborate on enforcement.

Substantial trade offers more chances to smuggle illegal goods without attracting notice. This is the case for wildlife trafficking, which uses the same routes as legal commerce to illegally trade CITES-listed²⁴ animals and animal products to and from Europe.²⁵ This is particularly significant when there is already a legal trade of the product or of its equivalents, as it is easier to launder the illegally sourced batches through mixing. While this is the case for instance for Asian python skins or for baby lobsters, such criminal methodology is much more common in relation to agricultural commodities, particularly palm oil, timber, rubber and coffee – some of the key exports of South East Asia towards Europe. Demand for several raw materials sourced from European countries in South East Asia is also growing because of mega-trends such as the energy transition and digitalisation, and this will likely result in an increase in illegally sourced commodities traded between the two regions. Notable in this regard are critical raw materials, which are key for the deployment of renewables in Europe and concerning which the EU is actively seeking to diversify its supply (still largely dominated by China), particularly in South East Asia.

A possible FTA between the EU and ASEAN, and implementation of the current ones with individual countries, could have mixed impacts on these trends. On the one hand, FTAs could represent an additional risk for wildlife or other kinds of environmental trafficking, since they would reduce controls and leave more room for smuggling. Historically, FTAs also put negative pressure on environmental regulations, which have been sometimes watered down over concerns they would limit trade or even be ousted by the World Trade Organisation. Recall for instance the ban on the import of furs from animals caught in leghold traps in the early 2000s, which was rejected over fears it would provoke a strong reaction from Canada, Russia and the US.²⁶ On the other hand, from the EU side the situation has significantly evolved in recent years; the 2014 FTA with Vietnam already recognised the importance of illegal wildlife trade and contained relevant provisions to address it – among the others, a directive from the Prime Minister towards all involved ministries to deliver a series of dedicated measures.²⁷ The current EU strategy for FTAs has a strong focus on making trade “greener, fairer and more sustainable”,²⁸ and environmental provisions will be a requirement for all future agreements. This has been significantly influenced by the mainstreaming of sustainability across sectors brought in by the European Green Deal since 2019, and thus extends from FTAs to how the EU is structuring and will structure trade more generally.

Relation between legal and illegal trade

Impact of FTAs on the environment

The impact of the European Green Deal

The EU's approach to environmental crimes in South East Asia is indeed influenced by the strategic relevance of the region and by the importance of trade, but also and perhaps mostly by the policy shift triggered by the launch of the Green Deal. The initiative has been the core of the work of the von der Leyen Commission and is focused on a holistic approach to sustainability, with a strong external component. This has led to the enactment of legislation such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)²⁹ and the EUDR,³⁰ the first to prevent carbon leakage because of more stringent European policies on emissions, the second to impede the entry into the EU of agricultural commodities that caused deforestation (both are discussed in more detail in section 3.1.4). Both legislative items impose on trade strong sustainability provisions that heavily influence South East Asia, and envisage an empowerment and collaboration on the enforcement side from both regions. In this sense, this new European attention to sustainability across all sectors has given environmental legislation much more relevance than in the past and is already influencing collaborations over the enforcement of environmental legislation (as described in section 3.2.2). This is however also having negative repercussions to some extent – for instance, the protests over the EUDR from Malaysia and Indonesia (section 3.1.4), echoing previous protests over biofuels. In addition to this new overall focus on environmental topics, the EU is also boosting its attention specifically to environmental crimes, and this is not just reflected in the extensive enforcement provisions in the EUDR or the new Waste Shipment Regulations³¹ (unseen in previous legislation, such as the EU Timber Regulation, EUTR):³² the European Council confirmed environmental crime as a priority for the EU Policy Cycle for organised and serious international crime covering 2022 to 2025,³³ while the Union has also approved a new and particularly ambitious Directive against environmental crimes in 2023.³⁴ This is likely to trigger further initiatives to promote collaboration on enforcing environmental regulations between the two regions already in the short term. Stronger diplomatic relations such as those envisaged by the EU for South East Asia will further contribute to this push.

An aerial photograph of a tropical coastline. On the left, a wide, sandy beach curves along the edge of a dark, calm sea. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, hazy glow over the water and casting long, soft shadows. To the right of the beach, a dense, lush green forest covers the land, extending towards the background where a body of water is visible under a hazy sky. The overall scene is serene and natural, highlighting the beauty of the environment.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMES BETWEEN THE EU AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

Most common offenses Environmental crimes between the EU and South East Asia are varied and evolving, but the most relevant offenses are related to the kinds of trade taking place between the two regions: illegal logging and illegal trade of agricultural products is related to imports of palm oil and other commodities, for instance, while the legal trade of waste influences the flows of illegal waste.

This research has identified a set of more common offenses that likely see the involvement of players belonging to both the EU and South East Asia: waste trafficking, wildlife trafficking and illegal logging and other forest crimes (including forest fires and the trade of illegal agricultural products). New categories are however gaining importance and may be relevant in the near future – fisheries crimes and illegal mining above all. Other environmental crimes, such as pollution and illegal construction, although relevant in the region do not show a relevant involvement of EU players and are thus not considered for this report.

Different roles for the EU and South East Asia in these trafficking

The roles the two regions play in these kinds of trafficking are different and sometimes complex. The EU is the destination for wildlife, timber and agricultural products coming from South East Asia, which in turn is the destination for EU waste. Both are however a transit for several illegal trades: wildlife products, and particularly rhino horn and ivory, often transit from Africa through the EU and then reach Vietnam and other South East Asian countries, which in turn could be the final destination or could stage another transit towards China or northern Asia.³⁵

Third countries

Third countries also influence or are part of these illegal trades. Offenders from Canada, the US, the UK and Saudi Arabia have been involved in seizures of waste,³⁶ while players from Mexico, the UAE, Japan, India, South Korea and Israel have also been identified as involved in wildlife trafficking either as destination or transit.³⁷ The border between Turkey and Bulgaria is a particularly relevant entry point for wildlife trafficking that will transit through Europe,³⁸ especially after the closure of the Ukrainian border after Russia's invasion.³⁹

2.1 WASTE TRAFFICKING

Waste trafficking as the most common issue

Waste trafficking is by far the most common environmental crime occurring between the EU and South East Asia. While legal and illegal trade of waste has existed for several years, the situation changed considerably in 2018, following a series of Chinese bans on the import of waste (largely plastic, but also including other materials). A significant share of waste exports that were once destined to China had to be quickly redirected from the EU (and to some extent from the US, Canada and Japan)⁴⁰ towards other destinations. The Chinese ban was also largely meant to reduce the amount of contaminated waste that was unlawfully imported as recyclable material, and this triggered a new wave of illegal waste

« A beach near Meru Betiri National Park Banyuwangi, Indonesia

trafficking from the EU that was destined to some extent to Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa (the latter particularly in relation to e-waste), but which was mostly directed to South East Asia.

The increase first concerned plastic waste imports into the region, which decreased in 2019 due to a series of restrictions imposed by several South East Asian countries.⁴¹ However, the situation has been evolving and in 2020–2021 overall waste imports surged again, this time consisting mostly of paper and metal waste.⁴² Illegal waste is indeed correlated to legal waste: smugglers are sometimes also legal waste importers, or they try to hide illegal shipments inside legal ones. An increase in legal imports is then likely associated to a surge in waste trafficking.⁴³

The modus operandi varies across shipments and importing countries, but common patterns have been witnessed by EU and ASEAN enforcement agencies and are common also in other routes for illegal waste trade:⁴⁴ in most cases traffickers have irregular or false documents to circumvent Prior Informed Consent procedures established by the Basel Convention,⁴⁵ which controls international trade of hazardous substances and of which both the EU and ASEAN countries are signatories. In some cases different quantities than the ones actually shipped are declared, in others household and hazardous waste are mixed or the content of the shipment is different than the declaration (i.e., hazardous or non-recyclable waste instead of recyclable plastic).⁴⁶ With the exception of landlocked Laos,⁴⁷ where loads are sent by truck, illegal shipments arrive via sea routes.⁴⁸ Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia are the countries targeted the most by traffickers, but also those that, as a consequence, have so far enacted the strongest legislation.

Despite legislative improvements (described in section 3.1.4), there are strong reasons why these trends are likely to stay, at least in the short term. The EU is the largest exporter of waste, with a share of more than 40 per cent of the global total;⁴⁹ exports increased significantly between 2004 and 2009 and then levelled to around 30–33 million tonnes per year (counting only legal shipments).⁵⁰ The growing adoption of electronics (sometimes short-lived) as a result of the digitalisation process will also result in an increasing amount of e-waste, which is particularly expensive to dispose of. All of this is a remunerative business for ASEAN countries, being worth some 50 billion euros for the period 2017–2021. Growing regulations for waste disposal on the EU side will make cheaper, borderline-legal solutions more attractive for companies; as international tracing of shipments remains scanty, it will still be easy for enterprises to hide behind the presumed legality of the disposal. Obstacles on the operative and, to some extent, legislative sides (described in section 3.2) make enforcement on illegal waste trafficking still complicated. A game changer could be however the new Waste Shipment Regulation (described in section 3.1.4), since it establishes a total ban on waste exports from

A rapidly evolving situation

Modus operandi

Prospects for the short term and the Waste Shipment Regulation

the EU to non-OECD countries (thus including all of South East Asia). If legal trade will indeed be blocked, a major reduction of illegal waste trafficking between the two regions is to be expected. At the time of writing the Regulation has just entered into force (on the 20th of May 2024). Implementation phases have however been complicated for many EU Regulations (EUTR and EUDR in particular) and the effectiveness of this new piece of legislation will depend on its ability to actually enforce the export prohibition.

Impact on the environment and human health

Waste trafficking poses a significant environmental and health risk for South East Asia. While all waste has a relevant impact on the environment when not properly disposed of, e-waste and several kinds of metal waste can cause significant pollution to soil and waters. This is particularly true for plastic waste which, despite representing a minor share in total imports to South East Asia, poses one of the major health and environmental risks:⁵¹ this is due mostly to the contaminants plastics often contain and which are released when it degrades, and the ease with which it disperses through the environment. Repatriation of seized containers is also an issue⁵² because of missing agreed procedures under the Basel Convention (although attempts have been made),⁵³ lack of cooperation and length of bureaucratic procedures (described in detail in section 2.1).

2.2 WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

Routes of wildlife trafficking

Wildlife trafficking is another common occurrence between the EU and South East Asia, although flows are much more complicated and not as unidirectional as in the case of waste.

Trafficking takes three main directions: from South East Asia to Europe, from Africa to Europe and then to South East Asia (and then eventually also to China), and from Europe to South East Asia (and then again eventually to China). In all cases the items traded could significantly differ, and range from animal products (skins, horns) and trophies to live animals and even pills for traditional medicine.⁵⁴

Route 1: South East Asia to Europe

In the first case (South East Asia to Europe), illegal traders gather a variety of goods and live animals (particularly corals, live reptiles, plants and animal parts) from local poachers and then ship them to Europe, sometimes directly (through airports and ports alike) and sometimes through transit countries such as Turkey or Balkan states.⁵⁵ Traffickers tend to exploit either the confusion of large ports (Rotterdam in particular) or the entry points guaranteed by EU member states that have larger and/or less controlled borders (Bulgaria, Greece).⁵⁶ This kind of trafficking has also sometimes been associated with the use of online communication, such as Telegram groups, for sales and trade.⁵⁷

In the second case (Africa to Europe and then South East Asia or China), traffickers exploit legal trade fluxes for other products or consolidated illegal routes for, for instance, arms and drugs, to ship the goods gathered by poachers and local traffickers first to the EU and then to South East Asian countries. While some goods are destined to buyers in South East Asia (particularly in Vietnam),⁵⁸ in several cases the region acts as a transit towards China and, to a lesser extent, South Korea and Japan. While in this case also the items traded are varied, a significant share is represented by animal products destined for traditional Chinese medicine (sometimes in the shape of pills), rhino horn and ivory.⁵⁹ South East Asia is a major trading hub for the latter:⁶⁰ ivory is still legally harvested in Thailand from registered elephants and poaching remains an issue across the region, and this complicates investigating shipping from Africa. Following the Chinese ban on ivory sales in 2018 South East Asia has thus become one of the key destinations for Asian and non-Asian buyers. This happens despite the purchase being illegal in all countries except Thailand, due to lax enforcement and often insufficient sanctions (as in the case of Laos).⁶¹

Route 2: Africa to Europe and then Asia

In the third case (Europe to South East Asia and then eventually to China), traffickers mostly trade wildlife sourced in Europe which is in high demand in the region and among Chinese buyers: seahorses from Southern Italy (used in traditional Chinese medicine), sea cucumbers sourced across the Mediterranean (which are usually eaten) and above all glass eels. The latter are at the centre of one of the most (if not the most) lucrative wildlife trafficking flows in Europe, with a significant impact on the environment: glass eels are the early stage of European eels, a critically endangered species which has lost 97 per cent of its population since 1980 and could risk completely disappearing in the next decade.⁶² The larvae are illegally fished and then shipped alive in containers to Asia, where they are grown and then sold across the continent.⁶³ Europol estimates⁶⁴ that circa 100 tonnes of glass eels are contrabanded from Europe each year, and they are sold at thousands of euros per kilo. The topic has been at the centre of a series of operations led by Europol and which involved several European law enforcement agencies (LAKE operations). The last one took place between 2022 and 2023 and led to the seizure of 25 tonnes of glass eels and to 256 arrests of Chinese, European and South East Asian nationals.⁶⁵ While enforcement is becoming increasingly more effective (the last operation increased arrests and seizures by more than 50 per cent compared to the previous one), the growing rarity of European eels will likely further push prices up and maintain high criminal interest in a business that is already worth several billions of euros.

Route 3: Europe to Asia

2.3 FOREST CRIMES

Despite decades of efforts to counteract the issue, South East Asia is still strongly affected by a variety of forest crimes that see the direct or indirect involvement of European players. This category comprises a variety of offenses that are often

A variety of forest crimes different from each other but are equally interconnected: above all illegal logging, forest fires and the illegal trade of agricultural products. The latter is a new addition to forest crimes; the newly enacted EUDR has indeed criminalised the importation to the EU of agricultural commodities that caused deforestation in origin countries (see section 2.3). It is however important to note that the Regulation is still to be implemented and that no other country or institution has yet delivered similar legislation.

Role of agriculture Generally speaking, agriculture has been the leading cause of deforestation and forest degradation⁶⁶ both on the global level and specifically in South East Asia for the past three decades, and it is still the main source.⁶⁷ Clearing is done by either cutting the logs for sale, or by burning the forest; the latter is a methodology that is applied mostly in Indonesia and in areas either where the forest is of low economic value and/or to change the pH of the soil in order to make it more suited for palm oil production. After the clearing, the land is indeed converted mostly to palm oil plantations or, to a lesser extent, to rubber, coffee or other plantations (which are however usually more responsible for forest degradation than deforestation).

A blurred line between legal and illegal The main issue concerning forest crimes in South East Asia is the blurred lines between illegal and unsustainable activities. While forest fires have been illegal for years in all ASEAN countries, a relevant share of logging in the region has been perfectly legal, despite its destructive impact on communities and ecosystems alike.⁶⁸ More importantly, proving the illegality of deforestation has been particularly hard, both for timber-producing countries and for buyers because of the lack of traceability, convoluted supply chains and wide-spread corruption. Even proving the culpability of palm oil companies that started fires has been complicated, particularly until a recent change of law in Indonesia that allowed judges to ask for a much lower burden of proof.⁶⁹ This has made a real estimation of illegal logging in the region particularly complicated, but it is clear that it represents the lion's share of timber production: the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) goes so far as to evaluate that illegal logging was the source of some 80 per cent of total wood products in Indonesia in the 2000s.⁷⁰ The country is particularly affected by the problem: deforestation has been alternatively the first or second highest in the world in the past decade,⁷¹ with a peak in 2016 where it reached almost a million hectares. This has decreased in recent times,⁷² also because of the disappearance of the most valuable and accessible natural forests, but a rebound could happen in some of the still untouched areas, such as Northern Kalimantan. Forest fires in Indonesia have also increased in recent years following a steady decline in the 2017–2021 period, and 2023 witnessed a significant spike due to a particularly powerful El Niño.⁷³

Role of the EU in South East Asia deforestation The EU and South East Asia share strong, although often indirect, connections on the issue. The EU is one of the world's main importers of tropical deforestation through the purchase of timber and of products that cause it (palm oil above all,

but also natural rubber and coffee),⁷⁴ and trading partners like Indonesia and Malaysia have been some of the most affected. European players are however rarely directly involved and are hard to prosecute, because in most cases they import products that appear to be perfectly legal (timber, palm oil, etc.), although they have nonetheless been responsible for criminally relevant illegal logging in the origin country. Illegal timber and illegal agricultural products are in fact laundered by batch-mixing with legal products, or sometimes use counterfeit documents (for instance for CITES-protected species); since tracing is still rare and corruption high, it is often very complicated, if not impossible, to confirm the illegal origin of the commodity. It is however worth noting that, once the EUDR is fully implemented in December 2024, international importers bringing agricultural commodities into the EU will be responsible for due diligence, and will be charged if European authorities prove that the commodity caused deforestation after the cut-off date of the Regulation (December 2024).⁷⁵ This could in turn increase the visibility of the involvement of European and international players in forest crimes in South East Asia.

Log laundering and tracing

2.4 OTHER CRIMES

Some categories of environmental offences are increasingly affecting South East Asia and may involve European players already or in the future, with fisheries crimes and illegal mining being the most likely. Others, such as water, air and soil pollution, have a relevant impact but also a mostly entirely local component and are thus not considered here.

Fisheries crime covers a variety of offenses; although often assimilated into Irregular, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUUF), it is a wider concept since it includes also crimes that go beyond fishing activities and considers the whole supply chain.⁷⁶ The offense is getting increasingly more attention on the global level, although it has only recently begun to be recognised as a criminal threat and not a fishery management issue.⁷⁷ South East Asia is one of the regions where the problem is increasing at the fastest pace:⁷⁸ Indonesia has suffered economic losses because of IUUF alone of almost 200 billion euros between 2013 and 2018, while also Vietnam has been largely affected.⁷⁹ Data are however lacking and estimates can vary considerably.⁸⁰ Players involved are usually transnational organised crime groups, but there is also a significant share of legal trawlers that conduct extensive illegal activities (exceeding quotas, fishing in Exclusive Economic Zones where they are not allowed, adopting inhumane working practices and even forms of slavery, for instance).⁸¹ Although the involvement of China's Distant Water Fleet in some of these activities is very likely,⁸² generally speaking it is complicated and very often impossible to understand the ultimate beneficial owner (UBO) of the trawlers performing fisheries crimes – i.e., the person mostly benefitting from the fishing. This

Fisheries crime

new wave of fisheries crimes in South East Asia is however relevant to the EU for a variety of reasons; while UBOs could also be European, the EU is a net importer of seafood, also from Asia – China and Vietnam respectively rank as the third and seventh most relevant importer for the EU.⁸³ Fisheries crime is also a security concern for ASEAN countries⁸⁴ and will likely be addressed more in the years to come.

Illegal mining

Illegal mining is also growing in the region, pushed by an increased demand for critical and other raw materials due to the energy transition and the digitalisation process. For instance, nickel mining has grown exponentially in Indonesia and the Philippines as a consequence of electric vehicle production, with significant risks for the environment and for the health of workers.⁸⁵ In most cases, mines have a legal permit but part of their activities could be illegal because of corruption or lack of due diligence assessments. Considering the high potential for environmental destruction and land and water contamination due to mining activities, this is likely to have a significant impact on human health and ecosystems.⁸⁶ There are however some instances of completely illegal mines (particularly gold) in Indonesia⁸⁷ and Cambodia (the latter with a direct involvement of Chinese companies),⁸⁸ with even greater environmental and human impacts. Many countries are either already part of this trend of expansion (Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines) or are trying to boost their mining production (such as Malaysia)⁸⁹ and thus this kind of environmental crime is likely to become more relevant in the years to come. No relevant connection has been proven between these offenses and European players, but there are several reasons why illegal mining should be relevant for the EU; European companies could have a financial involvement in legal mines performing illegal activities (exceeding quotas, violating regulations, etc.), and generally speaking critical raw materials and minerals more broadly increasingly represent a key commodity for the EU. The Union has been focusing on diversifying its supply (which is still largely dominated by China) and has enacted a series of key pieces of legislation – the Critical Raw Materials Act above all⁹⁰ – and will thus likely be more involved in the sector in the near future.

3. LEGISLATIVE AND OPERATIVE FRAMEWORKS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA AND THE EU



Importance of mapping institutions and legal frameworks

Information about the available legislation and the agencies involved in action against environmental crimes in both South East Asia and the EU is highly fragmented and often not available. Mapping the legislative and operative processes in both regions that prescribe how environmental crimes are detected, investigated and prosecuted, and by whom, is thus a key prerequisite for effective action. This section will explore how the main offences related to waste, wildlife and forest products are addressed in both regional frameworks and how they are regulated by national legislation. Subsequently, an overview of the main law enforcement agencies involved in the fight against environmental crimes at the regional and national levels in both the EU and ASEAN is described.

3.1 LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS

3.1.1 South East Asia – Regional level

A scarce ASEAN attention

The legislative perspective of transnational environmental crimes is rarely mentioned in South East Asia forums, regional meetings and joint declarations. The ASEAN charter scarcely addresses the environment outside of the promotion of sustainable development.⁹¹ The main focus remains on environmental protection, while the necessity for cooperation on legislative and enforcement tools is often overlooked.⁹² Similarly, regional operative aspects have been often relegated to a subset of transnational and organised crimes in regional cooperation platforms such as the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime and the ASEAN Regional Forum Intersessional Meeting on Counter Terrorism.⁹³

Role of international agreements

ASEAN action on wildlife trafficking and poaching has been promoted mainly by the progressive adhesion of its member states to international agreements, such as CITES, which also made it possible to establish regional operative tools such as the first ASEAN Working Group on CITES and Wildlife Enforcement in 2005. However, specific dedicated forums are still limited in capabilities and reach; for example, the 2015 ASEAN Regional Forum on Combating Wildlife Trafficking, which focused on enhancing transboundary cooperation on wildlife offenses, did not produce any advancement in the regional legal framework on the issue.⁹⁴

ASEAN and forest crime

Forest offences and illegal timber trade are more regulated at the regional level, and they have been addressed from an earlier date. The first ASEAN Working Group on Forest Products Development was in 1998 and it addressed issues related to legal standards in timber trade.⁹⁵ Since 2003, coordination on combating illegal logging and illegal timber trade with the EU was codified through partnerships with the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) programme. However, these initiatives have involved countries at the bilateral level through Volun-

« An illegal dumpster near Kruja, Albania

tary Partnership Agreements (VPAs), instead of developing ASEAN or Asia-wide regional approaches.

Regional cooperation in South East Asia is more advanced on crimes related to waste. The Asian Network for Prevention of Illegal Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes,⁹⁶ established in 2003, is the reference framework for application of the Basel Convention in South East Asia. However, state participation is limited and the Network's capability to deal with transboundary waste trafficking is thus narrow.⁹⁷ In 2017 the ASEAN Joint Declaration on Hazardous Chemicals and Wastes Management⁹⁸ called for ASEAN Member States to strengthen cooperation on waste trafficking and management, underlining an interest in tackling the issue. However, the nature of the Joint Declaration remains non-binding. In 2019 the short ASEAN foreign ministers' statement on illegal transboundary movement of hazardous waste and other wastes in South East Asia⁹⁹ did confirm the urgency of the issue but did not produce further legal or operative cooperation.

Cooperation on waste

Among other less regulated offences, the high level of fisheries crimes in the region exemplifies the need for increased cooperation; ASEAN countries have highlighted this necessity in the Vision and Strategic Plan for ASEAN Cooperation in Food, Agriculture and Forestry (2016–2025)¹⁰⁰ and in the Strategic Plan of Action on ASEAN Cooperation on Fisheries (2016–2020).¹⁰¹ These declarations led to the establishment of the ASEAN Network for Combating IUU Fishing (AN-IUU) which focuses on the exchange of information between member states to facilitate enforcement.¹⁰² Similarly, illegal mining, alongside transboundary smuggling of these resources, has hardly been addressed in South East Asian regional forums as an environmental crime, but has gained attention as an economic problem. In 2021 ASEAN adopted the Framework for Circular Economy for the ASEAN Economic Community, which includes guidelines for the harmonisation of policies and standards to decrease the environmental impact of extraction.¹⁰³ Issues of illegal mining are not addressed in the ASEAN Mineral Cooperation Action Plan 2016–2025.¹⁰⁴

Cooperation on fisheries crime

3.1.2 South East Asia: National legislation

National legislation on environmental crimes is strongly heterogeneous in South East Asia, varying substantially over what is considered an offence, whether it is prosecuted under criminal or administrative law and what the degree of fines and penalties is. As shown in the previous section, this heterogeneity has not sufficiently been addressed at the regional level, with very few ASEAN-wide legislative frameworks capable of harmonising regulation on these issues. National legislation indeed shows little convergence for any of the three main trends analysed in the report: almost all national legislation shows stronger regulations for the domestic dimension of wildlife, waste and forest crimes, often overlooking the external component of these offenses.

A strong national heterogeneity

3.1.3 ASEAN

■ Vietnam

In Vietnam, environmental crimes were first codified in the 1985 criminal code. Currently, the main legislation regulating environmental crimes is the 2015 Criminal Code¹⁰⁵ which entered into force in 2018. The Code has a specific chapter (XIX) dedicated to environmental offences – with fines up to VND 1 billion (circa 37,000 euros) and imprisonment between one and 15 years.

Vietnam has a comprehensive legislation on waste trafficking; the Law on Environment Protection of 2014¹⁰⁶ prescribes that import and transiting of waste in any form that does not meet environmental standards is prohibited. Illegal waste trade and management is also regulated in article 239, which prescribes specifications to bring waste into Vietnam's territory.

Illegal trade in wildlife and forest products is described in article 232, which dictates that fines and sentences will increase if "the offence is committed across the border or between a free trade zone and the domestic market", while art. 234 specifies that "the illegal goods are traded or transported across the border".

Some environmental offences are contained in the Economic Offences chapter (XVIII), as some crimes are linked with larger phenomena like organised crime. Other elements of the code should also be considered, in particular articles related to money laundering (art. 324), corruption-related crimes (art. 353 to 359) and forging seals and documents from competent agencies (art. 341). Since the 2015 code, the use of criminal law related to environmental crimes has been expanded, to address a necessity to specify criminal liability of legal entities, such as companies and organised crime groups.¹⁰⁷

■ Laos

The Laos Penal Code¹⁰⁸ dedicates a specific chapter (chapter 9, art. 326 to 353) to offences against natural resources and the environment, with fines ranging from 3,000,000 to 100,000,000 kip (circa 1,305 to 4,255 euros) and imprisonment up to five years. The code covers most offences such as illegal logging, illegal hunting, illegal fishing and unlawful exploitation of natural and mineral resources.

In the code, waste related offences are however addressed only as causes of pollution, such as releasing chemicals or waste in water (art. 347) or on land (art. 348).

The code specifically addresses wildlife crimes (art. 335 on Importing, Exporting, Transiting or Moving Aquatic Animals and Land-Based Wildlife) and illegal activities indirectly related to transboundary offences such as "Falsifying Seals and Documents Relating to Exploitation, Trade, Transportation, Production and Sale of Wood and Forest Products" (art. 329).

Forestry-related offences were further defined with the 2019 amendment to the Forestry Law,¹⁰⁹ which revised rules for the import, transit and export of timber

and wood products (art. 97 and 99) and added rules for trade in Forest Carbon (art. 103). The 2012 Customs Law establishes the degree of offences related to the import and export of illegal goods, including products obtained through or related to environmental crimes.¹¹⁰

■ Indonesia

Neither the current Criminal Code, which originated in Dutch colonial law, nor the 2023 code that should enter into force in 2026, establishes a specific legal status for environmental offences.¹¹¹

The 2009 law on the Protection and Management of Environment¹¹² regulates the management of hazardous and toxic materials as well as hazardous and toxic waste. Several decrees regulate the disposition of waste imports and exports, among them the Minister Trade's Decree No. 31/2016 concerning the Regulations on Importation of Non-Hazardous Wastes¹¹³ and the Presidential Decree No. 61/1993 on Ratification of Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal.

Indonesian wildlife and timber trafficking laws are considered outdated and largely unable to deal with contemporary globalised illicit trade;¹¹⁴ the 1990 Conservation of Biological Natural Resources and Their Ecosystems Law¹¹⁵ focuses on the supervision of protected areas, while the 1999 Forestry Law¹¹⁶ regulates wildlife, although only in measures related to forested areas, such as art. 50 on "transporting illegally sourced timber and wildlife".

Timber and forest products trade is regulated instead by the 2013 law on Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction¹¹⁷ which defines illegal activities for individuals and organised groups.

In 2014, as part of the FLEGT programme, the EU and Indonesia established a bilateral agreement to ensure timber trade legality and create transparent information exchange during the import and export of forest products – the Indonesia-European Union Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA). As a consequence, in order to increase the traceability and legality of sourcing of timber products, wood exporters have to carry VPA-compliant licenses from the point of harvest to their final destination. The agreement also established provisions to avoid unverified products being mixed with verified goods, and to monitor the regularity of these supplies through regular assessments.¹¹⁸

■ Cambodia

Cambodian legislation related to wildlife includes the 2006 Sub-decree on International Trade in Endangered Animals and Plant Species,¹¹⁹ which is the main legislation for the implementation of CITES, the 2002 Law on Forestry¹²⁰ and the 2006 Law on Fisheries.¹²¹ In 2023, many of these instances were systematised in the 2023 Environmental and Natural Resources Code.¹²²

The code strengthens environmental protection by imposing stricter penalties for violations, including fines from KHR 10,000,000 (approximately 2,500 euros)

to a maximum of KHR 2 billion (approximately 500,000 euros), and imprisonment from one month up to 30 years.

Waste-related crimes are also addressed by the 2023 Environmental Code, such as hazardous substance emissions and waste management, repealing the 1996 law on Environmental Protection and Natural Resource Management.

The 2023 Law on Customs¹²³ regulates transboundary aspects, while anti-money laundering and smuggling laws are also often applied to environmental crimes to address the involvement of organised crime in these sorts of trafficking.

■ Malaysia

The Malaysian Penal Code does not have a section dedicated to environmental crimes and considers only domestic aspects of offences related to waste and wildlife.¹²⁴

The 1974 Environmental Quality Act¹²⁵ establishes provisions that cover the control of exporting and importing waste, with penalties up to 500,000 RM (approximately 100,000 euros) or five years imprisonment or both for the illegal trafficking of waste.

The 2008 law on International Trade in Endangered Species¹²⁶ regulates imports and export of wildlife, prescribing imprisonment of up to seven years for illegal conduct. The Fisheries Act was published in 1985¹²⁷ and was then included without major changes in the 2013 National Plan to Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing¹²⁸ as the main piece of legislation to counteract fisheries crimes; however, it does not include specific considerations to address transboundary illicit traffic.

■ Thailand

Thailand has implemented a robust legal framework to combat environmental crimes, addressing both sector-specific regulations and overarching transnational issues.

The 1992 Hazardous Substance Act and its 2001 amendment¹²⁹ focus on managing hazardous substances and waste, categorising them in three types (type 1, 2 or 3) depending on their potential environmental damage; the law also prescribes the criteria for allowing the import and export of these materials and establishes stringent measures to prevent the release of harmful materials into the environment. The 1992 Enhancement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act¹³⁰ also includes relevant provisions about conserving national environmental quality. It encompasses various aspects, such as water, soil, air and waste.

The 1992 Wild Animal Reservation and Protection Act¹³¹ serves as the main legal framework for conserving and protecting wildlife. It includes provisions related to endangered species as well as restrictions on hunting and possession, and explicitly establishes standards for imports and exports. Similarly, the

1975 Plants Act and its 2007 amendment¹³² aim to preserve endangered plants and regulate traffic in CITES-listed species.

Fisheries crimes are finally regulated by the 2017 Royal Ordinance on Fisheries,¹³³ which addresses various aspects, including combating illegal fishing.

In 2024 a series of proposals have been discussed to expand the scope of environmental protection; among the most relevant is an amendment to the 1992 Enhancement and Conservation of National Environment, which would introduce fees calculated as four times the damages done to the environment, and two drafts, the Sustainable Packaging Management Act and the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Management Act.¹³⁴

■ Philippines

The Philippines legislative framework against environmental offences is relatively comprehensive and well-integrated between various laws.

Waste trafficking in the Philippines is regulated by two main dedicated pieces of legislation, the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act, which regulates waste management in the country and describes waste dumping criteria, and the Toxic Substances and Hazardous and Nuclear Wastes Control Act, which prescribes the list of allowed materials which are permitted to be imported as waste into the country.¹³⁵

The National Integrated Protected Areas System Act of 1992¹³⁶ represents the basis for environmental legislation in the country and prescribes protected areas hosting biodiverse animal habitats or multiple species of plants. The Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act¹³⁷ describes norms for the conservation, preservation and protection of wildlife species, specifically addressing supervision against hunting and illegal trade, and prescribing in chapter V imprisonment from four to six years and fines up to 500,000 pesos (circa 8,000 euros).

The 2013 Forest Resources Act¹³⁸ establishes the limits and measures to prohibit logging in endangered forests; however, it does not define penalties for the illegal trade of these resources on domestic soil or on international markets.

■ Brunei Darussalam

Brunei legislation covers all the main offences analysed in this report, but the country has generally lower penalties for their infringement than other ASEAN member states; for example, the Wildlife Protection Law prescribes penalties for capturing, killing and exporting protected animals, with sanctions of between six months and one year of imprisonment and fines of up to 2,000 Brunei dollars (circa 1,400 euros).¹³⁹

The Forest Act regulates concessions and criteria for logging, but it does not include provisions for domestic or transboundary trade of forest products.¹⁴⁰

The main waste-related legislation is the Hazardous Waste Order¹⁴¹ which established controls for shipments of waste entering, exiting or transiting for the country.

■ Myanmar

Myanmar has historically had a less comprehensive legislation on environmental crimes, but in the last decade it has introduced new regulations that directly address the transboundary aspects of environmental crimes.¹⁴²

The best regulated sector is wildlife trafficking, thanks to the Conservation of Biodiversity and Protected Areas Law¹⁴³ which defines criteria for trade of wildlife and plants. It establishes penalties of imprisonment up to ten years and fines from 300,000 to 1,000,000 Kyats (from circa 130 to 440 euros).

The Forest Law¹⁴⁴ establishes the competency of the Forestry Department in allocating permits for logging and forest extraction; however, after the 2021 coup, the military government has established a comprehensive ban, prohibiting logging except in restricted circumstances, as well as transboundary export of wood.¹⁴⁵ Still, illegal timber trade continues, with large volumes exported to European markets.¹⁴⁶

Currently, there is no dedicated legislation to combat waste trafficking in Myanmar; however, the issue is addressed in the framework of the Environmental Conservation Law¹⁴⁷ which establishes which materials it is prohibited to import, export and trade, including hazardous waste.

■ Singapore

Singaporean legislation is among the most effective in addressing transboundary aspects of criminal offences, including environmental ones.

The Endangered Species (import and export) Act¹⁴⁸ establishes the methods and criteria to obtain permits to import, export or re-export listed species; individuals and companies violating the Act may incur a fine up to 200,000 Singaporean dollars (circa 140,000 euros) per traded specimen and imprisonment up to eight years.

The country's small forested area limits the necessity for a dedicated forest law, with relevant regulations being instead the National Park Board Act and the Parks and Trees Act, which establish norms for conservation and maintenance, rather than international trade.¹⁴⁹

The Hazardous Waste (Control of Export, Import and Transit) Act establishes the required permits for the export, import or transit of hazardous waste.¹⁵⁰

3.1.4 EU

■ The European Green Deal and other relevant legislation

The European Green Deal has since its launch in 2019 placed environmental protection and green transition goals at the centre of the EU agenda. Its development has also significantly improved the legislative framework for environmental crimes also through other relevant pieces of legislation, producing a renewed attention to the protection of the environment on both the domestic and international levels. Many of the Green Deal's proposals did not directly address criminal offences, but they aimed to curb the EU's role in indirectly causing them.

The CBAM, for example, aims to address carbon emissions in industrial production in countries outside the EU that have less stringent environmental regulations, by making companies importing such products into the Union buy certificates linked with the price of EU ETS allowances, thereby avoiding carbon leakage dynamics.¹⁵¹

Member states are also tasked with monitoring and checking the implementation of the CBAM through the institution of National Competent Authorities, which in the transition phases are responsible for controlling companies' emission declaration in the CBAM Transitional Registry, the platform for declaring emissions imports.¹⁵²

The Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) is another particularly relevant example for EU–South East Asia relations; the latter region accounted for the majority of global production of nickel and tin, and both materials are in high demand among European companies since they are required by a number of green technologies.¹⁵³ The CRMA prescribes to improve the environmental impact of mining resources in non-EU countries, however, it makes no direct reference to the legality of the production of these commodities in the countries of origin and has thus a very limited role for enforcement.¹⁵⁴

CBAM and other legislation

■ The 2024 Environmental Crime Directive

In March 2024, the European Council approved a new Directive on the protection of the environment through criminal law;¹⁵⁵ this was meant to replace the 2008 Directive, and to update and expand the systematisation of its legislative framework on how to counteract environmental crimes.

The previous Directive had already marked a significant turning point in the EU's approach to environmental protection through criminal law; it defined the environmental offences that should be criminalised, requiring member states to ensure criminal liability for inciting, aiding and abetting such crimes, and to provide for "effective, dissuasive and proportionate criminal penalties".

However, this approach has been criticised for its lack of clarity in defining environmental crimes, and for insufficient coordination among national authorities. The 2024 Directive addressed these issues; in particular, the Directive offers a definition of what an environmental crime is – a complete novelty on both the EU and the global level until now. Indeed, the Directive aims to criminalise any conduct that endangers the environment, defined as "offences that cause the destruction of, or widespread and substantial damage which is either irreversible or long-lasting to an ecosystem of considerable size or environmental value or a habitat within a protected site, or cause widespread and substantial damage which is either irreversible or long-lasting to the quality of air, soil, or water."¹⁵⁶ The 2024 Directive also uses the currently much-debated expression "ecocide" for the first time, and expands the list of crimes considered as environmental offences from nine to 20. New offences include timber trafficking and the illegal recycling of polluting components of ships.

A key change in EU environmental enforcement

The new Directive also defines EU-wide minimum rules on the definition of criminal offences and penalties. Penalties for companies will range from 3 to 5 per cent of the total worldwide turnover depending on the degree of the offences, or alternatively a fine between 24 and 40 million euros. Sentences could go up to ten years if offences cause the death of a person, while the “qualified offence” clause increases penalties if the act committed causes the destruction of or irreversible or long-lasting damage to the environment.¹⁵⁷

A potential game changer for waste trafficking

■ **The 2024 Waste Shipment Regulation**

The 2024 Waste Shipment Regulation¹⁵⁸ has recently updated the EU framework to deal with transboundary movements of hazardous waste, which was first regulated in 1993¹⁵⁹ and then in 2006.¹⁶⁰ The main innovation of the Regulation is the complete ban of hazardous waste shipments towards non-OECD countries; this could *de facto* stop all legal waste trade between the two regions, and thus radically decrease illegal flows as well. It also completely prohibits the export of non-hazardous waste such as plastic materials toward these countries. In parallel, the Regulation increases obligations for waste exporters, requiring companies operating in the EU to adhere to waste management rules and to guarantee that the destination country’s recipient facility also complies with the same rules.

Notably, the Regulation also contains provision for the establishment of a “Waste Shipment Enforcement Group”, which will serve as a reference body to coordinate action against illegal shipments of waste and will link officers from environmental, customs and policy agencies from both Europe and international law enforcement institutions. Such an enforcement mechanism represents a strength of this regulation, as other legislation proposed to address transnational environmental crimes often fails to design effective tools for monitoring and cooperation with third countries.¹⁶¹

EU’s umbrella framework on wildlife

■ **The Wildlife Trade Regulation and the 2022 Wildlife Action Plan**

A similar focus on combining enforcement and legal tools has been adopted in the 2022 Action Plan on Wildlife Trafficking. The Action Plan has been designed to reinforce and update the Wildlife Trade Regulation, which implements CITES provisions uniformly in all EU member states.¹⁶² The Plan establishes a wide range of priorities, aiming to reduce consumer demand for illegally traded animals, while at the same time supporting source countries in preventing poaching.¹⁶³ It also calls for a better harmonisation between European and national laws, and for increased cooperation with civil society, recognising their role in producing the most current evidence and analysis on the latest market trends in the wildlife sector.¹⁶⁴

Regarding enforcement, the Action Plan aims to strengthen capacity building, encourage cooperation among member states’ LEAs and expand the information exchange system with non-EU countries’ relevant agencies.¹⁶⁵

■ The 2023 Deforestation-free Regulation

The EUDR¹⁶⁶ is the main piece of legislation to address deforestation caused by the production of agricultural and forest commodities imported to the EU.¹⁶⁷ The legislation prohibits imports of seven commodities (cattle, cocoa, coffee, palm oil, rubber, soya and timber) if their production has caused deforestation after December 2020. Among these, palm oil, coffee, rubber and timber are of great economic importance for South East Asian countries, and the Regulation has the potential to strongly influence trade patterns with and from the region, and even to influence changes in national legislation.

Unlike its predecessor, the EUTR, the EUDR does not just focus on the legality of the production of these commodities based on legislation in the country of origin, but mainly on its sustainability. The EUDR establishes a range of due diligence criteria to import the seven listed commodities and their relevant products, and companies have to provide information on their sourcing and their deforestation-free status. The EUDR also directly addresses enforcement, which is however largely delegated to member states, as the Regulation relies on national so-called Competent Authorities to monitor and conduct checks on the operators and traders importing the listed commodities into the EU. Competent Authorities have the task of preventing imports that do not comply with the EUDR from entering the common market, and of issuing offenders a temporary prohibition from operating in the EU. The Regulation also introduces conditions of proportionality between the environmental damage and the fines issued, which could reach 4 per cent of the EU turnover for the company in the year before the violation.¹⁶⁸

■ EU member states' legislation

All EU member states have transposed into national legislation the 2008 Directive against environmental crimes, but the level of implementation varies and their legislation often presents a different degree of penalties. For example, the Spanish Criminal Code¹⁶⁹ addresses environmental offences in Chapter III – “on criminal offences against natural resources and the environment” – prescribing imprisonment of one to three years, or a fine of two to four times the damage caused. The German Criminal Code¹⁷⁰ by contrast has penalties ranging from six months to ten years (as described in its division 29 articles).

Member states' penal codes also vary in the attention given to transnational environmental crimes. For example, the French Environmental Code¹⁷¹ prescribes detailed rules for trafficking related to waste, wildlife and forest-related activities. It has also recently expanded its reach by including the crime of ecocide, which is described as widespread, long-term and intentional acts of environmental harm.¹⁷² On the other hand, while the Czech Republic's Criminal Code addresses Criminal Offences against the environment (chapter VIII), it does not include specifications for preventing transboundary traffics.

Legislation focusing on the connection between environmental crimes and

A first-of-its-kind Regulation

Role of competent authorities

Various levels of national implementation

organised crime groups is perhaps the most varied across EU member states, as some countries are still struggling to address the issue (this is the case for instance for Germany). The Italian legislation is among the most advanced frameworks, with a strong focus on corruption and organised crime groups. Penalties for waste trafficking feature reclusion up to six years,¹⁷³ but they may increase including monetary fines up to 25,000 euros and cumulative reclusion up to six years for offences that show a connection with organised crime.¹⁷⁴

3.1.5 International legislation

As national legislation often does not have the comprehensive vision to deal with transnational environmental crimes, and coordination is much needed on the global level to address them, several conventions and international agreements have emerged over the years to set international standards and procedures.

■ Basel Convention on the Control of Trans-boundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal

The main reference for
waste trafficking

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal¹⁷⁵ is the principal international agreement for waste trafficking. It was adopted in 1989 and entered into force in 1992. It now has 189 parties. The Basel Convention establishes a procedure known as “Prior Informed Consent”, under which parties are required to prohibit or refrain from permitting the export of hazardous and other wastes to an importing state if it has not declared its written consent. In 1994 the Basel Convention was expanded with the adoption of the Ban Amendment,¹⁷⁶ which prescribes that all country parties of the convention that are members of the OECD will prohibit all transboundary hazardous waste shipments from their country to states not part of the OECD; however, most ASEAN countries have not ratified or translated the amendment into national legislation. Currently, only Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei have ratified the Ban Amendment.¹⁷⁷

The main reference for
wildlife trafficking

■ Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, also known as the Washington Convention or simply CITES, is the main international agreement on wildlife and plant trafficking. It was adopted in 1973 and provides the legal framework governing international trade in wild animals and plants including provisions on the penalisation of illegal trade, confiscation of illegally traded specimens, and mechanisms for inter-regional cooperation. It has now 184 parties, with almost all of them having translated the Convention into their national legislation. The CITES is particularly relevant for addressing wildlife trafficking taking place between the EU and South East Asia;

the latter is among the regions with the most species on the CITES list banned or restricted for commercial trade, with the most recent 2022 CITES Conference of Parties having further expanded the number of restricted species from the region.¹⁷⁸ At the same time, European demand for rare animals is growing, making it more profitable to illegally source them.¹⁷⁹

■ **Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade**

The Rotterdam Convention is the international treaty that regulates imports of hazardous chemicals. It directly addresses the transnational nature and risks of chemicals trade, mandating that shipment of hazardous chemicals should implement proper internationally recognised labelling and measures to avoid polluting spills. Parties to the Convention can decide whether to ban imports of these chemicals or to allow them under specific regulations described in the text.¹⁸⁰ As Europe has listed as banned a larger number of chemicals than South East Asian countries, the Convention has a direct impact on trade between the two regions. It also provides practical training on the operational aspects of the Convention, such as guidelines on submitting notifications of updated regulatory actions and reporting incidents.¹⁸¹

Relevant legislation for waste

■ **International Conventions against corruption and organised crime**

Considering the correlation between corruption, organised crime and environmental crimes, agreements such as the United Nations Convention against Corruption¹⁸² and the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime¹⁸³ also have a relevant influence on EU–South East Asia trafficking. Addressing the connection between these phenomena and transnational environmental crime is particularly necessary in the latter region, because of the still high level of corruption there: with the exception of Malaysia, other countries have consistently scored low levels in the global corruption index.¹⁸⁴ The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is responsible for monitoring and promoting the two conventions, and it has indeed widely indicated environmental offences as a priority.¹⁸⁵

Cross-cutting agreements also touching environmental crimes

3.2 OPERATIVE FRAMEWORKS

Due to the multifaceted nature of environmental crimes, in both the EU and in South East Asia they are investigated by multiple agencies, with overlapping and often not clearly defined competencies. This complexity can make intra-agency cooperation difficult, especially when collaboration between officers from different countries is required to investigate transnational crime and competences are not clear. This section will define the main actors involved in investigations, border controls, administrative decisions and generally speaking enforcement.

3.2.1 South East Asia

■ Vietnam

The Environmental Police Department, under the Ministry of Public Security, is the main agency for investigating environmental crimes in Vietnam. It also conducts inspections to ensure its compliance with relevant regulations. Its competencies sometimes overlap with the Corruption, Economy and Position-Related Crime Investigating Police Department, under the Ministry of Public Security, and with the Anti-Smuggling and Investigation Department of the General Customs Department (in the case of transnational crimes). These agencies have also a series of units to conduct operations at the local level.

Administrative environmental checks are conducted by units of the Department of Environmental Pollution Control, under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. Forest-related offences are also investigated in cooperation with the Forest Protection Department, from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, while offences that may pose a risk to human health can involve Functional Units from the Ministry of Health. The General Customs Department is responsible for monitoring and controlling goods and means of transportation at the borders, preventing smuggling and illegal transportation of goods.¹⁸⁶

■ Laos

The Environmental Police Department, part of the Laos Police, is designated as the agency responsible to combat environmental crimes and is mainly involved in investigations on waste and pollution-related crimes. The Forest Inspection Department, under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, is tasked with monitoring and investigating crimes that involve forest products and wildlife. Investigating transnational crimes requires cooperation with the Customs Department, which is tasked to control transboundary activities and to implement measures to prevent and suppress activities relating to all kinds of smuggling and illegal trade.¹⁸⁷ The environmental protection law of 2013,¹⁸⁸ art. 81, also established the so-called Rights and Duties of Local Districts and Municipality Offices of Natural Resources and Environment, tasking them to cooperate with central authorities in investigating and monitoring environmental offences.

■ Indonesia

Officers of the Indonesian National Police Force are tasked to investigate offences related to the environment in collaboration with the Security and Law Enforcement Unit for the Environment and Forests, under the Directorate General on Environment and Forestry Law Enforcement. Customs helps to control illegal smuggling and is also tasked by Indonesia's Ministry of Trade Regulation 87/2015¹⁸⁹ to monitor pre-shipment verification on some imported materials,

including scrap paper, scrap plastic and scrap metal (since 2019), with the objective of verifying that they do not include hazardous waste.¹⁹⁰ Customs may also be aided by civil servant investigators from relevant ministries, such as the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.¹⁹¹ Together they conduct joint inspections of goods that may be linked with environmental offences. Local authorities, such as governors at the regional level, regents at the district level and mayors, for cities, have the task to ensure that businesses are compliant with environmental standards.¹⁹²

■ Cambodia

The Anti-economic Crime Police operates to contrast environmental crimes, and cooperates with Customs to address transboundary activities. The Ministry of the Environment is in charge of monitoring waste dumping and trafficking crimes, and has the authority to determine what constitutes hazardous or irregular waste.¹⁹³ The Ministry has five general directorate departments, including the Directorate of Environment Protection, which in turn comprises eight departments, among which the Department of Solid Waste Management and the Department of Inspections. Other agencies involved in action against environmental crimes are Customs, the Anti-Economic Crimes Police, the Forestry Administration, the Gendarmerie, the Environmental Unit, Agriculture's Phytosanitary Unit and the Quarantine Unit of the Ministry of the Environment.

■ Malaysia

The Royal Malaysia Police is tasked to investigate environmental crimes; it works with the Department of Environment, under the Ministry of Environment and Water, to conduct investigations on several environmental offences. Regional authorities may be involved in the investigation as long as they receive a mandate from the Director of the Department of Environment. The Royal Malaysian Customs Department oversees the regulation and implementation of environmental standards at ports and borders. The International Trade in Endangered Species Act of 2008 also establishes that some officers from the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, the Department of Fisheries, the Department of Agriculture and the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-Based Industries may have powers for enforcing and investigating environmental offences.

■ Thailand

The Royal Thai Police has two departments to investigate environmental offences: the Royal Thai Police Natural Resources and the Environmental Crime Suppression Division. Regional authorities' officials from Provincial Administrative Organisations may collaborate with other agencies and support operations by providing intelligence from local areas; the Ministry of Natural Re-

sources and the Environment is responsible for matters related to the environment in general, while if offences are conducted within national parks the Department of National Parks can support the police in the investigation. The Office of the Attorney General is responsible for prosecution of the crimes. Thailand has an advanced system of cooperation for international investigations, involving the Attorney General as the Central Authority to coordinate different agencies.

■ Philippines

The Philippines law enforcement against environmental crimes is the responsibility of the Philippine National Police and the National Bureau of Investigation. They sometimes cooperate with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, particularly the Biodiversity Management Bureau, which develops training activities and coordination efforts, such as the Wildlife Law Enforcement Manual of Operation, a common reference for operating procedures for all the agencies investigating wildlife crimes. The Bureau of Customs has established a dedicated unit to counteract environmental offences, the Environmental Protection Unit, which operates under the Enforcement and Security Services.¹⁹⁴

■ Brunei

Brunei does not have a dedicated law enforcement agency against environmental crimes. However, the Narcotics Control Bureau, part of the Royal Brunei Police, serves as a coordinator between different units for a different range of investigations, among which environmental crimes. The Royal Customs and Excise Department is the competent authority to address illegal waste trade at the country's borders.¹⁹⁵

■ Myanmar

The Forestry Security Police, part of the Myanmar Police Force, have been established to specifically counteract crimes such as illegal logging and wildlife trafficking. A National Wildlife Enforcement Task Force has also been established within this unit. The Customs Department is tasked with monitoring and supervising the import and export of materials which could potentially harm the environment, but no specific unit has been established for this scope.¹⁹⁶

■ Singapore

The National Parks Board is responsible to counteract wildlife trafficking in Singapore.¹⁹⁷ The Singapore Police Force does not have an environmental department, however officers can cooperate with officials from the National Environmental Agency on environmental protection.¹⁹⁸ Waste trafficking is jointly addressed by the Singapore Customs and the Chemical Control and Management Department, part of the National Environmental Agency.¹⁹⁹

3.2.2 EU

The importance of environmental crimes in the EU law enforcement framework has increased in the last years. The European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) has represented an integrated approach to EU internal security, including environmental crimes among its priorities in both the 2018–2021 and the 2022–2025 policy cycles. EMPACT envisages border controls, police, customs and judicial cooperation to provide information exchange and training, also addressing the external dimension of the offences investigated. The initiative has promoted multiagency operational cooperation to combat criminal networks involved in all forms of environmental crime, with a specific focus on waste and wildlife trafficking.²⁰⁰

■ Europol

The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) is the EU's law enforcement agency. Europol operates by supporting national agencies and cooperating with non-EU partner states and international organisations, particularly in transnational investigations. For example, Europol supported the Spanish Guardia Civil in Operation Hartie by cross-checking operational information of a network of illegal waste operators operating from Europe to South East Asia.²⁰¹ The use of Europol's databases and analytical support may allow national legislation to better evaluate the international reach of an investigation. Europol also established an Analysis Project on EnviCrime to support national agencies in their criminal investigations regarding all environmental offences. Europol also manages the Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA), a platform that allows member states' law enforcement agencies to exchange data and evidence, facilitating cooperation and communication in transboundary investigations.²⁰²

■ Eurojust

European collaboration at the judicial level is coordinated by Eurojust, the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation.

Eurojust supports national authorities by providing a platform for coordination, improving information exchange and supplying capacity training. It can also issue a request for joint investigation between member states to facilitate transboundary investigations, but it cannot issue binding orders superseding national authorities. It also offers specific training especially in context of offences that take place between different jurisdictions, and with specific reference to environmental crimes.²⁰³ Eurojust has pledged to promote engagement with the South East Asia Justice Network, launching initiatives to raise awareness on transnational issues and study visits that may lead to the exchange of best practices.²⁰⁴

3.2.3 International agencies and institutions

■ Interpol

Interpol is the largest international organisation for coordination and cooperation of national law enforcement agencies. The main unit of Interpol for environmental crimes is the Environmental Security Sub-Directorate. This is involved in several investigations in South East Asia related to wildlife and high-value wood trafficking, such as rhino horns and rosewood.²⁰⁵ It has also addressed the role of transnational organised crime in electronic waste in the region and in the Pacific.²⁰⁶ The Sub-directorate helps countries establish national environmental security task forces, and builds international capabilities to address transnational environmental crime by connecting all national authorities responsible for environmental law enforcement, such as police, customs, environmental agencies, prosecution and the judiciary.

■ World Customs Organisation

The World Customs Organization (WCO) is the intergovernmental body tasked to coordinate cooperation on customs issues. Considering the importance of illegal trade as a key component of transnational environmental crimes, the WCO can be of crucial assistance not only in supporting national customs services, but also to aid offices from two or more countries in addressing transnational environmental crimes involving them. For example, the WCO coordinated the Sky-Hole Patching initiative, which focused on combating illegal trade in ozone-depleting substances in the Asia-Pacific region, fostering cooperation between customs agencies and facilitating information sharing.²⁰⁷ In 2012 the WCO launched the Environment Programme to contribute to combating of environmental crime – in particular illegal wildlife and timber trade, and illegal trade in hazardous and other waste.²⁰⁸ Even with the high level of traded goods and illegal trafficking between the two regions, the WCO has established no framework for direct cooperation or exchange of information between the EU and ASEAN. The organisation has limited its action to offering assessments, such as an evaluation of ASEAN countries' customs agencies on how to better manage transboundary plastic waste traffic.²⁰⁹

■ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is the UN body delegated to address international threats related to drugs, organised crime, corruption and terrorism. UNODC has also been recognised under the framework of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime as part of the legal and operative international framework for preventing and combating transnational organised crimes that affect the environment.²¹⁰ The agency has supported coordination efforts and practical action for UN member states to address environmental offences,²¹¹ as in the case of Unwaste, which

was designed to promote cooperation between the EU and ASEAN countries on issues of waste trafficking. The project, financed by the EU, has produced extensive research on the topic of environmental crimes.²¹²

■ International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime

The International Consortium on Combatting Wildlife Crime is a joint effort of five intergovernmental agencies, the CITES secretariat, Interpol, UNODC, the World Bank and the WCO. The initiative has been launched to build a structure aimed at addressing enforcement cooperation; it works to build long-term capacity and to provide technical support and expertise to national agencies operating to combat wildlife and forest crimes.²¹³ For example, the Consortium was instrumental in coordinating Operation Mekong Dragon, a joint enforcement initiative to combat transboundary wildlife trafficking in the Mekong Region.²¹⁴

3.2.4 Civil society and other players

Civil society organisations have traditionally been a fundamental instrument to address environmental crimes; in many cases they have been the first player to act on issues such as wildlife trade or deforestation, due to their connection to the local dimension and their expertise on these issues. NGOs have been instrumental in increasing the policymaker's attention to quickly developing issues, such as illegal logging in South East Asia, and to lobby heavily for stronger legislation and better enforcement. They act as a key watchdog against all levels of corruption in both the EU and South East Asia, and they are often the first to uncover new trafficking and offences. Not by chance, international and local NGOs often support enforcement agencies in environmental investigations; support from local communities and more flexibility in their action indeed sometimes allow civil society to gather evidence with more ease than LEAs and other agencies.

Despite their positive contribution to action against environmental crimes, relations between LEAs and NGOs are not always linear. National legislation in some cases forbids NGOs from actively participating in investigations (this is the case for instance in most EU countries),²¹⁵ and a lack of dialogue and of trust between LEAs and NGOs is a frequent occurrence both in the EU and in South East Asia.²¹⁶ In some cases, governments have directly undermined the work of NGOs, often for political reasons; this has recently been the case for WWF in Indonesia, where the NGO has been ousted from the majority of projects and reserves it was managing.²¹⁷

The civil society's structure is varied in both the EU and South East Asia. A few, large international NGOs work on both the national and international level, for example TRAFFIC, WWF, Greenpeace, Global Fishing Watch and Wildlife Conservation Society. All of these have both international offices and dedicated bureaus in most EU and South East Asian countries; coordination between the international and the national levels is strong, but the national offices often maintain a high level

Role of civil society

Obstacles to effective cooperation with NGOs

Structure of the civil society

of independence. In all countries local NGOs are also common (and, in some cases, even local departments of international NGOs). They tend to focus on local issues and offenses, but also share information with the central office when dealing with issues that have a wider, often international perspective.

Most organisations do not address environmental issues as a whole, but focus on single issues – fisheries crime for Global Fishing Watch, wildlife trafficking for TRAFFIC, etc. Some have however a wider respite (as in the case of WWF) or, due to the connections between different issues, deal with a variety of topics – Global Fishing Watch also touches on human rights violations, for instance.

One of the main networks involved in the fight against waste trafficking between the EU and South East Asia is the International Pollutants Elimination Network. Among its affiliated organisations is EcoWasteCoalition, a Philippines-based NGO that mobilised an international consortium to advocate against illegal waste trade in South East Asia and to raise awareness to push for ASEAN members' ratifying the Basel Ban Amendment.²¹⁸ They also coordinated with the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation to expand cooperation with European NGOs.²¹⁹

Wildlife and forest sectors

The wildlife and forest sectors are often addressed together and they have received much attention from international organisations such as TRAFFIC and WWF.²²⁰ TRAFFIC is among the main NGOs working against the illegal trade of animals and forest products, and promoting biodiversity protection; it has six offices in Asia, forming a network that has extensive connections in the fight against transboundary crimes. WWF has also addressed wildlife trafficking in South East Asia, focusing recently on the crimes taking place between Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, which is a hot spot for illicit wildlife trade.²²¹ Their strategy consists of building partnerships with other private and institutional local stakeholders and providing them with information, skills and tools to close these illegal wildlife markets.²²² The CSO Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime has addressed the necessity to cooperate with law enforcement agencies in the fight against environmental offences; it launched ECO-SOLVE, a programme funded by the EU and designed to provide data on illicit environmental trade in order to strengthen action against it; ECO-SOLVE has been used in investigations against illegal logging and has also addressed instances of corruption.²²³

Role of the private sector

The private sector is to some extent already playing a supportive role in environmental investigations, but this will likely expand in the years to come. Some companies cooperate with enforcement agencies in both regions on monitoring suspicious exports²²⁴. Particularly regarding timber trade, some have been working with EUTR competent authorities across Europe to tackle illegal logging. Cooperation between LEAs and the private sector is however still very limited, and the role of the latter still ambiguous; on the one hand in many cases companies are among

the perpetrators of the environmental crimes debated in this report, especially concerning those where the border between the legality and the illegality of the commodity traded is thin (palm oil, timber). On the other hand, companies tend to have the most detailed information about their own supply chain and trade routes, which in turn are key for investigations and to understand criminal methodologies. Regulations such as the EUDR have also increased the due diligence burden on the private sector, demanding significant and extensive tracing over the trade of commodities; in this sense, as environmental legislation is growing in both regions, and so the compliance demanded of companies, it is very likely that they will be increasingly involved in environmental investigations in the years to come.



4. OBSTACLES



There is a variety of obstacles that are still undermining effective action against environmental crimes, on both the EU and the South East Asia side. They range from insufficient sanctions (which mostly affect South East Asian countries, but are also relevant for the EU), inadequate resources for enforcement, lack of cooperation, and issues in detecting the crimes and tracing the offenders.

This section of the report analyses different obstacles, considering limitations in South East Asian and EU legislation (section 4.1), issues in relation to investigations and operative frameworks (section 4.2), problems related to the specific features of the trafficking considered (section 4.3, divided into waste, wildlife and forestry crimes), and finally obstacles to cooperation between the two regions (section 4.4).

4.1 LEGISLATIVE OBSTACLES

4.1.1 Legislative obstacles – regional level South East Asia

Limited attention to transnational crimes

As shown in the previous section, many countries in both regions have increased their attention to environmental offences in recent years, with new pieces of legislation and operative tools having been enacted in the past decade. However, attention to transnational crimes remains insufficient and obstacles are strong; among the most relevant are insufficient penalties for sectors such as wildlife trafficking, lack of harmonisation of definitions and standards, as well as lack of specialisation and of platforms for information exchange and cooperation on investigation.

Lack of harmonisation among national legislation

Lack of harmonisation between national legislation is one of the main obstacles for counteracting environmental crimes in South East Asia. Indeed, there have been no major initiatives to harmonise ASEAN member states' legislative frameworks on any of the major environmental crimes analysed.

For example, harmonisation of legislation for wildlife trafficking is complicated by the heterogeneous translation of international agreements (such as the CITES) into national law. Countries' legislation related to these international standards varies greatly in the degree of penalties and attention to transnational aspects. The CITES secretariat, for example, has highlighted inadequate national legislation on wildlife trafficking for Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos and Vietnam.²²⁵ A common issue among these legislative frameworks is the lack of inclusion of non-native CITES-listed species in their regulations, which in turn makes them ideal transit countries and a safe haven for traffickers.

A similar issue can be found in national waste trafficking legislation and its relationship with the Basel Convention. Even if all countries have translated the Con-

vention into national laws, many have done so as part of larger environmental laws, without enacting dedicated regulations that would offer more guidance and tools. This is the case for Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, which have relegated waste crimes as a subset of larger environmental protection laws; by contrast, the Philippines and Singapore have put specific legislation in place to implement the Basel Convention, as the EU does.²²⁶ This creates a number of loopholes between multiple jurisdictions with different interpretations of how to deal with waste trafficking – which has a particular impact on repatriation (see section 2.1).

Harmonisation efforts on laws related to illegal trade of timber and forest products has been even more complicated, given the absence of any established international agreement on the issue. Past regional initiatives, such as the 2020 ASEAN Standard for Legality of Timber, have been focused on establishing a reference system to determine criteria and indicators for the legality of these products. However, these guidelines are not-binding and have not contributed to the convergence of national laws.²²⁷

Furthermore, ASEAN national legislation, with the exceptions of Vietnam and Cambodia, does not sufficiently address the intersectionality between environmental and economic crimes, lacking sufficient or indeed any coordination between laws to counteract organised crime with laws to address traffic in wildlife, forest products and waste.²²⁸ These differences in penalties have led to some countries being targeted as international destinations or sources of illegal commodities, facilitating the creation of entry points, which then allow criminal networks to establish their operations in the whole region.

Another issue is the low penalty/high profit ratio of these crimes. Reforms and amendments of these norms are slow, and fines remain fixed and static. By contrast, profits from such traffic may expand rapidly, as a consequence of rising demand in the European markets for illegal animals.²²⁹ For example, penalties for wildlife trafficking in Cambodia are individuated by the Sub-decree on International Trade in Endangered Animals and Plant Species from 2006, which has not been amended since its adoption, while in the same period, illegal trade of animals from the country has increased in number of specimens captured and sold, as well as profits.²³⁰

Shifting trends in traffic can also rapidly make the definitions used in legislation obsolete, and therefore more difficult to apply. For example, the recent increase in used electronic and electrical equipment shipments towards South East Asia has highlighted problems in the definition of hazardous and e-waste,²³¹ and there is also a general lack of guidelines for e-waste management in the region. Some countries however task specific institutions to periodically update their definition of hazardous waste, such as the Ministry of the Environment in Cambodia,²³² while others have codified it in the text of the law, like the Law of Environmental Protection in Vietnam.

Harmonisation in the forest sectors

Intersectionality between environmental and economic crimes

Low penalty/high profit ratio

A changing criminal landscape

4.1.2 Legislative obstacles – EU

Despite the advancement brought by the 2024 Environmental Crime Directive (which is however still to be implemented by member states), the current EU legislative framework still needs to address a series of relevant shortcomings on both the European and national levels.

Shortcomings of the new envicrime Directive

The new Directive better clarifies what constitutes an environmental crime, but it still leaves undefined what “environmental damage” means, which could lead to legal ambiguity and difficult implementation across member states;²³³ there is also uncertainty over what will represent an “environmental victim”, again limiting a coherent application of the text across countries.²³⁴ The Directive has also not extended the mandate of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office to address environmental crimes; the Office is currently able to prosecute offences like fraud, corruption and money laundering.²³⁵ This limits the ability of the Directive to promote action from the EU level, and increases the burden on member states. Other initiatives trying to address the relation between environmental crimes and international criminal networks are non-binding assessments, such as the EU Strategy to tackle organised crime 2021-2025²³⁶ or the EUROPOL Organised Crime Threat Assessment,²³⁷ and have thus a limited impact.

Diplomatic troubles for the EU

The external component of newly enacted EU legislation has expanded the capacity of the Union to address transnational environmental crimes, but it has also led to complications on the diplomatic level. Indeed, many South East Asian countries (and others) have perceived these regulations as imposed by the EU, with little to no dialogue before their approval. This has worsened trade conflicts and indeed overall relations, risking to undermine cooperation between the two regions on enforcement as well.

The case of the EUDR

The EUDR is a primary example of this. To be effective in creating a tracing mechanism of deforestation-free commodities it requires large enforcement cooperation from third countries. However, the debate that anticipated the approval of the Regulation featured little to no communication with third countries, and discussions with key providers of agricultural products such as Indonesia and Malaysia started only as a consequence of these countries’ protests. Uncertainty over the implementation and lack of guidance to both authorities and private players further increased the confusion and heightened tensions.

The EUDR, as well as the Waste Shipment Regulations and other new pieces of legislation, all still rely on member states for checks and controls, and leave them ample autonomy over deciding specific criteria. This risks favouring loopholes and opening entry points for traffickers into countries where these standards will be lower.²³⁸

4.2 OPERATIVE OBSTACLES

4.2.1 Operative obstacles – regional level South East Asia

Difficulties for transnational and even intra-agencies coordination, lack of attention to environmental issues and scarce resources, both financial and expertise, have been major obstacles to creating an adequate operative framework of action against environmental crimes in South East Asia.

Lack of specialisation on environmental issues is one of the main obstacles for law enforcement in South East Asia (and, generally speaking, on the global level). Officers who have not received dedicated environmental, or even sectorial, training tend to be less effective because of insufficient understanding of *modus operandi*. They are also often not aware of applicable laws both in their own country and in others that are relevant to the investigation (as source or transit). A lack of dedicated environmental units is usually associated with insufficient expertise; for example, while Vietnam and Laos have a designed Environmental Police Department, which is specifically tasked to address environmental offences, other countries like Indonesia and Malaysia just provide their national police forces with aid from relevant departments of competent Ministries. In Cambodia and Brunei, environmental crimes are under the competencies of larger departments, respectively the Anti-economic Crime Police and the Narcotics Control Bureau, which are tasked to address a larger variety of crimes and therefore lack the necessary training and expertise for fighting these offences.²³⁹ Issues of specialisation are also common in customs authorities. Except for the Philippines Bureau of Customs and its Environmental Protection Unit, there is almost no specific division tasked with supervising the import and export of illegal commodities sourced through environmental offences. Without effective training, customs officials are not able to recognise smuggling techniques usually employed in these flows, such as mixing of legal and illegal goods and forgery of documents related to environmental standards.

Another obstacle is the absence of specialised judges for environmental offences in most South East Asian countries; when judges with no specific competencies in these fields operate in an environment with low penalties, they will be less likely to prosecute these offences, which may also have a limiting effect on starting investigations. Consequently, environmental crimes have also not been perceived as serious offences and prosecution rates are low in the whole region; while these offences are addressed if they have economic or social consequences, environmental impact is usually overlooked.²⁴⁰

Lack of specialisation generates further issues for coordination, as not all partners are communicating on the same basis of expertise. Indeed, communication and information exchange is already a major issue, as platforms for exchanging information between agencies from different countries are very limited and rarely

**Lack of specialisation
in South East Asia**

**Lack of a specialised
judiciary**

Insufficient intra-agency coordination

dedicated to environmental offences. Coordination between different law enforcement agencies, both in the same country and at the international level, is one of the main obstacles to counteracting environmental crimes. In the case of transnational offences, the absence of clearly defined regional frameworks makes it almost impossible to adequately coordinate agencies with different competencies to investigate crimes committed across state borders. The main form of cooperation for investigating transboundary crimes is the Mutual Legal Assistance model, which established the criteria for sharing information and accessing evidence from another jurisdiction.²⁴¹ However, this system must be established through international or regional agreements, which are lacking in the ASEAN region, or bilateral agreements, which have been established for a small set of South East Asian countries.²⁴² Even in national frameworks that have established bilateral Mutual Legal Assistance systems, their application can be challenging when more than two countries are involved. For example, Indonesia has a bilateral Mutual Legal Assistance agreement with Vietnam, but with no other ASEAN member states, rendering it insufficient for investigations against ASEAN-wide criminal networks.²⁴³ These forms of operative assistance are also often limited by the reactivity of the supporting agency; for example, a 2009 request for information sharing on a case of illegal logging made by the Indonesian National Police to the Hong Kong government was slowed down by bureaucratic procedures and was never sent to relevant authorities.²⁴⁴ The main factors contributing to this lack of attention may also be influenced by corruption on the LEAs level and low awareness on the part of the judiciary regarding the consequences of these crimes.²⁴⁵

4.2.2 Operative obstacles – EU

As in the case of South East Asia, the main obstacle to enforcement against environmental crimes in the EU remains the lack of specialisation. Difficulties in cooperation between different agencies constitute another major impediment.

Lack of specialisation in the EU

Several EU member states do not have specialised units on environmental crimes, with some countries like Bulgaria counting as few as ten environmental officers.²⁴⁶ Furthermore, even where environmental units are established and have a large number of officers, such as in Italy, France or Spain,²⁴⁷ the evolving nature and the complexity of environmental crimes still require more and ongoing training for officers.²⁴⁸ Lack of specialisation is indeed linked with limited budget to train officers and with a scarce interest in environmental capacity building, given by the perception of environmental crimes as a lesser priority.²⁴⁹ In some cases (particularly for the judiciary), individuals avoid specialising in environmental topics as this is perceived as a less rewarding career.²⁵⁰

Specialisation issues are then amplified by transnationality, because even trained officers usually have expertise mostly on their own national legislation and on offences taking place in their country. In some cases, legislation from the origin

country is not available or only in the original language – this has been a major obstacle in the early implementation of the EUTR, for instance.²⁵¹ The gap of knowledge on international traffic patterns is also an issue, as well on criminal methodologies for international trafficking.

Coordination difficulties between different countries' agencies to investigate transboundary crimes is another relevant obstacle. In the EU, coordination between monitoring, enforcement, and administrative agencies is often challenging even within the same country and affects information sharing and planning joint action. This is particularly relevant for federal countries or member states with high level of regional autonomy (Belgium and Spain, for instance).²⁵² One of the main difficulties in cross-border cooperation is also the delays caused by administrative procedures, which may ultimately hamper progress in the investigations. Another element preventing cooperation is the difference in requirements across member states to allow for advanced investigative techniques in environmental investigations; while in some countries the use is relatively widespread (France), in others this is still quite limited. This particularly concerns tools such as wiretapping or drones, and whether the resulting evidence may be used in another jurisdiction.²⁵³

Insufficient coordination among countries

4.3 SECTOR SPECIFIC OBSTACLES

4.3.1 Sector specific obstacles – waste trafficking

Despite a number of legislative improvements in recent times, addressing waste trafficking between the EU and South East Asian countries remains complicated for a series of operative and legislative reasons belonging to the sector structure.

Tracing of waste shipments is still scarce and often unreliable.²⁵⁴ The Basel Convention does not require specific measures for tracking shipments,²⁵⁵ and this is also the case for most national and international legislation.²⁵⁶ Both legal and illegal shipments also tend to involve a number of intermediaries, further complicating understanding of the route followed.²⁵⁷ This has several consequences: legal and illegal shipments are easier to mix since their respective origin is often hard to detect. Document fraud is often relatively simple since the information demanded in documents is usually brief and with limited requirements; the standard document provided by the 2006 Directive on Shipments of Waste in Annex VII was very simple, containing only basic information and no particular measures on tracking.²⁵⁸ Despite its potential as a game changer (as described in section 3.1.4), the new Regulation on Waste Shipments equally does not improve the tracing process.²⁵⁹

Lack of waste tracing

Tracing has a particularly strong impact on a common issue for waste trafficking – repatriation. Although the topic has been often discussed within the Basel Convention, the agreement does not yet provide any standard procedures or guidelines

The issue of repatriation

on how to repatriate illegal waste to the country of origin. The return usually must be agreed by the latter through the decision of a judge, who however can require proofs and documents that can vary considerably across countries and even across individual magistrates – this is mainly due to low specialisation, lack of consolidated procedures or of clarity in national legislations. Repatriation is also sometimes a sensitive political issue; origin countries tend to deny being responsible for the trafficking, while receiving ones sometimes renounce returning the shipments to avoid stressing diplomatic relations with their partners. This has been recently and notoriously the case for another route for waste trafficking (Italy-Tunisia),²⁶⁰ but lack of political will for repatriation also been reported between the EU and South East Asia.²⁶¹ Frequently changing contact points among agencies in both regions and the financial burden of the return shipment (which rests on companies that are often bankrupt after the trafficking is discovered) are also key obstacles to the repatriation process.²⁶²

Geographical features of South East Asia

The territory of South East Asia also represents a challenge for the detection of illegal waste shipments. The abandonment of containers on small islands and remote shores is a frequent occurrence in some countries, particularly Vietnam and to some extent Indonesia.²⁶³ Smaller ports, with less trained officers, with limited control by customs authorities or where corruption is stronger represent remarkable access points for traffickers who often choose them as the destination for illegal shipments.

Connection with other operative and legislative obstacles

Finally, waste trafficking is an offense that is particularly exposed to some of the operative and legislative obstacles that have been already discussed in section 2.1. The categories of waste often vary among countries and understanding them requires a significant level of specialisation which is often lacking, particularly on the local level. Considering the trends described in section 2.1, waste trade often varies in its structure and in the kinds of materials being traded over the years, which is further complicated the work by customs and police forces. Contaminated batches can thus be easily mistaken by officers as recyclable plastic and thus accepted, while document fraud concerning declarations over the kind of waste being traded is more difficult to detect. This also makes corruption easier as it makes the unlawful conduct of officers harder to detect. Across South East Asia, and to some extent Europe, punishments finally remain low, while earnings are among the highest among environmental crimes, and likely to grow.²⁶⁴

4.3.2 Sector-specific obstacles – wildlife trafficking

Addressing wildlife trafficking has been particularly complicated in the past and remains so even nowadays. Despite improvements (mostly on the EU side), the sector remains by far the one where the sanctions are the least proportionate to the high earnings of traffickers, and where despite new operations and efforts, enforcement action remains often ineffective. Lack of specialisation by judges and prosecutors makes investigations less appealing to enforcement agencies as they know the pro-

ceedings will be lengthy and will rarely be successful. This is for instance the case for a major rhino horn investigation in Czechia in 2011 which, despite involving 164 agencies and the seizure of 30 horns, resulted in just a single, two-year deferred sentence.²⁶⁵ In particular, the rigidity of legislation is often inadequate to face rapidly changing criminal methodologies and routes, and to cope with the steadily growing price of commodities such as rhino horn, ivory and glass eels.

One of the most complicated sectors to address

There are however several other issues hampering effective action against wildlife trafficking between the EU and South East Asia. The detection of crimes is sometimes complicated because the items traded are small but their value is high – tiger bones, dried seahorses or rare succulents, for example. Wildlife is also traded along routes that are heavily used for legal trade of other commodities, and it is thus relatively easy to hide shipments of ivory or rhino horn within containers of electronics or machinery. This is for instance the reason why the EU is likely a transit region for trafficking directed from Sub-Saharan Africa to South East Asia, as the direct route between the two regions is much less used than the one passing through Europe.²⁶⁶ The existence of legal trade for some species is also a problem, because of the ease of laundering illegal items by batch mixing with legal ones – this is the case for ivory in Thailand, for instance, but also for several CITES Annex II species that have insufficient protection in some South East Asian countries.

Insufficient detection

Difficulties in monitoring the sometimes inaccessible territories of South East Asian countries is also an issue, particularly in the mountainous regions of Indonesia or in the remote forests of Borneo. In many cases national parks and other high biodiversity areas have very limited staff, no access to technologies and complicated territories to monitor.²⁶⁷ The strong economic reward of poaching also strongly influences corruption, which is widespread at all levels and across agencies – from forest officers to customs and others. While the South East Asian side is more exposed to corruption,²⁶⁸ this is also an issue for the EU. There is also a relevant cultural component to corruption and generally speaking to wildlife crime: this is often perceived as a victimless offense with little impact, and so the violation of regulations is regarded only as a minor offense. Many local communities perceive that exploiting natural resources is within their right and continue to do so despite its being prohibited. The so-called “Parks vs People” conflict²⁶⁹ is indeed often correlated to poaching, as well as the lack of economic alternatives or political instability.

A difficult geography and high rewards

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in South East Asia are also a relevant obstacles to counteracting wildlife trafficking. SEZs are widespread across the region and feature laxer export and import procedures, a single administrative entity, fewer controls by national authorities and very limited access by international or foreign bodies.²⁷⁰ This has favoured the proliferation of wildlife trafficking and sale, particularly along the border between China, Myanmar, Thailand and Laos – the so called “Golden Triangle”. Due also to the heavy Chinese influence on the area, the

Special Economic Zones

SEZs in the region have been identified as a hotspot for rhino horn, ivory, tiger and other wildlife products, with little possibility for investigations at the moment and no change to be expected in the near future.²⁷¹

Power of criminal groups

Another key issue is the power of criminal groups dealing with wildlife trafficking between the two regions, which is usually much stronger than for other environmental crimes. Such illegal flows generate high earnings and have often existed for decades, so networks are consolidated and pervasive on both sides. They are highly flexible and adaptative²⁷² and exploit the rigidity of national and international institutions, and loopholes in regulations, to avoid enforcement. They can also guarantee a steady flow of finance, being sometimes involved also in other kinds of trafficking,²⁷³ that increases their resilience and their ability to adapt to new investigative techniques and legislation.

4.3.3 Sector-specific obstacles – forestry crimes

Among all categories of environmental crimes taking place between the EU and South East Asia, forestry crimes are perhaps the most complicated to address because of complications in the detection process.

Identifying the illegality

Identifying the illegality of products of forest activities (timber or agricultural commodities) is in most cases very complicated, sometimes impossible. Laundering through batch mixing is a very common occurrence both in timber trade²⁷⁴ and for high deforestation risk commodities such as palm oil, coffee, cocoa and soy.²⁷⁵ While some countries are developing DNA and isotope scanners for timber recognition (see section 5.3), this solution is still at an experimental stage and has yet to be applied. Once they are mixed, it is almost impossible to distinguish legal and illegal batches of cocoa, coffee or of palm oil.

Tracing timber and agricultural products

Tracing is also complicated and in most sectors represents only a fraction of total production. Coffee is among the most traced commodities but the certified share of production is only some 25 per cent on the global level and significantly less in South East Asia²⁷⁶ (with the exception of Vietnam, which has recently become the second largest producing country in the world and whose certified production is around 26 per cent of the total).²⁷⁷ Tracing itself is however not a guarantee of legality: national palm oil certifications in Indonesia (which are regarded as perfectly valid by the EU and require tracing) are often assigned to companies whose production features extensive environmental violations.²⁷⁸ This has been the case also for many other commodities, timber in particular.²⁷⁹

Unreliable tracing and certifications have also been one of the key issues undermining the success of EU policies such as FLEGT and the EUTR, but other factors have also contributed. The multilateral approach of these initiatives was meant to ease cooperation, but had a very limited effect in boosting joint operations and information exchanges between European and South East Asian agencies, and in in-

creasing enforcement action.²⁸⁰ Instead, lack of contact points, insufficient dialogue between institutions in the two regions and no delivering of joint solutions to address key issues such as tracing have been common occurrences in the circa ten years of life of the policies. The EUDR radically changed this and proposed a unilateral approach to the issue of deforestation, triggering however a heavy political response from several South East Asian countries which could likely hamper collaboration in the future, without solving these still standing issues.²⁸¹ Supply chains of commodities such as coffee, palm oil or timber are also particularly convoluted and involve a relevant number of intermediaries on both the local, national and international level; this in turn makes not only tracing, but also investigations particularly complicated and frequently unsuccessful.

Differences in definitions and standards among South East Asian countries and EU member states, and between the two regions, also represent a significant obstacle to effective action. Forest categorisation in Indonesia is for instance particularly complicated and changing,²⁸² which translates into a frequently unclear understanding of the origin of timber and agricultural products. Forest tenure in the country and to some extent in the region is also equally convoluted²⁸³ – most palm oil and forest concessions are not digitised and publicly available in Indonesia, for instance. This necessitates a significant requirement for specialisation and experience in forestry investigations in both the EU and South East Asia, which is largely missing on both sides of trade.

There is also a remarkable lack of attention on both sides to the drivers of forestry crimes, particularly considering policies. Although agriculture is responsible for the vast majority of illegal clearing,²⁸⁴ most EU, UN and regional initiatives do not address the sector directly. The EUDR is the only policy on the global level that focuses on the impact of agriculture on forests, with the exclusion of the proposed FOREST Act in the US, which is however unlikely to be approved in the near future.

International finance has been often proven to fund projects at high risk of illegal deforestation,²⁸⁵ but no proposal has ever been made to address the problem, which is also not considered by the EUDR itself. These funds arrive mostly through legal channels because of low transparency, but provide the consistent amount of investment needed to continue the highly rewarding illegal logging activities.

**Heterogeneity
in standards
and definitions**

**Insufficient
attention
to drivers**

**Role of
international
finance**

4.4 OBSTACLES TO EU–SOUTH EAST ASIA COOPERATION

There are finally a few obstacles that are specific to the cooperation between the EU and South East Asian countries and relate to the structure of their diplomatic and economic relations, their legislation and how enforcement cooperation has developed so far.

Inadequate attention to enforcement	Indeed, cooperation between the EU and South East Asian countries had so far a very limited enforcement component, with an even smaller involvement in environmental crimes. The only European initiative to promote such a collaboration had been the EUTR, which however had a relatively small impact. ²⁸⁶ In this sense, initiatives on environmental offenses between the two regions have been largely confined to specific operations, ²⁸⁷ mostly on wildlife trafficking and only recently also on waste. Information exchange has been equally limited and non-structured, with a lack of adequate contact points in past years being highlighted by both sides. ²⁸⁸ Most contacts indeed take place through Interpol, ²⁸⁹ and no dedicated platform for exchanges between EU and South East Asian LEAs have been so far deployed. European law enforcement agencies and South East Asia customs departments have very limited interactions, often limited to border and port units. ²⁹⁰ Coordination with customs departments is often limited as financial legislation often prohibits or makes it very complicated to share information related to imports and exports. Consequently, the exchange of information is often slow or incomplete. ²⁹¹
Action often on the national and not on the EU level	In most cases, diplomatic relations between EU member states and South East Asian countries also take place through national embassies instead of through EU institutions (particularly the External Action Service's delegations). This is particularly true for countries with a historic relation with the region (France and the Netherlands), and undermines cooperation at the European level and increases the fragmentation of initiatives and of investigations.
Lack of communication with local stakeholders	New legislation on both the EU and the South East Asian side has also had little to no coordination with relevant stakeholders in third countries. We have already looked at this in relation to the EUDR, for which the EU had very limited contact with third countries before its approval, but it is also true for new environmental legislation across South East Asian countries, which was often not coordinated through ASEAN or other channels.
Entrenched national interestes	There are also strong national interests entrenched in many of the businesses benefitting from the environmental crimes considered in this report: palm oil represents 4.5 per cent of Indonesia's GDP, ²⁹² while Vietnam exported more than three billion euros of coffee in 2022 alone. ²⁹³ This in turn reduces the political will to regulate and monitor the trade of such commodities to avoid losing competitiveness with respect to African or Latin American producers.

Cooperation is also scattered across different topics and agencies, on both the EU and the South East Asian sides: environmental crimes are mostly considered as a set of different offenses, with little understanding of the connections between players and sectors. Communication and coordination among different entities, even within the same country, is thus often lacking.

5. SOLUTIONS



Despite the many hurdles to EU and South East Asian cooperation on environmental crimes, this is a positive time to promote it thanks to a new set of political, economic and technological tools now available to LEAs and other players. Many are the factors behind this unique momentum for environmental action: the rising environmental awareness and political action on the global and particularly EU level, global efforts to protect biodiversity and forests (such as those promoted by COP28 and the Montreal Biodiversity Convention) and the development or expansion of technologies such as satellite imagery analysis and drones.

However, in order to maximise the impact of such positive developments, it will be key to adopt a series of changes to the approaches held by the EU and South East Asian countries, expand some national instruments and develop joint tools.

5.1 SOLUTIONS – EU

Alongside with the current expansion of its environmental action, the EU is also increasing the enforcement component of such policies. This trend should however be expanded and extended specifically to cooperation with South East Asia.

A new role for environmental enforcement

The EU should steadily include enforcement in its environmental strategies and legislation, a change which is already occurring but which needs to become structural to the EU's policymaking. There is still a strong discrepancy between the significant amount of new environmental legislation enacted by the EU, which has considerably increased, and the still unclear role given to LEAs and other institutions in enforcing these regulations, which has not changed significantly since the 2008 Environmental Crime Directive. Enforcement is rarely mentioned, often in a very generic way and in almost all cases with little to no European coordination – all enforcement activities are demanded of national institutions, but with no EU guidance. The much (and to some extent still) debated EU Nature Restoration Law, for instance, aims at reaching a significant level of protection for European land and marine ecosystems, but the text of the regulation makes little reference to enforcement activities.²⁹⁴ Other legislation is however changing this approach: this is not just the case for the already recalled EUDR, but for instance the new Waste Shipments Regulation, which also contains some recommendations for EU-level coordination²⁹⁵ – for instance the creation of a dedicated enforcement group or promoting collaboration with the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). Similarly, the new Action Plan against Wildlife Trafficking, updated in 2022,²⁹⁶ strongly focuses on coordinating action not only across national agencies, but also involving civil society and private players, with a significant attention to capacity building as well. This in turn promotes information exchanges, increases much-needed specialisation and addresses the issue of the still wide-spread silo mentality that affects many players working against environmental crimes.

« Aquaculture in Lake Ranau, South Sumatra, Indonesia

While the EU is responsible for the majority of environmental laws affecting member states, enforcement is still almost entirely done at the national level, with relevant support but only limited coordination by institutions such as DG Home, Eurojust or Europol. This is affecting the effectiveness of action at the domestic level, but it has also significant, perhaps even more impact regarding transnational, extra-EU crimes. Offenders can use countries where enforcement is weaker or where trade is more convoluted as favoured entry points and then have access to the EU as a whole. It will thus be key that the implementation phase of measures such as the Environmental Crime Directive or the Waste Shipments Regulation ensures that they will be equally effective and coherent across member states – unlike what happened to some extent with provisions such as the EUTR or the previous Environmental Crime Directive.

More EU-level action

Enforcement should also become a more important component in EU diplomacy towards South East Asia and ASEAN in particular. Despite the extensive and to some extent growing political involvement of the EU in the region (as discussed in section 1), enforcement has played a limited role in the discussion, and environmental crimes even less. This despite the significant attention the EU is giving to environmental topics in general and in relation to trade with South East Asia. The growing attention brought to enforcement by initiatives such as the new Wildlife Action Plan should be reflected also in developments such as the FTA between the EU and ASEAN; this and other agreements should not only reflect the new awareness of environmental issues (as already done for Vietnam's FTA), but also provide the tools for enforcing the regulations and the measures that are needed to achieve the agreed environmental targets.

Incorporating enforcement into EU diplomacy

5.2 SOLUTIONS – SOUTH EAST ASIA

Several advancements are also needed among South East Asian countries and among ASEAN institutions to improve effective action.

Generally speaking, most countries in the region would benefit from stronger legislation, particularly concerning wildlife crime. Insufficient penalties have been highlighted as an issue by most respondents to the questionnaires and workshops undertaken for this report,²⁹⁷ and indeed it is a problem that is hampering action regarding ivory and rhino horn in particular. While improving maximum penalties is key to discourage traffickers and increase the involvement of LEAs and the judiciary, it is also important that such measures be flexible enough to cope with changes that are occurring at a faster pace than in the past: rhino horn, glass eels and ivory prices are increasing and so also the stakes of organised crime groups (and the resources they are putting into the trafficking). It is essential to have penalties (as well as operative tools) flexible enough to cope with this.

Strengthening national legislations

Increasing resources for agencies

The operative side could also benefit from new and greater resources, considering the increasing magnitude of the tasks LEAs and other players are facing, and the still standing obstacles related to the territory of South East Asia and the nature of these crimes. A different approach could also benefit LEA action: a more holistic and less fragmented vision could help understand the connections between criminal groups operating across sectors, for instance, and address the constraints and lack of flexibility of institutions many offenders are exploiting for their trafficking.

Improving regional cooperation

Regional cooperation and coordination should also be improved, and ASEAN could be the right platform. The Association is indeed increasing its focus on environmental issues, as shown by the work done for instance for the ASEAN State of Environment Reports²⁹⁸ and the recent ASEAN State of Climate Change Report;²⁹⁹ considering its solidity and history as a regional organisation ASEAN can indeed become the right platform to improve environmental enforcement in the region. However, it will be necessary to finally include a dedicated enforcement focus, which is largely missing, providing new tools and platforms for collaboration and information exchanges between LEAs, customs and other authorities. The currently debated ASEAN Declaration on Environmental Rights (the so-called ADER) could be a relevant occasion for the inclusion of an enforcement component in the Association's focus, although it may be too late – at the time of writing the Declaration is already at the drafting stage. Nevertheless, ongoing opposition by indigenous people and other groups to the current text³⁰⁰ could delay its approval and offer a chance for action against environmental crimes to be included in the ADER. Such collaboration should however extend from the solely operative side, to the legislative one as well, since aligning environmental definitions and standards (and possibly sanctions as well) is a fundamental prerequisite for effective joint action.

5.3 SOLUTIONS – BILATERAL

Some improvements finally either need to be achieved through bilateral action or should be implemented on both sides to be fully effective.

Understanding the novelty of threats

It will first be key to recognise that both the EU and South East Asia are now facing a new and different wave of environmental crimes, which builds on previous trends but which also shows remarkable change from the past. Forestry crimes and forest fires for instance now affect not only primary forests, but also secondary or managed ones (as in the case of East Kalimantan or Sumatra).³⁰¹ The destruction of habitats in the past two decades has eased access to remote areas and increased the conflict with wildlife, which in turn is escalating poaching. It will be fundamental to have a clear understanding on how supply chains are evolving and to expect rapid changes of criminal modus operandi, for instance.

In this sense, understanding political and economic trends on the EU, South East Asian and global levels is essential to forecast which crimes will increase, and where – and act pre-emptively. The energy transition and the digitalisation process are leading to a boom of mining activities in South East Asia (as discussed in section 2.4), which could likely translate into illegal extraction as well (and to some extent it already is). Growing Chinese demand for palm oil could also impact illegal deforestation and forest fires, and influence the production destined to Europe as well. Understanding the evolution of these trends can help both sides to act beforehand, rather than reacting to already critical situations.

Delivering shared methodologies could be a tool to improve action in the short term, and it is something the EU and South East Asian countries could do with relative ease. Agreeing on standard repatriation procedures for waste could make the process smoother and reduce the impact of illegal waste in South East Asia, for instance. Opening dedicated channels for information exchange on consolidated trafficking, such as rhino horn, could improve investigations and coordination between the two sides. The UNITE project and the intelligence-sharing network set up between France and the countries of South East Asia are a recent example of cooperation between the two regions. This year-long collaboration (2023–2024) has enabled the two parties to set up an international operation to combat waste trafficking. By targeting European companies likely to be sending illegal waste to South East Asia, 60 container checks were carried out between March 18 and April 7, 2024, in Europe and South East Asia, identifying 27 non-compliant containers and targeting 16 suspect companies. This operation is set to continue with further investigations and officer exchanges between the two regions in 2025.

The adoption and mainstreaming of technologies could be particularly relevant, especially considering satellite applications. Satellite data analysis indeed offers an easy way to monitor tracing of commodities even at a distance, and is freely and largely available through the EU's Copernicus programme. Some of these technologies are already being applied; Indonesian authorities and civil society employ for instance the European Space Agency's European Forest Fire Information System³⁰² for real-time detection of forest fires,³⁰³ and the EUDR envisages a consistent use of satellite data for the due diligence process. Applications are however very varied and, thanks to the use of both optical and multispectral images, these data can be applied in almost all sectors (with perhaps the exclusion of wildlife crime). Other technologies are becoming increasingly relevant as well: scanners developed by the Italian Carabinieri allow for a quick estimation of the magnitude of waste, while other LEAs are working on tools to discover the presence of contaminated waste within a legal shipment.³⁰⁴ Drones allow for the easier monitoring of large, hard-to-access territories (such as Indonesian or Malaysian mountains) and are already employed by the civil society in Sumatra and Kalimantan to identify the culprit in forest fires.³⁰⁵ European LEAs (particularly the French CESAN, the

Focusing on political and economic trends

Shared methodologies

New technologies

Spanish SEPRONA, the Portuguese GNR and the Italian Carabinieri) are finally developing isotope and DNA scanners that can allow for the identification of the origin of timber, to determine whether it was harvested legally or illegally. The system is very accurate and can be even applied to processed timber; it will however require extensive collaboration with local authorities to produce a DNA database of protected areas in South East Asia – an issue which has blocked similar projects with Latin America in the past, for instance.³⁰⁶ Despite limitations, new technologies can nonetheless reduce significantly the costs of investigations and enforcement activities, as well producing information that would have been unavailable in the past. It will be essential to mainstream their application and include their use in new legislation.

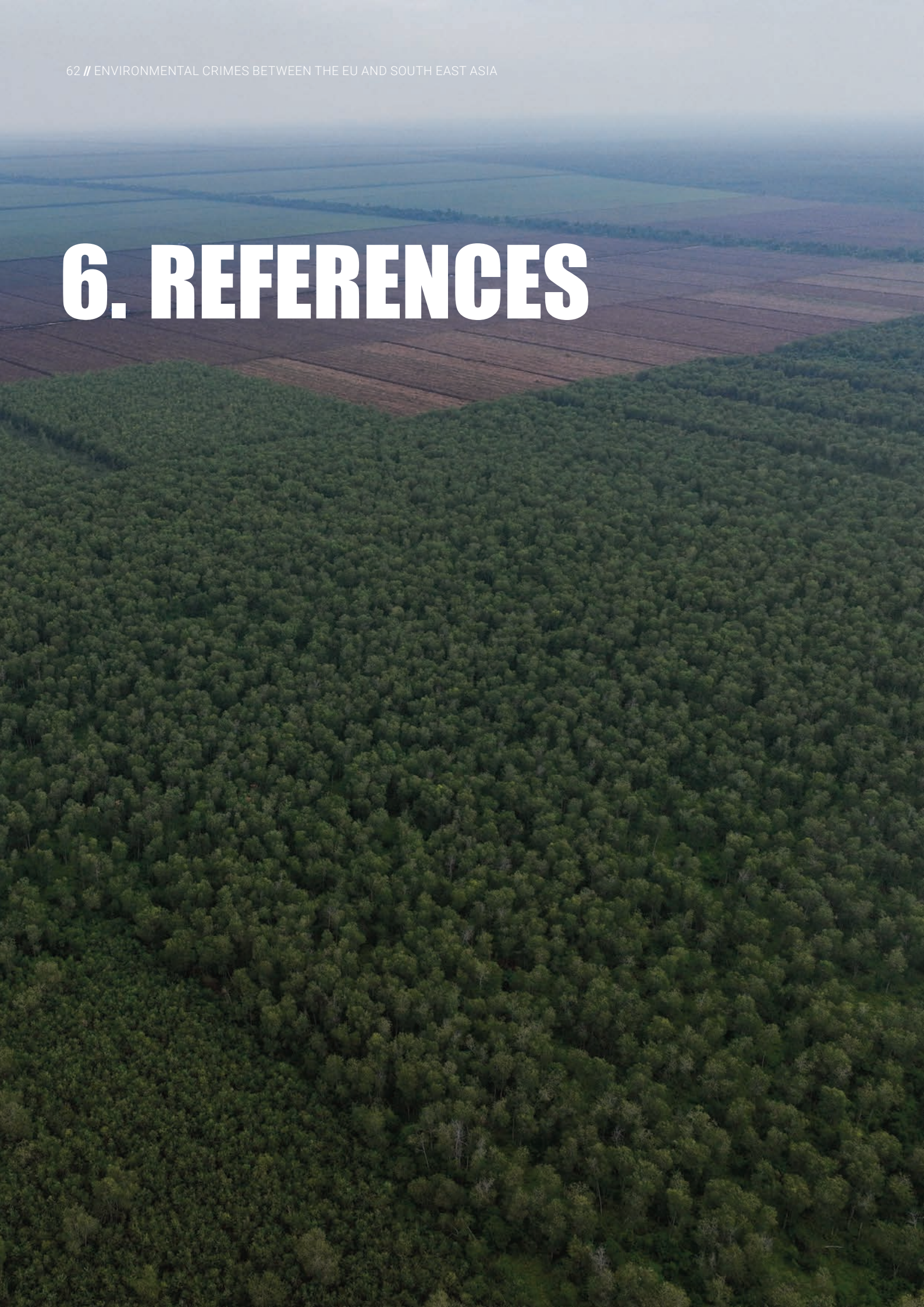
**Mixing tools
of all kinds**

It will be however equally relevant to address environmental crimes from a variety of perspectives, joining these new tools also to considerations on corruption and governance. Environmental crimes do not happen in a vacuum: while international and external actors play a significant role, the support or lack of opposition by local communities is key for their success, and many are the factors influencing this. Unclear tenure is usually associated with forestry crimes,³⁰⁷ while wildlife crimes increase when economic alternatives to poaching are limited, for instance. The FLEGT Action Plan had the correct intuition of using economic development, the fight against corruption and the improvement of local governance as key tools to counteract deforestation, but missed a relevant enforcement component to match this. The EUDR is instead much more skewed towards the second component; however, only a mix of the two could be truly effective in reducing environmental crimes.

**Improve synergies
among initiatives**

Finally, it will be pivotal to improve synergies across platforms and initiatives, and to coordinate targets and instruments. The Global Gateway funds promised by the von der Leyen Commission should also promote the enforcement of environmental regulations, for instance, while the work done by the EU's global climate diplomacy should also focus on the protection of habitats and of biodiversity (and thus address forestry and wildlife crimes as well). Cooperation on circular economy (such as the initiative recently launched between the EU and China)³⁰⁸ should also discuss the role of illegal waste shipments and include tools to address them. Ultimately, it will be particularly effective to replicate the holistic, interconnected approach proposed by the European Green Deal, extending it also to environmental cooperation between the EU and South East Asia, to increase the leverage and impact of single initiatives.

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