INTERPOL's Role in Fighting Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia: Exploring the Cultural Aspects of International Police Coordination

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Abstract
Human trafficking, a form of transnational crime still present throughout the world, especially in Southeast Asia, threatens regional security and human rights. This paper examines INTERPOL's role in facilitating cooperation among countries to combat this problem through communication systems, global criminal databases, joint operations, and other tools that help law enforcement entities collaborate more efficiently. In Indonesia, Divhubinter Polri, as INTERPOL's NCB Jakarta, serves as the intermediary linking national authorities with international partners. The research shows that faster information exchange and improved coordination have facilitated cross-border cooperation; nevertheless, differences between legal systems, lack of resources, administrative barriers, and other factors continue to hamper its effective functioning. To sum up, INTERPOL is a major player in the fight against human trafficking, but capacity building, better coordination, and legal harmonisation are necessary to achieve better results.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Transnational Crime, INTERPOL, International Law Enforcement Cooperation, Southeast Asia, Divhubinter Polri

INTRODUCTION

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This research utilises secondary data that has already been collected and made public. The data is derived from a comprehensive review of existing studies and documentation. A review of the literature was carried out to gain a deep understanding of human trafficking and how law enforcement agencies worldwide cooperate with each other. The study draws on data from a variety of sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, official organisational reports, government publications, and policy documents on trafficking and international police cooperation. Among the organisations providing international policing cooperation reports, INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) are the major sources of crucial information on global trafficking trends and responses. Regional publications from ASEAN institutions, national law enforcement agencies, and non-governmental organisations fighting trafficking provide views on human trafficking scenarios in specific areas. Human trafficking is a global problem, and many countries have reported cases in recent years.

Citing the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2022), the authors of some earlier articles refer to the UNODC report to say that there has been a drastic increase in the number of human trafficking cases since 2020. This increase is attributed to several factors that have changed people's way of life. The main factor was the economic instability caused by COVID-19. This situation forced people to move from one country to another in search of work. Moreover, people became victims of technology, and organised crime networks also infiltrated these systems. The Global Estimates of Modern Slavery (2021) report of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) further confirms these findings by stating that economic vulnerability is the main reason for exploitation. In fact, the pandemic has put so many communities in an economically vulnerable position, especially in the context of unemployment, and the need for money has led some to put themselves in dangerous situations. At the same time, traffickers are also using digital platforms for the recruitment and exploitation of victims, which greatly complicates law enforcement's efforts to tackle the problem in a traditional way. In the article, the authors rely on IOM's Counter Trafficking Data Report (2021), which shows how recruitment and exploitation have shifted to digital and transnational channels.

Among INTERPOL's diverse missions, one of the major ones is combating human trafficking, a form of transnational crime by which Southeast Asia continues to be severely affected. Indonesia reports new human trafficking cases almost daily: in 2020, 382 cases with 422 victims were detected. In 2021, Indonesia reached a new record of 624 cases and 683 victims, which generated huge outrage; the major reason was the economic vulnerability caused by the pandemic. Indonesia reported 412 cases with 476 victims in 2022 and 392 cases with 471 victims in 2024; the figures for 2026 have not yet been updated. This research paper examines human trafficking cases and considers NCB INTERPOL Jakarta a significant platform for global

discussion and intelligence exchange. Women and children are the primary victims of the sex trade. Most traffickers use very intricate routes and transit through numerous countries. The Indonesian police have even found cases where victims have been trafficked to the Middle East, Asia and other parts of Southeast Asia. Moreover, Indonesia's vast archipelago consists of thousands of islands with numerous points of human activity, making it difficult to track movements. Criminal gangs usually take advantage of these geographical conditions to smuggle victims across borders.

Border entry points present a huge risk for the monitoring and prevention of human trafficking. INTERPOL has facilitated new international collaboration through tools such as information sharing, real-time coordination of law enforcement agencies, capacity building, and joint international operations that target human trafficking networks in Southeast Asia. The research uses descriptive analysis to determine how these tools operate and how effective they are. Challenges include differing jurisdictions and legal systems, language barriers that hinder communication, limited institutional resources, the risk of corruption, and the need for standardised procedures for investigation and prosecution. The research shows that eliminating these challenges through continuous international cooperation will be the most effective way of enhancing global measures to fight human trafficking and rescue victims of such a serious human rights violation.

Therefore, this research aims to answer the following research questions:
1. In the context of a culturally diverse region, how does INTERPOL help facilitate international police cooperation to tackle human trafficking in Southeast Asia?
2. What are the difficulties faced in carrying out international cooperation to fight human trafficking in Southeast Asia, especially those related to different cultures, language barriers, legal systems, and institutional practices?
3. What role does NCB INTERPOL Jakarta play in enhancing international police cooperation and cross-cultural communication when dealing with human trafficking in Indonesia as part of the Southeast Asian regional context?

By answering these questions, the present study contributes to the growing body of scientific writing on transnational crime, international law enforcement cooperation, and human trafficking in Southeast Asia. It provides a framework for understanding INTERPOL's role, particularly how the organisation supports cross-border coordination, facilitates information exchange, and promotes joint work among member countries. In addition, this paper provides a theoretical framework for understanding the interaction between international policing networks and institutional cooperation mechanisms in the fight against complex transnational crime, illuminating the reasons for strengthening international partnership and institutional capacity. This viewpoint is of particular importance in the context of enhancing the efficiency of anti-trafficking initiatives and ensuring regional security, especially in Southeast Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human Trafficking as a Transnational Crime and Socio-Cultural Phenomenon

Human trafficking is one of the major crimes that involve crossing borders and harming human lives. It is a complex crime and difficult to understand for numerous reasons, such as economic disparities, porous borders, and organised criminal groups operating underground. Human trafficking is the act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring, or receiving people by use of threat, force, deception, or other means of control for the purpose of exploitation (Gozdziak & Vogel, 2020; UK Parliament, 2023; UNODC, 2025). Theoretically, this phenomenon can be analysed through push-pull migration theory, which accounts for economic and social drivers, and through structural vulnerability theory, which highlights systemic inequalities within society (Imran Khan et al., 2023; Strielkowski & Urba, 2022). Through the lens of Cultural Studies, this deplorable practice can be conceptualised as a social construction shaped by cultural norms, power relations, and the processes of globalisation (Essien, 2022). Other things being equal, poverty, gender inequality, and migration culture act as catalysts of exploitation risk for vulnerable populations such as women and migrants (Chadambuka et al., 2025). Moreover, through the theory of transnational criminal networks, it is possible to examine how criminal organisations exploit legal loopholes and differences across national systems (Lindley, 2022).

Migration Culture, Cultural Identity, and Migrant Workers' Vulnerability

Migration is the movement of people from one territory to another, driven by livelihood needs and by economic, social, political, and cultural factors (Erdal, 2019; Vazquez, 2023). Push-pull theory explains that migration can be driven by push factors in areas of origin, such as poverty and limited job opportunities, and by pull factors in destination areas, such as better economic opportunities (Saraswati et al., 2025). Migration network theory further explains that social relationships among individuals or communities may even strengthen migration flows through the exchange of information and social support (Massey, 2015). Labour migration is one strategy through which families seek to improve their welfare and raise their social status through remittances, as illustrated by the new economics of labour migration (Taylor, 1999). Migrant labourers, through their movement between the culture of their origin and that of the destination country, reconstruct their identities in line with cultural identity theory. This process involves people's values, standards, and work experiences across borders, which result in hybrid identities (Cai & Zimmermann, 2024). A strong migration culture may foster social mobility, but it may also become a loophole for human trafficking networks to exploit informal recruitment mechanisms and offer fake job opportunities (Cai & Zimmermann, 2024).

Southeast Asia: A Multicultural Region at Risk of Human Trafficking

In theory, regionalism and complex interdependence suggest that countries in this area are linked through shifting economic, social, and security networks (Rana, 2015; Saricha, 2025). While this variety gives regional identity its richness, it also

makes cross-border collaboration difficult, as mismatched values and legal systems affect law enforcement coordination (Sarocha, 2025). Migration theories, such as the push-pull model, suggest that people's desire to move is mainly shaped by economic hardship, conflict, and job availability in destination countries (Zanabazar et al., 2021). Accordingly, this paper focuses on the factors of population movement, labour migration routes, economic development gaps, and very loose border controls that make Southeast Asia a fertile ground for the recruitment and exploitation of victims of trafficking in human beings as a form of transnational crime (Chatterjee, 2022; INTERPOL, 2026).

Globalisation, Digital Culture, and New Modes of Human Trafficking

Globalisation is the process of worldwide integration that is marked by increased cross-border movement of people, information, and technology. Digital culture has become a new realm for social interaction, but it also opens avenues for transnational crime (Shan, 2026). Human trafficking has evolved with the aid of digital platforms such as social media, messaging apps, and websites for victim recruitment and exploitation (Alsemairi, 2022). The emergence of new types such as online scams, romance scams, and sextortion, as well as the use of technologies like deepfakes, underlines how complex this crime is (Herke & Szabo, 2026). Moreover, criminal networks exploit the anonymity and speed of digital communication to avoid detection by law enforcement agencies (Ezeji, 2024).

International Police Cooperation, Cross-Cultural Communication, and the Role of INTERPOL

Cross-border policing theories suggest that combating cross-border illegal activities requires various forms of interaction between law enforcement agencies, including information exchange, operational alignment, sharing criminal records, technical support, and capability enhancement (Lindley, 2022). INTERPOL is a global police agency that helps member countries connect and work together through information systems, criminal databases, and mechanisms to solve problems across borders. NCB INTERPOL Jakarta acts as a communication channel between national law enforcement agencies and the world INTERPOL network. It connects domestic law enforcement agencies with the worldwide network to deal with various types of crimes, including trafficking in persons (INTERPOL, 2026). However, the level of success of such cooperation depends not only on the technical aspects of policing but also on bridging differences in language, legal culture, bureaucratic systems, social values, and institutional practices among countries. Cross-cultural communication theory explains that successful joint anti-trafficking operations supported by INTERPOL require good communication between police from countries with diverse cultures and languages, mutual understanding and trust in each other's institutions, and effective communication channels between countries (Sahadevan & Sumangala, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examines the impact of INTERPOL in the fight against human trafficking as a form of transnational organised crime in Southeast Asia. It is based on secondary data gathered through an extensive literature and document review, including journal articles, expert-authored books, reports by international agencies, official government records, and documents on human trafficking legislation and cross-border law enforcement. Beyond INTERPOL and UNODC documents, this paper also drew on printed materials to provide a broader picture of trafficking and global responses. For fieldwork, the authors visited the International Relations Division of the Indonesian National Police (Divhubinter Polri), which serves as the INTERPOL National Central Bureau in Jakarta, for observation and interviews. Participating in its activities gave the authors a vivid picture of international law enforcement cooperation, showing how Indonesian officers on the frontline handle cross-border crimes, including their techniques for mutual legal assistance, their work with international partners, and their policing of border areas prone to illegal movement. The focus was on human trafficking incidents where NCB INTERPOL Jakarta operates as the core for global communication, intelligence dissemination, and aligned actions with foreign authorities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Role of INTERPOL in Facilitating International Police Cooperation in Southeast Asia within the Context of a Culturally Diverse Region

Human trafficking is one of the most complex and heinous crimes at the international level. It is not only about recruiting victims but also about transporting trafficked persons to different areas for exploitation. This criminal activity is not confined to a single country; it often spans several jurisdictions, making it impossible for one country alone to fight it. Therefore, in a globalised world, the only way to tackle this evil is to work hand in hand with other nations. In this regard, INTERPOL significantly facilitates worldwide police collaboration. It acts as a meeting place where the 196 member countries can exchange information, coordinate their operations, and establish joint measures against not only organised crime but also human trafficking (INTERPOL, 2023). Through this cooperation, enforcement agencies are empowered, as cross-border collaboration augments their internal efforts. A major service of INTERPOL is the provision of a global communication system called I-24/7. This system gives police worldwide immediate access to information such as suspect profiles, locations, stolen or lost travel documents, and trafficking trends (INTERPOL, 2022). Equipped with this data, law enforcement teams can more effectively pursue criminals and dismantle cross-border networks. Besides promoting communication, INTERPOL also operates several specialised international databases that serve as an extremely valuable resource for law enforcement. Their databases contain fingerprint data, DNA profiles, stolen or lost documents, and wanted criminal records; as a result, law enforcement officers worldwide can share information, link suspects, and

uncover more about extensive organised crime networks. These databases provide a critical complement, especially in human trafficking cases, which are most often linked to large, well-organised transnational criminal groups (UNODC, 2020).

INTERPOL greatly contributes to coordinating international law enforcement operations. With its assistance, member countries can simultaneously conduct joint operations such as raids, investigations, and victim rescues. Coordinating efforts this way allows countries to share resources, knowledge, and tactics, increasing not only effectiveness but also the efficiency of law enforcement measures (INTERPOL, 2023). INTERPOL is one of the main initiators of the efforts towards international collaboration aimed at the fight against human trafficking. Its communication infrastructure, worldwide databases, and coordination of cross-border operations provide law enforcement agencies globally with the tools needed to overcome the challenges of transnational crime and maintain global security. Besides breaking up criminal networks, such joint operations also lead to the discovery and protection of trafficking victims. Successful criminal investigations, operations, and prosecutions depend heavily on INTERPOL's support. Beyond disrupting traffickers, this shared approach helps shut down their operations by restricting their movement. Meanwhile, INTERPOL strives to equip national law enforcement agencies with the tools needed to carry out their work effectively.
It does so by providing training, technical support, and operational guidance. This is particularly helpful for countries with limited expertise, technology, or funding. INTERPOL sets up training programs that teach officers how to investigate crimes, analyse information, and use technology to fight cross-border crime. By helping law enforcement personnel improve their skills, INTERPOL ensures countries are prepared to handle trafficking cases and cooperate effectively with one another. INTERPOL is thus central to this process because it helps countries work together to fight crime.

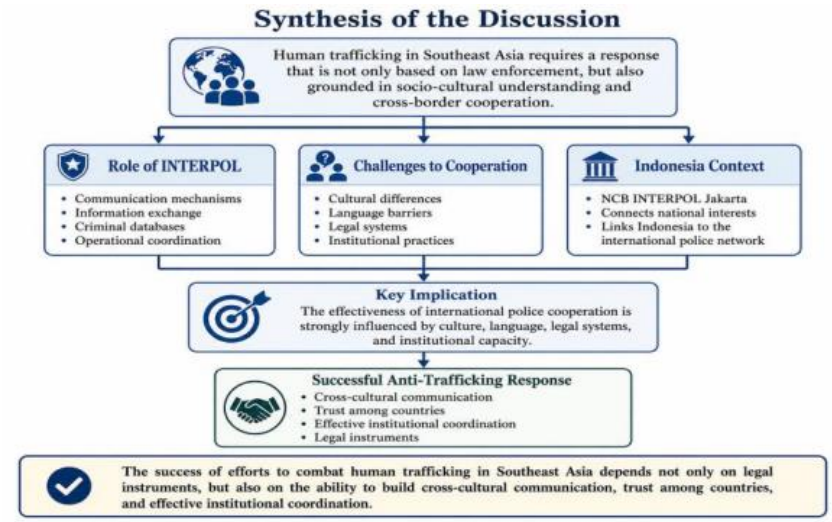
2. Challenges in Implementing International Cooperation to Combat Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia, Particularly Those Related to Cultural Differences, Language Barriers, Legal Systems, and Institutional Practices

The analysis shows that international cooperation to tackle human trafficking in Southeast Asia faces many challenges, primarily because of the different cultural, linguistic, legal, and institutional traditions of each country. In fact, human trafficking usually involves countries of origin, transit and destination. Therefore, differences in legal definitions, evidentiary standards, investigative procedures, mutual legal assistance mechanisms, and victim protection systems, among others, can delay case processing. According to international cooperation theory, the effectiveness of inter-state coordination largely depends on shared interests, trust, institutional capacity, and willingness to exchange information. Firstly, the hurdles that cooperation faces are not simply technical; they also involve cross-cultural communication issues. Language barriers can cause errors when translating legal information, victim identities, timelines of events, and cooperation requests.

Besides that, a case that carries the label of human trafficking in one country may, in the light of different legal cultures, be considered an immigration violation, labour violation, or cybercrime by the law enforcement of another country. This situation shows that international cooperation depends on a shared understanding of victimisation, exploitation, legally admissible evidence, and victim protection. Through a Cultural Studies lens, these issues suggest that fighting human trafficking transcends law and security and involves negotiations between different cultures and institutions. Southeast Asian nations have diverse social backgrounds, cultural values, bureaucratic systems, and law enforcement means. In addition, unequal technological levels, limited human resources, poorly controlled borders, and the possibility of corruption may also limit effective cooperation. As a result, fighting human trafficking will need procedural harmonisation, institutional capacity building, cross-cultural communication, and trust among countries.

3. The Contribution of NCB INTERPOL Jakarta in Strengthening International Police Cooperation and Cross-Cultural Communication in Addressing Human Trafficking in Indonesia as Part of the Southeast Asian Regional Context

NCB INTERPOL Jakarta holds a key position in Indonesia as a connecting channel between local law enforcement agencies and the worldwide INTERPOL network. Document review and observation showed that NCB INTERPOL Jakarta actively facilitates the exchange of criminal information, coordinates cross-border investigations, communicates with foreign police authorities, and operates INTERPOL systems and databases. This function is crucial since Indonesia is in Southeast Asia, a region with high labour mobility, a vast archipelagic territory, and susceptibility to cross-border human trafficking networks. From a transnational policing perspective, NCB INTERPOL Jakarta serves as a national node in the global policing network. The NCB's presence gives Indonesian law enforcement access to international information that helps them identify perpetrators, trace victims, track travel documents, and link evidence scattered across countries. In the context of human trafficking, a high level of coordination is required, as criminals often take advantage of differences in jurisdictions and poor coordination among states to elude law enforcement. Another important aspect is that NCB INTERPOL Jakarta helps promote cross-cultural communication. In terms of international cooperation, the NCB’s role is not limited to forwarding information; it also helps Indonesia overcome linguistic, legal culture, bureaucratic, and institutional practice challenges with other countries.



To sum up, the discussion points to several things: human trafficking in Southeast Asia is a problem that cannot be solved by police or law enforcement measures only. It requires, on the one hand, deep socio-cultural knowledge and, on the other, a foundation of cooperation among the region's countries. INTERPOL is one mechanism through which member countries can communicate, share information and crime data, and coordinate operations. However, the level of this cooperation depends heavily on differences in culture, language, legal systems, and institutional practices. NCB INTERPOL Jakarta is a crucial link between Indonesia's national priorities and police worldwide. Thus, cultural understanding, trust-building among countries, and efficient institutional collaboration will greatly contribute to eliminating human trafficking. Besides legal measures, the capacity to develop mutual cross-cultural communication, trust, and effective institutional coordination is also key to the success of the campaign against human trafficking in Southeast Asia.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has examined how INTERPOL helps countries work together to stop human trafficking in Southeast Asia. Human trafficking is a persistent problem that countries can only solve together. According to the available figures, many people in Indonesia are still trafficked every year, which means that trafficking groups remain active despite police efforts to stop them. Human trafficking involves several countries: it usually begins with the recruitment of victims, continues with their transport to another place, and ends with their exploitation. Countries therefore need to cooperate to stop it, and INTERPOL plays a key role in helping police from different countries work together.

Despite the many benefits cooperation between countries can bring, certain obstacles can hinder the successful realisation of such collaboration. Differences in legislation and resource constraints within certain law enforcement authorities can

hinder the speed at which investigations are conducted as well as the quality of information which can be shared between countries. Moreover, as more organised crime groups use technology and go digital, police forces must evolve and improve their own technological capabilities.

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