



# THE CONVERGENCE OF CRIMES IN THE NATURAL RESOURCES SECTOR: A Proposal for Comprehensive Policy Responses

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In the context of increasing globalization and complex climate change, the illegal exploitation of natural resources - including wildlife trafficking, illegal logging, mining, illegal fishing, and unsustainable land conversion - has emerged as a serious threat to global ecosystems. These activities not only harm the environment but also contribute to social instability, exacerbate food insecurity, undermine economies, and erode efforts toward sustainable development.

However, in many countries, including Vietnam, policy and legal responses to this type of crime remain slow and fragmented. Current legislation has not kept pace with the trans-national, diverse, and highly adaptive nature of resource-based crime. In addition, weak coordination among domestic authorities- and across borders - creates gaps that criminals can readily exploit. According to the 2020 INTERPOL-UNEP report, the illegal trade in natural resources is now the world's third largest area of transnational organized crime, surpassed only by drug trafficking and counterfeit goods, with annual revenues estimated turnover of between 110 and 281 billion USD per year [2].

In light of this reality, the article proposes a number of key policy solutions to enhance the ability to respond to the convergence of crimes in the natural resources sector. The recommendations are based on an analysis of the characteristics, impacts and current legal context, aiming toward a comprehensive, multi-sectoral, and sustainable response strategy.

## 1. THE CONVERGENCE OF CRIME - A GROWING THREAT

The "convergence of crimes" refers to the intersection of various criminal activities-from drug, arms, and human trafficking to the illegal exploitation of natural resources-forming complex and multi-layered organized crime networks. These organizations are becoming increasingly agile and decentralized, leveraging modern technology and gaps in state governance to expand their operations, particularly in resource-rich regions with weak governance.

Traditional criminal organizations that once focused on drug trafficking are now shifting toward gold, timber, and wildlife trade due to higher profits and lower risks. They exploit existing supply chains, transportation infrastructure, and social media networks to legitimize operations, launder money, and sustain cross-border

activities. The result is a transnational crime network capable of seriously threatening biodiversity, human security, and regional economies.

In Brazil, especially in the Amazon and Cerrado regions-the convergence of deforestation, illegal gold mining, and wildlife trafficking with other crimes such as human trafficking and drug trade has become widespread [4]. Criminal groups use profits from drug trafficking to invest in mining equipment and operate illegal gold mines, often using the same routes to traffic both gold and drugs. Remote border areas with limited state presence have become hotspots for converging criminal activities.

In addition, illegal gold mining serves as an effective tool for money laundering due to its cash-intensive nature and ease of legitimization through trade. Investigations in South America have uncovered billions of USD laundered through illicit gold mining and trade activities [1].

This situation is not limited to South America. In Southeast Asia, wildlife trafficking, illegal logging, and illicit mineral extraction are also intertwined with other criminal activities such as drug and human trafficking-particularly in the Golden Triangle and border regions between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia [3].

## 2. IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS AND IMPACTS OF THE CRIME CONVERGENCE

### 2.1. Common features of the crime convergence

Crime convergence is a global phenomenon, with evidence found across many countries, reflecting diverse economic, social, and political contexts. While its manifestations vary by region, several common characteristics of crime convergence involving natural resource exploitation can be identified from criminological, legal, and global perspectives:

*Exploitation of vulnerable populations:* Criminal organizations often prey on poverty, lack of economic opportunities, and weak access to education and healthcare in remote and marginalized communities. Local residents may be drawn into illegal supply chains or transportation networks, becoming unwilling participants in criminal activities. In the Amazon or Southeast Asia, many indigenous communities are recruited into illegal gold mining, wildlife poaching, or timber smuggling due to the absence of sustainable livelihoods.

*Weak or fragmented legal frameworks:* Legal shortcomings - such as lenient penalties, overlapping



*Ivory trafficking is one of the serious crimes prohibited by law*

mandates among enforcement agencies, or absence of specific environmental crime legislation - create loopholes that criminals can exploit. In some countries, acts such as illegal logging, unregulated fishing, or illicit mining are still not classified as serious crimes, leading to light sanctions and weak deterrence.

*Use of natural resource profits to finance serious crimes:* The extraction of timber, gold, gemstones, and wildlife often yields massive profits with relatively low legal risks compared to drug or arms trafficking. Criminal organizations treat these sectors as cash engines for broader operations. Gold and gemstones are typically traded in cash due to their traceability challenges, while minerals and timber can be laundered using forged permits or export documents. The profits are then funneled into the financial system, real estate, or cross-border trade. This significantly increases the reach and impact of organized crime networks. In South America, drug cartels have been found using gold mining supply chains to conceal cash flows and fund cocaine trafficking. In East Africa, proceeds from illegal ivory trade are suspected to fund armed groups.

*Cross-border coordination that bypasses traditional legal boundaries:* Resource-based crimes rarely operate within the confines of a single country. Instead, they exploit weak international cooperation to move, legitimize, or launder illegally obtained goods. Their methods include using international smuggling routes to move illicit resources through multiple transit countries; employing shell companies to obscure ownership and financial trails; and exploiting legal inconsistencies among nations to avoid prosecution. For example, illegal timber from Laos may be transported through Thailand, legalized in Vietnam, and exported to Europe or the U.S. as "plantation timber." Each country controls only a segment of the chain, making it difficult to trace back to the origin.

## **2.2. Some key impacts of crime convergence**

*Decline in biodiversity:* The convergence between illegal resource extraction and organized crime is now

one of the leading causes of global biodiversity loss. The trafficking of wildlife, rare timber, and prohibited marine species has pushed many species to the brink of extinction. Ecosystems - from the Amazon rainforest and Southeast Asia's primary forests to coral reefs in Africa - are being severely degraded by these activities. This results in ecological imbalances, disrupts food chains, and threatens the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on natural resources, especially poor local communities.

### *Economic instability and regional insecurity:*

Transnational criminal activity in the resource sector not only harms the environment but also erodes the legal economy and threatens regional security. When criminal groups control the extraction and trade of natural resources, state revenues suffer due to tax evasion and commercial fraud. These illicit profits are often used to fund armed groups, insurgents, or other criminal networks, contributing to prolonged instability in resource-rich areas such as Central Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America. This shadow economy undermines social order and weakens the ability of local authorities to govern and respond effectively.

### *Increased corruption and weakened governance:*

Organized crime in the resource sector frequently relies on and fosters corruption to conceal or legitimize illegal activities. Criminals bribe forest rangers, customs officers, police, and even high-level officials to facilitate the transport, trade, and export of illegally sourced goods such as timber, minerals, or endangered wildlife. This not only obstructs investigations and prosecutions but also undermines the entire public governance system, rendering the rule of law ineffective. When citizens witness the government's inability - or complicity - in dealing with wrongdoing, trust in the state deteriorates, creating a vicious cycle of crime, corruption, and social injustice.

*Exacerbation of social inequality and resource conflicts:* Natural resources are a common good, yet when they are captured and exploited illegally by organized groups, it is often the local population - especially vulnerable communities and ethnic minorities - who suffer the most. They lose land and forests, are forcibly displaced, or are excluded from decisions affecting their environment. Inequality deepens as a small minority profits from criminal activities while the majority bears the environmental, economic, and social costs. Such injustices can ignite resource conflicts, land disputes, weaken social cohesion, and provide fertile ground for the rise of extremist movements.



### 3. POLICY PROPOSALS TO ADDRESS CRIME CONVERGENCE

In the face of rising illegal resource extraction linked to transnational organized crime, building a comprehensive response strategy is an urgent necessity. The following policy solutions should be implemented in a coordinated, targeted, and multisectoral manner to weaken criminal networks and enhance sustainability in resource governance:

*First*, strengthen law enforcement effectiveness and interagency coordination. The current enforcement systems suffer from fragmented information and uneven capacity across agencies. Therefore, it is essential to establish mechanisms for transparent, rapid, and secure information sharing among law enforcement, environmental, judicial, and financial authorities. Investigations and prosecutions must go beyond traditional approaches that target only individuals caught at the scene. Instead, it is necessary to focus on dismantling intermediaries and masterminds – entities that play a decisive role in the operational chain of resource crime networks.

*Second*, strengthen the legal framework and raise the level of environmental crimes. Many countries still classify environmental crimes as administrative violations or minor criminal offenses, making the handling of them less deterrent. It is necessary to upgrade the severity of acts such as illegal exploitation, transportation, and trafficking of natural resources, classifying them as serious crimes equivalent to drug crimes or money laundering. This not only contributes to unifying awareness in the legal system but also creates conditions for expanding international cooperation in cross-border investigation and prosecution.

*Third*, promote sustainable development and support livelihoods in local communities. One of the root causes of people engaging in illegal mining activities is the lack of legal livelihood opportunities. Therefore, it is necessary to expand sustainable rural economic development programs, creating conditions for local people to access stable, environmentally friendly jobs. At the same time, it is necessary to integrate the goal of protecting natural resources into socio-economic development policies, especially in areas near forests, national parks and reserves.

*Fourth*, enhance transparency and control corruption in the resource supply chain. Corruption in regulatory agencies and law enforcement agencies that facilitate resource crime continues to be rampant. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen internal monitoring measures, enhance accountability and apply technology to effectively control the resource supply chain – from mining, transportation to consumption.

*Fifth*, promote international and regional cooperation. Due to the transnational nature of resource crime, it is difficult for a single country to effectively deal with it. Establishing bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms on investigation, extradition and information sharing is essential. Existing networks such as INTERPOL, CITES or the ASEAN Wildlife Enforcement Network (ASEAN-WEN) should be fully utilized, while promoting Vietnam's role in regional and global initiatives on environmental crime prevention.

*Sixth*, strengthen the legal framework and raise the level of environmental crimes. Many countries still classify environmental crimes as administrative violations or minor criminal offenses, making the handling of them less deterrent. It is necessary to upgrade the severity of acts such as illegal exploitation, transportation, and trafficking of natural resources, classifying them as serious crimes equivalent to drug crimes or money laundering. This not only contributes to unifying awareness in the legal system but also creates conditions for expanding international cooperation in cross-border investigation and prosecution.

### CONCLUSION

The convergence of natural resource crimes and organized crime networks presents a global challenge. This is not merely an environmental issue - it is a matter of security, development, and justice. To respond effectively, a multidimensional strategy is required, spanning law, enforcement, international cooperation, and community development. Only by recognizing the seriousness and cross-sectoral nature of this threat can we begin to dismantle the sophisticated criminal networks that are expanding in scale and influence ■

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