

V&V

VISIONS & VOICES

The Climate Change-Organized Crime Nexus: Building Pacific Resilience

By Virginia Comolli and Alastair MacBeath



Figure 1. Port Villa, April 2023. Photograph courtesy Virginia Comolli.

The Pacific Islands find themselves on the frontline of climate change, extreme weather conditions, and disasters—as the earthquake hitting Vanuatu in December 2024 reminded us once again. Pacific Islanders have also been very vocal at the regional and international levels about the challenges they face, seeking climate justice and demanding greater accountability on the part of the world’s largest polluters.¹

Discussions are well-advanced, and indeed often spearheaded by Ni-Vanuatu efforts.² However, one under-discussed and under-appreciated facet of the environmental conundrum is the nexus between climate change and organized crime (OC). The intersection between the two challenges, that are both worryingly on the rise in the Pacific,³ speaks to the need for integrating respective policy responses in order to strengthen Pacific resilience to both threats.

¹ Shiva Gouden. “What started in the Pacific is now the world’s largest climate justice campaign!” *Greenpeace*. December 4, 2024. <https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/71691/what-started-in-pacific-now-worlds-largest-climate-justice-campaign/>.

² Stephanie van den Berg. “Vanuatu urges World Court to recognise climate change harms.” *Reuters*. December 2, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/world-court-open-climate-change-hearings-2024-12-02/>.

³ Pacific Islands Forum. *Regional Transnational Organised Crime Disruption Strategy 2024–2028*. 2024. <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/Regional%20Transnational%20Organised%20Crime%20Disruption%20Strategy.pdf>.

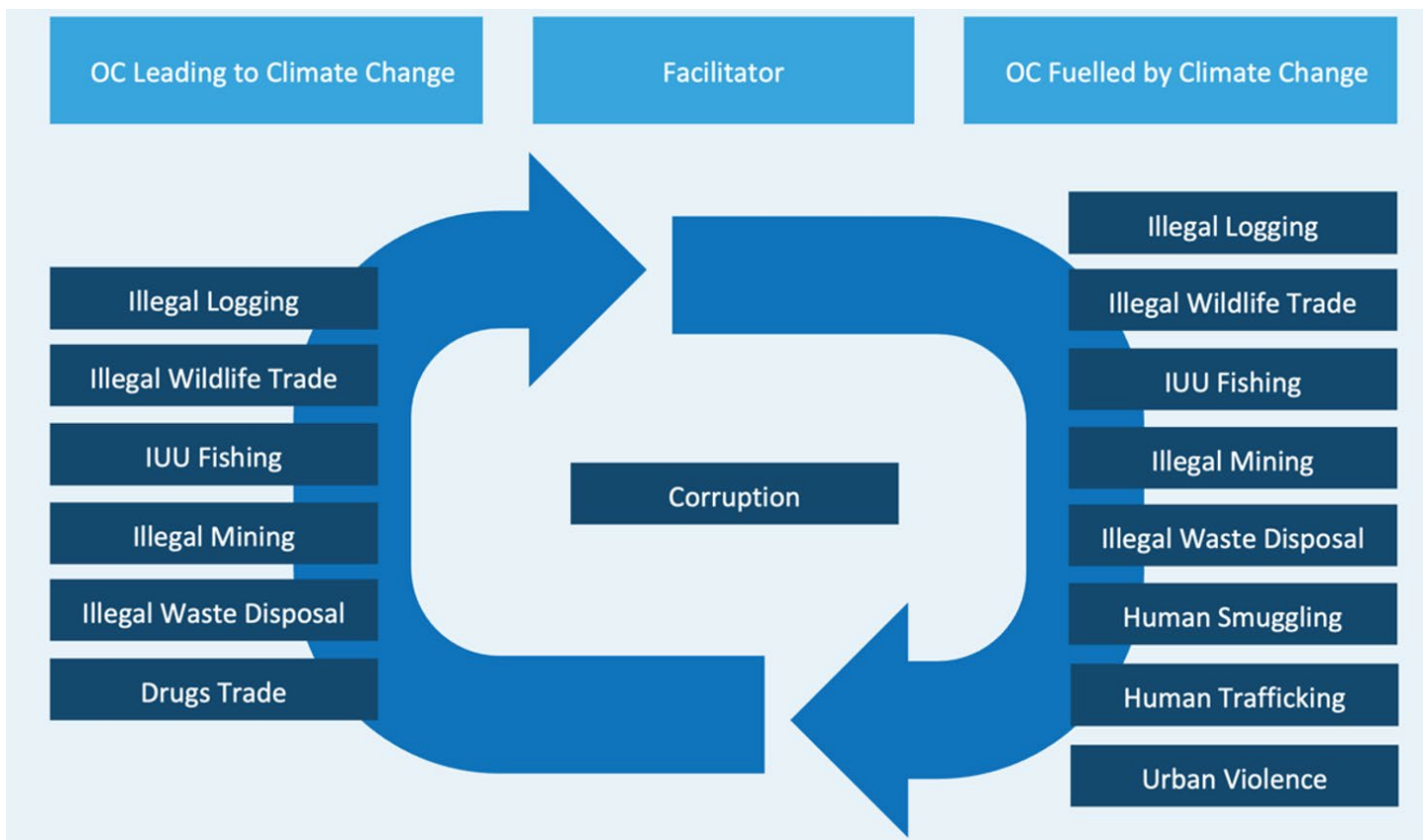


Figure 2. The Organized crime–Climate change nexus. Source: Compiled by the authors.

In fact, although climate change and biodiversity loss are caused primarily by entirely lawful means,⁴ as the climate situation deteriorates, the opportunities for criminal actors and illicit economies are likely to increase, further fueling the impacts of climate change.

The Organized Crime–Climate Change Nexus

A close relationship exists between climate change and organized crime. On the one hand, climate change is a driver of crime due to its impact on social control and its ability to create new opportunities for criminal actors.⁵ Its effects put pressure on local economies and communities, which leads to instability and facilitates the creation of new illicit markets.⁶ On the other hand, criminal activity exacerbates climate change as it often involves practices damaging to the environment, while simultaneously frustrating the ability of societies to withstand and respond to the impacts of climate change, due to the degradation of governance and the decreased resilience of local and Indigenous communities.⁷

The relationship between organized crime and climate change can be classified into three categories (see Figure 2).

First, certain crime types are classed as having a *direct* impact as they predominantly affect the environment. They include illegal logging and deforestation, which are for instance widespread in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands; the ubiquitous illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing; illegal wildlife trade; illegal mining; the illegal waste trade; and the drugs trade. These crimes contribute to climate change because they cause loss of forests and the release of sequestered carbon, ecosystem damage, biodiversity loss, and the release of pollution into the natural environment. The impacts of climate change and the loss of traditional livelihoods such as farming and fishing can push more people into participating in these forms of crime, which further fuels their impact on climate change.

Second are crimes classed as having an *indirect* impact on climate change. These are activities that facilitate other forms of harm that, in turn, impact the climate. They include the smuggling and trafficking of humans, along with the proliferation of gangs and violence. These crime types are predominantly human-centric in nature and can impact climate change through increased demand on natural resources and the increasing pressure on urban centers.

⁴ Wildlife Fund (WWF). *Crimes That Affect the Environment and Climate Change*. 2022.

https://files.worldwildlife.org/wwfmsprod/files/Publication/file/8mie6esklg_Crimes_that_Affect_the_Environment_and_Climate_Change.pdf

⁵ Robert Agnew. "Dire Forecast: A Theoretical Model of the Impact of Climate Change on Crime." *Theoretical Criminology* 16, no. 1 (2011): 21–42. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1362480611416843>.

⁶ Interpol. "Crime, Law Enforcement and Climate Change." *Background Paper*, Innovation Centre. 2022.

<https://www.interpol.int/content/download/18519/file/IC%20Background%20Paper%20-%20Crime%20Law%20Enforcement%20and%20Climate%20Change.pdf>

⁷ Salvatore Villani. "Fight Against Organized Crime and Resilience to Climate Change." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Climate Resilient Societies*, edited by R.C. Brears, 1–20. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-3-030-42462-6_87#citeas.

The third type of criminal activity involves those crimes that do not in themselves increase the risk of climate change but do facilitate other illicit/illegal activities that enable climate change. These predominantly fall under the umbrella of corruption or money laundering, and include bribery, extortion, abuse of discretion, document fraud, use of front companies, agency capture, and elite protection. They are an integral part of the criminal ecosystem and act as a means of facilitating criminal activities, sometimes alongside threats of violence, while simultaneously disguising criminal enterprises and protecting them from law enforcement action.

As highlighted at the Sharm el-Sheikh Climate Change Conference in Egypt in 2022, regions vulnerable to climate change tend to also have high levels of organized criminality, such as Southeast Asia and Africa.⁸ This can be seen when comparing nations vulnerable to climate change, as reported by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,⁹ against nations with high levels of organized criminal actors. The combination of high organized crime levels and high vulnerability to climate change presents considerable challenges to the development of effective long-term climate change interventions, largely due to the conflict between the aims of the criminal actors and those working to mitigate the effects of climate change. And whereas the criminality levels in the Pacific are not on the par with those of, for instance, neighboring Southeast Asia, the upward trends represent a concern, both when assessed independently and in connection to climate change.

Resilience Levels

Pacific Islanders are very resilient people capable of adapting to some of the most challenging conditions resulting from their unique geography or their often limited economic opportunities, to mention just two aspects of island living. Looking at resilience to organized crime specifically, the picture is somewhat different. It is worth noting that the combination of multiple factors determines a country's ability to withstand criminal threats and the resulting harms. They include, but are not limited to, the effectiveness of policies and preventative measures, government transparency, territorial integrity, international cooperation, the robustness of the economic regulatory environment, and the degree of openness afforded to the civic space.

As indicated in the Global Organized Crime Index, and notwithstanding country variations, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia exhibit average scores of 4.73, 5.27, and 5.74 out of 10 respectively—all the while the impact and pervasiveness of transnational crime is on the rise across the three regions.¹⁰ This suggests that resilience is—at best—only moderately effective in the face of deeply rooted and pervasive criminal markets and the continuing diversification and growing influence of (often foreign) criminal actors.

The Road Ahead: A Call for Cross-Policy Cooperation

Looking ahead, it is legitimate to expect that the challenges faced in the global response to climate change will intensify owing both to the increased frequency and severity of climate-related events, coupled with responses aimed at controlling them. This will create new opportunities for criminal actors and will compound existing challenges. This can be seen in the erosion of democratic values taking place in various countries around the world, which is likely to decrease resilience against organized crime. The continued growth in the global population increases the risks of poverty, internal and external migration, and conflicts—all of which fuel criminal activities such as human smuggling, illegal resource extraction, and violence. Population growth also places continued pressure on food and water, both of which are at risk due to drought and extreme weather events.

In terms of responses to be implemented by Pacific governments, regional and international organizations, and foreign donors, the nexus between climate change and organized crime demonstrates how organized crime-related programming activities can both directly and indirectly mitigate environmental harms and therefore climate change. With this in mind, it would be helpful to increase awareness within program development teams of the relationship between climate change and crime types that directly affect climate change. This would help improve the policy integration between organized crime and climate change and foster cooperation across institutions and countries cognizant of the fact that neither climate change nor transnational crime can ever be contained within national borders, and no country or region could ever tackle them alone.

Virginia Comolli (virginia.comolli@globalinitiative.net) is the head of the Pacific Programme at the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime leading research and engagement with local and international stakeholders across Oceania. Previously, she spent 14 years with the International Institute for Strategic Studies, most recently as senior fellow and head of the Conflict, Security and Development Programme.

Alastair MacBeath (alastair.macbeath@globalinitiative.net) is the Southeast Asia coordinator for the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime based in Bangkok. Previously he was an analyst within the Global Policy Team in London researching environmental crime policy, international enforcement cooperation, and the nexus between organized crime and climate change.

Visions & Voices is a quarterly periodical published by the Pacific Islands Development Program at the East-West Center. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of the Pacific Islands Development Program or the East-West Center.

Learn more at www.pireport.org

⁸ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). *Sharm El-Sheikh Implementation Plan, Decision -/CP.27*. November 2022. https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/cop27_auv_2_cover%20decision.pdf.

⁹ Hans-Otto Portner et al., eds. *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022. See Figure 8.6, "Global Map of Vulnerability."

¹⁰ Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). *Global Organized Crime Index 2023*. 2023. <https://ocindex.net/>.