LITERATURE MAPPING:

IMPACT OF NATURAL AND HUMANITARIAN DISASTERS ON IRREGULAR MIGRATION, AND IRREGULAR LABOUR MIGRATION IN THE BALI PROCESS REGION

Australian National University

THE MIGRATION HUB

REGIONAL SUPPORT OFFICE
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The ANU Migration Hub advances fundamental knowledge about population movement, educates future policymakers and experts on human mobility and displacement, and accelerates the translation of research into better migration policies and outcomes.

We support and draw on ANU’s vibrant multi-disciplinary network of world-leading migration scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. We work to drive investment in the development of a cluster of outstanding migration and displacement expertise based here in the Asia Pacific.

The first of its kind in this region of the world, the Migration Hub convenes leading experts across academia, policy, NGOs, and industry, to share knowledge, collect evidence, question assumptions, and inform solutions to major challenges concerning the movement of people.

Throughout history, population movement has been a driver of human progress and conflict. Today, more people than ever before live outside their birthplace, some by choice, and many more due to events beyond their control. The movement of people is a defining feature of our time.

Regulating migration and displacement is a complex task that requires working across sectors and disciplines to understand how population movement changes lives, transforms societies, and shapes national, regional, and global economies. The Migration Hub at The Australian National University serves as a leading focal point for this critical work.

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Foreword

Each year, a significant number of people within and across Bali Process Member States face protection risks as a result of dangerous irregular migration journeys. Despite the numerous policy and operational efforts of governments to address irregular migration and promote safe, orderly, and regular migration, individuals continue to pursue irregular journeys. This owes to vulnerabilities resulting in a complex interplay of social, economic, political, and environmental factors. Gaining a deeper understanding about these drivers of irregular migration and the various nuances that are unique to each context is at the heart of an effective response to the issue.

While there is an existing evidence base which explores these factors in detail, the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (RSO) sought to identify research patterns, gaps, and inconsistencies in existing research and literature. This approach seeks to inform future efforts undertaken by enhancing the existing evidence base through the generation of new knowledge.

The approach of the RSO is derived from the Bali Process 2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation which reflects the call made by the Bali Process ministers during the Eighth Bali Process Ministerial Conference held in Adelaide, Australia in 2023, to undertake research within the Bali Process mandate to enhance Members' understanding of the impact of drivers of irregular migration such as natural and humanitarian disasters. In response to these objectives set out in the Bali Process 2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation and based on bilateral and multilateral discussions the RSO has undertaken with a range of stakeholders during 2023 and 2024, this literature mapping was conceptualised.

This exercise was made possible through the additional funding provided by the Australian Government which was announced at the Eighth Bali Process Ministerial Conference, and the implementation support from the Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs. The RSO extends our gratitude to our technical partner, the Migration Hub of the Australian National University, for producing this literature mapping and making recommendations to strengthen the evidence base for policymaking on irregular migration in the Bali Process region.

We hope that this report will provide useful insights in the design of research projects in the Bali Process region and encourage government and non-government stakeholders to action these recommendations for a safer migration landscape for all persons within the Bali Process region.

Fuad Adriansyah
RSO Co Manager (Indonesia)

David Scott
RSO Co Manager (Australia)

Foreword

On behalf of the authors and of The Australian National University (ANU) Migration Hub, it is with great pleasure that I present this report, which builds on a concept proposed by the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (RSO). This report was commissioned and funded by the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs and is aligned with the 2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation and responds to the priorities set during the Eighth Bali Process Ministerial Conference.

The study before you, a Literature Mapping on the Impact of Natural and Humanitarian Disasters on Irregular Migration and Irregular Labour Migration, focuses on a critical intersection of global challenges that impact millions of lives in the Bali Process region: climate change, forced displacement, and irregular migration.

The urgency of this research cannot be overstated. As climate-related disasters intensify, and vulnerabilities among populations rise, irregular migration has increasingly become both a response and a risk for those seeking refuge or livelihood opportunities. This report offers a thorough analysis of existing literature from 2019 to 2024, mapping out knowledge gaps and emerging trends in irregular migration. It delves into the gendered dynamics of climate-induced displacement and irregular labour migration, providing insights into how these challenges interact with human trafficking, forced labour, and organised crime in the Asia-Pacific region.

The findings presented here have the potential to inform ongoing policy discussions, including those held by the Bali Process, and also serve as a foundation for future research initiatives. I trust this report will be a valuable resource for all stakeholders working to mitigate the impacts of disasters on vulnerable populations and create more resilient regional frameworks.

Sincerely,

Professor Alan Gamlen

Director of the ANU Migration Hub

Executive Summary

This report explores the intersection of natural and humanitarian disasters with irregular migration and labour migration in the Bali Process region. It highlights how climate change exacerbates vulnerabilities, driving irregular migration and displacement. The analysis spans key themes: climate-induced displacement, legal gaps, risks without safe pathways, and the role of flexible mobility solutions.

Climate-induced migration, often localised and temporary, is shaped by drivers like economic deprivation, limited livelihoods, and environmental degradation. Sudden disasters and slow-onset climate impacts force many to migrate or adapt within constrained options. Legal definitions for 'climate migrants' remain absent, hindering consistent policy responses. Initiatives like Fiji's planned relocation frameworks offer models for regional adaptation but require further evaluation.

Irregular labour migration arises from systemic issues such as restrictive immigration policies, exploitative industries, and the lack of legal pathways. Migration pathways are complicated by barriers, creating reliance on smugglers and exposing migrants to exploitation. Emerging industries, such as scam operations, exploit global labour markets, highlighting the evolving nature of trafficking and forced labour.

The role of intersectionality is underscored, as gender, disability, age, and socio-economic disparities exacerbate vulnerabilities. Displacement-driven pressures amplify risks for marginalised groups, including women, children, and disabled persons. Labour mobility schemes, while offering potential solutions, require regulation to ensure fairness, inclusivity, and long-term benefits.

The report emphasises regional diversity and recommends targeted, localised solutions over one-size-fits-all policies. It highlights gaps in data and advocates for inclusive, community-driven research methodologies. Strengthening rights-based frameworks and promoting safe, regular migration pathways are crucial for mitigating risks and fostering resilience.

A central purpose of this report is to identify the state of knowledge on these topics, and identify where important knowledge is lacking. Each main sub-section of the report therefore provides a summary of key gaps in the existing research literature and priorities for future research.

We identify 40 such gaps and highlight the following six key areas as **Top Priorities** for future research:

1. **Localised analysis of migration patterns**: Study localised climate migration in vulnerable regions like the Pacific, focusing on demographic changes, mobility options, and socio-economic drivers.
2. **Intersection of climate mobility and exploitation**: Explore how climate mobility intersects with exploitation, and assess how safe migration pathways reduce risks in disaster contexts.
3. **Legal pathways for climate mobility**: Investigate frameworks for cross-border climate migrants, addressing gaps in current systems to reduce reliance on irregular channels.
4. **Labour market dynamics and irregular migration**: Study how demographic shifts and labour gaps in sectors like healthcare and agriculture shape irregular migration in Bali Process Member States.
5. **Effectiveness of border deterrence policies:** Examine whether border controls reduce irregular migration or shift it to riskier pathways, comparing rights-based and deterrence strategies.
6. **Emergence of multi-directional smuggling:** Study drivers of multi-directional smuggling, including unauthorised returns, and impacts of restrictive return policies.

Introduction

This literature mapping was undertaken for The Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (hereafter, the Bali Process). Its purpose is to explore emerging trends in climate change and labour and their impact on irregular migration in the Bali Process region.[1] The report is divided into two main sections: climate-induced irregular migration and displacement, and irregular labour migration.

Understanding that irregular migration persists due to violence, persecution, and socio-economic despair is central to this project. These challenges are compounded by restrictive and complex visa regimes. Border restrictions themselves are a significant driver of irregular migration. Events such as economic crises, pandemics, and slow-onset climate change—whether occurring separately or simultaneously—disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. These include individuals impacted by gender, age, disability, sexuality, or socio-economic challenges.[2] Such circumstances not only make irregular migration appealing but also heighten migrants' vulnerability to exploitation. Establishing safe, regular, rights-based, and accessible migration pathways reduces the likelihood of irregular migration.

The majority of climate and labour migration globally occurs through legal and regular channels, despite significant challenges. The focus on irregular migration in this report reflects its audience and purpose and should not imply that all climate or labour migration is irregular.

Irregular migration encompasses a wide range of phenomena, including people smuggling, trafficking in persons, and other forms of exploitation such as forced labour, and forced marriage. This report distinguishes between these facets where possible, acknowledging that they can occur at different stages of a migrant's journey and often influence one another. Failure to address these distinctions risks creating distorted policy responses that overlook migrants' agency and evolving needs. Migrants may encounter multiple aspects of irregular migration over time, either simultaneously or at different stages of their journey.

The Bali Process region spans diverse political, cultural, economic, and social contexts.[3] Literature evaluated in this project may not apply uniformly across the region; what holds true for Kiribati may differ for Australia, Thailand, or Afghanistan. These differences call for tailored research agendas and policy responses. We have aimed to be as specific as possible, but some generalisation has been necessary. Future policy or research initiatives based on this report should focus on specific states, subregional frameworks, or even community-level contexts to ensure locally relevant solutions rather than overly broad approaches.

The findings highlight the need for more evidence-based, nuanced discussions, and policies addressing the complexities of irregular migration in the Bali Process region.

1 Funded by the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs.

2 Gender has been mainstreamed throughout this report.

3 Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, DPR Korea, Fiji, France, Hong Kong SAR, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Macau SAR, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nauru, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Syria, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Türkiye, United Arab Emirates, United States of America, Vanuatu, and Viet Nam.

Methodology

Following best practices in literature reviews and mapping, particularly in the context of forced labour (Decker Sparks et al., 2021; Jackson, 2023), we sourced a combination of academic and grey literature. Grey literature included contributions from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), governments, international organisations, and think tanks. This approach ensured a diverse range of perspectives on the challenges and potential solutions to irregular migration. The range of literature surveyed is summarised in *Table 1: Academic and grey literature mapped (2019–2024)*.

Literature was selected based on its publication date (2019–2024) and relevance to the Bali Process region. The project team from The Australian National University Migration Hub identified pertinent sources, which were consolidated and summarised by a Research Assistant. We acknowledge that the team's location in Australia, reliance on Australian university search engines, and Google's geographical location settings may have influenced the selection process. Additionally, the focus on English-language materials may have limited access to some relevant sources. Despite these constraints, efforts were made to include literature from the broader research areas of the Bali Process region.

Table 1: Academic and grey literature mapped (2019-2024)

Category	Count
International organisation literature	66
Journal articles	59
Books	19
Policy brief	9
NGO literature	6
Academic commentary	5
Government literature	5
Think tank	5
Working paper	3
Dissertation/thesis	2
Total sources	**179**

The selected literature was analysed for patterns, trends, and gaps. These insights were incorporated into the report by a lead author, with guidance from the project team. Identified gaps were flagged as areas for potential future research by Bali Process Member States.

State of the literature

The most innovative and effective methodology identified during this research period was developed by a University of Auckland research team. Funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, this team investigated the impacts of climate change on mobility in the Pacific Islands region (Burson et al., 2024; Bedford et al., 2023a; Newport et al., 2024; Newport et al., 2023). Their approach prioritised Pacific perspectives through a diverse and inclusive research team familiar with the region. This enabled the research to be truly community-led and grounded in Pacific indigenous methodologies and protocols. As a result, their findings were considerably deeper and more culturally resonant than any other literature reviewed. Further community-led research using indigenous methodologies is encouraged.

A significant theme in the literature was the persistent data deficits, particularly regarding irregular migration. Many international organisation reports struggled to engage directly with irregular migrants, citing ethical concerns for their safety. In larger regions such as Southeast Asia, reports often provide estimates of irregular migration and stateless populations, while acknowledging that these figures are likely underreported. Amplifying the voices of survivors and those directly affected by irregular migration is essential to capturing the full scope of these challenges. Future research should employ culturally sensitive and ethically sound methodologies to ensure these voices are represented.

The inclusion of diverse stakeholders—civil society, the private sector, and survivors themselves—is critical for designing policies that address migrant realities. For example, the Australian Survivor Advisory Council exemplifies the value of integrating survivor perspectives into migration policymaking. NGOs also play a pivotal role in modern slavery reforms by bridging businesses, philanthropic donors, and government policymakers (Kadfak et al., 2023; Louw, 2020). This highlights the complexity of migration governance and underscores the need for nuanced, context-specific policies that prioritise migrant voices and lived experiences (Missbach and Phillips, 2020).

The literature also revealed regional variations. For example, research on irregular labour migration in Southeast Asia frequently focuses on stateless populations and irregular maritime migration, issues that are less prominent in the Pacific Islands region. Conversely, there is an extensive body of literature on climate mobility in the Pacific Islands region. This area serves as an epicentre for climate mobility policies—both internal and cross-border—largely because of its acute vulnerability to rising sea levels and climate-induced disasters (Moore, 2024). While these challenges are particularly pronounced in the Pacific, the broader Bali Process region is not immune to the impacts of climate change on mobility. The Pacific Islands region could serve as a potential model for managing migration flows in a climate-affected context.

The first section of this report will focus on climate change-induced irregular migration and displacement.

Climate-induced irregular migration and displacement

Climate change is an existential threat facing humanity, intersecting with challenges such as gender inequalities, human security, and migration (Howard, 2022). As climate impacts worsen, policy and research have failed to keep pace with rising temperatures, leaving significant gaps. What is evident is that most climate mobility is internal and not irregular. However, the same factors that drive irregular migration generally—such as a lack of livelihoods, poor economic conditions, and limited regular migration pathways—are likely to exacerbate irregular migration linked to climate displacement.

Much of the recent literature on climate mobility builds upon Black et. al.'s (2011) seminal work *Migration as Adaptation*, which in turn builds on the earlier work of Graeme Hugo (1996, 2011; Gamlen et. al., 2018). Black et. al.'s framework formally identified multiple intersecting drivers of migration, including environmental, social, political, economic, and demographic factors, alongside individual or household characteristics that influence the decision to migrate or remain. These interconnected drivers highlight the complex nature of migration decision-making.

1.1 Defining climate migrants and climate mobilities

1.1.1 THE LACK OF LEGAL DEFINITIONS

The debate around climate migration often highlights the absence of a legal definition for 'climate migrants.' Existing frameworks fall short of addressing the complex interplay between climate change and exploitation (Brown et al., 2021). Terms like 'environmental migrants' and 'climate refugees' are commonly used but lack formal legal recognition and protection (Schewel, 2023; Mallick, 2024; McAdam, 2024; Huang, 2023a; Godin, 2020; Hiraide, 2023). Experts caution against their use for two key reasons.

First, the term 'climate refugees' has no status under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. However, the 2020 case of Ioane Teitota, a man from i-Kiribati who was denied refugee status in New Zealand and later appealed to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, marked a significant precedent. The ruling acknowledged that climate change "may expose individuals to a violation of their rights… thereby triggering the non-refoulement obligations of sending states" under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Steenmans and Cooper, 2020; Bedford et al., 2023a).

Second, determining whether areas are 'sufficiently uninhabitable' remains a subjective and contentious legal challenge (Godin, 2020).

Approaches outside of the Bali Process region: Some regions, like Latin America, have broadened the definition of refugees to include events that "seriously disturb public order," potentially encompassing climate-induced disasters. Similarly, the East Africa Intergovernmental Authority on Development provides a promising framework for cross-border rights (Neef and Benge, 2022; Godin, 2020).

The absence of an overarching legal definition for climate migrants hinders policymaking on climate mobility, often creating barriers for those most affected by climate change who seek to migrate (Huang, 2023a). At present, no clear guidelines exist for the admission or stay of migrants displaced by disasters (Mokhnacheva, 2022).

In response, advocates have called for the creation of a dedicated legal instrument for climate refuge, potentially as an additional protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Meanwhile, in the absence of international consensus on a new declaration, the Kaldor Centre is developing a practical framework to provide protection under existing refugee and human rights law principles for individuals facing climate-induced displacement (McAdam, 2024).

The second reason concerns the connotations of securitisation and victimisation. States and populations affected by climate change are often portrayed as vulnerable victims, stripping agency from individuals—particularly those who wish to remain in their homes (Shea et al., 2020; Boas et al., 2023). For Pacific Island states, this framing touches on dignity. Many believe it conveys a perception of "people who can't help themselves, who are in need, who are perhaps less worthy or outsiders of society," or individuals requiring "rescue" (quoted in Munoz, 2021: 1277-1278).

Communities in these regions often prefer terms like 'climate change-related displacement' and 'resettlement' over 'forced climate migrant' (Munoz, 2021: 1278). Additionally, the term 'climate refugee' can undermine support for migration in potential host communities. It sometimes fuels securitised narratives that frame migrants as threats, exacerbating disinformation and xenophobia (Munoz, 2021; Boas et al., 2022).

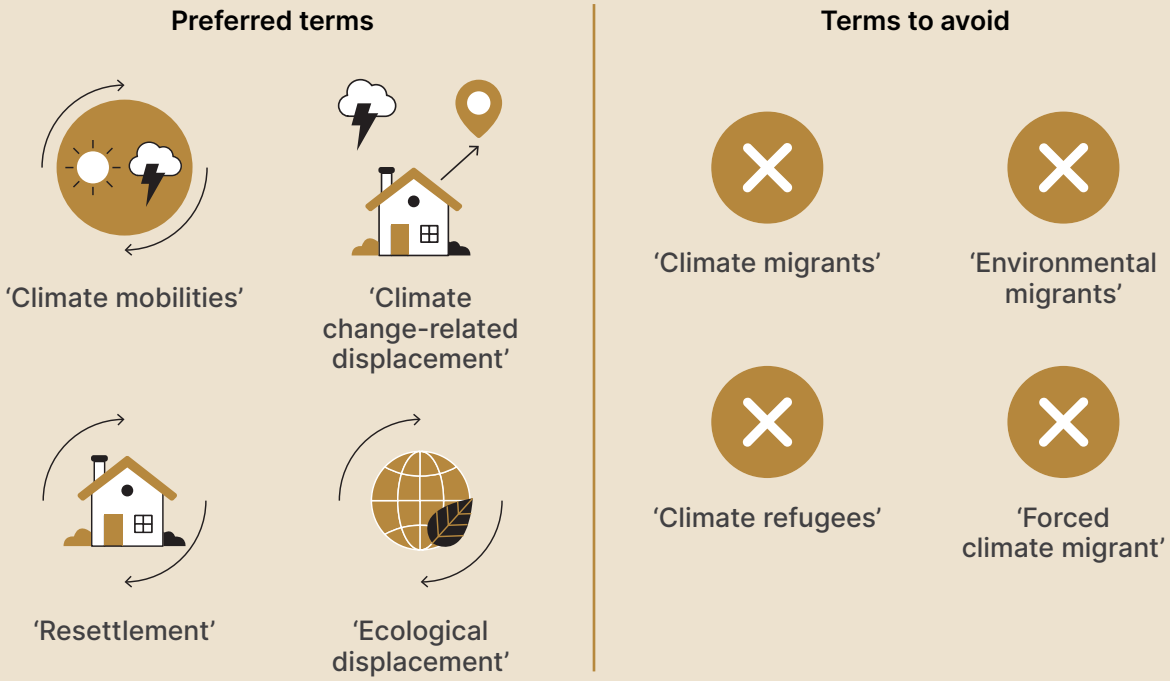
1.1.2 THE SHIFT TO 'CLIMATE MOBILITIES'

As noted earlier, climate migration takes many forms, including internal and cross-border displacement, as well as temporary and permanent movements. The diversity of migration driven by climate change makes overly broad definitions problematic, as they risk conflating distinct types of displacement and undermining targeted policy responses (Schewel, 2023).

To address this, the term 'climate mobilities' has gained preference. This concept reflects the 'multiplicity of human movement' driven by climate-related factors, encompassing both voluntary and forced migrations (Boas et al., 2022: 3366; Coelho, 2020). Another term, 'ecological displacement', broadens the scope to include displacement from other environmental drivers such as volcanic eruptions, landslides, and conflict (Hiraide, 2023).

These terminologies shift the focus away from framing climate migration solely as a cross-border phenomenon and instead consider adaptive mobility and immobility options available to those affected by climate change. They also support the development of more nuanced policy responses tailored to the needs of specific groups. However, research on effective policy responses to diverse forms of climate mobilities remains sparse at national, regional, and international levels.

Navigating the language of climate mobility: preferred & problematic terms



1.1.3 KEY LITERATURE GAPS AND PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Top priority: Policy implications of 'climate mobilities': Research is lacking on how the term 'climate mobilities' can inform adaptive policies that accommodate diverse forms of movement, from voluntary relocation to forced displacement. Exploring its practical integration into international and national policy frameworks is essential.

Legal recognition and definitions: There is a critical need for research to establish comprehensive legal definitions for 'climate migrants' and 'climate mobilities.' Current frameworks fail to address complexities like rights under existing conventions, leaving climate-displaced populations unprotected and policymaking fragmented.

Barriers to international consensus: Investigating the obstacles preventing international consensus on climate migration legal instruments, such as conflicting political interests and limited global governance structures, is necessary to propose actionable pathways for multilateral agreements.

Perceptions and narratives of climate migrants: Further research should explore how securitisation and victimisation narratives impact host community attitudes and migrant agency. Identifying strategies to counter disinformation and foster inclusive, dignified representations is a pressing priority.

Frameworks for diverse displacement scenarios: Few studies address how existing refugee and human rights laws can be adapted to climate-related internal, cross-border, and ecological displacements. Research on practical, context-specific frameworks to enhance protection across diverse scenarios is urgently needed.

1.2 Climate migration patterns and drivers

1.2.1 ESTIMATING THE SCALE OF THE ISSUE

Climate change is 'reshaping migration' in both high- and low-income countries. In 2022, 21 percent of disaster displacements occurred in Small Island Developing States and other developing states (Huang, 2023a). Between 2008 and 2018, more than 80 percent of new disaster displacements occurred in the Asia Pacific region (McAdam and Pryke, 2020). Climate change is increasingly recognised as a 'root cause of migration' (Fontana, 2024: 13), displacing more people globally than conflict—although the two factors often intersect (McAdam and Pryke, 2020).

Recent studies highlight that climate-related disasters such as flooding, droughts, fires, cyclones, typhoons, and extreme weather directly displace people in the short term (Huang, 2023a; Panda, 2020; Seigfried, 2024-3). For instance:

- In 2022, droughts in Bangladesh and Sudan displaced over one million people.
- Between 2008 and 2018, monsoon flooding displaced 3.6 million people in India.
- In 2022 alone, more than half of newly reported displacements were caused by climate-related disasters.

21%

of all disaster displacements in 2022 occurred in **Small Island Developing States** & other developing nations.

>80%

of new disaster displacements between 2008 and 2018 took place in the **Asia Pacific** region.

These trends indicate a dramatic increase in climate-induced movements, often disrupting established migration patterns and complicating the practicality of return.

Debates over the scale of potential climate-induced migration have shifted over time. Early predictions sought to quantify precise migration figures but were widely criticised as speculative or exaggerated (Kulp and Strauss, 2019; de Haas, 2020). For instance:

- One study estimated that over 110 million people currently live on land below the high tide level, with sea level rise potentially 'displacing' 150 million people by 2050.
- Estimates from 1995 predicted 25 million climate-induced migrants by 2050, while a 2007 claim suggested up to one billion migrants due to climate change.

Such projections have since been debunked as oversimplified 'guesstimates' (Sakdapolrak and Sterly, 2020). Scholars now emphasise that climate migration is rarely massive or linear. Instead, it occurs in smaller, context-specific ways, shaped by a mix of environmental, socio-economic, and political factors (Boas et al., 2022; Zickgraf, 2023). Framing the issue as a "mass exodus" is seen as dangerous and unfounded (de Haas, 2020).

Significant gaps remain in understanding migration patterns under future climate scenarios, particularly in the Pacific Islands region. While larger nations like Papua New Guinea offer more options for internal mobility and adaptation, smaller atoll states face severe constraints. These disparities underscore the need for localised research on demographic changes exacerbated by climate impacts (Bedford et al., 2023a; Newport et al., 2024).

1+ MILLION

people displaced by **droughts** in Bangladesh and Sudan in 2022.

3.6 MILLION

people displaced by **monsoon flooding** in India between 2008 and 2018.

> 50%

of all newly reported displacements in 2022 were caused by climate-related disasters.

1.2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNAL MOBILITY AND RELOCATION

Large-scale estimates of climate migration often overlook the significant role of internal migration and the phenomenon of remaining in place, whether by choice or necessity. Most people in climate-vulnerable areas do not migrate (Zickgraf, 2023). Climate mobility predominantly manifests as voluntary internal displacement rather than cross-border migration (Bedford et al., 2023b; Panda, 2020; Huang, 2023a; Burson et al., 2024; Hay et al., 2023).

In cases of disasters, most displaced individuals eventually return home. However, as climate conditions worsen, more permanent migrations may become necessary (Huang, 2023a). For countries experiencing increasingly frequent and severe climate-induced disasters, long-term solutions will be essential to address the growing challenges of permanent displacement.

These strategies highlight that individuals and states have protection obligations in internal climate mobility scenarios. They emphasise the need for adequate funding and forward-looking, pre-emptive solutions (Moore, 2023). Scholars have recommended that Australia develop and implement a National Relocation Strategy based on evidence-based risk assessments of communities affected by climate change (Hay et al., 2023). Pacific Island leaders, while viewing planned relocations as a last resort, recognise their potential to avert displacement if managed carefully to uphold cultural preservation (Pacific Islands Forum, 2023). However, limited data on internal mobility restricts understanding of population dynamics and adaptation strategies (Bedford et al., 2023b).

Bali Process Member States Fiji and Vanuatu have pioneered world-first guidelines on planned relocations. Fiji's guidelines, notably, offer a framework that could be applied to a broader range of circumstances and serve as a model for other regions (Moore, 2023: 2; Bedford, 2023a; McAdam and Pryke, 2020). Similarly, the Solomon Islands has adopted a relational approach to planned community relocations, combining principles from International Organization for Migration (IOM) guidelines with a predominantly community-led model (Monson et al., 2024).

1.2.3 LACK OF ATTENTION TO IMMOBILITY AND TRAPPED POPULATIONS

The literature also underscores the prevalence of immobility—both voluntary and involuntary—as a complementary aspect of climate mobility. For many Pacific Islanders, remaining in place is a priority, with migration viewed as a last resort. A strong connection to land, ancestral ties, and spirituality reinforces this commitment to being "rooted in place" (Farbotko and McMichael, 2019; Farbotko, 2022). Indeed, most Pacific populations are expected to adapt and remain in their home countries (Bedford et al., 2023b). Considering this, some Pacific Island governments have advocated for *migration with dignity*, a framework allowing individuals to move if, when, and how they choose, which will be discussed later (Rimon, 2022).

An evolving body of literature examines **trapped populations**—those unable to leave climate-affected areas due to migration restrictions or financial constraints. These studies highlight the intersection of economic vulnerabilities and environmental pressures in migration decisions (Huang, 2023a; Zickgraf, 2019, 2023; de Sherbinin, 2020; Panda, 2020). Disasters can further deplete resources necessary for migration, creating a paradox where climate change simultaneously increases the need to migrate while inhibiting the ability to do so (Beine et al., 2019; Zickgraf, 2023). Trapped populations face significant vulnerabilities and shifting needs due to climate change, even without relocating. Policymakers must consider their unique challenges, yet empirical research on this issue remains scarce. This research gap contributes to misunderstandings of (im)mobility and overlooks the reality that those forced to stay due to economic hardship may be among the most vulnerable (Zickgraf, 2019, 2023). The IOM (2022a) advocates for targeted policies addressing gender, disability, and social inclusion for trapped populations.

Additionally, there is limited research on **stranded populations**, defined as those "stranded in other countries because of climate change-related disasters and hazards" (PIF, 2023: 7). Stranded populations are often temporarily affected, particularly those in transit when disasters strike their home countries, disrupting their ability to return. This issue is especially relevant for individuals participating in circular labour mobility schemes.

While largely outside the scope of this reporting period, the only research specific to stranded populations in a Bali Process Member State was conducted in 2016. That study examined ni-Vanuatu labour mobility workers who became stranded in Australia and New Zealand during Cyclone Pam. Although their remittances helped rebuild homes and contributed tools like chainsaws to the cleanup, their absence was acutely felt in relief efforts due to a lack of working-aged men available for physical clearing and rebuilding infrastructure (Bailey and Ng Shiu, 2016). This case underscores the need for further research on stranded populations in Bali Process Member States, particularly given their high levels of mobility through organised labour schemes and frequent exposure to climate-induced disasters.

1.2.4 CLIMATE MOBILITY DRIVERS

1.2.4.1 Sudden- and slow-onset events

Sudden-onset events like floods and storms, unpredictable weather patterns, and droughts are the most reported causes of displacement. However, slow-onset events—including crop and livestock diseases, salinisation, and extreme temperatures—are increasingly relevant to understanding long-term climate-induced migration (UNODC, 2024; Burson et al., 2024; IOM, 2024; Irudaya and Arcand, 2023). Coastal communities are particularly vulnerable to environmental degradation, with water salination and rising sea levels disproportionately affecting low-lying atoll nations in the Pacific (Panda, 2020; Fabinyi et al., 2022; Thalheimer et al., 2022). Limited options for internal mobility in these regions often force populations to consider cross-border migration, as acknowledged by the Pacific Islands Forum's Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility:

> "Emergency evacuations and internal displacement following disasters are already common across the Pacific and are likely to increase as the impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events and slow-onset climatic occurrences, take hold, with the potential for cross-border displacement becoming an eventuality" (PIF, 2023: 6).

1.2.4.2 Conflict

Conflict is a significant factor in migration decisions, as individuals often weigh the risks of remaining in place against the dangers of moving due to conflict or poverty (Zickgraf, 2019). For those affected by conflict, climate change exacerbates their vulnerabilities. Over 40 percent of refugees and 70 percent of internally displaced persons (IDPs) reside in highly climate-vulnerable countries, including Bali Process Member States (IOM, 2021). Displaced populations, particularly those facing government restrictions, frequently inhabit high-risk areas, complicating disaster responses for these already marginalised groups (Rostami and Asad Paski, 2024; Huang, 2023a).

Many refugees contend with challenges such as water scarcity and environmental degradation, which are sometimes further exacerbated by international sanctions that limit host governments' capacities to respond to disasters (Rostami and Asad Paski, 2024). Refugees entering irregularly may face additional dangers, including violence from border enforcement, such as torture or being forced into waterways where drownings occur. Upon arrival, they often encounter climate fragility, rapid urbanisation, and water scarcity, further complicating their integration into host communities (Sayed and Sadat, 2022).

>40%

of **refugees** reside in highly climate-vulnerable countries, including Bali Process Member States

70%

of **internally displaced persons** (IDPs) live in highly climate-vulnerable countries, including Bali Process Member States

Climate change also intensifies conflict, driving migration decisions, often through irregular channels. For instance, disputes over water resources can ignite tensions, exacerbating challenges for both local communities and refugees (Rostami and Paski, 2024). In Afghanistan, the interplay between Taliban forces and Afghans seeking to escape conflict is prolonged by climate-induced hardships, limiting opportunities for safe migration (Sayed and Sadat, 2022). Similarly, in Assam, India, land disputes between the Bodo tribes and Bangladeshi migrants are magnified by climate stress, which acts as a '**threat multiplier**' (Bharadwaj et al., 2022: 10).

Even in regions currently free of active conflict, such as Kiribati, the potential for future disputes looms. Coastal erosion, population growth, and pollution threaten food security, creating conditions that could eventually spark land conflicts (Ng Shiu et al., 2024).

1.2.4.3 Climate change as a catalyst and accelerant of migration

As environmental degradation intensifies, livelihoods are increasingly impacted, exacerbating existing push factors for migration and potentially driving irregular migration. Environmental factors often act as catalysts rather than sole causes of migration, intersecting with social, economic, and political drivers (de Sherbinin, 2020).

For instance, coastal villages in Southeast Asia, which depend on small-scale fishing, face significant challenges from climate-induced cyclones and flooding. These events damage infrastructure, disrupt fish catches, and trigger climate-induced fish migration, all of which undermine community incomes and livelihoods (Fabinyi et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2021). Additionally, the phenomenon of **coastal squeeze**—resulting from intensified maritime developments like land reclamation and industrialisation—restricts access to traditional fishing grounds, further complicating livelihood strategies (Fabinyi et al., 2022).

Without sustainable livelihood options, individuals may feel compelled to migrate. In this way, climate change acts as a '**great amplifier**,' intensifying existing economic and social challenges and reshaping global migration patterns (Fontana, 2024; Ford, 2023).

1.2.5 KEY LITERATURE GAPS AND PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Top priority: Localised analysis of migration patterns: Research is needed to understand climate migration patterns at localised levels, particularly in vulnerable regions like the Pacific Islands. This includes investigating demographic changes, internal mobility options, and unique socio-economic factors driving migration.

Data on internal displacement and trapped populations: There is limited empirical data on internal displacement and trapped populations who are unable to migrate due to economic or policy constraints. Studies should focus on these groups' vulnerabilities, adaptive strategies, and policy needs.

Integration of sudden- and slow-onset drivers: Research on the interplay between sudden-onset events (e.g., cyclones) and slow-onset processes (e.g., salinisation) in shaping migration patterns remains sparse. Exploring these dynamics is essential for targeted interventions and adaptation planning.

Intersection of climate change and conflict: Limited attention has been given to the role of climate change as a conflict accelerant and its implications for migration. Future studies should examine how climate stress exacerbates resource disputes, displacement, and irregular migration.

Economic livelihoods and climate mobility: Research should address the economic pressures driving climate-induced migration, particularly in livelihood-dependent communities. Identifying sustainable adaptation measures to support populations affected by environmental degradation is a key priority.

1.3 Risks without safe pathways

1.3.1 RISKS OF MASS ARRIVALS

While irregular migration in the form of mass arrivals has been discussed—most notably by the New Zealand Government in relation to potential movement from the Pacific Islands—research indicates a different reality. From the perspective of Pacific peoples, such movements are likely to occur at a family or community scale, with migration most commonly happening at the individual or household level over an extended period, spanning two or three decades, rather than as a sudden, large-scale event (Burson et al., 2024: 166). This makes the policy conception of '**mass arrival**' highly unlikely in the Pacific Islands context, especially given that mass arrivals are not a typical form of irregular migration in this region (McNeill, 2022).

The broader literature on mass arrivals linked to climate change suggests that such perceptions are rarely borne out in practice. Instead, they are often driven by **crisis narratives** that shape public attitudes toward migrants, determining who is deemed (un)deserving of inclusion or support. These narratives frequently justify restrictive policies aimed at curbing mobility rather than facilitating it (Hut et al., 2020; Boas et al., 2023).

Research gaps persist, particularly in understanding how regular and irregular migration pathways intersect in the context of climate mobility. Questions remain about how humanitarian pathways might reduce exploitation and improve protections for affected populations (Schewel, 2023; Walk Free, n.d.).

The complexities surrounding the definitions of climate mobility and migration have hindered the development of robust policy responses, particularly for cross-border movements. Consequently, there have been calls for states to remove legal barriers to climate mobility and to establish regional and global frameworks that provide clear guidelines for the admission and residence of migrants displaced by disasters (IOM, 2021; Neef and Benge, 2022; Mokhnacheva, 2022).

As with other forms of irregular migration, the absence of safe, regular, and rights-based pathways can compel migrants to rely on smugglers or expose them to exploitation. An emerging body of literature explores the nexus between forced labour, environmental degradation, and climate change. It argues that individuals subjected to exploitative practices are sometimes forced to work in emissions-intensive industries, creating a vicious cycle that exacerbates climate change and drives further climate-induced migration (Boyd et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2021; Jackson, 2023).

1.3.2 SMUGGLING, TRAFFICKING, EXPLOITATION, AND FORCED MARRIAGE

Climate change is intensifying the factors that drive migrants to seek irregular routes, rely on smugglers, and face heightened risks of exploitation (Jackson, 2023). According to a 2024 survey by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), one in four smuggled migrants and refugees reported that climate-related issues influenced their decision to migrate and turn to smugglers. Climate issues are particularly significant among smuggled Bangladeshis: three out of four respondents cited climate-related or environmental factors as reasons for leaving. Similarly, 69 percent of surveyed Laotians and 65 percent of Cambodians identified these factors as influential (UNODC, 2024).

This does not necessarily mean that climate change will lead to an increase in people smuggling. Rather, it underscores that in the absence of safe, regular, and rights-based migration pathways, along with adequate adaptation support—including economic

1 in 4
smuggled migrants and refugees report climate-related issues influenced their decision to migrate and turn to smugglers

Among smuggled **Bangladeshis**, **3 out of 4** respondents cited climate or environmental factors for leaving

opportunities—migrants may view smugglers as their only viable option. Some literature suggests that smuggling networks actively exploit climate-induced disasters and disruptions, seeking out vulnerable individuals to profit from. As Jackson (2023: 11) notes, "their paths can directly cross as a result." Some scholars argue that climate change adds a new dimension of risk for migrants, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking in persons, particularly in the context of slow-onset climate-induced hazards. However, this link remains underexplored in the literature (Jackson, 2023: 5; Bharadwaj et al., 2022; Walk Free, n.d.).

One of the few studies explicitly examining this relationship was conducted in India's Palamu and Kendrapara regions. The study found that climate-related migration in these areas was often seasonal and driven by food insecurity.

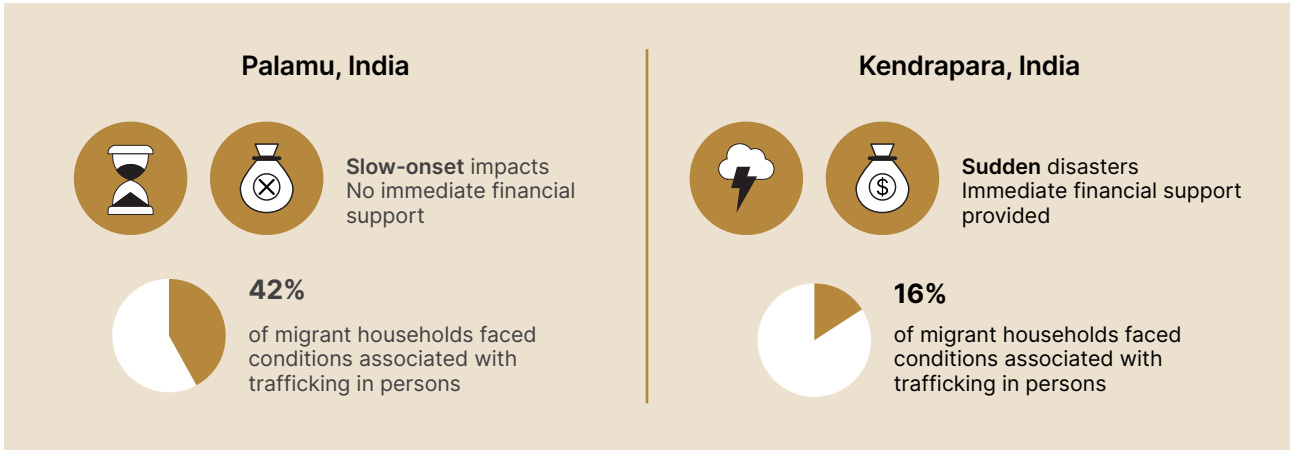
69%

of surveyed **Laotians** identified these factors as influential

65%

of surveyed **Cambodians** identified these factors as influential

In Palamu, where the effects of climate change were slow-onset and lacked the immediate financial support provided to sudden disaster-affected Kendrapara, 42 percent of migrant households faced conditions associated with trafficking in persons, such as forced labour, bonded labour, debt bondage, wage withholding, and exploitative working conditions. By contrast, the rate in Kendrapara was significantly lower at 16 percent (Bharadwaj et al., 2022).



Source: Bharadwaj et al., 2022.

Given the prevalence of slow-onset climate change in the Bali Process region, more research is urgently needed to identify factors that could prevent exploitation and trafficking and to address these issues in other affected areas. Globally, much of the literature focuses on the risks associated with irregular migration driven by climate-induced disasters and slow-onset climate change. While there is some empirical research on the link between irregular migration and climate mobility, it remains limited and is concentrated primarily in South Asia, with some attention given to Southeast Asia. Data on trafficking in persons in the Pacific Islands region is particularly scarce. Given the increasing frequency of climate-induced disasters in this area, further research is needed to explore and address this issue (McNeill, 2022).

Forced marriage as a means for families to secure access to necessities and resettlement sites after climate-induced disasters is a documented but understudied issue. On Ambae Island in Vanuatu, non-governmental organisations reported an increased risk of forced marriage following volcanic eruptions; this was attributed to family pressures aimed at ensuring access to basic necessities in relocation sites (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2021: 4). In India's Assam province, trafficking in persons targeting women occurs in poverty-related conflict situations, including trafficking in persons for domestic labour, forced labour, and forced marriage. Climate change exacerbates these vulnerabilities, compounding the risks faced by women in these contexts (Bharadwaj et al., 2022).

1.3.3 INTERSECTIONAL VULNERABILITIES

When addressing the pressures of irregular migration, it is essential to acknowledge that climate change acts as a threat multiplier, intensifying existing vulnerabilities both before and during migration. Its impacts are unevenly distributed, and this inequality also extends to migratory contexts, a factor that must inform policy development (Zickgraf, 2023; Hay et al., 2023; Vigil et al., 2024). These dynamics can inadvertently push individuals into irregular situations or expose them to exploitative circumstances. For instance, while labour migration opportunities may appear to address climate mobility, they can also obscure its underlying causes and heighten the risk of exploitation (Decker Sparks et al., 2021).

As highlighted in the following section on irregular labour migration, labour mobility carries significant risks if exploitative practices are not effectively curbed through regulation, compliance, and robust worker protections. If climate mobility is addressed via expanded labour mobility options, policies must ensure safeguards against exploitation and prioritise the welfare of workers.

Current approaches to climate mobility often fail to explicitly account for the protection needs of affected populations (Mokhnacheva, 2022). Enhanced international cooperation and the integration of human rights, age, and gender considerations into disaster response policies are critical to supporting displaced individuals effectively (Mokhnacheva, 2022; Pécoud, 2021).

Much of the literature instead refers states to the guiding principles within the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*:

- People-centred
- International cooperation
- National sovereignty
- Rule of law and due process
- Sustainable development
- Human rights
- Gender-responsive
- Child-sensitive
- Whole-of-government approach
- Whole-of-society approach

1.3.3.1 Child-sensitivity

Children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in migration exacerbated by climate change. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility underscores the need for strong protection mechanisms for at-risk groups, including women and children, to prevent exploitation during migration (PIF, 2023). Climate change often displaces children among populations affected by slow-onset disasters and environmental degradation, leaving families separated or children unaccompanied during critical stages of their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development (United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth, and IOM, 2021; Traore Chazalnoël et al., 2021; Vigil et al., 2024).

Policies addressing climate mobility must prioritise the unique rights and needs of children affected by climate-related migration and displacement, addressing existing protection gaps. Integrating children's perspectives into climate discussions—particularly in planning and decision-making—is vital. A World Vision report (2024: 140) emphasises this, recommending that states "develop research projects that actively involve local communities, especially children and youth, in planning and decision-making processes," drawing on international examples of locally led adaptation to tailor approaches for specific contexts in Southeast Asia. Recognising the perspectives and aspirations of young people is essential for crafting responsive and inclusive policies (Burson et al., 2024).

Data on children and youth affected by climate mobility remains scarce, highlighting a critical research need in the Bali Process region. This is particularly urgent as the continents that are most vulnerable to climate impacts also host the highest proportions of child and youth migrants (Traore Chazalnoël et al., 2021: 4). Research is also limited on how climate-induced displacement impacts children's education and healthcare, especially in post-disaster contexts, which can contribute to drivers of irregular migration (UNICEF, UNMGCY, and IOM, 2021). Furthermore, studies exploring the long-term, intergenerational effects of climate-related migration are essential to understanding its broader impacts (Burson et al., 2024).

1.3.3.2 Gender-sensitivity

The gendered dimensions of climate-induced livelihood loss and mobility often exacerbate existing inequalities, with women facing migration-specific vulnerabilities such as reduced decision-making power, limited access to essential services, food and water insecurity, challenges to land rights, and heightened risks of exploitation and gender-based violence—including sexual assault in evacuation facilities (Mallick, 2024; Howard, 2023; Burson et al., 2024; IOM, 2022b; Ford, 2023; Newport et al., 2024).

For instance, in Vanuatu, domestic violence surged by 300 percent following cyclones, and women and girls experienced sexual harassment in evacuation centres during climate-induced disasters (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2021). These risks were intensified by the breakdown of communications infrastructure, which rendered normal reporting mechanisms unavailable. Such vulnerabilities shape migration patterns, with some women seeking mobility as a means of resilience or to escape violent environments. However, labour mobility itself can expose women to gender-based violence (ILO and UN Women, 2021; Burson et al., 2024; Casabonne, 2023).

↑ 300%

surge in domestic violence in Vanuatu following cyclones

Even for women who remain in situ while men migrate for work, social costs often arise. These women may be compelled to take on additional responsibilities traditionally assigned to men, such as managing household or village affairs, increasing their burden and altering traditional gender roles (Bedford et al., 2020; IOM, 2022b).

Women also play pivotal roles in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, yet these contributions are often overlooked in policy and practice (Burson et al., 2024). Howard (2023: 529) highlights the need for further exploration of the intersection between climate change and the "gendered dimensions of space, masculinity, femininity, evacuation, and relocation," to better address these dynamics in climate mobility responses.

1.3.3.3 Disability-sensitivity

Disability is seldom addressed in discussions about climate mobility, representing a critical gap in both policy and research (IOM, 2022b). It is estimated that 80 percent of people with disability live in countries highly vulnerable to climate change (UNHCR, 2021). These individuals face unique challenges during climate-induced events, including evacuation difficulties, mobility and transportation barriers, a lack of accessible resettlement options, and limited access to essential services (Goyal, 2023). As a result, many people with disabilities are unable to evacuate from dangerous situations, reach temporary shelters or evacuation centres, or access information about available resources. This leaves them at heightened risk of harm, exploitation, and neglect following disasters (UNHCR, 2021).

80%

of people with disabilities live in countries most vulnerable to climate change.

Understanding the specific barriers that people with disabilities encounter in making decisions about climate mobility is a pressing research need. To ensure inclusivity and equity, individuals with disability must be actively involved in shaping policies related to disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation, humanitarian responses to displacement, and planned relocation strategies (IOM, 2021). Their perspectives are essential for designing effective, accessible climate mobility solutions that address the diverse needs of all affected populations.

1.3.4 RIGHTS-BASED APPROACHES

Given the concerns surrounding gender, children and young people, people with disability, refugees, and other vulnerable populations, adopting a rights-based approach is crucial in addressing climate mobility. The IOM (2024) emphasises the importance of integrating human rights principles into migration policies, particularly by embedding migration considerations into climate adaptation strategies, fostering resilience in affected communities, and safeguarding the rights and needs of climate-induced migrants. Central to this approach is ensuring that the voices of those most affected are prioritised in policymaking and research (Burson et al., 2024).

Similarly, the PIF (2023) Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility calls for inclusive, rights-based migration policies that uphold safety, dignity, and resilience for communities impacted by climate change. An essential area for further research lies in operationalising this rights-based framework within the Bali Process region, ensuring that the perspectives of the most vulnerable—those affected by climate displacement or immobility—are actively heard and incorporated into policies (Fabinyi et al., 2022).

A rights-based approach to climate mobility emphasises the importance of enabling individuals, families, and communities in climate-affected areas to retain the choice and agency to decide whether to move or stay (Munoz, 2021; Newport et al., 2024). Offering options and flexibility reduces the likelihood of irregular migration. People facing the inevitability of climate change express the desire to migrate with dignity—having the autonomy to decide if, when, why, and how to migrate while equipping themselves with the skills and tools needed to make this movement successful (Rimon, 2022; Burson et al., 2024).

Bharadwaj et al. (2022) propose a comprehensive approach to mitigate the risks of irregular migration and trafficking in persons associated with climate change, including:

- **Support in-situ adaptation**: Develop programs to assist communities in adapting locally and prevent distress-driven migration.
- **Expand social protection outreach**: Strengthen social protection programs in areas prone to climate-induced migration and trafficking in persons.
- **Digital registration of migrants**: Promote the use of digital tools for efficient migrant registration.
- **Worker registration at destinations**: Ensure proper registration of migrant workers at destination sites.
- **Enhance food and nutritional security**: Improve the reach and coverage of food and nutrition security initiatives.
- **Promote gender-specific employment**: Facilitate skilled employment opportunities for women at migration source regions.
- **Mainstream migration in planning**: Integrate climate-induced migration and trafficking considerations into broader climate and development strategies.

- **Incorporate trafficking in climate policies**: Address trafficking risks in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and secure climate-finance commitments.
- **Strengthen social safety nets**: Build robust social safety mechanisms for climate risk management.
- **Enhance international coordination**: Align efforts with existing global initiatives to address migration and trafficking.
- **Advance planning for relocation**: Adopt proactive measures for relocating and resettling displaced communities.

Resilience exists within communities and families, including across transnational migration pathways, enabling them to adapt to the varied challenges posed by climate change (Burson et al., 2024; Bedford et al., 2023a). However, gaps remain in understanding how regional and national policies align—or conflict—with local decision-making processes, leading to uneven and often gendered mobilities (Zickgraf, 2019).

Research increasingly frames climate mobility as a proactive adaptation strategy rather than a failure to adapt (Sakdapolrak and Sterly, 2020; PIF, 2023; Huang, 2023a). Communities play a vital role in the success of climate change policies, both in their development and implementation (Moore, 2023; Burson et al., 2024; Zickgraf, 2019). Research in this area should be co-designed with communities, ensuring their perspectives shape the process. Similarly, policymakers should account for community voices and experiences when crafting policies that directly or indirectly impact them.

1.3.5 KEY LITERATURE GAPS AND PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Top priority: intersection of climate mobility and exploitation: There is insufficient research on how climate-induced migration intersects with exploitation, including trafficking in persons and forced labour. Further studies should explore how safe migration pathways can mitigate these vulnerabilities in both sudden and slow-onset disaster contexts.

Gender and climate mobility: The gendered dimensions of climate migration require deeper investigation, particularly how climate change exacerbates risks such as gender-based violence, forced marriage, and unequal access to services. Research should guide gender-sensitive policy frameworks addressing these challenges.

Vulnerabilities of trapped and disabled populations: The unique challenges faced by individuals unable to migrate due to financial, physical, or systemic barriers remain underexplored. Research must address how to include trapped populations and people with disability in climate adaptation and mobility strategies.

Impact of climate-induced displacement on children: The impacts of climate displacement on children's education, health, and long-term development are poorly understood. Further studies should prioritise child-sensitive approaches, focusing on education continuity and social protections during migration and resettlement processes.

Rights-based climate mobility frameworks: Limited research exists on operationalising rights-based frameworks for climate mobility at regional and global levels. Future studies should explore how to embed human rights, gender equity, and community voices into policies to ensure safe, dignified migration pathways.

1.4 Flexible climate mobility options

While most climate-induced mobility is small-scale, temporary, and internal, this section focuses on cross-border migration pathways, aligning with the priorities of the Bali Process. The absence of clear legal definitions for climate migrants means there are currently no dedicated legal pathways for those displaced solely by climate change. This gap limits options for migrants and can compel individuals to resort to irregular migration when no other routes appear available (Schewel, 2023; Sakdapolrak and Sterly, 2020).

Developing flexible pathways for safe, regular, and rights-based migration can reduce instances of irregular migration driven by environmental factors (Cholewinski, 2019; UNICEF, UNMGCY, and IOM, 2021). For example, while not classified as irregular migration, the lack of formal immigration pathways has left I-Kiribati and Tuvaluans affected by climate change reliant on informal channels that lack government support (Yates et al., 2023).

Further research is essential to explore these complexities, identifying the diverse forms of migration needed to support adaptive strategies and mobilities for populations affected by climate change (de Sherbinin, 2020).

1.4.1 LIMITED FOCUS ON LARGE-SCALE MOBILITY

Huang (2023a) emphasises the urgent need for policies that both facilitate mobility and address the root causes of immobility. These include creating migration pathways, strengthening legal frameworks, and providing adaptation support. Although several programmes claim to address climate mobility, most are small-scale due to the localised and context-specific nature of climate mobility and its overlap with other drivers of migration (Huang, 2023b).

A global review by the Migration Policy Institute identified 54 climate mobility projects, but few directly supported mobility—and when they did, it was typically internal. Most initiatives focused on helping people adapt to staying in place, while some supported individuals already on the move by offering employment assistance or resilient infrastructure (Huang, 2023b).

Analysing climate mobility projects in the Bali Process region through this framework could illuminate areas where support is concentrated and highlight gaps that need addressing.

1.4.2 ROLE OF LABOUR MOBILITY

Beyond explicit climate mobility projects, various policy options exist within current mobility pathways, though they are not universally accessible. These pathways are particularly prevalent in the Bali Process region. The IOM Strategic Plan 2024–2028 underscores the vital connections between climate change, migration policy, and labour mobility (IOM, 2024). While labour mobility schemes have expanded across the region, there is an acknowledged need for deeper analysis of internal migration dynamics, as temporary rather than permanent migration often follows disasters (Bedford et al., 2023b).

Labour mobility is widely regarded as a potential solution for ensuring migration with dignity, particularly for coastal communities in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands that depend on fisheries for their livelihoods (Rimon, 2022; Fabinyi et al., 2022; Mokhnacheva, 2022). Additionally, informal movements driven by economic opportunities and cultural practices play a significant role in climate mobility. Short-distance migration for work, education, or community events highlights the need for policies that address these routine movements while accounting for broader climate-induced displacement challenges (Underhill-Sem et al., 2024).

Safe, regular, and rights-based migration offers opportunities for young people to develop skills needed in green job sectors, benefiting both origin and destination countries. Framing labour mobility as a proactive adaptation strategy can empower youth by providing access to education and sustainable job opportunities (Traore Chazalnoël et al., 2021). However, some nations remain resistant to integrating climate considerations into their labour mobility policies, reflecting a lack of foresight and coordination across migration, climate change, and employment policies.

1.4.3 NEED FOR PERMANENT SOLUTIONS

While labour mobility offers a temporary solution, more permanent pathways are also emerging. Examples include Australia's recently introduced Pacific Engagement Visa and New Zealand's long-standing Samoan Quota and Pacific Access Category (Rimon, 2022). These programs provide equitable access via a ballot system but still impose age and skill restrictions and often fail to fill all allocated places (Higuchi, 2019). Additionally, these mechanisms have been criticised for shifting the burden of resettlement onto migrants, potentially perpetuating poverty and poor health outcomes, particularly among i-Kiribati migrants (Yates et al., 2023).

In late 2023, Australia announced the Falepili Union Treaty with Tuvalu, described as an innovative and promising pathway for addressing climate mobility pressures. The treaty increases options for both permanent and temporary migration for various purposes, including education and employment, while granting migrants greater agency (Kitara and Farbotko, 2023). Crucially, it preserves the option for Tuvaluans to remain in their homeland or return by choice. However, the treaty has drawn criticism for its transactional security arrangements and lack of consultation in Tuvalu, which sparked domestic political unrest. These shortcomings should inform any future iterations. Despite this, the treaty's flexible migration provisions offer a potential model for developing innovative climate migration solutions (Kitara and Farbotko, 2023).

Countries with established migration pathways are often preferred destinations for climate migrants due to existing diasporic communities that facilitate integration. New Zealand, for instance, hosts significant Pacific Islander populations, including individuals from climate-affected states. This has fostered broader public acceptance of climate migration compared to generalised migration (Yates et al., 2022). New Zealand's cultural and policy alignment with Pacific populations further positions it as a preferred destination (Burson et al., 2024).

However, these preferences create pressures on states already accepting significant numbers of migrants, in contrast to those maintaining restrictive border policies that drive irregular migration. When resettling cross-border climate migrants, it is critical to prioritise family and community connections and support cultural preservation (Burson et al., 2024: 167; PIF, 2023).

1.4.4 KEY LITERATURE GAPS AND PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Top priority: Legal pathways for climate mobility: Research is needed to establish robust legal pathways for cross-border climate mobility. Current systems lack dedicated frameworks for climate migrants, leaving individuals to rely on irregular channels and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.

Evaluation of climate mobility projects: There is limited analysis of the effectiveness and scalability of existing climate mobility initiatives. Research should identify gaps, especially in the Bali Process region, and assess how programs can better support diverse mobility needs, including permanent solutions.

Integration of labour mobility and climate adaptation: The intersection between labour mobility and climate adaptation remains underexplored. Future studies should examine how labour mobility schemes can serve as a proactive adaptation strategy while ensuring safeguards for vulnerable populations.

Long-term cross-border solutions: Research is needed to evaluate and improve emerging cross-border migration programs, such as Australia's Falepili Union Treaty. This includes assessing their social impacts, addressing criticisms, and enhancing flexibility while prioritising community and cultural ties.

Impacts of irregular migration on vulnerable communities: There is a lack of research on the socio-economic and cultural impacts of irregular migration driven by climate change. Studies should explore how to align global migration, climate adaptation, and development policies to reduce risks for displaced populations.

Irregular labour migration and migrant workers in irregular situations

Most labour migration globally occurs through regular, state-sanctioned channels. This literature review, however, focuses specifically on irregular labour migration, which constitutes a smaller portion of overall labour flows. It is important to note that even within legal labour pathways, opportunities for exploitation and abuse persist. States should address these vulnerabilities by ensuring employer compliance with labour laws and closing regulatory loopholes (Harkins et al., 2017; Chee, 2020; Harkins, 2019; LeBaron & Phillips, 2019).

Policies should promote fair recruitment practices to minimise economic burdens on migrants, thereby reducing their vulnerability to exploitation (Cholewinski, 2019; Bylander, 2022b). The priority should be the development of safe, regular, and rights-based migration pathways.

Notably, recent literature has shifted focus. While earlier discussions centred on return, repatriation, protection, and prosecution, contemporary research increasingly highlights issues such as modern slavery, supply-chain governance, due diligence frameworks, and business reporting (Molland, 2019).

2.1 Key drivers

2.1.1 COMPLEX AND EVOLVING DETERMINANTS

Irregular labour migration is driven by factors such as violence, conflict, economic deprivation, and insecurity. However, the primary driver is the mismatch between meaningful formal migration pathways and labour market demands. Labour market deficiencies push both skilled and low-skilled workers to seek employment in high-income countries, contributing to irregular migration that bypasses formal policy frameworks (Daovisan et al., 2022). Irregular migration patterns evolve over time, influenced by aggressive border control measures, economic pressures, and the prevalence of informal labour markets (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022; Wagle, 2024; Carella, 2024).

The UNODC (2024) identifies three key drivers of migrant smuggling in Southeast Asia:

1. Aspirations for migration (Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Cambodia) driven by a demand for low-wage labour (Thailand and Malaysia)

2. Large populations facing forced displacement or statelessness (Myanmar and Afghanistan)

3. Corruption in origin, transit, and destination countries facilitates smuggling

However, scholars argue that such assessments often obscure the role of state policies in producing irregular migration and exploitative labour systems (Rusenko, 2024; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Specific events can amplify irregular labour migration. For example, Sri Lanka's 2022 economic collapse led to a surge in irregular labour migration via smuggling routes, including maritime pathways (Hedwards et al., 2023).

There is limited research on how labour migration interacts with population ageing, demographic transitions, and life-cycle migration in Bali Process Member States, especially in sectors like healthcare. Demographic changes are already impacting migration patterns, with labour shortages in Thailand's care industry prompting recruitment from Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) due to cultural and linguistic similarities. More research is needed to analyse how economic, social, and demographic factors shape labour surpluses and shortages, driving irregular migration.

2.1.2 THE ROLE OF BARRIERS

Irregular migration often results from stringent border controls and inadequate legal pathways for accessing labour opportunities, forcing vulnerable populations to seek undocumented routes (Pécoud, 2021; Bhagat, 2022). Research during this period confirms long-standing findings in both academic and grey literature that restrictive border policies and complex migration systems create opportunities for third-party facilitators of irregular migration, such as people smugglers, traffickers, and brokers (Andersson, 2019). While political, social, and economic challenges drive individuals toward irregular migration, corruption enabling smuggling is closely tied to the strict border controls designed to prevent it (Lelliot & Miller, 2023: 196).

Restrictive immigration policies, such as visa sponsorship requirements and the high cost of regular migration, often push individuals toward irregular routes, exposing them to significant risks, including exploitation and abuse (Ennis & Blaurel, 2022; Bylander, 2019). Barriers to regular migration reflect historical patterns of (im)mobility shaped by wealth distribution and xenophobia. While these patterns may not directly cause irregular migration, they exacerbate the challenges faced by migrants (Fynn Bruey & Crawley, 2024; Carella, 2024; Collins, 2022; Zagor, 2024; Bylander, 2022a; HRW, 2024). Overregulation further pressures women into irregular migration pathways (Jayasuriya, 2021).

In regions reliant on migrant labour for economic growth, even regular pathways can be unsafe. Complex migration systems often compel migrants to rely on smugglers or leave them unprotected from exploitation and abuse (Bylander, 2019; Bylander, 2022b). In the ASEAN region, challenges such as insufficient information, restrictive visa requirements, and ineffective migration mechanisms contribute to irregular migration among low-skilled workers (Daovisan et al., 2022). The high cost and bureaucratic complexity of visa processes, combined with inflexible work contracts, further trap workers in exploitative arrangements (Molland & Bell, 2022). Regional governance frameworks in ASEAN have failed to expand safe and regular migration pathways, opting for reactive rather than preventive measures. This has left significant gaps in protections against abuse and exploitation (Asis & Maningat, 2024).

State-sanctioned migration pathways are often costly and complicated, resembling bonded labour by locking workers into rigid contracts that are difficult to exit (Bylander, 2022b; Molland, 2021; Molland & Bell, 2022). To address irregular migration, scholars advocate for safe, regular, and accessible pathways, which reduce reliance on smugglers and mitigate risks (Molland, 2021; Zagor, 2024). Additionally, these pathways should empower migrants—enabling them to decide if, when, how, and why to migrate (Koro & McNeill, 2024). The IOM (2024) calls for holistic migration policies encompassing health, social protection, and labour market dynamics to ensure safer pathways and reduce irregular migration.

Inconsistent policies often lead to unintended consequences. In Nepal, anti-trafficking measures create "choke posts" that restrict the rights, mobility, and choices of prospective migrant workers, forcing them to pay more or resort to irregular routes (Bhagat, 2022: 6, 1). Collins (2022) highlights how irregular migrants face dehumanising treatment, reduced to mere statistics or security risks rather than individuals with rights and circumstances. Aggressive border control policies, such as pushbacks and indefinite offshore detention, fail to dismantle smuggling networks. Instead, they exacerbate vulnerabilities for those relying on smugglers, exposing them to further exploitation and abuse (Missbach, 2022; HRW, 2024a; HRW, 2024b). Moreover, border control practices can inadvertently create smugglers, as stranded irregular migrants unable to access formal work may turn to smuggling as a livelihood (Molland, 2022; Missbach, 2022; Lelliott & Miller, 2023).[4]

4 See also (outside of the reporting period): Missbach, Antje. 2015. "Making a Career in People-Smuggling in Indonesia: Protracted Transit, Restricted Mobility and the Lack of Legal Work Rights." Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia 30 (2): 423–454.

2.1.3 INDUSTRIES WITH HIGH IRREGULAR LABOUR DEMAND

A focus on specific industries in the literature does not necessarily indicate an actual increase in exploitation within those sectors; rather, it may reflect shifting priorities of international organisations and the resulting discourse. For example, while past literature emphasised sex trafficking, there is little recent focus on this issue despite no major structural changes that would reduce its prevalence (Molland, 2019; Tichenor, 2021). Media and policy focus on a topic often reflect attention rather than the true scale of the phenomenon.

In the Bali Process region, irregular labour migration is commonly linked to agriculture, fishing, and factory work—industries where dangerous conditions exploit the desperation of migrant workers, increasing their susceptibility to trafficking in persons and forced labour (Brown et al., 2021). The pandemic amplified concerns in agriculture, domestic work, and construction. Notably, scandals in the fishing sector since 2015 have spotlighted severe exploitation and forced labour, particularly in Thailand (Kadfak, 2024; Kadfak et al., 2023). Declining fish stocks in Thailand have created economic pressures leading to exploitative labour conditions, debt bondage, and trafficking in persons of migrants from Cambodia and Myanmar (Brown et al., 2021; Harkins, 2019). Other issues on fishing vessels include excessive working hours, poor hygiene, and cases of workers being held as slaves (Otumawu-Apreku et al., 2024; Kadfak, 2024).

Primary industries commonly linked to irregular labour migration and exploitation
in the Bali Process region

While less common, sexual exploitation also occurs in the fishing sector, with victims trafficked onto vessels at ports or offshore, away from local authorities (UNODC, 2023). Exploited migrants rarely seek help due to language barriers, threats to their employment, or fear of repercussions (UNODC, 2023). Fishermen themselves, driven by financial hardship, have also participated in smuggling activities (Missbach, 2022). In the Pacific Islands, fishing, logging, and mining are key industries for forced labour, often involving migrants from Southeast Asia (UNODC, 2023). Weak laws, expansive oceans, and limited patrolling make addressing exploitation on fishing vessels particularly challenging, with more research needed to assess the full scope of the issue and its supply chain impacts (Lozano et al., 2022).

Significant cases of trafficking have been prosecuted in the Pacific Islands. For example, in Vanuatu, four individuals were convicted of trafficking and enslaving 101 Bangladeshi nationals. However, limited victim protections and weak legal frameworks complicated the prosecution (McNeill, 2022). Perpetrators and victims in the region are often from outside the Pacific, including Bangladesh, the Philippines, and China (UNODC, 2023).

Labour mobility schemes in Australia and New Zealand also show evidence of exploitation. Pacific workers in these schemes face issues such as poor working conditions, restricted access to healthcare, and visa policies that tie workers to employers for up to four years, with penalties for leaving early (Kagan, 2024; Adhikari et al., 2023). While exploitation is less prevalent in these schemes than in other low-skilled visa categories (e.g., backpacker visas), Pacific Islanders have been trafficked outside formal channels, often through local recruitment brokers (UNODC, 2023).

In other contexts, stricter regulation of labour mobility schemes has improved outcomes. For instance, Canada has introduced stronger safeguards for its migrant workforce, sourced primarily from Latin America and increasingly from Asia and Europe (Chartrand & Vosko, 2020). Research also shows that highly regulated schemes, like those in South Korea and Thailand, yield better conditions for migrant workers by involving governments directly in recruitment and oversight (Joyce, 2024). These models could inform improvements to labour mobility schemes elsewhere.

Emerging issues include the role of cyber-scam centres in facilitating trafficking in persons. Scam syndicates, primarily in Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Cambodia), Palau, and transit countries like Thailand and the Philippines, exploit workers in financial crimes such as cryptocurrency scams and illegal gambling (Jesperson et al., 2023; Raymond, 2024; OHCHR, 2023). Trafficked workers are held in guarded compounds, stripped of their passports, and subjected to debt bondage. Scam operations often invert traditional trafficking patterns, recruiting individuals from developed and developing countries alike, including highly skilled and educated workers (Jesperson et al., 2023). Additionally, cyber-scam centres heighten the risk of sexual exploitation of children (OHCHR, 2023).

2.1.4 THE ROLE OF SMUGGLERS IN PROVIDING INFORMATION

A lack of resources—especially education and information about migration risks—makes potential labour migrants highly vulnerable to trafficking and smuggling (Khan, 2020: iii; Kranrattanasuit and Sumarlan, 2022). Current anti-trafficking interventions are poorly targeted, delivered by unsuitable actors, and tend to reinforce existing hierarchies. Moreover, they fail to align with the social, political, and economic realities of the affected populations (Zimmerman et al., 2021).

As migration routes become stricter, smugglers adapt their tactics and paths, often increasing risks for migrants (Pécoud, 2021; UNODC, 2022). Family and friends frequently influence individuals to rely on smugglers for migration journeys, and in some cases, they act as the smugglers themselves (MCC, 2024). The role of smugglers evolves throughout the journey, with clients increasingly depending on them for information, access to food, water, and essential services. Smugglers also play a key role in route selection (MCC, 2024). Notably, seven percent of smuggled individuals surveyed by the UNODC (2024) reported that their smuggler helped them find a job upon arrival. This underscores the limited access that smuggled individuals and their families have to reliable information from other sources. It also highlights the need for research into how accurate information about legal pathways and services could reach those in irregular situations—whether before migration, during transit, or after arrival.

2.1.5 THE DUAL ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

The rise in social media activity during COVID-19 has driven increased use of technology for fraud, including facilitating irregular labour migration (Martinus and Aridati, 2024). Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, and smartphones are key tools for recruiting migrants with promises of job opportunities (Hedwards et al., 2023; Mekong Club, 2019; IOM, 2021). In cases of commercial sexual exploitation, traffickers use websites and apps targeting dating, escort services, gaming, and job advertisements. These platforms are even used to exploit children by broadcasting sexual acts (Mekong Club, 2019).

The Mekong Club (2019: 8) highlights how those providing job information manipulate or obscure critical terms and conditions, exploiting job seekers' vulnerabilities through fake photographs, misleading tags, and fabricated recommendations. Smartphone apps, in particular, are luring migrants into exploitative work, with cases reported in Taiwan involving workers from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Viet Nam, China, and Cambodia (Mekong Club, 2019). Interestingly, smugglers tend to avoid social media for communication, opting instead for phone calls or face-to-face meetings, although encrypted services are occasionally used (UNODC, 2024).

To address these challenges, the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Combating Trafficking in Persons Caused by the Abuse of Technology was adopted in 2023. This declaration focuses on tackling the role of technology in trafficking and forced labour, including exploitation linked to scam centres. However, research remains limited on how smugglers and traffickers adapt technology for their activities. Current literature consistently emphasises the need for deeper understanding of technology's role in irregular labour migration. While technology is also employed in border control, these measures often displace irregular migration rather than reducing it, forcing vulnerable individuals into the hands of brokers (Olwig et al., 2019).

Despite these risks, technology can be a valuable resource for migrants. It provides access to reliable information about regular migration routes and highlights the risks of irregular migration (IOM, 2021). Martinus and Aridati (2024) suggest forming partnerships with the private sector to reduce the inadvertent facilitation of trafficking in persons via social media. Their recommendations include offering digital literacy courses to potential migrants, supporting fact-checking initiatives, and combating disinformation on social media to prevent trafficking and related content from spreading.

There is a pressing need to investigate how artificial intelligence (AI) and automation are transforming labour markets, particularly in sectors reliant on migrant workers. This research should connect to the broader discussion on technology's role in migration, examining both the challenges and opportunities presented by technological changes.

2.1.6 KEY LITERATURE GAPS AND PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Top priority: Impact of labour market dynamics on irregular migration: Research is needed to analyse how demographic transitions, labour shortages, and life-cycle migration influence irregular migration in specific sectors like healthcare, agriculture, and fishing, particularly in Bali Process Member States.

Effects of stringent border policies: There is limited understanding of how restrictive immigration policies create vulnerabilities and dependence on smugglers or traffickers. Future studies should focus on balancing security measures with accessible legal migration pathways to reduce risks.

Technological adaptation by traffickers: The role of technology in facilitating irregular migration and exploitation, including social media and encrypted platforms, remains underexplored. Research should examine how technology is leveraged by traffickers and how it can be countered through targeted interventions.

Sectoral focus on exploitation: The fishing, agriculture, and construction industries remain hotspots for exploitation, yet the full scope of abuse in these sectors is poorly documented. Research is needed to develop regulatory solutions and improve worker protections across supply chains.

Role of smugglers as information providers: The dual role of smugglers in facilitating irregular migration and providing critical information underscores gaps in accessible legal migration support. Studies should explore how to deliver accurate, reliable information to potential migrants to mitigate reliance on smugglers.

2.2 Irregular migration corridors

Economic disparities often drive individuals from developing countries to seek opportunities in developed nations. These movements are frequently hindered by migration barriers, which can lead to irregular migration patterns (Ford, 2023). However, in some cases—such as the rise of cyber-scam centers in Southeast Asia and Palau—this pattern is reversed, with people from various countries being transported to developing regions (Jesperson et al., 2023). Additionally, many individuals become undocumented not by following specific migration routes but by overstaying visas and remaining after their legal status expires (IOM, 2023a).

Refugees, stateless individuals, and those forcibly displaced often turn to irregular labour migration to sustain themselves. This highlights the challenges faced by refugees and displaced populations, who frequently lack access to regular frameworks under migration governance systems (Hoffstaedter and Missbach, 2024; MMC, 2024a; Hedwards et al., 2023).

A significant body of literature focuses on the plight of over one million displaced and mostly stateless Rohingya people, fleeing conflict and seeking opportunities to live and work in Southeast Asia (Adiputera and Missbach, 2021; ADSP et al., 2022). With limited access to safe and regular migration pathways, tens of thousands of Rohingya rely on smugglers to escape conflict (UNODC, 2024). This desperation makes them vulnerable to exploitation by smugglers (Hoffstaedter and Missbach, 2024).

The primary migration route for Rohingya is from Myanmar to Malaysia, home to a substantial Rohingya diaspora, though some also migrate to Indonesia and Thailand (UNODC, 2024; MMC, 2024a). Smugglers typically charge an average fee of USD 2,380 per person, though prices vary (UNODC, 2024). Policies in destination countries aimed at blocking irregular migration by sea often leave many Rohingya stranded at sea for extended periods (Hoffstaedter and Missbach, 2024).

Smuggling practices differ based on the destination. When migrating to locations with smaller Rohingya diasporas, such as Thailand, migrants tend to rely on a single smuggler, often recommended by family or friends. In contrast, journeys to regions with larger diasporas, like Malaysia, typically involve multiple smugglers, with transitions occurring at borders (MMC, 2024a).

Some Rohingya migrants also travel to India, where a community is forming (Mitra, 2024; Brenner, 2019). Others move to Bangladesh and China, though it is unclear whether their purposes are primarily labour-related or focused on seeking refuge (Faye, 2021; UNODC, 2024).

Further research is needed on how stateless populations, including the Rohingya, can achieve safety and access work through regular mechanisms within the Bali Process region.

2.2.1 INTRA-REGIONAL, INTER-REGIONAL, AND MARITIME ROUTES

Much of the literature focuses on specific migration routes. However, despite the emphasis on inter-regional migration, empirical research indicates that irregular labour migration is predominantly intra-regional—occurring within regions rather than between them (Zagor, 2024). United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) (2020) highlights that total migration, most of which is regular, is typically intra-regional, with 70 percent of the foreign-born population in the Asia Pacific originating from within the region.

70%

of the **foreign-born population** in the Asia Pacific originate from within the region

In Southeast Asia, "the smuggling industry fills a market niche to supply the demand for mobility outside of regular channels, for a profit, in a region with a vast and diverse geography" (UNODC, 2024: 2). Malaysia and Thailand serve as key origin, transit, and destination countries for irregular labour migration (UNODC, 2024). Key origin countries for smuggled individuals include Myanmar, followed by intra-regional sources such as Indonesia, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), and

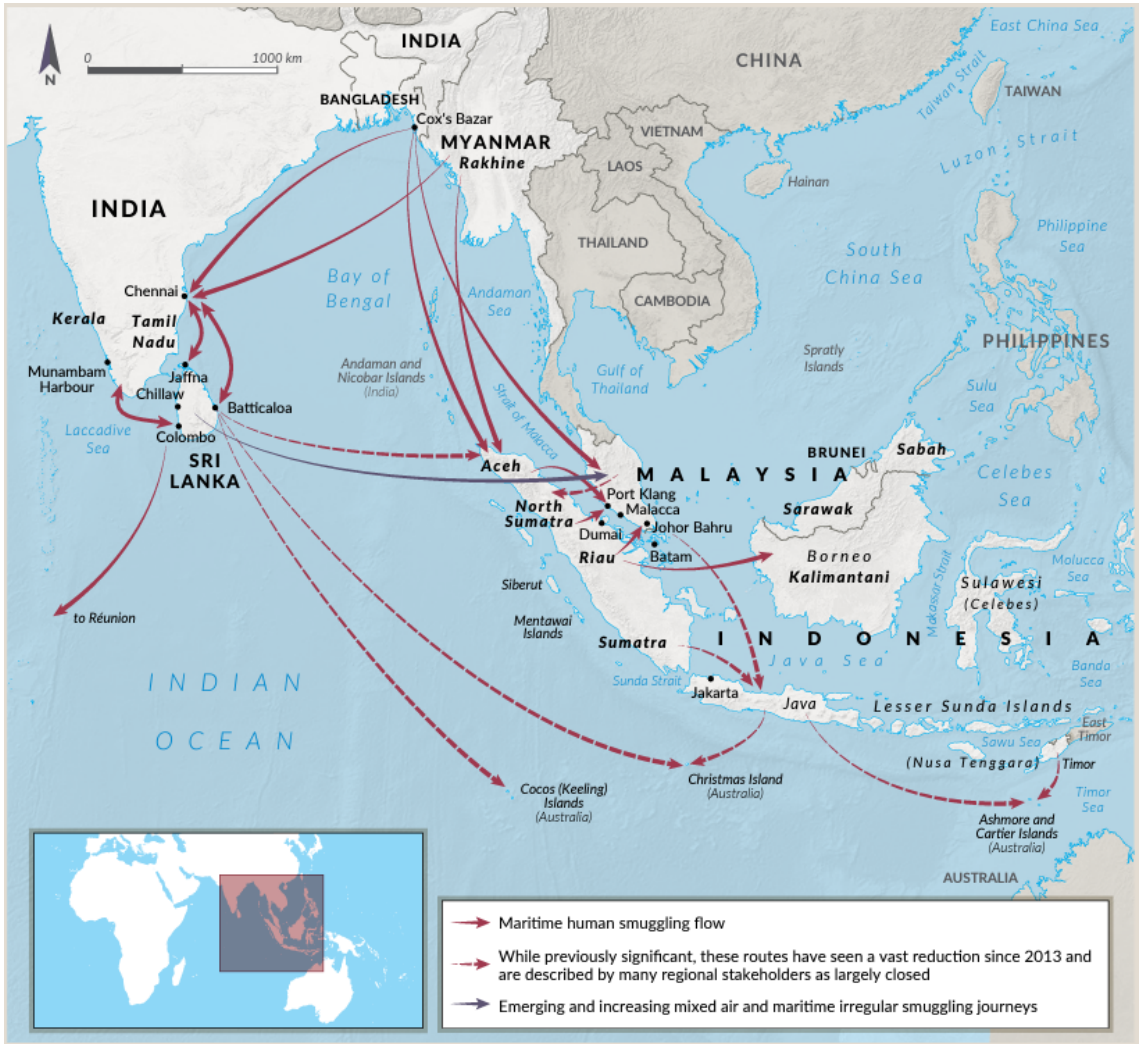
Viet Nam. Beyond the region, migrants also come from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Somalia (UNODC, 2024; Hedwards et al., 2023).

Irregular migrant workers within Southeast Asia frequently rely on brokers to secure employment. For example, in one study, only one percent of Cambodian workers migrating to Thailand used a registered recruitment agency; the remainder used unregistered brokers or pursued direct employment (ILO, 2020b). Interestingly, irregular workers in Thailand often incur lower recruitment costs than regular migrants in the region (ILO, 2020b).

Significant efforts have been made to map maritime migrant smuggling routes. Notably, there was a decline in maritime smuggling and irregular labour migration through these routes between 2015 and 2022 (Hedwards et al., 2023). Researchers at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, including Hedwards et al. (2023), have identified current, reduced, and emerging flows in this context (Figure 1).

Aggravated smuggling practices, including kidnapping for ransom and exploitation that amounts to trafficking, are frequently reported by migrants crossing the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. These practices are less commonly reported on routes between Indonesia and Malaysia (Hedwards et al., 2023: 7). Hoffstaedter and Missbach (2024) emphasise the need for in-depth analysis of maritime transit conditions, the role of legal frameworks, and the effects of Southeast Asian immigration policies on displaced populations.

Figure 1: Irregular maritime migration flows (source: Hedwards et al, 2023: 4)



While irregular labour migration between regions exists, most migration to the Gulf states remains regular. Migrant workers in the Gulf primarily come from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. However, irregular migrants, estimated to comprise 20 to 40 percent of the total migrant population in the region, were not included in a survey by Ewers et al. (2023). Nepalese migrant workers, particularly women, are highly vulnerable to exploitation in Gulf countries, compounded by the lack of robust diplomatic support for those in irregular situations (Devkota, 2022).

Pakistani workers also frequently seek employment in the Gulf and face significant challenges common to labour migrants. These include high migration costs leading to debt, labour rights violations, and exploitation by recruitment agencies that misrepresent job conditions (Ennis and Blarel, 2022). Similarly, Bangladeshi fishermen endure precarious working conditions, irregular legal statuses, and substantial financial hardships. Many incur significant debts to secure visas through a private visa trade system, which operates with minimal oversight from Bangladeshi and Omani authorities (Ennis and Blarel, 2022).

The 'South Asia to Gulf migration governance complex' remains difficult to navigate due to limited data on irregular movements and inadequate protections for irregular migrants, particularly women (Ennis and Blarel, 2022; Shah and Alkazi, 2022). Recruitment agencies and informal brokers play a central role in facilitating irregular migration, often exacerbating migrants' vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking (Ennis and Blarel, 2022). Cyber-scam centres, as previously mentioned, also contribute to irregular labour migration, including from regions such as Latin America.

Although irregular labour migrants make up a smaller proportion of migration flows, there is notable research on irregular migration from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia to Australia. This literature often focuses on Australia's stringent border control measures, which prevent irregular maritime arrivals, particularly from Indonesia (Missbach, 2022). Scholars have identified gaps in understanding the effectiveness of these deterrence measures compared to rights-based regular migration approaches (Missbach, 2022).

Once in Australia, irregular migrants face heightened vulnerability to forced labour-like conditions and often find it difficult to report exploitation to authorities. This is especially challenging for those with disability (Barnes et al., 2023; Stead and Davies, 2021). Additionally, irregular migrants experience systemic racism and racial discrimination, including inequitable recognition of qualifications, stereotyping, and verbal abuse or threats (Bolger, 2023).

2.2.2 KEY LITERATURE GAPS AND PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Top priority: Effectiveness of border deterrence policies: There is a lack of evidence on whether stringent border controls effectively reduce irregular migration or simply displace it to riskier pathways. Future research should compare rights-based approaches to migration governance with current deterrence strategies.

Understanding stateless populations and irregular migration: Limited research explores how stateless populations, such as the Rohingya, can access safety and employment through regular migration frameworks. Further studies are needed to develop inclusive policies for stateless and displaced individuals within the Bali Process region.

Intra-regional migration dynamics: Despite its prominence, intra-regional irregular migration remains underexplored. Research should focus on the role of brokers, recruitment systems, and legal frameworks in shaping migration patterns within Southeast Asia to identify opportunities for safer migration pathways.

Maritime smuggling practices and risks: More comprehensive analysis is needed on maritime smuggling routes, especially regarding aggravated practices like trafficking and ransom demands in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Studies should evaluate the impact of regional legal frameworks and policy interventions.

Irregular migration to the gulf states: The vulnerabilities of irregular migrants in Gulf countries, particularly women and low-skilled workers, require deeper investigation. Research should address recruitment systems, exploitation risks, and governance challenges in the South Asia-to-Gulf migration corridor.

2.3 Recent and emerging trends on irregular labour migration

2.3.1 PANDEMIC IMPACTS ON IRREGULAR LABOUR MIGRATION

The global COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered labour and migration patterns, including irregular migration. Migration overall decreased during this period, with a 59 percent drop in identified trafficking victims and reduced criminal justice responses to trafficking (UNODC, 2022). The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2022a) estimates that 10 percent of undocumented migrants left Thailand at the start of the pandemic, primarily returning to Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar. However, the pandemic also intensified demand for smugglers, raised migration costs, and forced migrants into more dangerous routes, heightening risks of exploitation (MMC, 2021; Irudaya & Arcand, 2023). In the Mekong region, the paralysis of formal migration channels compelled migrants to turn to brokers and irregular migration pathways (Molland & Bell, 2022).

↓59% drop

in identified trafficking victims and reduced criminal justice responses to trafficking during the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic exacerbated humanitarian challenges for migrants, particularly in Southeast Asia and India. Migrants faced job losses, wage theft, exploitation, and discrimination (ASEAN, 2022; Lozano et al., 2022; Samaan, 2021; Shah & Alkazi, 2022). Undocumented migrants, fearful of deportation, often avoided medical care and vaccinations, further increasing their vulnerability (ILO, 2020a; IOM, 2023a). Globally, only 46 percent of countries provided vaccine access to irregular migrants (Migration Data Portal, 2023). Access to food and personal protective equipment also remained limited for irregular migrants during the pandemic (ILO, 2020a).

Some governments implemented measures to mitigate these challenges, such as regularising irregular workers, extending visas, and offering amnesties to ensure access to healthcare and basic rights (ILO, 2022a). In Kuwait, for example, almost half of surveyed irregular migrants planned to leave in response to amnesties, while others were uncertain or intended to stay (Shah & Alkazi, 2022).

Forced labour was the first form of exploitation detected during the pandemic, particularly in sectors like fishing. Employers exploited migrants' precarious situations through deferred or non-payment of wages, sudden terminations, and confiscation of documents. Many workers, especially women, experienced threats, harassment, and violence (UNODC, 2022; ILO, 2022b; ILO, 2020a).

2.3.2 THE CHANGING ROLE OF TRANSIT STATES

Transit states are defined as countries where "migrants and asylum seekers try to pass on their way to another destination country," but they often become buffer states due to the efforts of neighbouring countries to prevent irregular migration across their borders (Missbach and Phillips, 2020: 19). For instance, Indonesia and Malaysia function as transit states for irregular labour migration but frequently become de facto destination states because of the border control policies of other nations (Missbach, 2022).

Migrants may remain in transit states for extended periods because they deplete their savings on transportation, documentation services, and other transit expenses. This often compels them to stay longer than planned to engage in casual labour or entrepreneurial activities to fund onward travel. Additionally, political pressures from major destination countries can result in the restriction or closure of downstream routes, leaving migrants stranded (Saunders, 2021).

Traditionally, transit states have been characterised by porous borders and an inability to process asylum applications. However, Missbach and Phillips (2020) argue that the significant pressures these states face—largely due to the strict border control policies of neighbouring countries—are often overlooked. Social and economic dynamics within these transit-turned-destination states require greater attention, potentially through Bali Process mechanisms that share responsibility for managing migration's consequences (Missbach, 2022).

In some cases, foreign aid is tied to the likelihood that certain states will bear the consequences of their neighbours' border control measures. However, Missbach and Hoffstaedter (2020: 64) note that "despite providing lucrative funding, material incentives, and other support to combat people smuggling, destination countries are unable simply to impose their strategies upon neighbouring transit states." Domestic political, social, and economic conditions within transit states often result in resistance or noncompliance with these imposed strategies.

Migrants in transit states frequently find themselves in limbo, living in irregular situations and vulnerable to exploitation. Clarifying the roles of transit states within legal frameworks could improve understanding of the human rights responsibilities owed to migrants (Missbach and Phillips, 2020). Further research is needed to explore the experiences of migrants who remain in transit states rather than reaching their intended destinations, examining the vulnerabilities they face and the protections they require.

2.3.3 THE EMERGENCE OF MULTI-DIRECTIONAL SMUGGLING AND DIGITAL NOMADISM

Missbach and Palmer's (2024) research challenges the prevailing notion that smuggling operates solely as a one-way process, particularly in the context of Malaysia and Indonesia. They highlight that irregular migrants, especially Indonesian labourers in Malaysia, often encounter punitive and costly bureaucratic obstacles that render authorised return channels impractical (Missbach and Palmer, 2024).

Their study reveals that both smugglers and their clients are increasingly being arrested for unauthorised returns, which involve smuggling individuals back to their countries of origin. This phenomenon underscores the lack of practical and affordable options for irregular labour migrants seeking to return home while avoiding detection by authorities. Missbach and Palmer (2024) call for further research into the dynamics of multi-directional smuggling services and the factors driving migrants to pursue unauthorised returns via smuggling.

Relatively few studies have explored the rise of "digital nomadism" in Bali Process countries and its connections to climate mobility and irregular migration (Bahri, 2024). This lifestyle blurs the boundaries between remote work, international travel, circular migration, and transnational engagement, often falling outside traditional visa frameworks (Mancinelli & Molz, 2023). Anecdotal evidence suggests that,

in the post-COVID-19 era, a growing number of individuals are adopting this lifestyle in Southeast Asian countries, frequently operating within legal grey areas by utilising diverse visa categories. These trends are tied pull factors such as the appeal of the climate and lifestyle in locations like Bali, Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Ubud, and Canggu (Wibowo, 2024). They also reflect push factors from countries like Ukraine, Russia, Viet Nam, and China.

2.3.4 INCREASING RE-MIGRATION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION

There is limited research on the re-migration of migrant workers from the Asia Pacific region, particularly those who previously engaged in irregular migration. However, re-migration is widespread, especially in the Mekong region, where it is considered a norm (Molland, 2021). For example, a report highlights that some migrants from Lao PDR choose to re-migrate after returning home, often due to social dislocation and stigma associated with their status as irregular labour migrants (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023).

Re-migration is not unique to this region. Similar patterns are seen elsewhere, such as migration from Africa to Gulf or European states, Latin America to the United States, and Afghan migrants to Russia and the European Union (Piipponen and Virkkunen, 2020). However, the extent of re-migration globally, particularly after large-scale returns during the COVID-19 pandemic, remains unclear (Le Coz, 2021).

Research suggests that efforts to deter migrants from using dangerous smuggling routes often fail because they do not address the harsh realities of migrants' lives. Messaging campaigns are also vulnerable to misinformation (Missbach, 2022). Further studies could explore what types of messages resonate with target audiences and how anti-smuggling messages might be better conveyed through peer networks rather than state-driven initiatives.

As discussed in the section on the reintegration of migrant workers in irregular situations, the likelihood of re-migration increases if returnees lack access to work, housing, and a sense of purpose, including social reintegration. The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) (2024b) observes that the "underlying reasons for migration may persist on return" and, in some cases, "become even more pronounced," leaving individuals in worse conditions than before their initial migration and driving them to re-migrate. Addressing systemic factors that fuel migration is essential to reducing re-migration. Another key policy intervention is assisting potential migrants in accessing regular and safe migration channels.

2.3.5 KEY LITERATURE GAPS AND PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Top Priority: Emergence of multi-directional smuggling: Multi-directional smuggling, including unauthorised returns, is an underexplored phenomenon. Research should examine the socio-economic and policy drivers behind this trend and evaluate the impact of restrictive return channels on irregular migration.

Digital nomadism and climate mobility: The rise of digital nomadism in Bali Process countries intersects with irregular migration and climate mobility. Research should explore its regulatory challenges, socio-economic impacts, and implications for migration governance frameworks.

Impacts of pandemic on irregular migration dynamics: Research is needed to evaluate the long-term effects of COVID-19 on irregular migration patterns, particularly the increased reliance on smugglers and the challenges faced by undocumented migrants in accessing healthcare, wages, and basic services.

Role and responsibility of transit states: The evolving role of transit states requires deeper investigation. Studies should clarify their legal responsibilities, social dynamics, and the vulnerabilities of migrants who remain stranded or transition to de facto destination states.

Re-migration trends and drivers: Limited research exists on re-migration among returnees, particularly after COVID-19. Future studies should address the systemic factors that drive re-migration, including economic pressures, social stigma, and the availability of regular migration pathways.

2.4 Human Rights Risks in Irregular Migration

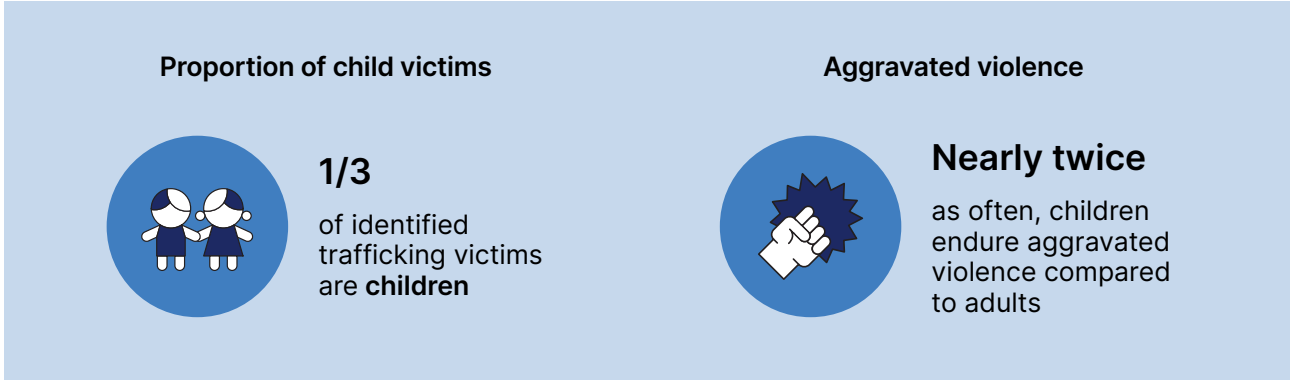
2.4.1 RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

A significant body of academic and grey literature highlights that irregular migration statuses often heighten the risk of human rights violations, exploitation, and abuse. Smuggled migrants, for instance, may be trafficked or coerced into forced labour and debt bondage during or after their journeys. Many remain indebted to their smugglers, leaving them in precarious situations, and some trafficked individuals even seek smugglers' services (Lelliot and Miller, 2023; Hedwards et al., 2023; UNODC, 2024). NGOs and academics have reported that Rohingya migrants in India, for example, are especially vulnerable to trafficking and bonded labour, compounded by their irregular status (Brenner, 2019; Mitra, 2024). Similarly, the UNODC (2024) found that 75 percent of migrants using smugglers experienced abuse, often at the hands of military personnel, police, smugglers, border guards, or criminal gangs. Women disproportionately face higher levels of abuse, underscoring the gendered nature of these vulnerabilities.

Children in migration contexts are at even greater risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse, particularly if undocumented, unaccompanied, or separated. These risks include pushbacks, immigration detention, child trafficking, aggravated smuggling, child labour, child marriage, and recruitment into armed groups (OHCHR, 2024). Undocumented children, especially in settings of socio-economic exclusion and with limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and social protection, are particularly vulnerable to child labour (OHCHR, 2024).

2.4.2 POLICY INITIATIVES AND SOLUTIONS

International human rights law provides protections for children against exploitation and abuse, including trafficking in persons and sexual exploitation. Nonetheless, children make up one-third of identified trafficking victims, and they endure aggravated violence nearly twice as often as adults (ICAT, 2023). Protecting the rights of individuals experiencing irregular migration requires special attention to children's rights. This includes implementing child-sensitive approaches and upholding the non-punishment principle, which prohibits the arrest, prosecution, or penalisation of child trafficking victims for illegal acts committed as a consequence of their trafficking (UNODC, 2022).



Source: ICAT, 2023.

The Inter-Agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT, 2023: 1) have called to end child trafficking by 2025, suggesting the following measures:

- Prioritise investment in prevention and protection systems and services that are easily accessible to all children without discrimination.
- Protect and assist trafficked children.
- Ensure ethical, safe, and meaningful participation of survivors of child trafficking and children at risk in the design of anti-trafficking responses.
- Strengthen measures to deter traffickers.
- Strengthen efforts to guarantee child online safety.
- Set out clearly the expectation that businesses conduct child rights due diligence as part of their human rights due diligence.
- Ensure that child trafficking is addressed in humanitarian contexts as part of measures addressing the broader continuum of violence against children.
- Mainstream child protection in environmental and climate change policies as well as disaster preparedness and response plans and action.
- Enhance the evidence base (i.e., data and research) to address gaps in knowledge on child trafficking and inform appropriate responses.
- Enhance collaboration and coordination among different stakeholders and between States to facilitate effective response to child trafficking.

Effective employment, information, and social policies play a key role in protecting the rights of irregular migrants (Kiss et al., 2019). Harkins (2019, p. XIII) emphasises that "ensuring fair compensation will provide a crucial financial deterrent to abuse and encourage more migrants to pursue justice, reducing impunity for offenders who violate their labour rights." He also highlights the importance of enabling migrants to change employers under the same visa, allowing them to escape abusive situations.

To advance these goals, the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020, p. 14) has urged states to:

> *"Ensure that all migrant workers, including irregular migrant workers, have access to legal remedies and compensation for unfair treatment, abuse, and interpretive services to assist in their access to justice in these cases. Ensure that in cases of violence, women migrant workers' specific needs, including being supported by women officials, are respected."*

However, scholars contend that advocating for compensation alone is insufficient. Effective enforcement mechanisms are essential to ensure compliance and delivery on these claims. In some countries, while claim functions exist, courts lack the enforcement capacity needed to uphold these rights (Molland, 2021).

2.4.3 CORRUPTION AS A MIGRATION DRIVER AND RETURN BARRIER

While many policy-focused studies emphasise corruption as an enabling factor in irregular migration, it is crucial to address broader structural elements, such as labour market regulations and immigration policies, which profoundly shape migrant outcomes. Corruption is often framed as a "convenient bogeyman," exemplified by corrupt officials and smugglers, but systemic drivers like political economy, labour market demands, and restrictive border controls play a far greater role in facilitating irregular migration. Addressing these underlying systems would yield more substantive results than solely targeting bad actors, though prosecuting corrupt officials remains essential.

Scholars and international organisations widely recognise corruption as a key enabler of irregular migration. Public officials in origin, transit, and destination countries often collude with smugglers or provide impunity for such activities (Lelliot and Miller, 2023; Suber, 2024; UNODC, 2019, 2024). For instance, the UNODC (2024) found that a quarter of smuggling cases in Southeast Asia involved officials receiving bribes, gifts, or favours. Smugglers are often viewed as necessary intermediaries between migrants and officials, creating entrenched patterns of corruption.

In cases of trafficking in persons, some victims seeking assistance are returned to exploitative workplaces, revealing gaps in legislative and policy frameworks. This also suggests complicity between law enforcement and powerful figures involved in exploitation rings (Jesperson et al., 2023: 21). However, this claim, while frequently repeated, lacks substantial primary evidence.

25%

of smuggling cases in Southeast Asia involved officials receiving **bribes, gifts, or favours**

The UNODC (2024) further highlights that corruption often involves collusion between smugglers and officials, such as immigration officers, military personnel, or police. Bribes paid by smugglers or migrants underscore both systemic vulnerabilities and the economic pressures driving corrupt practices (Missbach, 2020). Hoffstaedter and Missbach (2021) note that such corruption undermines policies aimed at curbing irregular migration. Paradoxically, strategies like training law enforcement to combat smuggling may empower the very actors complicit in these crimes.

Moreover, prosecutions disproportionately target lower-level actors, while complicit officials often escape accountability (Missbach, 2022; Hoffstaedter and Missbach, 2021). This raises questions about the effectiveness and fairness of anti-trafficking programs when law enforcement itself may be implicated in exploitation (UNODC, 2019).

2.4.4 PROSECUTION EFFORTS

The UNODC (2024) identifies a critical gap in the prosecution of those facilitating irregular labour migration: a lack of knowledge about trafficking in persons and people smuggling among key actors, including immigration and law enforcement officials (see also McNeill, 2022 on the Pacific Islands). This knowledge gap extends to understanding the full range of exploitation faced by irregular labour migrants and the mechanisms necessary for effective responses (Denney, 2023).

However, the broader issue, as highlighted in the literature, lies in systemic barriers to prosecution, including complex legal frameworks, outdated legislation, and insufficient deterrence. Prosecution efforts are further undermined by an overemphasis on individual culpability rather than structural causes of exploitation (Denney, 2023).

Denney (2023) critiques the disproportionate reliance on criminal justice approaches, which often overshadow the vulnerabilities of irregular labour migrants. She argues that "prosecution alone is a blunt tool for dealing with a highly complex issue and is arguably unrealistic given the scale of exploitation and the prevailing political economy of countries in the [Southeast Asia] region." For instance, victims of trafficking are sometimes granted visas only if they participate in prosecutions, a policy that undermines victim agency and the principles of rights-based approaches (Farbenblum et al., 2023). In other cases, victims of modern slavery are criminalised for actions undertaken while under the control of traffickers (Walk Free, n.d.). This branding of irregular migrants as "victims" in legal proceedings both highlights their vulnerability and misrepresents their agency (Missbach and Palmer, 2024; Qiao-Franco, 2021).

Corruption further impedes the prosecution of smuggling and trafficking. It "hinders the investigation and prosecution of illicit activities," enabling traffickers and smugglers to evade accountability (Lelliott and Miller, 2023: 196). In Southeast Asia, corruption often shields facilitators of irregular migration from prosecution (Lelliott and Miller, 2023). Hoffstaedter and Missbach (2021) argue that addressing corruption within the criminal justice system is essential for creating effective migration policies.

Prosecutions frequently target low-status, financially distressed individuals rather than organised criminal networks. In Indonesia, for example, those prosecuted for smuggling are often drivers or boat crew recruited for operational roles (Missbach, 2022). Similarly, in Viet Nam, traffickers are often as financially distressed as their victims, predominantly coming from ethnic minorities with limited education and few income opportunities (Luong and Wyndham, 2022: 33). This imbalance in justice highlights systemic inequities.

To address these issues, scholars call for better regulation of recruitment practices and the prosecution of those who exploit and abuse migrants (ILO, 2022a). Structural approaches that focus on the broader socio-economic drivers of migration and exploitation could provide more meaningful solutions than narrowly focusing on criminal prosecutions.

2.4.5 REGULARISATION EFFORTS

The UN, through the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), has issued guidance on regular pathways for migrants who are vulnerable. This includes information on regular travel, admission, stay, visas, regularisation processes, and status adjustments (UN Network on Migration, 2021). Some states, such as New Zealand, Israel, Hong Kong, and Malaysia, have implemented visa portability programs to regularise irregular migrants who have been exploited. These programs aim to encourage migrants to report labour violations and trafficking in persons (Farbenblum et al., 2023). Further research in the Bali Process region could explore whether irregular migrants are aware of these pathways and assess their effectiveness in empowering exploited migrants to approach authorities.

Scholars, however, caution against overly simplistic approaches to regularisation. In one case, Cambodian migrants in Thailand who were regularised found themselves in more precarious and insecure situations. Their new legal status created "asymmetrical relationships with states, brokers, employers, and financial institutions," leaving them vulnerable to further exploitation (Bylander, 2022a: 3434). Similarly, in some contexts, regular migrants fare worse than their irregular counterparts, facing document retention, harassment, and abuse more frequently (Bylander, 2019).

In Malaysia, many migrant workers only pursued regularisation when it provided a clear benefit, which was often not the case due to high costs and limited incentives for employers (Frank and Anderson, 2019). Additionally, many irregular migrants remain unaware of regularisation programs, while others fall victim to agents who abscond with their money (IOM, 2023a).

2.4.6 RETURN AND REPATRIATION

Global research highlights the diverse motivations, circumstances, and degrees of "voluntariness" surrounding returns, a complexity often overlooked in return and reintegration discussions (MMC, 2024b). Irregular labour migrants detected by authorities may face deportation—either voluntary or forced—or may return independently if undetected. Deportations are carried out through formal procedures by the deporting state, while voluntary returns are often facilitated by international organisations such as the IOM (Fine and Walters, 2021). In the Bali Process region, countries including Australia, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan use IOM support for return processes (IOM, 2023b). Embassies also play a role in some returns, particularly for workers whose employers terminate their contracts due to pregnancy (Mahdavi, 2022).

Although Thailand and China have established procedures for returning identified trafficking victims, such frameworks are absent in much of the Mekong region, including Lao PDR (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023). For example, approximately 10,000 migrants from Lao PDR are deported annually from Thailand, often without official notification to Lao PDR. Migrants who return independently may face fines if they lack proper documentation or have overstayed visas (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023; IOM, 2020c).

10,000 migrants

from Lao PDR are **deported annually** from Thailand

Scholars emphasise the need for rights-based return processes, advocating for protective measures such as accommodation, counselling, psychosocial support, legal advice, skills training, and shelters for women in vulnerable situations. However, these require sustainable funding to be effective (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023). Policies often place returning women in more precarious positions, creating tension between stated commitments to women's rights and actual practices (Louw, 2020).

The GCM urges compliance with international human rights obligations in return processes, while the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) cautions against returns that compromise individual rights (Lelliot, 2023). ASEAN, in collaboration with the ILO and Indonesia, has developed guidelines for effective return and reintegration of migrant workers, citing successful policies in the Philippines, Indonesia, Korea, and Sri Lanka (Wickramasekara, 2019). However, cohesive regional migration policies remain challenging due to socio-economic disparities that drive irregular migration and remittance flows (Asis and Maningat, 2024; Daovisan et al., 2022; Adiputera and Missbach, 2021; Smerchuar and Madhyamapurush, 2020). Most irregular migrants are unable to report unpaid wages or seek restitution upon return (IOM, 2023a). States must prioritise preventing further exploitation, such as denying migrants access to owed wages.

The return of smuggled migrants often aims to both deny individuals the benefits of smuggling and deter future attempts by smugglers (Lelliot, 2023). However, Missbach (2022) criticises the practice of returning boats of migrants without assessing asylum claims or securing consent from origin states. Stateless individuals, who cannot be repatriated under international law, face additional challenges due to poorly designed resettlement and return policies (Susetyo and Chambers, 2020).

The challenges of return migration were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic, as countries of origin were unprepared for the sudden influx of returning migrants, particularly in managing quarantine facilities (ILO, 2020a; Irudaya and Arcand, 2023). Some countries in the Bali Process region detain, imprison, or extort returnees, compounding their vulnerabilities (Hagan and Wassink, 2020). While ASEAN (2022) reports progress in reintegration policies in Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam, similar policies remain limited in Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Singapore. These reintegration efforts often include return agreements with deporting countries, support from NGOs, skills development, and financial assistance for returnees. Some initiatives specifically target workers in industries such as sex work or domestic labour. However, shelter services, while available in some cases, are often short-lived due to cost-saving measures, failing to provide the holistic support returnees require (Lavmo, 2020).

Return migrants frequently face stigma, discrimination, isolation, and mental health challenges (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023; Irudaya and Arcand, 2023). Those who have experienced trafficking endure long-lasting physical and mental health effects from abuse, extortion, violence, and kidnapping (Khan, 2020). They are often further stigmatised as "failed migrants," as seen in studies of women returning to Nepal and both men and women returning to the Philippines (Yea, 2020; Laurie and Richardson, 2019). Regressive gender norms hinder reintegration for women, while queer returnees face similar barriers (IOM, 2023a).

Stigma often varies by location, with urban areas offering greater anonymity and access to support services, prompting many women to relocate to cities upon their return (Laurie and Richardson, 2019). These diverse challenges underscore the importance of tailored reintegration policies, particularly for vulnerable groups such as trafficked individuals, women, and LGBTQ+ migrants (Irudaya and Arcand, 2023). Despite this, there is limited research addressing these needs. A notable exception is a large study on the health and psychosocial needs of male migrants returning from irregular maritime labour migration within the Bali Process region (Khan, 2020).

2.4.7 KEY LITERATURE GAPS AND PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Top Priority: Corruption in trafficking in persons networks: There is a lack of empirical research on how corruption within law enforcement and border control systems facilitates trafficking and exploitation. Future studies should evaluate mechanisms to disrupt these networks and improve accountability.

Gendered vulnerabilities in irregular migration: Research is needed to explore the gender-specific risks faced by irregular migrants, including trafficking, forced labour, and violence, particularly in vulnerable populations such as women and unaccompanied children, to inform targeted protective measures.

Child rights violations in migration contexts: The experiences of undocumented and trafficked children require deeper investigation. Studies should focus on the impacts of irregular migration on child health, education, and safety, and develop child-sensitive approaches to address exploitation and abuse.

Post-return reintegration challenges: Limited attention has been given to the stigma, mental health challenges, and socio-economic reintegration of trafficked or exploited returnees. Research should explore tailored reintegration strategies for vulnerable groups, including women, LGBTQ+ migrants, and stateless individuals.

Efficacy of legal remedies for migrant rights: Further research is required to assess the effectiveness of legal remedies, compensation systems, and enforcement mechanisms for irregular migrants. Studies should identify barriers to justice and propose frameworks to strengthen accountability for labour and human rights violations.

Conclusion

This report provides a comprehensive examination of the complex and interconnected challenges surrounding irregular migration, climate mobility, and labour migration in the Bali Process region. By synthesising insights from academic and grey literature, the analysis reveals critical vulnerabilities and systemic gaps in governance, policy frameworks, and research that drive irregular migration and amplify risks for migrants.

One key finding is the role of climate change as a significant driver of mobility, intensifying pre-existing vulnerabilities and reshaping migration patterns. While most climate-induced migration is internal and voluntary, the lack of adaptive support and regular migration pathways compels some to pursue irregular routes, exposing them to exploitation and trafficking. The Pacific Islands and other climate-vulnerable regions highlight the urgent need for planned relocation strategies and tailored policies that uphold the dignity and agency of affected populations.

Irregular labour migration remains a pressing issue, driven by restrictive border controls, socio-economic inequalities, and unaddressed labour demands. Exploitation in industries such as fishing, agriculture, and construction underscores the systemic risks migrants face, exacerbated by limited access to justice and weak enforcement mechanisms. The evolving role of technology in irregular migration—both as a tool for recruitment and as a potential avenue for intervention—requires further attention to combat misinformation and enhance digital literacy among migrants.

Emerging trends, including re-migration, multi-directional smuggling, and the rise of digital nomadism, reflect the dynamic nature of migration in the region. These patterns underscore the importance of adapting policies to address the diverse realities of migrants, ensuring that both internal and cross-border movements are managed through inclusive, rights-based approaches.

Return and reintegration processes remain fraught with challenges, as returning migrants often face stigma, discrimination, and inadequate support services. Without sustainable reintegration frameworks, many are compelled to re-migrate, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability. A key priority is to align return practices with international human rights standards and develop comprehensive reintegration policies tailored to the unique needs of vulnerable groups, including women, children, and LGBTQ+ individuals.

This report highlights the urgent need for regional cooperation and evidence-based policymaking to address systemic drivers of irregular migration and promote safe, regular, and rights-based pathways. By filling critical research gaps and strengthening multi-stakeholder collaboration, Bali Process Member States can create equitable and sustainable migration systems that prioritise the dignity, safety, and resilience of all migrants.

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