

Forum: International Bioethics Committee

Topic: Question of Tackling the Ethical Standards in Organ Transplantation and Combating Organ Trafficking in Southeast Asia

Chair

Introduction

Organ transplantation is one of the greatest achievements of modern medicine, as it provides life-saving treatment and significantly improves the quality of life for millions of patients suffering from end-stage organ failure. Advances in medical technology, surgical techniques, and post-transplant care have made transplantation increasingly successful. However, the growing global demand for transplantable organs has far exceeded the supply available through legal and ethical donation systems. This constant shortage has created opportunities for illegal organ markets to grow. As it allows criminal organizations to profit from the exploitation of vulnerable populations while undermining international medical ethics and human rights standards.

Organ trafficking refers to the illegal recruitment, transportation, transfer, or harboring of individuals for the purpose of removing and trading their organs for financial gain. Victims are often people living in poverty, migrants, refugees, displaced individuals, and other socially marginalized groups who face severe economic hardship. Many are deceived about the medical risks, pressured through force or manipulation, or driven by financial desperation into agreeing to organ extraction. In numerous cases, informed consent is either absent or obtained under exploitative circumstances and promised payments are reduced or never delivered. Following surgery, victims frequently receive little or no post-operative medical care, leaving them with long-term physical and psychological impacts.

Southeast Asia has emerged as one of the regions most affected by organ trafficking due to a combination of economic inequality, weak regulatory oversight, corruption, limited healthcare access, and the expansion of transplant tourism. The region's geographical links and varying legal frameworks have enabled large-scale criminal networks to operate across borders. These criminal networks recruit vulnerable individuals in one country while arranging illegal transplant procedures in another. Countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia have documented cases that demonstrate the complex nature of these trafficking networks. The reported cases have exposed the involvement of brokers, recruiters, healthcare professionals, intermediaries, and recipients. These operations often exploit gaps in law enforcement and differences in national legislation.

The issue extends beyond criminal activity and presents significant ethical concerns for the international community. Organ trafficking violates fundamental human rights, including the rights to life, health, dignity, bodily integraty, and freedom from exploitation. It also undermines public confidence in legitimate organ donation and transplantation systems, preventing voluntary donation and placing additional strain on healthcare institutions. Furthermore, the rise of transplant tourism has created situations in which wealthier recipients travel abroad to obtain illegally sourced organs which further fuels demand and reinforces global inequalities

The international community has recognized the needs to address these challenges through legal frameworks and ethical guidelines, including the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNCAC), the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, the World Health Organization's (WHO) Guiding Principles on Human Cell, Tissue and Organ Transplantation, and the Declaration of Istanbul on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism. Despite these efforts, inconsistent implementation, limited enforcement capacity, corruption, and insufficient regional cooperation continue to hinder progress, particularly in developing countries.

This year's theme "Moderating Morality" is directly relevant in this topic, as organ trafficking and organ transplant ethics demonstrate a clear struggle to balance medical advancements with human morality. Finding solutions for this pressing international crisis is crucial as organ trafficking itself is deeply immoral. When life-saving transplantation is done, it must be done in a way which complies with ethical standards and basic humanity.

Definition of key terms

Bioethics

Bioethics is the study of the moral and ethical questions that arise from developments in biology, medicine and biotechnology. It examines how scientific advancements should be used responsibly by considering their impact on individuals, society and the environment, and guides ethical decision-making in these fields.

Organ transplantation

Organ transplantation is a medical procedure in which a healthy organ is surgically removed from a donor and transplanted into a recipient whose organ has failed or no longer functioning properly.

Organ trafficking

Organ trafficking is the illegal recruitment, transportation, or exploitation of individuals for the removal, sale or transplantation of their organs for financial gain or other forms of exploitation.

Ethical standards

Ethical standards are the moral principles and professional guidelines that govern medical practice and decision-making.

Transplant tourism

Transplant tourism refers to the practice of traveling to another country to receive an organ transplant. Although some medical travel is legal, transplant tourism often involves illegally obtained organs or unethical transplantation practices that exploit vulnerable populations and undermine fair organ allocation.

Medical ethics

Medical ethics refers to the principles that guide healthcare professionals in making decisions that protect patients and respect human rights. It is based on the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, ensuring that medical treatment is provided responsibly , fairly and without exploitation.

Cross border cooperation

Cross border cooperation refers to collaboration between countries to prevent, investigate, and prosecute crimes that operate across national borders. In combating organ trafficking it involves information sharing, coordinated law enforcement and joint efforts to dismantle international trafficking networks.

General overview

Origins and backgrounds

Organ transplantation is one of the greatest advances in modern medicine, providing life-saving treatment for patients with end-stage organ failure. Nevertheless, the worldwide need for transplantable organs has continually surpassed the supply offered by lawful and voluntary donation programmes. This deficit has given rise to illicit organ markets, where criminal groups prey on vulnerable people using coercion, deceit, and monetary rewards.

During the 1980s and 1990s, organ trafficking attracted global scrutiny as accounts surfaced in developing nations where poverty, fragile medical infrastructures, and insufficient legal safeguards heightened vulnerability to exploitation. In response, the World Health Organization introduced its Guiding Principles on Human Cell, Tissue and Organ Transplantation, while the United Nations addressed organ removal as a form of human trafficking through the Palermo Protocol. These policies encourage voluntary donation, require informed consent, and forbid profiting from organ sales.

Southeast Asia is a region that has been significantly impacted by organ trafficking because of high levels of poverty, corruption, lax law enforcement, and an increasing number of people traveling abroad for transplants. Transnational criminal organizations take advantage of varying regulations regarding organ transplantation in different countries to find poor individuals who are willing to sell their organs. Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, and Cambodia have each reported incidents related to illicit organ trafficking.

Today, organ trafficking remains a major medical and human rights issue in Southeast Asia. In 2023, Indonesian authorities dismantled a kidney trafficking network that recruited individuals to travel to Cambodia for illegal transplant surgeries after promising them large payments. The Philippines has also uncovered kidney-selling operation targeting low-income communities, while Vietnam has reported illegal organ brokerage networks exploiting financially vulnerable individuals. These cases highlight how poverty, weak law enforcement, and transplant tourism continue to fuel organ trafficking, emphasizing the need for stronger ethical standards, stricter legislation, and greater regional cooperation.

Development of organ trafficking in Southeast Asia

Organ trafficking in Southeast Asia developed as a result of a growing global demand for transplantable organs combined with a limited legal supply. The region's widespread economic inequality, poverty, and limited access to healthcare made many vulnerable individuals susceptible to exploitation by criminal networks. Many people facing financial hardship were persuaded or deceived into selling their organs in exchange for promised payments.

Differences in healthcare systems, legal frameworks, and law enforcement across Southeast Asian countries also contributed to the growth of organ trafficking. Criminal organizations exploited these gaps by recruiting donors in one country while arranging illegal transplant procedures in another, making prosecution more difficult. The expansion of transplant tourism further increased the demand for illegally obtained organs, allowing brokers, traffickers, and corrupt officials to profit from cross-border operations.

Today, organ trafficking remains a major challenge across Southeast Asia. Weak regulation, corruption, and continuing socioeconomic disparities have enabled trafficking networks to adapt and expand, highlighting the need for stronger healthcare systems, improved legal enforcement, and greater regional cooperation to prevent further exploitation.

Ethical implications and need for international cooperation

Organ trafficking raises serious ethical concerns by exploiting vulnerable populations, including people living in poverty, migrants, refugees, and other marginalized groups. Many victims are deceived, pressured, or driven by financial desperation into agreeing to organ removal, often without fully informed consent. In many cases, promised payments are reduced or never delivered, while victims receive little post-operative care, leaving them with long-term physical and psychological consequences.

Eliminating organ trafficking remains difficult because criminal networks operate across national borders, taking advantage of differences in healthcare systems, legal frameworks, and law enforcement. Brokers, recruiters, and traffickers move donors and recipients between countries where regulations may be weaker, making investigations and

prosecutions more challenging. Corruption and inconsistent enforcement further allow these networks to continue operating.

The growth of organ trafficking also undermines public trust in healthcare systems and legitimate organ donation programs. Fear of exploitation and unethical transplantation practices discourages voluntary organ donation, worsening the shortage of legally available organs. These challenges demonstrate the need for stronger international cooperation, harmonized national laws, improved information sharing, and coordinated enforcement efforts to protect vulnerable populations and uphold ethical standards in organ transplantation

Current challenges and major developments

Organ trafficking continues to be a major challenge in Southeast Asia due to the persistent shortage of legally donated organs, which drives demand for illegal markets. Poverty, corruption, weak law enforcement, and differences in national legislation allow criminal networks to operate across borders and avoid prosecution. Limited public awareness and inconsistent enforcement further enable traffickers to exploit vulnerable individuals through deception and false promises of financial compensation.

Recent regional developments highlight both the scale of the problem and efforts to address it. In 2023, Indonesian authorities dismantled a major kidney trafficking syndicate that had recruited more than 120 victims for illegal transplant operations in Cambodia. The Philippines and Vietnam have also increased investigations into illegal organ brokerage networks and strengthened oversight of organ transplantation.

International organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and ASEAN continue to support Southeast Asian countries by promoting ethical transplantation standards, improving legal frameworks, and encouraging information sharing and cross-border cooperation. Despite this progress, stronger regional collaboration, consistent enforcement of national laws, and continued international cooperation remain essential to effectively combat organ trafficking.

Major parties involved

The World Health Organization (WHO)

The World Health Organization (WHO) plays a leading role in promoting ethical organ transplantation and preventing organ trafficking worldwide. WHO approved its Guiding Principles on Human Cell, Tissue and Organ Transplantation back in 1991, which was later revised in 2010. These guiding principles stress on the fact that the organ donation process must be voluntary and unpaid, must include informed consent from the donor, organ trade is prohibited, and access to transplantation procedures should be equitable irrespective of the economic background. It also supports governments by strengthening transplant legislation, improving healthcare systems and providing technical assistance to healthcare professionals.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is the main body within the UN that deals with transnational organized crimes including trafficking of persons for purposes of removing organs. The organization assists governments to strengthen legislation, train law enforcement agencies, improve border control measures, and conduct cross-border investigations regarding trafficking activities. Additionally, it plays an integral role in the implementation of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) as well as the Palermo Protocol, which identifies organ removal as a form of human trafficking. Through these efforts, UNODC helps countries improve cooperation against international trafficking networks.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

ASEAN is one of the key regional organizations that work for the promotion of cooperation between the ten member states of Southeast Asia in dealing with transnational crimes like organ trafficking. ASEAN also encourages information sharing between countries and coordinated law enforcement to combat organized crime. Although ASEAN

does not have a treaty specifically addressing organ trafficking it remains an important platform for regional collaboration.

Indonesia

Indonesia has become a key country in addressing organ trafficking due to prominent instances of organ trafficking. In 2023, the Indonesian National Police broke up a large international kidney trafficking ring, which was responsible for recruiting 122 Indonesian citizens to travel to Cambodia, where they were recruited to undergo illegal kidney transplantation procedures. A total of 12 individuals were arrested in connection with the crime, including one police officer and one immigration employee. Since then, Indonesia has strengthened investigations, increased cooperation with the Cambodian government, and tightened regulations on organ transplantation.

Cambodia

Cambodia has become an important party due to its involvement in several cross-border organ trafficking cases. The 2023 Indonesia–Cambodia kidney trafficking case demonstrated how organized criminal groups exploited healthcare facilities in Cambodia to facilitate illegal kidney transplants. Following initial investigation, Cambodian authorities have increased efforts to investigate trafficking syndicate, identifying those responsible, and strengthening oversight of illegal transplantation.

Vietnam

Vietnam is also a vital party due to an increase in illegal organ brokers using social media to recruit vulnerable people to sell their organs. The Vietnamese government's Ministry of Public Security claims that a number of trafficking rings have preyed on economically disadvantaged people using online advertisements of kidneys for sale and facilitating illegal organ transplants for foreign patients and Vietnamese citizens. Authorities have dismantled several trafficking networks and continue to strengthen enforcement against organ brokers.

Philippines

There have been cases of organ trafficking in the Philippines due to widespread poverty and the growth of transplant tourism. In the 2000s, the country was infamous for

its "villages of sale of kidneys" as people from various villages were recruited by brokers in exchange for money. The Philippines adopted stricter laws on this matter; there is a law in 2008 that bans the transplantation of organs to foreigners, unless they are closely related to the person donating the organ. The Philippines has maintained strict laws against organ trafficking to date, with the regulation of transplant centers and investigation of brokers within vulnerable areas.

Timeline of events

Date	Event
2008/4/30-2008/5/2	Over 150 experts in medicine, ethics, and government from 78 nations convene at the International Summit on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism in Istanbul, Turkey, to devise an international strategy for the unethical transplantation of organs.
2008/7/5	The Declaration of Istanbul on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism is officially published, establishing internationally recognized ethical standards for organ transplantation and calling for the prohibition of organ trafficking, transplant tourism, and organ commercialism.
2008/3/18	There is an Administrative Order 2008-0004 from the Philippine Department of Health prohibiting the transplantation of kidneys to foreigners unless they are related biologically to the donor. This

	greatly curtails the practice of transplant tourism in the Philippines.
2010/5/21	WHO adopts Revised Guiding Principles on Human Cell, Tissue and Organ Transplantation at the 63rd World Health Assembly, improving international standards for informed consent, transparency, traceability and equal distribution of organs.
2023/7/12	A kidney trafficking syndicate that had smuggled 122 Indonesians into Cambodia for organ transplant purposes was dissolved by Indonesia's National Police. The 12 arrested suspects include a police officer and an immigration official among others, marking this as one of the biggest cases of organ trafficking in Southeast Asia.
2024/10/16	Warning has been issued by the National Bureau of Investigation in the Philippines that the organ traffickers are using social networking websites to trap people who lack financial stability.
Present (2025-2026)	Governments in Southeast Asia, along with ASEAN, WHO, and UNODC, are continually enhancing the legal framework, increasing supervision over transplant centers, increasing border

cooperation to enforce laws against organ trafficking, and encouraging voluntary donations.

Attempts to solve the issue

United Nations Convention Against Organized Crime (UNTOC) (2000/11/15) (A/RES/55/25)

UNTOC was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in the year 2000, and the same acts as the key international legal instrument for tackling organized crime across different countries. The UNTOC is not solely an international legal instrument aimed at tackling organ trafficking. Instead, it provides various means through which member states can promote cooperation, extradition, mutual legal assistance, and law enforcement coordination when dealing with transnational crimes. UNTOC has made substantial progress in facilitating cross-border cooperation, although weak enforcement capability and lack of implementation remain major issues in some Southeast Asian countries.

Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. (2000/11/15)(A/RES/55/25)

This treaty is commonly referred to as the Palermo Protocol, which is an additional protocol that serves as a supplement to UNTOC. The Palermo Protocol defines trafficking in persons in a way that includes the removal of organs as one of its specified purposes. Traffickers should be criminalized and victims should be protected; border measures must be enhanced, and international cooperation should take place in order to investigate trafficking networks.

WHO Guiding Principles on Human Cell, Tissue and Organ Transplantation. (2010/05/21) (WHA63.22)

The new version of WHO Guiding Principles was adopted by the World Health Assembly in 2010 to promote ethical practices in organ transplants. The principles emphasize voluntariness and non-commerciality of organ donation, obtaining of consent, fair distribution of organs, openness, and ban on commercial transactions involving organ donation. The principles promote development of regulated transplant programs at the state level and creation of public awareness about the ethics of donation.

Declaration of Istanbul on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism. (2008/05/02)

The Declaration of Istanbul was adopted by transplant specialists in more than 70 nations to prevent organ trafficking, transplant tourism, and organ commercialism. This declaration aims to promote ethical organ transplant, voluntary in organ donation, and national self-sufficiency in organ donor programs.

ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. (2015/11/2)

ACTIP was developed by ASEAN to enhance regional collaboration to fight against human trafficking via law enforcement, protection of the victims, and information sharing. Although the Convention is not particularly concerned about organ trafficking, it has provided a very important foundation to fight against human trafficking in Southeast Asia.

Possible solutions

Strengthening legal frameworks and international cooperation are among the most effective strategies for addressing organ trafficking. As many trafficking operations involve crossing into other jurisdictions, Southeast Asian governments can cooperate through ASEAN and UNODC and develop common legal standards to exchange information and investigate such cases jointly.

Adding to that increasing regulation and transparency in organ transplant systems becomes vital. Developing organ transplantation programs that are clear and regulated is necessary to stop any illegal activity. This requires setting up organ donation databases at the national level for each country and documenting the donor and recipient carefully.

Moreover, the lack of legally obtainable organs is another major reason behind the development of black-market organs. To address this, expanding ethical organ donation programs is essential. Governments need to make voluntary donations more common by raising public awareness and making donation process accessible and straightforward, as well as focusing on donating after death. Developing reliable legal donation systems will help decrease reliance on black markets and thus diminish the motivation for organ trafficking networks.

Guiding questions

1. What is the present stance of your country on organ trafficking and organ transplantation?
2. Are there any cases of organ trafficking, illegal organ selling, or transplant tourism in your country? Did your country take any measures to eliminate the issue?
3. What are the current laws and regulations of your country on organ donation and transplantation?
4. How does your country participate in international and regional initiatives aimed at preventing organ trafficking?
5. Is there a sufficient number of legally donated organs in your country? If no, why does this happen?
6. What are the social and economic factors which may expose certain population groups to risks of organ trafficking in your country?
7. What obstacles exist for enforcement of anti-trafficking laws in your country (corruption, scarcity of resources, weak border control, etc.)?
8. How does your country address the shortage of donated organs?

9. What is the previous experience of your country in solving the problem of organ trafficking and the development of the transplantation system?
10. How could your country cooperate with other countries to avoid organ trafficking across the borders?

Appendix

- Transplantation. https://www.who.int/health-topics/transplantation
- WHO guiding principles on human cell, tissue, and organ transplantation. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-HTP-EHT-CPR-2010.01
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