
Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone: Adoption of the Shenzhen Model and Enhancement of Worker Rights and Protections

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Abstract

This research examines how the Shenzhen Model of economic development fosters an environment conducive to human trafficking and worker exploitation in Cambodia's Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ), with the purpose of analyzing this causal relationship, assessing the adequacy of Cambodian legal frameworks, and proposing policy solutions. The scope encompasses both traditional industries and the emergent illicit economy of large-scale online scam operations, which constitute a severe form of trafficking for forced criminality. Methodologically, this qualitative case study utilizes semi-structured interviews with key informants from international organizations, NGOs, labor unions, and a diplomatic mission, supplemented by extensive document analysis. Its findings indicate that the model's adoption has systematically led to systemic labor abuses and enabled transnational criminal networks to traffic individuals for forced criminality, revealing inadequate and poorly enforced Cambodian laws with critical gaps in victim protection and cross-border cooperation. Consequently, the study recommends a multi-pronged strategy including legal reform to close loopholes, awareness campaigns, disrupting criminal infrastructure, and fostering stronger regional cooperation within ASEAN.

Keywords: *Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, Shenzhen Model, Human Trafficking, Forced Criminality, Labor Exploitation, Worker Rights, Cambodia, Transnational Crime*

1. Introduction

The global pursuit of economic development has often seen the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as a primary strategy. These geographically designated areas, offering tax incentives and streamlined regulations, are designed to attract foreign investment, boost exports, and catalyze industrial growth (World Bank Group, 2019). For developing nations, they represent a promise of rapid modernization and integration into the global economy. Among the most celebrated blueprints for this strategy is China's Shenzhen Model, which transformed a small fishing village into a global economic powerhouse through aggressive deregulation and a singular focus on foreign capital. This model has been adopted worldwide, held up as a replicable formula for rapid economic development. However, this pursuit of growth often comes with a human cost, raising critical questions about the balance between economic efficiency and the protection of fundamental worker rights.

This research examines the adoption of this very model in the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ) in Cambodia. Touted as a second Shenzhen, the SSEZ is a cornerstone of Cambodia's development strategy and a key project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (Koty, 2021). The existing body of academic and policy literature has rightly identified the Shenzhen Model as a powerful engine for export-led growth and has documented the general risks of labor exploitation in developing economies. Scholars have explored how the model's emphasis on a flexible, low-cost labor force can lead to issues like wage suppression and poor working conditions (Liu, 2020; Loughlin & Grimsditch, 2021). Furthermore, previous studies have extensively cataloged Cambodia's broader struggles with weak regulatory enforcement and its status as a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking (Ponlok, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

However, a critical gap exists in this literature. Previous research has failed to anticipate how the specific, uncritical adoption of the Shenzhen Model in the SSEZ would actively create a uniquely insulated environment where exploitation is not a mere side effect, but a systemic feature. The literature has largely overlooked the rapid emergence of a parallel, illicit economy within the SSEZ (e.g., large-scale online scam operations) that represents a severe and modern form of human trafficking for forced criminality (UNODC, 2023). While weak enforcement is recognized as a problem, the existing research underestimates its systemic nature, failing to capture how the investor-first paradigm effectively sanctions the degradation of worker dignity as a cost of doing business. This

study argues that the conventional understanding is insufficient; the realities on the ground in Sihanoukville reveal a much more sinister convergence of economic policy and organized crime.

The SSEZ's regulatory environment, designed to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), has created fertile ground for severe labor abuse. Workers, particularly migrants, face precarious employment, wage theft, and suppression of their right to unionize (Chang, 2022; ILO, 2021). More alarmingly, this environment has been co-opted by transnational criminal networks who traffic individuals, lured by false promises of legitimate work, into forced labor in online scam compounds. Here, victims are subjected to imprisonment, debt bondage, and are coerced into perpetrating large-scale cyber fraud (Kennedy & Southern, 2022; UNODC, 2023). Cambodian laws have proven inadequate to address this crisis, with critical gaps in victim protection, law enforcement training, and cross-border cooperation (Acharya, 2019; Calabrese, Borodyna, & Nadin, 2022). It is this disconnect between the promised economic development and the reality of systemic exploitation that is the core of this research. The aim is to move beyond diagnosing isolated issues and reveal how the very architecture of the development model, when divorced from robust ethical and legal safeguards, can facilitate a human rights crisis.

Consequently, the overall aim of the data collection and analysis in this manuscript is to critically investigate how the adoption of the Shenzhen Model in the SSEZ fosters an environment conducive to both traditional labor exploitation and the emerging scourge of human trafficking for forced criminality, and to propose a multi-faceted strategy for reform that prioritizes human security alongside economic development.

2. Objectives

- 1) To critically examine how the adoption of the Shenzhen Model may contribute to or exacerbate human trafficking and labour exploitation in the SSEZ.
- 2) To assess the adequacy and enforcement of Cambodian laws to prevent and address human trafficking and labour exploitation within the SSEZ.
- 3) To propose concrete and actionable policy recommendations to mitigate the risks of human trafficking and promote ethical and sustainable worker practices within the SSEZ.

3. Materials and Methods

The materials for this research consisted of two primary categories: primary data collected directly by the researcher and secondary data obtained from existing sources. The primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with six key informants, strategically selected using purposive sampling. The six people in the sample represent institutions that have intervened in the formulation and implementation of policies, NGOs involved in protection activities and promoting improvements to protect workers' rights, and parties that have the capability to address the needs of the SEZ issue in Cambodia.

Participant A is an Officer from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Cambodia, who is involved in labor migration, focusing on improving the effectiveness of migrant worker protection and ensuring safe and ethical recruitment, as well as protecting and respecting migrant worker rights. Participant B is an Officer from the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers' Democratic Union (C.CAWDU), who, as a worker representative in the textile and manufacturing sectors, has been vocal about workers' needs in policy direction. Participant C is the Outreach Director of the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), which has been working to protect rights such as economic and social rights in Cambodia, and has been promoting respect for these rights. Participant D is the Programme Officer of the Center for Alliance of Labour and Human Rights (CENTRAL), Cambodia, which is involved in empowering workers in transparent and accountable governance of labour and human rights, who can also provide an overview of how targeted programmes are useful in improving workers' protection and rights. Participant E is an officer of the National Union Alliance Chamber of Cambodia (NACC), who has contributed a lot to protecting and promoting freedom in the labor sector, such as in the living conditions of the community, especially in terms of workers' salaries. Participant F is the Counsellor Officer of the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, who has coordinated a lot with the Cambodian government and representatives of other countries regarding

migrant workers who experience indications of forced labor or human trafficking in Cambodia. Each participant possessed over five years of professional experience, ensuring that the data collected is rich and informed by substantial practical expertise.

The secondary materials included a comprehensive analysis of policy documents, Cambodian labor laws (such as the 1997 Labor Law and its amendments, the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation (2008), and subordinate regulations like Prakas on minimum wage), as well as reports from non-governmental organizations and scholarly publications. This document analysis provided critical context on the regulatory framework governing the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ) and the operationalization of the Shenzhen Model, which aims to transform Sihanoukville into a multi-purpose SEZ. The methods employed in this study were designed as a qualitative case study to investigate the complex phenomena of labor exploitation and human trafficking within the SSEZ. The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide, which allowed focused conversations while providing flexibility to explore emerging themes based on participants' responses. All interviews were conducted with informed consent. The data collection process was tailored to the study's objectives and acknowledged significant methodological limitations; specifically, because a statistically significant sample was unfeasible, the research did not involve direct interviews with workers but relied on the expert testimonies of institutional stakeholders. The subsequent data analysis followed a systematic thematic analysis approach. This process began with the accurate transcription of interviews, followed by repeated readings to identify initial impressions. The data was then coded and organized into major themes and sub-themes, such as "Shenzhen Model Features", "Cambodian Regulations on Human Trafficking and Labor Exploitation", and "Policy Recommendations," which relate to the research objectives. This rigorous process ensured a nuanced understanding of the systemic failures and power dynamics within the SSEZ.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The findings revealed that the model's adoption systematically created an environment conducive to traditional labor exploitation and a parallel illicit economy of forced criminality, while Cambodian legal frameworks proved inadequate these challenges. The findings are divided into four parts. The first part will discuss the Shenzhen Model in Sihanoukville. The second part will identify the gaps in enforcement and systemic barriers to justice within Cambodian law. The third part will examine the rise of forced criminality. The fourth part will point to the foundations for reform.

1) The Shenzhen Model in Sihanoukville

The research found that the core tenets of the Shenzhen Model, as adopted in the SSEZ, directly fostered systemic labor exploitation. The primary driver was the overwhelming prioritization of attracting and retaining FDI, which systematically sidelined labor protections and created a significant power imbalance. As Participant B explained:

The model's focus on flexible labor markets, characterized by temporary contracts and subcontracting, has been widely cited as demonstrating the government's failure to prevent the weakening of worker protections and the enabling of labor exploitation. SSEZ prioritizes economic efficiency and foreign investment, often at the expense of investments needed for stable employment and social security. This model is prioritized over other policies that the government has decided in the last 10 years (Participant B, Personal Communication, March 10, 2025).

This investor-centric approach manifested in several ways. First, the proliferation of temporary contracts and complex subcontracting chains, a hallmark of the model, deliberately obscured accountability. This left workers vulnerable to widespread wage theft and unsafe working conditions. Participant A recounted that workers reported going months unpaid due to cost pressures from the top, a situation that often escalated into debt traps, coercion and passport confiscation. Participant A explained more on this point by stating:

Many people came to me saying that they had not been paid in full for several months. Some said that it was all because there were cuts and cost pressures from the top, others said that it was all

because the targets were not met so that payments from consumers were also delayed. The worst situation arose when multiple factors combined, leading individuals to pressure workers through debt traps, coercion and passport confiscation (Participant A, Personal Communication, March 12, 2025).

In addition, unionization was actively suppressed. Participant E reported that the 2016 Trade Union Law, with its requirement for a union to represent 20% of the workplace to gain recognition, acted as a significant barrier. Meanwhile, employers used short-term contracts and fear of non-renewal to prevent stable union formation.

Furthermore, socio-cultural factors exacerbated these systemic issues. Cultural norms of deference to authority and conflict avoidance created a reluctance among workers to challenge exploitative conditions, with many enduring unpaid overtime to preserve workplace harmony and job security. Participant C explained more on this point by stating:

Workers in SSEZ frequently endure unpaid overtime but refrain from reporting violations to preserve workplace harmony and job security. This silence is compounded by familial financial pressures, as many workers are migrants supporting dependents through remittances (Participant C, Personal Communication, March 6, 2025).

This environment, combined with a lack of adequate social safety nets, rendered workers particularly vulnerable to deceptive recruitment and trafficking.

2) Ineffectiveness of Cambodian Law: Gaps and Systemic Barriers

The study determined that despite Cambodia's legal framework for human trafficking and labor rights, including the Labour Law (1997, amended 2019) and the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation (2008) (which is formally aligned with international standards), its enforcement within the SSEZ was critically ineffective, creating a regime of impunity for exploiters. A significant gap was identified between the law on paper and its application on the ground. Participant B reported that labor inspections were severely under-resourced, leading to fewer than 20% of required audits in SSEZ annually. Participant B added more information to this in the following statement:

Labor inspectors conducted fewer than 20% of required audits in SSEZ annually, leaving violations like wage theft and unsafe conditions unchecked. Enforcement is further diluted by the government's prioritization of FDI retention over worker rights (Participant B, Personal Communication, March 10, 2025).

Participant A also commented on the lack of labor inspections:

Power imbalances are exacerbated by under-resourced labor inspections, only 150 inspectors monitor 1,300 factories nationally, and unionization rates are below 5% due to employer retaliation. These conditions mirror early Shenzhen practices, where lax regulations prioritized investor interests over worker dignity (Participant A, Personal Communication, March 12, 2025).

This enforcement failure was compounded by corruption and systemic complicity. Law enforcement agencies tasked with investigating trafficking and exploitation are often compromised. As Participant C explained, some individuals in SSEZ accept bribes to overlook indicators of trafficking such as passport confiscation and debt bondage which fostered a deep distrust in authorities among workers (Participant C, Personal Communication, March 6, 2025). The legal framework itself also contained critical gaps; the anti-trafficking legislation was found to have ambiguous definitions, which prioritize sexual exploitation over labor trafficking, leaving victims of forced labor without adequate protection (ILO, 2023).

Consequently, access to justice for workers is severely limited. The research identified four key systemic barriers: 1) fear of retaliation and job loss, 2) legal illiteracy and language barriers, 3) corruption and judicial bias, and 4) the bureaucratic complexity and cost of legal processes (Participants A, C, & D, Personal Communication, 2025). These barriers collectively ensure that investor interests are prioritized over worker dignity.

3) The Rise of Forced Criminality

A central finding of this research was the emergence of large-scale online scam operations within the SSEZ as a severe and distinct form of human trafficking for forced criminality. There have been several attempts since 2016 to shut down gambling operations, particularly online gambling, which is officially banned in Cambodia. These attempts have only resulted in their relocating and adapting, often alongside the growing influence of organized crime groups. For example, between 2014 and 2019, the number of casinos in Cambodia increased from 57 in 2014 to 150 in 2019 (Participant F, Counsellor of the Embassy of Indonesia to Cambodia, Personal Communication, March 5th, 2025).

The mechanisms of this exploitation are sophisticated. Victims involved in human trafficking cases are usually people who have limited access to education and hold low-paying jobs. However, a new phenomenon has emerged where victims are highly educated and professional. Many victims come from all over the ASEAN region and China (Kattamuri & Klein, 2025). Victims are typically lured through fake job advertisements on social media platforms like Facebook and Telegram (Participant F, Personal Communication, March 5, 2025). Participant A described how victims faced passport confiscation after they were subjected to a regime of imprisonment and coercion, confinement in heavily guarded complexes, and endured inhumane treatment (Participant A, Personal Communication, March 12, 2025). They were then forced to perpetrate complex online financial scams under force.

The law enforcement response to this crisis was found to be fundamentally inadequate. A critical failure is the lack of a formal victim identification process. As Participant F stated, "There is no formal victim identification process whatsoever. Victims are just sent back very quickly" (Participant F, Personal Communication, March 5, 2025). Furthermore, the task of investigating these compounds was delegated to an Anti-Gambling Task Force that possessed a huge gap in human trafficking knowledge and skills. In addition, cross-border cooperation is also minimal, with Participant C confirming that they have not had joint operations for forced criminality (Participant C, Personal Communication, March 6, 2025). This lack of coordination, combined with alleged corruption where officials would tip off human traffickers to escape, allowed the criminal networks to operate with high levels of impunity (Lazarus et al., 2025).

4) The Foundations for Reform

The investigation into the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ) revealed not only the depth of the systemic failures but also the urgent need for a fundamentally new approach to governance and development. The findings pointed to the existence of international and regional frameworks that could serve as a basis for reform, while simultaneously demonstrating that the current adoption of the Shenzhen Model in Sihanoukville is fundamentally incompatible with the protection of worker rights, necessitating its significant recalibration.

Findings highlighted that Cambodia is a signatory to key international and regional instruments that provide a normative foundation for combating trafficking and protecting workers. The UN Protocol on Trafficking in Persons and the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) were identified as the cornerstones upon which Cambodia could develop a more robust legal framework (Rafferty, 2021; Rösner, 2025). Furthermore, the findings noted the existence of multilateral and bilateral cooperation mechanisms, such as the Cambodian National Committee for Combating Trafficking in Persons and the Bali Process, which are designed to facilitate cross-border collaboration (Lelliott, 2021).

Simultaneously, Participant D revealed initial, localized attempts to adapt the Shenzhen Model, in particular pilot programs within the SSEZ that sought to link investor incentives, such as tax breaks, to compliance with fair recruitment practices. Participant D also noted that such initiatives had shown promise, with one pilot program reportedly reducing incidents of debt bondage by 30% (Participant D, Personal Communication, March 8, 2025). These findings suggest that a rights-based evolution of the model is not only possible but could yield tangible benefits, aligning economic incentives with labor protections.

Despite these foundations for reform, the current trajectory is unsustainable and ethically untenable. The findings reveal that the selective adoption of the Shenzhen Model in the SSEZ has created a self-reinforcing system of exploitation. The SSEZ has successfully adopted the model's economic tenets while failing to integrate the progressive labor regulations or institutional capacity that underpinned Shenzhen's later development.

Participant E captured this imperative for change by stating: "The Shenzhen Model's legacy need not be one of exploitation. By centering migrant workers as stakeholders, not just labor inputs, the SSEZ can redefine economic success" (Participant E, Personal Communication, March 11, 2025).

4.2 Discussion

The findings from the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ) present a critical case study in the perils of selectively adopting a foreign development model. This research concludes that the adoption of the Shenzhen Model in Sihanoukville has created a self-reinforcing system of exploitation, where the drive for rapid, export-led growth has systematically marginalized worker protections and created fertile ground for both traditional labor abuses and a modern, parallel illicit economy. The analysis moves beyond diagnosing isolated issues to reveal how governance structures, economic priorities, and criminal opportunism interact to produce a uniquely severe human rights crisis.

This study concludes that the Shenzhen Model's core tenets, as implemented in the SSEZ, are not merely compatible with exploitation but actively foster it. The model's reliance on deregulation, a flexible labor market, and a singular focus on attracting FDI has been operationalized in a context devoid of the robust regulatory counterweights that eventually emerged in Shenzhen itself. According to Quattrone & Chen (2023), a careful replication of the strengths of the Shenzhen Model's economic pillars (FDI, export-oriented manufacturing, and a business environment) reveals weaknesses in the accompanying socio-political and regulatory context. Shenzhen's success was underpinned by a strong, centralized state capable of enforcing its will and regulating its own markets.

The findings of this study suggest that the SSEZ adopted a version of the model that was at odds with its socio-political context and its accompanying regulations. This has resulted in a deliberate regulatory arbitrariness, where the zone's primary competitive advantage becomes its ability to offer a low-cost, low-protection environment. The systematic suppression of unionization, the proliferation of precarious subcontracting, and the chronic under-resourcing of labor inspections are not oversights but embedded features of this development strategy. As the data firmly establishes, this creates a power imbalance where migrant workers, often unaware of their rights, face heightened risks of wage theft and unsafe conditions with limited legal recourse.

The findings of this study suggest that exploitation is a feature, not a bug. The success of the SSEZ as an investment hub is partly based, as promoted by both Cambodia and China, on the creation of a low-cost and regulatory-free environment. The suppression of independent labor unions and alleged government involvement is not simply negligence but are the foundation of an economic model that tolerates, and even encourages, severe labor exploitation. This aligns with Mares & Young (2024) who explain that economic models in developing contexts often institutionalize labor precarity. Moreover, the findings of this study contribute to the critique of the law enforcement gap as a political condition. It frames weak labor law enforcement not simply as a capacity issue. Evidence of high-level corruption and the active persecution of whistleblowers and rescuers suggests that the lack of law enforcement is systemic and serves the interests of powerful political and business elites. The pervasive subcontracting system is not an accidental byproduct but a structural feature that intentionally obscures accountability, allowing lead firms to benefit from cheap labor while evading direct responsibility. This environment, combined with socio-cultural norms of deference, critically undermines worker agency, transforming legal protections from enforceable rights into theoretical promises (Mares & Young, 2024).

A central contribution of this research is its foregrounding of forced criminality as a defining labor issue within the SSEZ. The emergence of large-scale online scam operations represents a qualitative escalation in the nature of exploitation, moving beyond the well-documented risks of traditional manufacturing. It reveals that the very regulatory gaps and governance insularity designed to attract legitimate FDI have been co-opted by transnational criminal networks. These syndicates have leveraged the zone's infrastructure to operate a 21st-century form of human trafficking, where victims are exploited not for manual labor but for their digital labor in perpetrating complex fraud.

Calabrese, Borodyna, & Nadin (2022) argue that systemic flaws, such as law enforcement's lack of specialized training, break the chain of accountability from the start, rendering anti-trafficking laws meaningless and creating an asymmetrical scenario where agile traffickers outpace a bureaucratic state. Theoretically, this case

critically contributes to policy transfer theory by demonstrating that the transfer of a development model is not a technical process but a political one; the selective adoption of components like deregulation and flexibility, which align with the interests of powerful elites, occurs without the host country having the institutional capacity or political will to enforce a social contract (Calabrese, Borodyna, & Nadin, 2022). Consequently, in contexts of high-power asymmetry, the Shenzhen Model's emphasis on efficiency actively corrodes regulatory integrity, creating a governance vacuum filled by corporate opportunism and organized crime, which reframes the problem from accidental neglect to the active, systemic prioritization of capital over human security.

Finally, this discussion foreshadows the imperative for a multi-pronged and multi-scalar response, setting the stage for the subsequent recommendations. The analysis makes it clear that a state-centric regulatory approach is insufficient to address these complex challenges. The failures in victim identification, the lack of specialized law enforcement training, and the impediments to cross-border cooperation all point to the need for collaborative governance. This logically necessitates certain policy interventions, which are prefigured here: the critical role of multi-stakeholder initiatives that leverage civil society for monitoring and victim support; the indispensability of regional cooperation through bodies like ASEAN to combat cross-border crime; and the urgent need to engage the private sector, particularly technology companies, in disrupting the digital infrastructure of trafficking. By framing the solution set in this way, the discussion argues that mitigating the risks of the Shenzhen Model requires moving beyond traditional regulation towards innovative governance that embeds accountability at multiple levels.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the adoption of the Shenzhen Model in the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ) has created a self-reinforcing system of exploitation, where the pursuit of rapid and export-led growth has systematically marginalized worker protections. The findings reveal that the model's adoption in Cambodia has cultivated a fertile environment for both traditional labor abuses and a modern, parallel illicit economy, fundamentally challenging the zone's purported developmental benefits.

The core of the problem lies in a critical design flaw. The SSEZ successfully adopted the Shenzhen Model's economic tenets (deregulation, tax incentives, and a flexible labor market), while failing to integrate the robust regulatory and institutional safeguards that eventually emerged in Shenzhen. This has resulted in a deliberate regulatory arbitrariness where the zone's primary competitive advantage becomes its low-cost, low-protection environment. This prioritization of FDI above all else has led to dangerous power imbalances. Migrant workers, often arriving with little knowledge of their rights, face wage theft and unsafe working conditions, issues that are ignored to retain investor interest. The model's reliance on temporary contracts and widespread subcontracting further fragments responsibility, making accountability elusive and undermining collective bargaining power.

A central finding of this study is the escalation of exploitation through the rise of large-scale online scam operations. The very regulatory gaps and governance detachment designed to attract legitimate FDI have been co-opted by transnational criminal networks. These syndicates have turned the SSEZ into a hub for trafficking for forced criminality, a severe form of exploitation where victims are coerced into perpetrating complex cyber-fraud. This phenomenon represents a fundamental misrepresentation of the SEZ concept, revealing how zones of exceptional economic activity can become zones of severe human rights abuse when governance fails.

Furthermore, the research concludes that Cambodia's existing legal framework, while theoretically aligned with international standards, is rendered ineffective by systemic enforcement failures. The gap between law and practice in the SSEZ is vast, hampered by under-resourced labor inspections, corruption, and the inclination towards retaining foreign investment at all costs. The systematic suppression of unionization through restrictive laws and employer retaliation further breaks workers' ability to advocate for themselves. Compounding these issues are socio-cultural norms of deference and conflict avoidance, which, while encouraging harmony in other contexts, create a suffocating silence that allows exploitation to flourish unchecked.

In summary, the legacy of the Shenzhen Model in the SSEZ is one where economic efficiency has been prioritized over human dignity. The model's deregulatory core has entrenched exploitation, and effective mitigation requires not merely technical adjustments but a fundamental re-evaluation of governance priorities to close legal loopholes, resource enforcement adequately, and leverage multi-stakeholder coalitions.

5.2 Suggested Areas of Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several critical areas for future scholarly inquiry. First, a comparative analysis of different Cambodian SEZs would be highly valuable. Research could investigate how varying management models, investor nationalities, and industrial focuses impact labor conditions, unionization success, and the prevalence of illicit activities. Such a study would provide a more nuanced understanding of the demand conditions in the region and the role of the state in shaping a competitive yet ethical industrial policy, moving beyond the singular case of the SSEZ.

Given the central role of technology in both facilitating and combating the crimes documented here, future research should delve deeper into the digital ecosystem of trafficking. This includes a groundwork analysis of how specific social media platforms and encrypted messaging applications are used for recruitment and operation control, as well as an evaluation of the effectiveness of tech company interventions to remove fraudulent content. Concurrently, research into the mechanisms of transnational repression and the specific role of corrupt officials in protecting these illicit operations is urgently needed to understand the full spectrum of governance failure.

This work highlights the fundamental tension between promoting economic development and persistent worker exploitation. Future research should, therefore, systematically evaluate existing and potential social protection mechanisms. Investigating the effectiveness of social assistance programs and exploring how a strengthened social safety net could reduce worker vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation would provide critical evidence for policymakers seeking to build a development model that truly prioritizes human dignity alongside economic growth.

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