



# Strategic Risk Outlook

2025-26





Strategic Risk Outlook 2025–2026

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## Executive Summary

The Strategic Risk Outlook 2025—2026 is a broad thematic report highlighting key global risk trends, their consequential impacts on both modern slavery and human trafficking patterns, and the risks they pose to the operating context of responding agencies.

Drawing on key risk insights from credible risk leaders including the World Economic Forum, Chatham House, and the Munich Security Conference, among others, this report synthesises complex global phenomena into tangible risks and recommendations for practitioners working in counter-trafficking and related fields.

While this report may provide a relatively bleak outlook, given that risk is inherently focused on the negative impact of uncertainty, it is important to consider the positive impact of good prediction and projection, which together facilitate professional foresight and informed strategic thinking. Risk can also be a positive force, as global uncertainty opens new opportunities for counter-trafficking stakeholders to innovate for greater impact.

This report underscores the interconnected nature of risks across security, governance, financial, legal, reputational, and operational domains; and seeks to support organisations in anticipating, mitigating and preparing for external changes on the horizon. This report should serve to empower practitioners in their understanding and response to the most critical global themes of uncertainty and support informed decision-making in global counter-trafficking efforts.

The five most critical risks for 2025 are:

1. **Conflict & violence** — ongoing conflict and geopolitical tensions are exacerbating humanitarian crises. Armed violence in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, is increasing displacement and vulnerability to all forms of modern slavery and human trafficking. Governments are prioritising defence spending over humanitarian aid, reducing overall support for programmes that aim to tackle the root vulnerabilities and drivers of modern slavery and human trafficking.
2. **Geoeconomic hostility** — protectionism and nationalism are reshaping global economic policies, and the shifting geopolitical landscape is impacting global cooperation. Trade wars, reductions in foreign aid, and increased migration restrictions may heighten vulnerabilities, pushing marginalised communities toward informal and exploitative labour. A corresponding breakdown in multilateralism may further hinder global cooperation to solve complex cross border issues, including human trafficking.
3. **Climate disasters** — Extreme weather events will continue to accelerate displacement, food insecurity, economic instability and increase conflict. As people are forced into precarious situations, traffickers will continue to exploit these climate-related vulnerabilities. Policy shifts away from climate action practitioners also undermine regulatory protections in high-risk industries which may exacerbate the intersection between vulnerability, exploitation and climate disaster.
4. **Political discord** — Rising polarisation and misinformation are fuelling societal shifts that may impact social protections and certain elements of global anti-trafficking efforts. Hostile views towards migration, social protections and human rights are likely to reduce resilience of many at-risk of exploitation and in some cases limit their access to support. Misinformation may distort public perceptions of modern slavery and human trafficking, exacerbating polarised views as the issue becomes conflated with other issues like irregular migration, organised crime and national security.
5. **Cyber Security** — The rise of cyber threats, AI, online exploitation, and scam trafficking is creating new risks for human trafficking and the operations of counter-trafficking organisations. Cyber-attacks on agencies are increasing, while disparity between large and small organisations is exposing gaps in cyber security and resilience, leaving critical infrastructure and services vulnerable to disruption. Similarly, the increase in technology-facilitated trafficking is exposing a lag in policy-responsiveness to tackle emerging threats.

In this volatile environment, organisations must adopt dynamic risk management strategies to mitigate threats, ensure staff and beneficiary security, maintain operational continuity and protect themselves from reputational hazards. By anticipating and responding to these evolving challenges, counter-trafficking efforts can remain resilient despite increasing global uncertainty.

# Global Risks

## 1. Conflict & violence

Active conflict remains at the highest level in decades. Geopolitical, economic and environmental divergence is likely to protract and exacerbate hostilities, further threatening global peace and security. While state-based conflict remains a critical threat, all conflicts hold destabilising consequences for the geopolitical order, economy and human security, beyond the theatres in which they occur.

In the Middle East, Israel's ceasefire with Palestine and Lebanon remains fragile.<sup>1</sup> In the Ukraine a window of opportunity may open to negotiate an end to the conflict, with forces from both sides exhausted after three years of high-intensity warfare.<sup>2</sup> The role of the United States and Europe in negotiations on all fronts will prove critical for achieving a sustainable peace.

National security has become a growing priority with states shifting focus towards strengthening defence, safeguarding their sovereignty, and focusing on domestic matters. It is expected that states will increasingly take security into their own hands through increased national expenditure on defence, and unilateral arms proliferation.<sup>3</sup> Conflict is also likely to increase the threat of cyber warfare and espionage threatening state agencies, national infrastructure and key services.

Simultaneously, declining trust in multilateralism may reduce the strength of international law and agreements, leading some states to withdraw or reduce support in favour of non-traditional security alliances.<sup>4</sup> The influence of international security institutions such as NATO may be stretched,<sup>5</sup> creating opportunities for Russia and China to increase their influence. Plurilateral and regional alliances are likely to form, weakening Western dominance in soft power across international affairs.

Of growing concern are smaller conflicts and flashpoints in several states in the Sahel such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger, many of whom continue to suffer the fallout of military coups and wider instability.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, severe violence in

Sudan<sup>7</sup> and South Sudan<sup>8</sup> is intensifying one of the world's largest humanitarian displacement crises. Tensions in Ethiopia,<sup>9</sup> Eritrea and Somalia may reach boiling point, and escalating conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo<sup>10</sup> is likely to impact neighbouring countries. Tensions in the South China Sea could escalate into confrontations between Chinese forces and Taiwan<sup>11</sup> or the Philippines.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Latin America<sup>13</sup> is likely to see an uptick in conflict and violence between law enforcement or the military, and criminal gangs or cartels, as governments vow a 'tough on crime' approach.<sup>14</sup>

Conflict invariably deepens and protracts humanitarian crises. Immediate threats include direct attacks, bombings, drone strikes, and gender-based violence. Many are often subject to severe human rights abuses, such as persecution, torture, and arbitrary detention — especially where violence carries ethnic motives, targeting people of specific ethnic groups.<sup>15</sup> The destruction of homes, schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure cuts access to life-saving support. The loss of livelihoods drives acute economic vulnerability, and the destruction of food systems places entire regions at risk of food insecurity and famine.<sup>16</sup>

Conflict forces millions to flee, either as internally displaced persons or as refugees seeking safety across borders.<sup>17</sup> Forced internal displacement and mass migration across borders can drive individuals, families, or entire communities into greater insecurity, increasing their risk of exposure to people smuggling, modern slavery and human trafficking, and exploitation.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, individuals may resort to illicit means to cross borders, relying on people smugglers and traffickers for assistance.<sup>19</sup> This significantly heightens the risk of exploitation as people depend on organised criminal gangs for safety. Many states lack the infrastructure, capacity, political will, or policies to uphold the international legal protection framework that guarantees rights to those seeking

asylum and refugees, deepening the risk of human trafficking and expanding vulnerability to a wider population.

Armed groups often perpetrate human trafficking in a variety of ways as part of their belligerence. This includes recruiting new combatants, perpetrating sexual violence and generating illicit revenue streams to fund activities.<sup>20</sup> This includes enslavement; child soldiers; sexual slavery, organ trafficking, forced labour, fraudulent or deceptive recruitment into armed groups for servitude or military service.<sup>21</sup> The threat of such exploitation is also used as a method of exerting fear and control over particular populations in conflict environments.<sup>22</sup>

It is generally expected that governments will change their aid commitments in alignment with their economic policy objectives, but 2025 is likely to present a more rapid shift in a shorter timeframe than anticipated. Many states in the Global North will continue to cut foreign aid in favour of national security and defence spending. Such drastic aid reductions not only affect short-term development, but also hinder long-term recovery in conflict zones, prolonging instability and vulnerability beyond de-escalation. This is likely to

result in an increase in issues relating to peace, conflict and security, as foreign aid reductions leave gaps in programmes and informal, militant or criminal operations begin to emerge in the vacuum.<sup>23</sup>

Governments that maintain aid commitments may prioritise short-term humanitarian relief and immediate re-building, over longer-term programmes that directly address human trafficking or its root causes. This trend will likely further reduce funding for anti-human trafficking programmes, both through government grants and the decline of intermediary funding organisations. The remaining funding will likely face greater competition, with split pots dividing smaller amounts among more recipients. Some funds may be restricted to projects aligning with humanitarian or national security priorities in high-risk areas.

The ripple effects of conflict increase the risks for those on the frontlines of human trafficking responses. As resources become scarcer, operating environments become more dangerous, and access to vulnerable populations more difficult, organisations will need to navigate an increasingly complex and volatile landscape.

### Individuals, communities and those with lived experience of human trafficking and modern slavery are likely to face several risks resulting from rising conflict:

- Communities in conflict zones are at increased risk of harm due to warfare, strikes, explosive ordnance, roadblocks/checkpoints, kidnap and ransom, and illegal detention.
- Communities displaced by conflict either as internally displaced persons (IDPs) or cross-border refugees could be at greater risk of trafficking and exploitation by criminal actors and people smugglers.
- Refugees and IDPs are likely to be at increased risk as governments reduce cooperation and support for resettlement schemes.
- Children and adults may be trafficked by armed groups and exploited in a various forms of exploitation.
- The loss of livelihoods and the destruction of food systems drives acute economic vulnerability and places communities at risk of food insecurity.
- Destruction of civil infrastructure like schools, hospitals, and transportation systems can limit access to services.
- Currency instability impacts household income and resilience to economic shocks.
- Reduced funding for social programmes harms societal resilience and increases exploitation risks.



## Organisations working in human trafficking face several significant risks resulting from rising conflict:

### Security

- Safety and security threats for personnel and beneficiaries in situ and while travelling. Risks include violence, unexploded ordnance, informal militia control, roadblocks/checkpoints, kidnap and ransom, and illegal detention. These dangers are especially heightened for those with ethnic characteristics that may make them direct targets of belligerent actors if applicable to the context of the conflict.

### Operational

- Operational restrictions imposed by governments or rebel factions may limit aid distribution, interfere with programme activities, or directly target organisations due to perceived political or ideological affiliations.
- The emotional toll of working in conflict zones can lead to burnout and stress for frontline personnel, as well as causing direct and vicarious trauma.
- Supply chain disruptions may reduce local availability of critical programme resources, driving up procurement costs and worsening financial strain as overall funding declines.
- The destruction of infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and buildings (including schools and hospitals) can severely hinder access to beneficiaries and disrupt community programmes. Communication systems may also become unreliable, making coordination between international headquarters, country offices, and field staff increasingly difficult.
- Community partners and collaborators may become less reliable or harder to access, particularly if they fall under the influence or coercion of conflicting factions.

### Financial

- Governments may increasingly redirect aid budgets to urgent crises, particularly national security and defence spending. Even among those still committed to international aid, a growing focus on humanitarian relief and immediate rebuilding may leave longer-term anti-trafficking efforts with reduced financial support.
- Reduced funding will make it harder for organisations to cover the costs of staff safety and security in high-risk environments.<sup>24</sup>
- Diminishing government grants and the closure of intermediary funding organisations may leave remaining funds subject to greater competition and ‘split pots’ Some funds may also be restricted to projects aligning or intersecting with crisis priorities, limiting support for dedicated anti-trafficking work.
- Currency instability, including rapidly changing government policies, will make it harder to plan, budget and allocate funds effectively.
- Individual donors may redirect their giving away from modern slavery and human trafficking programmes towards immediate humanitarian relief efforts.

### Strategic

- As crises escalate, global governance mechanisms may weaken. This shift could impact collective efforts to combat human trafficking and modern slavery, further isolating the issue from global policy agendas.

## Global Risks

### 2. Geoeconomic hostility

Following a turbulent few years, the global economy has begun to show signs of stabilisation, though challenges remain.<sup>25</sup> The aftermath of the pandemic, combined with supply chain disruptions, rising inflation, and geopolitical tensions exacerbated by the national security agenda, has tested economies worldwide. Many nations have implemented recovery measures such as stimulus packages to boost growth, and while inflation has eased, the road to full recovery remains uncertain.

With more right-wing political positions gaining ground in polls across several leadership elections worldwide in 2025, the stability of national economies is certain to sit at the forefront of key electoral campaigns.<sup>26</sup> As such, many political candidates and leaders will seek to answer the question of blame for the economic downturn. As such, they may scrutinise the policies of previous administrations, while also projecting suspicion or antipathy towards the global status quo. It is likely that immigration and global trade will feature heavily as a key reason for economic harm. As a result, 2025 will likely see a rise in geoeconomic confrontation and trade wars<sup>27</sup> as states begin to decouple from institutions and agreements of cooperation, closing borders to focus on their economic interests. These shifts reflect the rising influence of both protectionism and nativism.

Protectionism i.e. the practice of shielding a country’s domestic industries from foreign competition,<sup>28</sup> is likely to increase in some of the world’s most influential economies. The United States is expected to continue implementing protectionist policies.<sup>29</sup> Tariffs on countries like Mexico, Canada, Europe, and China, are likely to trigger reactive countermeasures. The ensuing geoeconomic confrontations are likely to impact global economic mobility and disrupt the status quo of supply chains. A shift towards transactional diplomacy —

where economic relationships are based on shorter-term national interests rather than long-term alliances — is likely, with new economic relationships emerging outside of traditional alliances and groups such as BRICS gaining strength and influence.<sup>30</sup>

Overseas spending will become subject to even greater scrutiny as governments seek to ease the burden on the domestic taxpayer. Of note, is a certain reduction in foreign aid spending for work not in the interests of national security or economic gain. The corresponding cuts to Global North aid and development spending across the Global South are certain to disrupt the economic growth of several key nations, particularly in Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, which rely on such support. The soft power vacuum left behind is likely to diminish Western influence across key regions and open opportunities for increased Chinese and Russian investment and expansion of soft power.<sup>31</sup> While these shifts may remain primarily economic in the short term, they could trigger longer-term changes in governance and military cooperation, potentially leading to more serious security concerns on the horizon.

As protectionist policies disrupt global trade and create barriers to commerce, it is possible that these measures will inadvertently fuel an increase in illicit activities. Restrictions on legal imports and exports may push certain goods into the black market, where they can be traded without the burdens of tariffs or regulations. Smuggling networks and organised crime are likely to thrive in such an environment, exploiting gaps created by official trade barriers. In response, governments may simultaneously implement stricter migration policies to mitigate such concerns, further exacerbating political tensions as national security and criminal justice challenges become increasingly intertwined with economic policy.



Nativism i.e. the policy of protecting the interests of native-born or established inhabitants against migration, is likely to rise alongside protectionism, as governments increasingly target migration as a threat to economic stability and national security. By considering irregular immigration a burden on the job market, the welfare state, and national identity, a vast collection of states will implement much more stringent controls on both legal and illegal migration.<sup>32</sup>

In the United States, immigration is likely to remain elevated to the national security agenda, and the national emergency at the southern border is expected to continue.<sup>33</sup> In the United Kingdom, a counter-terrorism-style task force will remain mandated to tackle illegal boat crossings via the English Channel, and the migration restrictions from the previous government remain relatively unchanged.<sup>34</sup> Potentially of even broader impact is a wave of nativist policy spreading across Europe, with many countries proposing more restrictive and hostile positions toward migrants, potentially subduing the principles of the free-movement Schengen Area.<sup>35</sup>

While intending to protect the domestic industries and job markets, the constraints placed on migrant access to domestic labour markets, compounded by the exclusion of migrants from welfare support systems, are likely to drive many migrant workers, as well as those arriving irregularly, towards informal, undocumented, or illicit work.<sup>36</sup> In the conditions of higher-risk or precarious labour opportunities, migrants will be placed at increased risk of exploitation by corrupt employers, third-party recruiters, or organised criminals who exploit these vulnerabilities. Those seeking regular and documented work may also face restrictive short-term visas bonded to the sponsorship of an employer, greatly increasing the risks of labour exploitation.

Stringent immigration laws and enforcement measures intended to deter migration are likely to inadvertently reduce the likelihood that migrant victims of exploitation and human trafficking will come forward, for fear of detention, prosecution, and deportation. This fear is common and frequently exploited by human traffickers and exploiters to coerce compliance. The additional barring of migrants from accessing welfare safety nets may increase vulnerability,<sup>37</sup> as these services become reserved for select groups, or revert to elements of conditionality on engagement with criminal prosecutions.

While many stakeholders may differ in their views regarding migration policy, the normalisation of more extreme narratives that demonstrate xenophobia, racism, and strong anti-migrant sentiment, may further marginalise diaspora communities, hurt efforts towards social cohesion, and create an environment where migrants are seen as 'others'. In this context, the vulnerability of these communities to exploitation and human trafficking is likely to grow, as perpetrators begin to prey on the social isolation and stigmatisation of their targets, exploiting the growing societal divides.<sup>38</sup>

The convergence of economic, political, and security interests in global governance is likely to create a more challenging landscape for anti-trafficking efforts. With increasing national restrictions, funding limitations, and political barriers, individuals, communities and those with lived experience are likely to face more challenges in accessing support. Similarly, organisations may find it harder to safeguard and support victims in an environment of rising hostility.

## Individuals, communities and those with lived experience of human trafficking and modern slavery are likely to face several risks resulting from rising geoeconomic hostility:

- The increased cost of global trade may drive some industries to further cut labour costs in an attempt to maintain profit margins. This is likely to lead to an increase in exploitation and slavery-like practices in unregulated or irregular sectors
- Diaspora communities may face increased public hostility, reducing social cohesion and placing many at risk of exclusion, stigma, and harm.
- Restrictive employment policies may drive migrant workers towards informal, undocumented, or illicit work.
- Restrictive visas may tie migrant work to the sponsorship of an employer, greatly increasing the risks of labour exploitation.
- Rights and protections for victims and survivors in international legal frameworks may be eroded, ignored or removed from domestic legislation.
- Stringent immigration enforcement measures may reduce the likelihood that those in exploitation or human trafficking will come forward, for fear of detention, prosecution, and deportation.
- Government support services may become reserved for select groups, or contingent on the cooperation with criminal prosecutions.
- The inclusion of migrant survivors in national human trafficking discourse may decline due to anti-migration policies and sentiments.
- Smuggling networks and organised crime groups are likely to exploit gaps in trade and become emboldened in their operations. This may extend to human trafficking.

## Agencies working with victims of human trafficking, especially migrants, could face several significant risks resulting from geoeconomic hostility:

### Strategic

- Collaboration with government agencies may become more difficult or adversarial, particularly if organisations are perceived to be acting against national policy agendas, under foreign influences, or are publicly critical of emerging policies
- Human trafficking may be unduly conflated with immigration, deflecting from domestic incidents, and fuelling misinformation about the demographics of both victims and perpetrators,
- Shifting funding and power dynamics in multilateral institutions and diplomatic agencies may cause personnel changes or attrition, disrupting ongoing policy advocacy efforts.
- Gaps in multilateral cooperation in respect of cross-border human trafficking initiatives are likely to grow, and capitalised upon by transnational organised criminal operations.

### Legal & Regulatory

- Legal scrutiny may intensify for organisations seen to contradict national security or domestic policies, especially if working with migrant victims and survivors.

### Financial

- Governments may cut or redirect funding away from programmes or services that do not align with domestic economic policy priorities.

### Reputational

- Some voices may perceive anti-trafficking as supporting migrants and undermining national interests. This may make it harder to build rapport with key actors and the public, creating reputational dilemmas.

### Operational

- Restrictions on the employment of migrants may hinder recruitment, especially for outreach roles requiring language skills or lived experience from migrant or diaspora communities.
- Import tariffs, supply chain disruptions, and trade restrictions may limit access to essential programme resources and raise operational costs.
- Increased visa scrutiny and travel restrictions could make it harder to deploy staff to affected regions.





# Global Risks

## 3. Climate disasters

Climate disasters remains one of the most defining risks into the next decade. With 2024 marked as the hottest year on record,<sup>39</sup> the impact of climate shifts are unfolding sooner and with greater intensity than previously anticipated. The year ahead is likely to see the continued escalation of climate hazards, including extreme heat and shifting weather patterns — each threatening human security, disaster resilience, food production, and water security. Around 3.3 to 3.6 billion people currently reside in areas highly vulnerable to climate events.<sup>40</sup> Extreme heat is exposing vast regions to prolonged heatwaves and droughts,<sup>41</sup> while large-scale wildfires<sup>42</sup> have become a regular occurrence. Disrupted weather cycles are also bringing stronger weather systems, such as hurricanes and cyclones,<sup>43</sup> with heavy rainfall causing landslides and flash flooding.

The destruction caused by extreme weather is vast, threatening lives, causing fatalities and injuries, and damaging homes, buildings, and infrastructure. It rapidly devastates the livelihoods of millions in both the Global North and Global South, with the latter often lacking the resources and infrastructure needed to action sufficient climate adaptability, disaster risk resilience and recovery.<sup>44</sup>

Beyond the immediate damage, individuals and communities face long-term health impacts, such as pollution and disease, as vital civil infrastructure like power grids, water supply, and sanitation services are disrupted.<sup>45</sup> Damage to transportation systems can severely hinder mobility, making evacuation or relief efforts more difficult.

Extreme weather conditions also ravage crops, disrupt food production, and harm livestock leading to food insecurity. Likewise, changing weather patterns can affect the success of harvest seasons, often arriving early, later, or impacted by pests.<sup>46</sup> This not only threatens food security but can also lead to financial hardship for farmers and rural communities in key food-producing regions. Commodities like grain and maize are particularly vulnerable, straining supply chains and raising the cost of living, leading to food insecurity and deepening poverty.<sup>47</sup>

The impacts of climate hazards are especially severe in certain regions. For example, East Africa faces both drought in the dry season, and heavy rainfall during the wet season, often resulting in flooding near rivers and lakeshores. Food shortages in some areas may also trigger rising tensions, sporadic violence, and conflict over increasingly scarce resources.

Climate disasters are frequently precursors to displacement and migration, as extreme disasters or food insecurity render areas uninhabitable.<sup>48</sup> The displacement caused can uproot entire communities, forcing them to migrate in search of safer living conditions and a reliable food supply, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation as refugees or internally displaced persons.

As agricultural economies suffer from failed or destroyed crops, people may desperately turn to more precarious forms of labour to supplement their income, further heightening their vulnerability to exploitation.<sup>49</sup> Children may be forced into child labour to support their families,<sup>50</sup> or pressed into leaving home to alleviate pressure on caregivers. In this context, children often fall prey to traffickers and subjected to labour exploitation, sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude, or human trafficking along the way, or in urban centres. In some extreme cases, families, in desperate need, may send children into exploitative or bonded labour in exchange for

financial compensation or subsistence.

In parallel with growing concerns about climate, contemporary geoeconomic confrontations are likely to undermine cooperative efforts to address it. As many states downplay or deny the impact of climate change,<sup>51</sup> further deregulation is likely,<sup>52</sup> alongside withdrawals from climate related treaties like the Paris Agreement.<sup>53</sup> This will also affect industry compliance on broader human rights issues, such as worker protections, child labour, and modern slavery.

A withdrawal from environmental and green energy initiatives could present certain countries with minimal regulation an opportunity to invest even more heavily in this market.<sup>54</sup> This shift may raise concerns about the use of forced labour in green energy supply chains and the mining of rare earth minerals essential for their development.<sup>55</sup> In this context, environmental policies may act as a cover or “green-wash” for exploitative labour practices.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, industries that contribute significantly to environmental degradation — like agriculture, mining, and logging — are also high-risk sectors for human trafficking and modern slavery within their operations and supply chains.<sup>57</sup> Deregulation in these sectors will not only amplify the risk of climate issues, but all forms of exploitation including the worst forms of child labour, modern slavery and human trafficking.

As climate concerns intensify, so do the risks to vulnerable populations, making the work of agencies combating human trafficking and modern slavery even more challenging. The shift in priorities towards climate-related issues could further strain resources and funding for long-term anti-trafficking efforts. Agencies must adapt to this new reality by seeking innovative ways to integrate climate resilience with human rights protections to ensure the protection of those most at risk.

## Individuals, communities and those with lived experience of human trafficking and modern slavery are likely to face several risks resulting from climate disaster:

- Changes to climate and severe weather events are likely to disrupt local economies, especially in regions reliant on agriculture.
- Disruption to local supply chains for critical resources including food, water, and medical supplies, may cause economic shocks and acute vulnerability.
- Food and water insecurity may force community members including children into higher-risk labour to secure household provisions.
- Vulnerable communities, displaced by extreme weather, could be at greater risk of trafficking and exploitation as climate-migration becomes more common.
- Damage to schools, hospitals, and transportation systems can limit access to services.
- The mining of rare earth minerals necessary for the green energy transition may drive new types of forced labour in informal or unregulated emerging industries.
- Climate crises may strain public services, reducing state capacity to enforce anti-trafficking laws and provide victim support.

## Agencies working in the space of human trafficking and modern slavery could face several significant risks resulting from the issue of climate disasters:

### Security

- In regions experiencing extreme weather events, staff may be directly exposed to harm due to disasters or hazards.
- Extreme weather may impact the damage or loss of physical assets including offices, warehouses, electronic devices and vehicles, as well as non-physical assets such as data.

### Operational

- Disruptions to infrastructure, including damaged roads, insecure power grids, and communication network outages, may obstruct the delivery of services, outreach, and emergency relief.
- Rural programmes may be disrupted by failed, weakened, off-schedule, or pest-affected harvests.
- Disruption to local supply chains for critical resources including food, water, and medical supplies, may cause shortages and increased costs for programme operations.

### Financial

- Institutional funding priorities are likely to continue to shift toward disaster relief, climate adaptation, and building resilience in vulnerable regions. This reallocation of resources could result in reduced financial support for long-term, preventive human trafficking and modern slavery programmes that do not align or intersect with climate initiatives.

### Strategic

- International disagreements on climate could strain cooperation, reduce investment in climate initiatives, and further weaken the sustainability of programmes addressing human trafficking, labour exploitation, and human rights abuses in the climate nexus.

## Global Risks

### 4. Political discord

Political discord is a broad area of risk, encompassing many of the political challenges facing democracies in the current era. Political and social discourse is more divided than ever before, becoming more aggressive and emotional in dissent.<sup>58</sup> The complexities of political opinion are multifaceted, intertwined with identity politics, and reflect a wide range of views on issues such as human and civil rights, religion, race, gender, and national identity. Within this context, 2025 presents interlinked areas of risk and concern relating to growing political discord. Firstly, with a growing divide in opinion and people becoming more entrenched in extreme positions, society is likely to become more polarised on the political spectrum with moderate parties in the centre losing traction. Secondly, from these extreme positions, populist voices are likely to emerge, appealing to those who feel their views are disregarded by the established political elite,<sup>59</sup> alongside a rise in support from younger generations actively targeted on social media.<sup>60</sup> Thirdly, coinciding with the growth in digital communications and social media, society is certain to be subjected to intense waves of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation,<sup>61</sup> as well as digital propaganda from external sources.<sup>62</sup> Reliable and reputable news outlets will be questioned, and public trust in facts or truth will be eroded.

The polarisation of political opinion is not uncommon, especially in states where voters must choose between a limited number of options. However, this trend is also beginning to impact more representative democracies, as extreme positions gain electoral influence and enter coalitions with moderates.<sup>63</sup> As a result, many will adopt increasingly extreme positions on social issues such as race, gender, civil rights, economic policies, and free speech — often without understanding the complexities of both the issue and solutions. This shift is likely to fuel animosity, diminish opportunities for meaningful dialogue, and deepen

ideological entrenchment, making it increasingly difficult to find common ground on critical issues. This will make it increasingly difficult for societies to reach a consensus or find common ground on pressing issues, including human trafficking, modern slavery and associated issues. In extreme circumstances, disagreements on policy may trigger public demonstrations, protests, civil unrest, and riots.<sup>64</sup>

In 2025, polarised discourse is highly likely to favour more extreme right-wing positions, as demonstrated by the results and polls for several key elections,<sup>65</sup> nevertheless, extreme left-wing positions will remain and may grow stronger over time in response.<sup>66</sup> On the short-term horizon, right wing (and far-right) political dominance will likely lead to the rollback of policies deemed overly liberal or “woke”.<sup>67</sup> This is likely to bring momentous shifts away from established policies on migration, diversity, gender protections, social justice, environmental regulation, human rights and criminal justice, in favour of more hardline policies on national security and economic advancement.

Populism, characterised by charismatic leaders appealing to people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by the political establishment, will further challenge institutions and potentially lead to a rise in more extreme policies. Surging in situations where there is widespread polarisation and dissatisfaction, populist voices assert themselves as ‘champions of ‘the people’ and present bold, often solutions to complex systemic issues.

In personifying ‘the elite’ as a range of persons, rising populist movements are likely to target traditional mechanisms of accountability and criticism such as opposing parties, civil agencies, media organisations, or international institutions. By discrediting a wide range of opponents, populists can consolidate power while weakening the checks and balances considered proponents of elitism, corruption and bureaucracy.<sup>68</sup> Many civil branches and departments at



odds with key agendas or deemed unduly bureaucratic will face fierce scrutiny in their support and funding. Additionally, some leaders may begin to withdraw their administrations from agreements of cooperation with international bodies that also deemed as 'elitist'.

Both polarisation and populism thrive on the erosion of trust in objective truth. With a decline in critical thinking, growing ideological extremism, and a general mistrust of traditional media, there is a growing reliance on social media sources for information.<sup>69</sup> Subsequently, societies are increasingly susceptible to misinformation (false information spread unintentionally), disinformation (deliberate falsehoods), and malinformation (distortions of truth shared with malicious intent).

Digital and social media algorithms reinforce existing biases by showing users content aligned with their views, creating echo chambers that amplify radical beliefs while filtering out opposing perspectives.<sup>70</sup> Reduced content moderation, framed as a defence of free speech, will further enable the spread of misinformation,<sup>71</sup> contributing to instability and the rise of extremes at either end of the political spectrum, and across different issues. This may include instances of lone-wolf terrorism, racial supremacism, anarchism, extreme misogyny and incel groups.<sup>72</sup> AI-driven misinformation or "deepfakes" will become harder to recognise and undermine public confidence in traditionally reliable forms of media, such as video and audio recordings.<sup>73</sup>

Certain demographics will be especially vulnerable to disinformation campaigns as they struggle to critically evaluate the information they consume. This includes older adults who may be less digitally literate, younger people who spend proportionately more time on social media, and those with limited education or exposure to diverse viewpoints.<sup>74</sup> Disinformation often targets specific groups on ethnic or religious characteristics, to exploit existing fears, divisions, influence voters, or scapegoat certain groups. These campaigns are often tailored to exploit emotional responses, creating fear, anger, or outrage instead of rational, evidence-based reactions.<sup>75</sup>

While domestic political factions are likely to exploit opportunities for misinformation and disinformation among supporters and the electorate, foreign actors may also exploit these vulnerabilities through targeted campaigns.<sup>76</sup>

In 2025-26, it is highly likely that human trafficking, modern slavery, and associated issues such as migration, gender-based violence, climate, and humanitarian responses, will be subject to political discord. Public sentiment towards these issues and the people affected is likely to become more hostile and polarised, accelerated by instances of misinformation. Similarly, views on social justice and charitable programmes working towards those aims are likely to be questioned.

Extreme views are likely to begin to rise among certain groups, raising exploitation risks. For instance, the rise of misogyny and incel is likely to normalise attitudes of sexual objectification, increasing the risk violence against women and girls, and distorting perceptions of human trafficking.<sup>77</sup> It is also possible that responses to human trafficking begin to demonstrate biased demographic profiling in the identification of victims and perpetrators, potentially seeking to confirm policy positions rather than ascertain a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Human trafficking itself may continue to be misrepresented, misunderstood and conflated with other issues, occasionally used as a tool to push political agendas or discredit opponents.<sup>78</sup> In extreme circumstances, this may also include broad attempts to link members of the perceived political elite to human trafficking and criminal conspiracies, while simultaneously rejecting the findings of investigations into legitimate cases based on mistrust.<sup>79</sup>

In this environment of increasing political discord, organisations working on human trafficking and modern slavery may find their work more challenging. The pressure to navigate politically charged issues, while maintaining their mission and funding pipelines, will demand careful strategy, advocacy, and alignment with broader global efforts. In addition, it will require an ability to simplify complex issues, and solutions based on evidence to be well communicated and accessible to counter misleading narratives.



### Individuals, communities and those with lived experience of human trafficking and modern slavery are likely to face several risks resulting from political discord:

- Political and public sentiment may become more hostile, with disinformation and polarisation further fuelling antipathy, protest or attacks against minority populations such as migrants.
- Legislative changes may impact local support networks for individuals at-risk, increasing isolation and reducing access to critical services.
- Victim identification responses may become biased based on policy or public perception, potentially misrepresenting the realities of trafficking and skewing responses.
- Human trafficking may become weaponised to push political agendas, discredit opponents, or justify harmful policies, rather than address the communicated needs of victims and survivors.
- Misinformation and disinformation may distort public understanding of trafficking, hindering advocacy and evidence-based responses.
- The rise of extreme misogyny and incel ideology may normalise violence and exploitation against women among certain groups, leading to higher risks of trafficking and abuse.



## Agencies working in the space of human trafficking and modern slavery could face several significant risks resulting from the issue of political discord:

### Reputational

- Organisations may face pressure from stakeholders, donors, and beneficiaries to align their public stance, programming, and partnerships with specific political viewpoints. This can lead to reputational rifts if they speak out on policy changes or take positions that alienate certain groups or political parties.
- Organisations may be increasingly expected to engage with disinformation and misinformation related to human trafficking. This can lead to unrealistic expectations from supporters and stakeholders regarding the organisation's role, and any public position or perceived silence on an issue may provoke backlash.

### Operational

- Political differences may create rifts within an organisation, causing internal tensions between staff, personnel, or partners. This could lead to friction and division in the workforce.

### Security

- Organisations and staff may be subject to harassment (either physical or online), trolling or smear campaigns for their perceived contribution to societal harms, especially if relating to sensitive issues. This risk may become heightened if the organisation has taken a public stance.

### Financial

- Government funding may become more politically influenced, carrying expectations that align with specific agendas. This could result in conditions attached to funding to coerce compliance with political mandates.

- Funding for victim support services may be cut or redirected based on shifting political priorities, particularly if organisations are working on elements of human trafficking that no longer align with national interests.

### Legal & Regulatory

- Governments may place regulatory pressure on agencies in their registration or licensing, to ensure compliance with emerging legislation.
- New regulations may be enacted quickly and cause confusion towards compliance.
- Organisations may be censured for their advocacy work on human trafficking, particularly if their efforts challenge or criticise government policy.
- Emerging human trafficking policy may favour criminal justice led approaches over rights-based or trauma-informed approaches.

### Strategic

- Cooperation between organisations could be strained as divisions among professionals begin to fracture coalitions, or damage inter-organisational relationships.
- The anti-trafficking sector may struggle to maintain unity as organisations flux in and out of favour with government and funding streams.
- Individuals, communities and those with lived experience of trafficking may differ in their own political opinions and affiliations. Organisations making assumptions and broad statements on behalf of survivors may inadvertently disempower those with alternative views.

## Global Risks

### 5. Cyber security

The rapid growth of technology and computing has made cybersecurity a top concern for 2025. The convergence of technological advancements, the proliferation of AI, and the increased digitalisation of daily life have created a new era of complex cyber security challenges. From state-sponsored cyber-attacks following geopolitical tensions, to disinformation and the rise of online exploitation, the technological risks we face are more complex than ever. As the risk of cyber-attacks continues to rise, investment in cyber security responses presents inequality in resilience to the growing threats,<sup>80</sup> along with a growing cyber-security skills gap.<sup>81</sup> While the maturity of Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents exciting opportunities and efficiencies, it also amplifies multiple threats such as cyber-attacks, illicit content generation, and the integrity of information.<sup>82</sup> Additionally, as more social interactions shift to online platforms, particularly among young people, new risks to online safety emerge.<sup>83</sup>

The increasing pace of technological advancement, coupled with military conflicts and rising global tensions, has led to greater cyber threats from both state actors and criminal groups.<sup>84</sup> These threats include common tactics like phishing, malware, and ransomware, as well as more sophisticated attacks aimed at exploiting vulnerabilities in software coding.<sup>85</sup> As a result, critical infrastructure and large companies face heightened risks, including process disruptions, and supply chain attacks. This may include medical, water, biosecurity, communications and energy. For many companies, significant data breaches can compromise personal information, passwords, and identities, impacting both financial resources and sensitive data.

The speed at which malicious actors develop and deploy new technologies and techniques to conduct cyber-attacks has spurred significant investment in cyber security solutions. However, the high cost of these technologies has created a disparity in cyber resilience and skills between well-resourced organisations and sectors, and those with smaller budgets.<sup>86</sup>



Furthermore, while international frameworks such as the Budapest Convention facilitate better cooperation between states<sup>87</sup> and some governments are actioning more stringent legislation towards online safety, some government policies towards both cyber security may struggle to keep pace and may be further exacerbated by the interconnected challenges of security and economic cooperation.

AI-powered tools are already transforming industries, from image recognition software to Natural Language Processing models. However, this powerful technology is also raising new concerns, particularly in the realm of cyber security as AI begins to augment cybercriminal capabilities in social engineering attacks. Malicious actors may leverage AI to generate convincing misinformation, deepfake content, and other forms of illicit material.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the rise of AI-driven attacks on software infrastructure could increase the frequency of adversarial cyber threats and automated breaches, further complicating cyber defence.

Attempts to regulate AI and mitigate its risks are likely to lag, leaving organisations to rely on reactive measures rather than proactive mitigations. Considering this, businesses may need to adapt quickly, balancing their cyber security investments with a greater focus on emerging regulations to safeguard their systems and data.<sup>89</sup>

The digital world is increasingly becoming a platform for human trafficking, enabling perpetrators to recruit and exploit victims across a wide area and across borders. Traffickers are leveraging anonymity and deceptive scam tactics — such as false job advertisements and online relationships — to groom and control victims.<sup>90</sup>

Children are vulnerable to online exploitation, with traffickers often coercing and blackmailing victims to keep their exploitation secret from their families and subjecting them to sexual extortion (“sextortion”). Traffickers are active across various virtual spaces, including social media, chat rooms, online video games, and messaging platforms.<sup>91</sup> These platforms, while offering opportunities for connection, also expose vulnerable individuals to the risk of trafficking and exploitation. The increase in time spent

online, especially among youth, significantly raises the likelihood of encountering dangerous situations. As mobile devices and internet connectivity spread across the globe, these risks are no longer confined to wealthier nations but are now a concern for both urban and rural populations in the Global South.<sup>92</sup>

The growing scale and profitability of cyber-crime has drawn organised crime groups into the technology threat arena. The convergence between organised cybercriminals and violent crime groups is reshaping the landscape of cybercrime and significantly amplifying its social impact. The ability of organised groups to innovate in the digital age and utilisation of the dark web is significant and often more advanced than legislative regulatory structures and the capabilities/resources of law enforcement agencies.

Furthermore, the increased involvement of organised crime in cyber-attacks and fraud has also birthed a new wave of human trafficking and exploitation, whereby victims of human trafficking are forced to conduct scam activity.<sup>93</sup> Scam trafficking has become a major human rights crisis, especially in the last few years, particularly in Southeast Asia. Criminal networks continue to lure educated and highly qualified people under the pretence of well-paying jobs in customer service, tech support, or digital marketing, then coercing them into conducting scam or crime operations under threat. This includes ‘Pig Butchering’, a romance scam where victims build online relationships before being manipulated into making fake investments;<sup>94</sup> investment fraud, posing as financial advisors to persuade victims to invest in non-existent schemes; and cryptocurrency fraud.

To address the multifaceted nature of cyber threats and online exploitation, both governments and organisations should invest heavily in comprehensive cyber security strategies. For organisations of all sizes, investing in robust cyber security is crucial to maintaining resilience in the face of rapidly evolving threats. However, due to the high costs involved, smaller organisations may struggle to keep up with more resource-intensive measures, creating gaps in overall cyber security preparedness.



## Individuals, communities and those with lived experience of human trafficking and modern slavery are likely to face several risks resulting from the issue of cyber security:

- Perpetrators of human trafficking are likely to continue to utilise the online environment to recruit people into exploitation and perpetrate abuse including sexual exploitation of children. This includes the use of social media, messaging platforms, and online games to lure, manipulate, and control victims.
- Traffickers may increasingly exploit victims by coercing them into sharing explicit content and using it for control and extortion.
- Rising instances of human trafficking into scam centres are revealing a new geographic, demographic and educational profile of people being recruited and coerced into conducting online fraud, investment scams, or cryptocurrency fraud under threat of violence.
- Organised crime groups and perpetrators are likely to innovate and use technology, including AI to exploit others. AI-generated deepfakes and fraudulent content can be used to manipulate or discredit victims and advocacy efforts.
- Online disinformation and misinformation campaigns may influence public perception, or government responses to modern slavery, human trafficking and associated issues.
- Survivors’ personal information may be compromised by cyber breaches and attacks, putting them at risk of identification, re-trafficking or retaliation.
- Some survivors and vulnerable communities may lack awareness, resources, or digital literacy to safeguard themselves online.
- The expansion of internet access means human trafficking risks are no longer confined to specific regions but affect communities worldwide.

## Agencies working in the space of human trafficking and modern slavery could face several significant risks resulting from the issue of cyber security:

### Security

- Traffickers or hostile groups may target staff members, key activists, or volunteers, leading to online harassment, doxxing, or threats to personal safety.

### Regulatory

- Organisations may become subject to penalties under data protection regulations in the event of a breach. Agencies operating across multiple countries are subject to differing cyber laws and regulations that could complicate legal liabilities.

### Operational

- Sophisticated phishing or social engineering attempts may trick staff into clicking fraudulent links, revealing login credentials or transferring funds.
- Traffickers and other criminals may impersonate the organisation to manipulate or exploit individuals, survivors, partners or donors.
- Ransomware attacks could lock critical case files, donor information, and communication, and threaten to release sensitive data unless a ransom is paid. Spyware could compromise internal documents and communications, leaking sensitive information to adversaries or criminal groups.
- Sensitive communications about survivors, investigations, or donor details

may be intercepted within systems or via third-party processes, exposing the data to unauthorised access.

- Organisations may struggle to recover quickly from a cyber-attack, leaving critical data exposed and operations disrupted.

### Financial

- Without adequate cyber insurance, the financial burden of a breach, such as legal fees, data recovery, and reputational damage, could have a long-lasting impact.

### Reputational

- Cyber criminals could hijack campaigns by embedding fraudulent links or advertisements, redirecting donations to malicious accounts, or spreading misinformation about the organisation's work.
- Serious data breaches could become a reputational issue for organisations if not adequately addressed.

### Strategic

- Governments may innovate in legislation and regulation to address online safety, especially grooming, sexual exploitation of children and the use of AI, but this may reduce support for more traditional safeguarding responses.

## Risk and Resilience: Recommendations

In a rapidly evolving global risk landscape, it is neither feasible nor practical to eliminate all risks. Instead, organisations must embrace a proactive, adaptive, and intelligence-led approach to risk management that enhances resilience and ensures continuity of their mission.

Organisations should take time to consider how the global risks in this report — conflict; geoeconomic hostility; climate disasters; political discord; and cyber security — are likely manifest in their nuanced contexts and likely to assess their own risk levels accordingly. By using available resources, organisations should work to keep risk as low as reasonably practicable and within their tolerances to ensure the protection of staff, beneficiaries and other stakeholders from unnecessary, compounded, or escalated risk.

The following are key recommendations that all organisations should consider:

- Anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to global risk as a matter of resilience. This may include developing agile strategies that can respond to contextual changes, the diversification of funding sources to mitigate shifts in the donor landscape, building robust cash reserves to absorb financial shocks, or the transfer of risk to another entity (e.g. insurances). In decision-making, the organisation's resilience and its responsibility to its mission, staff and beneficiaries should be a priority.
- Invest in risk management as an independent function to monitor dynamic risks. A risk function should be empowered to analyse risk outside of management hierarchy, free from organisational or political bias, and able to provide full and frank advice to leadership. This ensures decision-makers are well-informed, and that ongoing or emerging risks do not exceed the appetites of those accountable.
- Invest in the management of safety and security across operations, including contingency and crisis protocols in high-risk environments. This should include the designation of roles with specific responsibility e.g. safeguarding, child protection, and security focal points; a suite of clear and accessible policies; and the procurement of training for all personnel.
- Strengthen cyber security infrastructure to mitigate risks from cyber-attacks and data breaches. This may include investment in cyber security software, regular audits of IT systems, and staff training to boost awareness of risks like phishing and malware.
- Ensure the integration of risk management costs into grants and funding proposals, especially costs relating to security, protection and cyber security. Grant giving organisations should be equally diligent in their apportionment of costs towards resilience.
- Consider the diverse knowledge, views, and perceptions of a wide array of stakeholders. This may include governments, civil society, the private sector and international frameworks such as UN conventions, or policy think tanks. Organisations should also engage local communities, frontline workers, and survivors themselves to shape risk responses that are informed by evidence and lived experience.
- Capitalise on opportunities that may arise out of global shifts. Risks management is not strictly a 'negative' exercise and can reveal many positive options available to an organisation. This may include identifying emerging gaps in policy, funding, or public discourse and proactively positioning themselves.
- Strengthen thought leadership and advocacy towards risk and security. Government and multilateral policy are invariably driven by global shifts and international affairs. Organisations should anticipate these changes, and advocate for human trafficking and modern slavery to remain central to global policy discussions while also recognising strategic interlinkages with primary themes of global policy.



Per international standards (ISO31000), risk management should not be siloed but embedded into all operational, strategic, and decision-making processes. Organisations should integrate risk management across their operations, ensuring a structured and comprehensive approach. By building a risk-aware culture, organisations can better support their teams and stakeholders to understand and engage with risk and uncertainty.

While many of the risks highlighted in this report will be relevant for all, they may not present the same level of threat. Different organisations may face different types of risk, experience threats with varying severity, have different approaches to risk, or have fluctuating resources available to mitigate threats.

Therefore, risk management strategies should be customised to meet specific needs, objectives, and contexts.

To remain effective in a turbulent context, organisations must move beyond reactive risk response and towards a proactive, intelligence-led approach that anticipates change. This approach relies on the best available information from reliable and reputable sources and ensures organisations are prepared for risks happening now, and for those on the horizon. By effectively anticipating both threats and opportunities, organisations will be able to confidently navigate uncertainty, remaining resilient in their mission to combat modern slavery and human trafficking.



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# Strategic Risk Outlook

2025-26

